

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION
GERMÁN DEHESA, MEXICO AND THE CRAFT OF WRITING

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And all of this, what for? Well I don't know my young grasshopper. I suppose there's no clear "what for?" Maybe there are some "why's"? We write and sing because we feel like it, because we love you, because Mexico, miraculously, is still standing (but for how much longer?).

--Germán Dehesa (La música de los años, 86)¹

Like the work of Carlos Monsiváis (b.1936), just one of many literary contemporaries, Germán Dehesa's writing is fragmented by the daily tribulations of one of the world's greatest metropolis: Mexico City. Mexico City and the country as a whole are as much a part of his writings as this spiritual and patriotic essence that we shall call *Mexicanness*. With his writing on daily life in Mexico, political events, family situations, etc., it's as if the hands of time turned back to the Spain of writers such as "El Fígaro", in which every day's writing was the ticket to a meal. The recording in print of *cuadros de costumbres* (sketches of manners or customs) is and has been prevalent, not only in today's and yesterday's Spain, but also in today's and yesterday's Mexico. Dehesa is just one of a number of *cronistas* (chroniclers) in Mexico today, but, as Monsiváis points out in *A ustedes les consta. Antología de la crónica en México*, he follows a long tradition dating

¹All translations are mine.

back to the conquest of Mexico, in which Hernán Cortés, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, Francisco Cervantes Salazar, Hernando Alvarado Tezozomoc and Motolinía, Sahagún, Mendieta, Durán, and Muñoz Camargo chronicled life in the pre-vice legal Mexico and Nueva España. At the outset after Spaniard rule, and once Nueva España became México, José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi begins a list of Mexican chroniclers which starts in the 19th century and continues into the 20th: Manuel Payno (1810-1894), Guillermo Prieto (1818-1897), Francisco Zarco (1829-1869), Ignacio Manuel Altamirano (1834-1893), Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera (1859-1895), Luis González Obregón (1865-1938), Ángel de Campo, Micrós (1868-1908), Amado Nervo (1870-1919), Gerardo Murillo, el Dr. Atl (1875-1964), Martín Luis Guzmán (1887-1976), Artemio de Valle Arizpe (1888-1961), Renato Leduc (1897-), Mario Gill (1900-1973), Gregorio Ortega (1902-1966), Salvador Novo (1904-1974), José Alvarado (1911-1974), Ricardo Cortés Tamayo (1911-), Fernando Benítez (1912-, D.F.), Arturo Sotomayor (1913-), José Revueltas (1914-1976), Gabriel Vargas (1918-, Tulancingo), Ricardo Garibay (1923-Tulancingo), Julio Scherer García (1926-, D.F.), Elena Poniatowska (b.1933, Paris), Vicente Leñero (b.1933, Guadalajara), José Emilio Pacheco (1939-, D.F.), Miguel Reyes Razo (1939, D.F.), Carmen Lira (1942, D.F.), and Hector Aguilar Camín (b.1946, Chetumal). Dehesa, born in 1944, continues the tradition of his chronicle-writing forefathers.

Germán Dehesa, even though he is widely read and well known in Mexico, is not as broadly translated (nor as much the subject of continuous critical articles for scholarly journals or conference paper fodder) as the aforementioned Monsiváis. But both share common traits: Monsiváis and

Dehesa are entertaining, and easy on the senses, not heavy or bogged down by philosophical ideas or critical concepts which would bore the regular folk who read their articles. Dehesa, although devoid of any foreign words, or hard to grasp topics, may be easy for Mexican readers or scholars to comprehend, but his eclectic prose presents difficulties which discourage possible translations into the English language.

In Dehesa's writing, there's a Mexican sensibility, an affinity for pop culture and a love for the Spanish language as filtered through the vernacular spoken in Mexico, full of clever puns and the occasional curse word which is used by intellectuals and writers, at times either to emphasize a point or to reflect the day to day speech of certain circles in the country. There are also layers upon layers of references to Mexico, Mexican history and culture, contemporary writers, and previous literature (Voltaire's Candide) in translation, and multicultural events (Americans on the moon). An endearing personal trait in his writing is Dehesa's referring to his family by pseudonyms to guard their identity; it reflect's Dehesa's past and current interests in history and/or culture: His former and current wives (La Thatcher and La Hillary) offer an insight into strong women, who still have time for either a husband and/or a husband and family; el Tamal, la Tractor, la pequeña Carlos, Viruta and el Colima are the names of his children and all allude to Mexican elements such as food, industry, national identity, entertainment, and geography.

One final reflection: This essay is a love letter to all that *is* Mexico, with its faults and weaknesses. Readers unfamiliar with Dehesa or Mexico in general can come away from reading the following essay with a brand new

sense of understanding for a country rich in complexities, but wonderful nonetheless. Dehesa's love for writing, even in the face of the greatest adversary human beings have known, death, should inspire all of us to do our part in the “garden” with which Dehesa concludes his book, *¡Fallaste, corazón!*

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“Dreams at the Portal”, final chapter from Germán Dehesa’s *¡Fallaste, corazón!*

How is a book written? I wish I knew. I have, I don't know how many pages, I don't know how many days and I don't know how many editors trying to figure it out. As long as I've been living, I've never stopped reading (this is the enjoyable part) nor have I stopped writing (this is the hard part) and, at close to 52 years old, it still shocks and excites me, this rarest of human activities of combining untiringly 24 sounds and some punctuation signs and dreaming that with them, one obtains an image of the world.

I am amazed more and more by those torrential writers, the full time ones, the ones which write punctually two books a year. There's no

contempt in my questions, but at what time do they live? What do they write about? I suppose that each one has his own personal formula, but the truth is they amaze me and in my admiration there's a great dose of gratitude; thanks to these freaks of literature who turn their whole being into a persistent laboratory of exploration and distillation of all possibilities of language, we the distracted ones, the pimps, the ones that dedicate ourselves to negotiating with daily life, have the efficient tools to manifest ourselves through writing when finally (and to the great chagrin of our editor) we decide to placate our frenetic madness and sit down to try to write a book.

Lately it has become stylish to reject with total contempt these "cubicle intellectuals" (postmodern version of the Ivory Tower) whose life never transgresses the confines of a library or a bibliographic file holder. I think that is nonsense and underhanded fascism. I understand that they are responsible for various of the most extensive and boring books that human kind has known; but it would suffice to invoke the names of Montaigne and Jorge Luis Borges to express complete reconciliation and gratitude. I recognize that I tried to be one of them and I failed. Idleness won over me, but this hasn't diminished my grateful admiration for them. If someone were to ask me for my model for a writer, I think I would mention a few names: Francisco de Quevedo (duelist, lover, politician, mysterious, Catholic and absolute owner of the written word); André Malraux (traveler, trafficker, fighter, lover and minister of culture); Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (pioneer of aviation, good patriot, and exquisite reader of the soul); Jaime Sabines (failed medic, untiring lover, clumsy merchant from Chiapas and illuminated writer of our poetic life); I could mention these names and I would still end with

Miguel de Cervantes, whose friendship I cherish. I am not even talking about the writers that I could most admire; I have named the ones that I love the most and who I feel were closest to the changing (and maybe irrelevant) profile of my spirit. In other words: I feel like naturally befriending writers that come and go pendulum-like and in pairs from books to life; everyday life with its prodigious winks, its silent catastrophes, its always flowered women, its invitations to travel, its risks and adventures and its comforting rituals and customs. I enjoy navigating very much, but I greatly enjoy returning to Ithaca.

All of this nonsense was planned to forewarn you that I apparently write in my spare time, but that in reality, at home or in the office, at a dance and a cantina, I am always writing. I am, as people from Cataluña and my wicked friend Ricardo Garibay would say, *lletra ferit* (wounded by the letter). Before an article, a conversation, or a chapter of this book—and who knows if it's even a book—really take place, I have already written them hundreds of times in my active imagination. What is worst is that each virtual version is different from the last one and completely different from what I end up saying and writing. “Is there a chance that you can disconnect your brain for a while?” my mother would ask me, exhausted with the madness that her boy would emit without pausing. Something similar was asked of me by the cardiologist that oversaw my stay at the hospital after my heart attack (and that's after all the tranquilizers!). I swear to God and before anything that Schulenburg has left of the Virgin of Guadalupe, that I don't do this on purpose. Sadly I am not Juan de Valdés and I can't proclaim that I

write as I talk; I talk and write as I think, feel and, almost always, on a hunch.

I ask you, intrepid reader who has read up to here (to those who have not bought this book or have already disposed of it, I have nothing to ask of you), to forgive my deteriorated physical design and to please imagine me as a cross between Fernando Soler and Joaquín Pardavé in the emotional final scene of *México de mis recuerdos*: various Mexican actresses—against a harbor backdrop—characterized (can you believe it!) as Porfirian ladies throwing flower petals in front of don Porfirio and doña Carmelita, who are about to depart towards Europe; and as fodder for a book by Carlos Tello. The camera of Bustillo Oro shows us intermittently an “Ipiranga” of cardboard and the shot of Soler and Pardavé as they remain saddened in the harbor because the movie is ending and because the Porfiriato was finishing (or so they thought). That's the way I feel now: my book is about to reach its conclusion and I feel that a cycle of Mexican life is also about to conclude. Add to this that the Aztec century used to be of only 52 years and you will begin to understand my sensation of a total dawning. Manuel Ávila Camacho, Miguel Aléman, Adolfo Ruiz Cortínez, Adolfo López Mateos, Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, Luis Echeverría, José López Portillo, Miguel de la Madrid, Carlos Salinas de Gortari and Ernesto Zedillo have hovered over my life in one way or another. I close my eyes (metaphorically speaking of course, for if I actually closed them I could not see the computer) and I feel over my shoulder the shy and tender hand of my father who wakes me up at eleven at night. In those days my father possessed and operated movie projectors. Once, General Maximino Ávila Camacho had the desire to watch

Bambi (which for him was the equivalent of Bergman) in the company of one of his multiple families. A car had arrived and its passengers had orders that my father had to show up at the residence of the teziutleco bastard in the company of one of his own children. It was (it will forever be) me. I could lie by saying I remember with some detail; I remember my father's shame and my early and dreamy repulsion for Walt Disney and the Mexican political machinery.

As you can see, this book tries to record at the very least a small fragment of history, that is why it centers itself on the presidency of Carlos Salinas de Gortari. My good friends (the intelligent ones) tell me that this is not the right time to judge him and that he was not all that bad (something similar could be said of Al Capone). What is missing, they tell me, is careful pondering and distance. That's possible. Of course this book proposed to be full of judgements, avoid prejudices and dispense with a definitive judgement. Even with all the benefits of doubt, what I can attest to is that during the six years of the presidency of de Gortari, the country and I suffered heart attacks, our hearts failed and now we are trying to recuperate.

The readers of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (is there one out there?) will remember that strange megalomania which would make him confuse his personal destiny with the destiny of the homeland. My case is not as bad (or as incredible). I understand that it's only a coincidence; but I also understand (I am sure the reader will comment on how much I understand) that this coincidence is vast as well as significant. Allow me to illustrate: I did not have a heart attack on the day of my heart attack nor did the Mexican system blow up on December 20th of 1994. One and the other tried for many years

to correct the hard surfaces of this rock which is our disgrace. The paroxysm of pain and of the prostration did not occur instantaneously or eventually; it was a long process filled with actions and omissions, with earthquakes and violence and negligence and heart breaks. Suddenly the chest catches fire and the clear eyes of death (Gabriel Celaya) fix on ours; time shortens; the dice roll and to live or to die or to survive is just a matter of chance or mystery. I understand that I survived. I can't prove it. It is possible that I might have never come out of the Hospital Español and that, since then up until today, all that I experience and narrate are not a matter of reality, but fulgurations of an illusion-like accident. Each time I see Mario Ruiz Massieu this sensation accentuates. Maybe Juan Diego and I were destined to live in this branch of Comala which is virtual reality. I seem to remember that Swedenborg had already predicted this discreet form of dying which consists in a millimetric but catastrophic displacement with respect to reality: it all seems the same, but one has remained with a slight maladjusted level which freezes us in the myth and it exiles us forever from history. I hope that it is not an exaggeration.

I mean it when I say that I would like to continue alive even with Zedillo. For my family and my own good, let's suppose I survived and let's suppose (let's procure, let's try, let's wish) that the country also survived. This will also be for the benefit of my family and my own. Please tell me, where would I go if this country should end or if it should become the shameful colony (and backdoor patio) to the United States? In this respect the coin is up in the air; the presidential system has already worn itself out, something that has many positive angles, but also represents grave problems

to the country. Proust used to say that beings suffer the most when they go from one custom to another. In that exact pit we Mexicans find ourselves. The system is crumbling, but it's crumbling over all of us, and what meanwhile lurks beneath the surface is a waste land where only drug dealers, the dinosaurs and the land owners roam. It's all about to be re-made, re-worked and re-invented.

As I finish this book I feel inhabited by the spirit of Voltaire, who wrote Candide. In no way do I feel that we are in the best of all possible worlds; not even Carlos Monsiváis can document my optimism. I feel disciplinarily pessimistic: I think that just about everything is wrong, but I also think that there are reasons and ways to make things a bit better. In the words of my admirable friend Fernando Savater, I am an active pessimist who, in much the same way as the Volterian Candide, has wandered through the time and space of my country and I have seen (and suffered) the baseness, the savage larceny, the predatory actions, the cruelty, the abuse, the outrage and the injustice. Without underestimating past presidential office terms, I think that in Carlos Salinas de Gortari's these horrors reached a peak, because, besides, they were exercised with the magnificent disguise of modernity, of transformation and joining the first world.

Cyclically Mexico is coming apart, but the crash, the damage and the stupor have been especially grave, because never before had so many fallen from such grand illusions or *chimeras*. Lest not forget that Carlos Salinas reached the highest point of popularity among all the past Mexican presidents. I can't forget that morning in which I accompanied Salinas de Gortari to visit Jaime Sabines. The luxuriously white presidential vehicle

advanced at half speed through the Periférico freeway and taxi cab drivers, car drivers and even women with 4 x 4's (such brave and lethal species like never seen before) would recognize the saintly Mr. President and would wave at him, blow kisses (dry and wet ones), praises, and gestures of admiration.

In three years time, the popular cheerfulness has turned into concentrated anger and the homeland walks sadly, disenchanted, and with an air of a wife who has discovered that her perfect husband has eight other families to maintain, is a pedophile, and is excited by torturing sheep. This is the state we are in. We don't get excited by the sun or Gloria Trevi. The famous negotiation table from which the new Mexican project and our new transition to democracy would supposedly be born from, looks more and more everyday like that famous game of chairs where some stand up and others sit down, but they are never able to come together. Of the economy and the banks we had better not talk. The media divulged a short while ago that Mexico has the distinction of being in first place when it comes to deforestation (a million hectares per year). There's drought in the north and famine in the south. Rubén Figueroa is exonerated; Roberto Madrazo receives all the support from the President; the governments of the Pan begin to give signs of intolerance and close-mindedness; the PRD can't find its way and wastes itself in ridiculous in-fighting. All of this (and all that is not told, because, as Sor Juana would say, it's too insane) is what has been seen in the great six years of cosmetics and what I continue to see in the six years of absence. I have been practically everywhere in the country and now, as a

character of Voltaire, I return to the territories of intimacy and I reencounter my garden.

Let us cultivate our garden, says Candide as a final and melancholic reflection when he left his home to know the world and to discover the greatness and splendor of humanity. A vain attempt. He found war, misery and horror; he returned home and discovered that his garden wouldn't stop producing fruits and flowers. This story doesn't differ much from that of Ulysses and, modestly, is not too different from this Creole Ulysses which is your Black Charro. I have been everywhere, I have been close to power, I have greeted the most powerful, I have peeked into the darkest corners of my country, and, as the song goes, I was allowed to come back. I have returned to my modest Ithaca and I find my smile untouched, my four children growing, my ex-wife, La Tatcher, friendly, affectionate and intelligent; my friends strong as iron, and I find my present wife willing to hug me and be a part of my happiness. My books are still there and don't complain at all. My heart (made up of rugged velvet, as Miguel Hernández would say) beats rhythmically with the same unexplained tenacity as the heart of Mexico. From here, my garden, I am invaded by a presentiment that we will win, as long as everyone decides to cultivate his own garden and forget about complaints and false predictions.

Once upon a time I once heard my teacher, Edmundo O'Gorman, address a select audience that was honoring him. From all that he said I remember these words: "I am convinced that the best things I can do for my country is lock myself up and write the best book I can." I will try something like that now after these 52 years of age that life has given me. "I

don't love the motherland/Its radiance is abstract and unattainable. . .” I think those are words of José Emilio Pacheco and they belong to a poem titled “Alta traición”. The quote has a purpose. He may not remember (he has no reason to remember), but Pacheco, the admirable Pacheco, was my literature professor in high school and his classes and life testimonial convinced me that I could only live to read and to communicate through words. This is my primary purpose in quoting him, but there’s also the poem itself, which, after declaring he doesn’t love the motherland, affirms that he would be willing to give his life for a city, for a sunset and for each and every one of the humble and daily ways in which the motherland becomes tangible and full of life. This is my case; I would also give my life so that Mexico would continue to be the place of my dead, the territory of my children, the place where my friends greet me with the unmistakable “what's up, *cabrón?*”; the permanent motive of my happiness; the only space I recognize as mine. I think that everything is fine and that it is in this small garden of mine where we must do battle so that Mexico is reborn and shakes off, like a dog just bathed, of all the parasites that have stolen its substance, its soul and style.

Last year the Americans—with their great machinery and clichés, which are so much a part of them—celebrated the twenty fifth anniversary of their arrival to the moon. We Mexicans are celebrating almost seventy years of that, and we are not boasting. The only thing that seems urgent to me now is to state that it is time to return to Mexico, our garden. By being on the moon we have allowed Mexico to get hurt and to deteriorate to the point of collapse. It is time to return. I, at least, have installed myself here with la

Hillary, el Tamal, la Tractor, with the little Carlos, with Viruta (who has just told me in an Oedipal way that he's going to study literature), with the Colima (my firstborn who lives happily with the idea that he has no idea what he's going to do in life) and with all of those beings who have made life livable and enjoyable. In this list I should also do minimal justice and include la Rubia Misteriosa, who gives an electronic presence to these totally pre-cybernetic digressions, to Sandra Martinelli, who cared for this text as her own child, to Juana Inés, who helped me choose the texts, and to Juan Guillermo López, who thankfully published them, work which I supposed has totally wrecked his nervous system and probably produced gastric ulcers in him. We hope they were for something.

A new "Ipiranga" is about to set sail and Mexico seems in a trance and about to be born again. My country and I have survived many attempts by death (time and time again: *¡Fallaste, corazón!*) and today we are about to inaugurate our future. It's about time. I remain here, in my garden, and I understand that even though my memories can still recall the horror of the past, I keep them as an important part of my life.

Just two quotes to conclude: the first one is by Humberto G. Tamayo, whose Programa de un sólo hombre ended with these great words: "I leave you with my reputation so you can tear it to pieces". The other one is by Borges and it's the climax of a poem titled "Casi juicio fina": "Who will dare condemn me/ if this great moon of my loneliness forgives me?"

My dear heart, where do we go from here?

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