

‡ A FALSE EXPLANATION OF MY STORIES

Translated with introduction by Jaime R. Brenes Reyes

FELISBERTO HERNÁNDEZ

Although not very well known, Uruguayan author Felisberto Hernández is regarded by influential writers such as Julio Cortázar, Italo Calvino, and Gabriel García Márquez as one of their main influences. Hernández's oeuvre has not yet been translated completely into English, and research into his stories has only recently begun to gain momentum. Mostly a writer of fantastic literature, Hernández poses questions on memory, subjectivity, and phenomenology, with himself admitting William James, Edmund Husserl, and Henri Bergson to have repercussions on his writing. His story "Las hortensias" ("Daisy Dolls"), for example, plays on the motifs of music (Hernández was a professional pianist), noise, and space, in order to create an atmosphere of fogginess.

In the same vein, the text that I have translated deals with the process of writing a "cuento" (a short story, or a tale). On his account, Hernández prefers not to explain how he writes, but rather to offer a "false explanation"; that is, he accepts in advance that he is not in control of what will come out of his pen. His "explanation," then, makes an analogous move by introducing the figure of the story as a plant, which is not a flora to be seized upon; that is, if the gardener intervenes, the plant would die. The plant grows with its own poetry and rhythm, unknown to itself, Hernández "explains." Drawing on the theme of the future, Hernández's text offers an insight into the strangeness of the process of writing: an act shaping itself in the present without knowing in advance what to expect in the future. Hence, my translation of the text, as is the case in the original text in Spanish, may not make much sense to the reader looking for a graspable or easy to understand explanation. As a false attempt explain how the stories that the writer himself does

not understand come into being, the words I have chosen are also an attempt to transmit the confusion in the writer's mind as well as the sensation that falls upon "the alien" reader as the plant grows at its own pace and rhythm.

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Obligated or betrayed by my own self to say how I cultivate my stories, I will use an external explanation of them. They are not completely natural, in the sense that consciousness does intervene – that, for me, would be unpleasant. However, the stories are not under some type of theory of consciousness. That would be extremely unpleasant. I would prefer to say that their intervention is mysterious. My stories do not have a logical structure. Regardless of the constant and rigorous vigilance of my consciousness, the latter is also unknown to me. At a given moment it occurs to me that there will be a plant growing in a corner of myself. I begin to haunt it, thinking that something strange has occurred in that corner, and that it could take an artistic path. Happy it would be if the idea did not fail. Nonetheless, I must wait for an unspecified amount of time. I do not know how to make the plant grow, or how to help it, or how to take care of it. I only wish that there are leaves of poetry; or that it turns into poetry if certain eyes fall upon it. I must watch that the plant does not take much space, and that it does not try to be beautiful or pretentious. Instead, I make sure the plant grows into what it was destined to be, and help it do so. At the same time, the plant will grow in accordance with its viewer, to whom it does not matter if there are too many big expectations. If it is a plant that knows itself, it will have a natural poetry, unknown to itself. The plant has to be like a person that would live for who knows how long, with its own needs, with discrete pride, at times flippant and improvised. The plant would not know its own principles, even though, deeply, it has laws that its consciousness cannot grasp. The plant will not be able to know to what extent consciousness will intervene; but in the end the plant will affirm itself, and it will teach the consciousness to be disinterested.

What is for certain is that I do not know how I cultivate my stories because each of them has a strange life of their own. But I also know that these stories are continuously fighting consciousness to avoid the strange ideas it recommends.