

# EMPTY WORDS

*Mario Levrero*

Translated by Annie McDermott



SHEFFIELD - LONDON - NEW YORK

First published in English translation by And Other Stories in 2019  
Sheffield – London – New York  
[www.andotherstories.org](http://www.andotherstories.org)

Originally published in Spanish by Ediciones Trilce, Montevideo, in 1996 as  
*El discurso vacío*.

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ISBN: 978-1-911508-50-2  
eBook ISBN: 978-1-911508-51-9

Editor: Lizzie Davis; Proofreader: Sarah Terry; Typesetter: Tetragon, London;  
Typefaces: Linotype Swift Neue and Verlag; Cover Design: Steven Marsden;  
Printed and bound by the CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CRO 4YY.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

This book was supported using public funding by Arts Council England.



Supported using public funding by

**ARTS COUNCIL  
ENGLAND**



*This book and its contents exist in relation to my wife, Alicia,  
and her world. Although it goes without saying, I should  
emphasise that this novel is dedicated to Alicia, Juan Ignacio,  
and Pongo the dog – in other words, to my family.*

M.L.

MONTEVIDEO, OCTOBER 1996



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## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

When asked by one interviewer to name his influences, Mario Levrero listed Mandrake the Magician, a comic-strip hero who hypnotised his enemies, along with Lewis Carroll, tango music from the 1940s, detective novels, The Beatles and the early days of *Tía Vicenta*, a satirical Argentinian current affairs magazine. 'It's a mistake to expect literature to come only from literary sources,' he said, 'like expecting a cheesemaker to eat nothing but cheese.' The Levrero archive in Uruguay's University of the Republic is similarly heterogeneous, containing records of homeopathic treatment, a guide to yoga exercises, graphs showing how much time he spent on the computer each day, drawings of the students in his creative writing workshops and a personal set of homemade tarot cards.

In Latin America, it's said that Chile produces poets, Argentina produces short-story writers, Mexico produces novelists and Uruguay produces '*los raros*' – the strange ones. Levrero was a *raro* of the highest order, though he rejected the label, complaining that it meant journalists and critics were forever wanting him to do new strange things. 'It would be far more interesting for them if, instead of writing, I committed a murder,' he grumbled in a famous 'imaginary

interview' he conducted with himself. Still, it's hard to think of a more fitting category for this uncategorisable writer who refused to be bound by rules or conventions, and for whom the 'only thing that matters in literature is writing with as much freedom as you possibly can'.

Levrero made his first departure from the conventions of ordinary life at the age of fourteen, when a heart murmur (combined, perhaps, with a dislike of going to lessons) obliged him to stay home from school and spend his days in bed, reading and listening to the tango station Radio Clarín – which, thanks to a system he'd devised involving pieces of string, he could turn on and off without having to get up. He didn't finish secondary school, and has said that the Guardia Nueva tango club in Montevideo served as his university. It was there, for example, that he first heard about James Joyce, and it also gave him the name for the Guardia Nueva second-hand bookshop he ran with a friend throughout his twenties. Though staunchly apolitical in later life, Levrero was briefly a member of the youth wing of the Uruguayan Communist Party, and was one of the protesters who ended up with diarrhoea after fascists poisoned some chorizo donated to a march in support of Cuba in 1962. (José Mujica, later the president of Uruguay, was on the same march.)\*

In 1966, at the age of twenty-six, Levrero wrote his first novel, *La ciudad* (*The City*). It was inspired by the work of Kafka: until reading him, Levrero said, he 'didn't realise

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\* Much of the information in this paragraph is taken from Jesús Montoya Juárez' excellent book *Mario Levrero para armar: Jorge Varlotta y el libertinaje imaginativo* (Ediciones Trilce, 2013).

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it was possible to tell the truth', and *La ciudad* was 'almost an attempt to translate Kafka into Uruguayan'. From this point on, Levrero wrote some twenty books, among them the dreamlike 'involuntary trilogy' of *La ciudad*, *París (Paris)* and *El lugar (The Place)*; the rollicking detective novel parody *Nick Carter se divierte mientras el lector es asesinado y yo agonizo (Nick Carter Enjoys Himself While the Reader Is Murdered and I Expire)*, and the autobiographical *El discurso vacío (Empty Words)* and *La novela luminosa (The Luminous Novel, forthcoming from And Other Stories and Coffee House Press)* – this last, a book with a 450-page prologue explaining why it was impossible to write the book itself, being widely recognised as his masterpiece. It is astonishing, considering the wildly varied nature of his literary output, that it should all form a coherent whole, and yet it does: everything Levrero wrote is instantly recognisable as his.

The novel *Empty Words*, first published in 1996, is a perfect introduction to the *levreriano*, or Levrero-esque. It charts the author's attempts to turn his life around using 'graphological self-therapy': if he can improve his handwriting, he thinks, he'll be able to improve his personality, 'transforming a whole plethora of bad behaviours into good ones and catapulting me blissfully into a life of happiness, joy, money, and success'. And yet as he persists with his daily handwriting practice, he comes to realise that the exercises 'are becoming less calligraphical and more literary as time goes on'. Another kind of text is trying to break through: 'a flow, a rhythm, a seemingly empty form' is guiding his hand, and he finds himself continuing to write without knowing what it is that he's writing, hoping to uncover the mystery of this 'empty' text as he goes.

This is pure Levrero: for him, writing is both a mystery to be solved and a means of solving it; at once a tool for exploring the Unconscious and a by-product of those explorations. Also typically *levreriano* is the way his efforts to understand this mysterious force are discussed in the same breath as his attempts to give up smoking, complaints about the weather, accounts of his dreams, investigations into the inner workings of his computer and musings about the behaviour of his dog. Levrero writes about all these things in the same unmistakable voice, combining an earnestly matter-of-fact desire to make himself clear with a sardonic, deadpan and fantastically absurd sense of humour. Here he is on his worsening mental state: 'I can feel myself getting more anxious by the day, at a rate I can even represent graphically by means of a curve showing my daily intake of cigarettes.' On (short-lived) improvements to his daily routine: 'Allow me to record, so it's known in the centuries to come, that I'm writing this at eight-thirty in the morning.' On trying to program the computer to make sounds: 'After a while, I managed to bring about some interesting bird-like cheeping'. And practising writing the letter r, which he finds particularly troublesome: 'rhododendron, rower, sombrero, bra strap, parricide, reverberate, procrastinate, corduroys (I repeat: corduroys).'

Throughout his literary career, Levrero resolutely denied that he had any such thing. He shied away from publicity, rarely left his house or even answered his doorbell towards the end of his life, and used to boast that he was impossible to interview because his voice didn't show up on audio recordings – which he made sure of by speaking



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in an indecipherable murmur as soon as anyone switched on a tape recorder in his vicinity. And yet, despite his best efforts, he became something of a cult figure in Uruguay and Argentina during his lifetime. Enthusiastic readers and friends went to great lengths to get his work published, and his legendary literary workshops, which focused on liberating the imagination, produced hundreds of students who consider themselves his disciples. Ever since the publication of *La novela luminosa* in 2005, one year after his death, he has been heralded as one of the great Latin American writers of the twentieth century, and it's been an honour and a joy to translate him.

ANNIE MCDERMOTT

LONDON, SEPTEMBER 2018



## THE TEXT

*Empty Words* is a novel formed from two different strands, or groups, of texts. One, entitled 'Exercises', is a series of short handwriting exercises, written with no other purpose than that. The other, entitled 'The Empty Discourse', is a single, unified text that's more 'literary' in intention.

The novel in its current form was constructed as a diary. To the 'Exercises', which were ordered chronologically, I added the parts of 'The Empty Discourse' that correspond to each date, using headings to separate the two. This solution was suggested by Eduardo Abel Giménez as an alternative to my previous method, which had been based on some fairly unreliable typographical variations.

Later, while editing, I removed a few passages and even entire 'Exercises', at points to protect my own privacy or other people's, but always with the aim of making the text less boring to read. I also added the odd phrase or paragraph here and there to clarify the meaning of some references. Apart from these minor surgical procedures, this text is faithful to the originals.

M.L.

COLONIA, MAY 1993

## PROLOGUE

*22 December 1989*

Something within me, which is not me, which I search for  
Something within me, which I sometimes think is me, but never find  
Something that shows up for no reason, shines for an instant, and then

vanishes for years

and years.

Something I also forget.

Something

which is close to love but not quite love,

which could be confused with freedom,

with truth,

with the being's absolute identity –

but which can't be contained in words,

considered in concepts,

or even recorded just as it is.

It is what it is, and it's not mine, and sometimes it's inside me

(but not very often), and when it is,

it remembers itself,

I remember it, I think it and know it.

It's not worth searching; the more you look

the more distant it seems, the better it hides.

Mario Levrero

You have to forget it completely,  
almost to the point of suicide  
(because without it life is worthless)  
(because those who've never known it think life is worthless)  
(which is why the world creaks as it turns).

This is my illness, my reason for living.

\* \* \*

I've seen God  
flash by in the eyes of a whore,  
give me signs with an ant's antennae,  
turn to wine in a bunch of grapes in the dust,  
appear before me in a dream as a disgusting giant slug;  
I've seen God in a sunbeam, giving slanted life to the afternoon,  
in my lover's purple jacket after a storm,  
in a red traffic light,  
in a stubborn bee sucking at a slight, wilted flower,  
trampled and sad in the Plaza Congreso.  
I have even seen God in a church.

11 March 1990

I dreamed I was a photographer, running to and fro enthusiastically with a camera. I was somewhere very large, a kind of warehouse or depot, though it could also have been the lobby of a big hotel, and I was trying to find the right angle from which to photograph two lesbians so that, although they were located fairly far apart in the huge space and even

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at different heights (maybe one was up some stairs), their mouths met in a way that suggested a kiss. They both had their lips painted a deep red. The one closest to the camera was in profile; the other, who was higher up, was facing me.

Later I find myself aboard an enormous double-decker bus – on the roof, or in an open-top area on the upper level. I'm photographing or filming scenes from a big city. All of a sudden there's a commotion, something happening in the distance, like waves crashing over skyscrapers. People tell me it's the end of the world. I photograph the chaos, which is far away and difficult to make out, and feel excited and strangely elated. I wake up with tachycardia.

When I go back to sleep, someone's telling a story (and I see the story taking place), or I'm watching a film, although somehow I'm also part of the action. There's a brown rabbit buried in the snow, and he's burrowing to and fro under the surface, moving quickly from place to place. I start to worry he's going to hit something, a tree or a rock, because suddenly he seems hesitant, but then I find that he's learned to communicate with a dove by means of a system that, in the dream, was explained in great detail. The dove was flying above the rabbit's head, above the snow, and guiding his movements.