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## Introduction and Translation of “Los amantes” [The Lovers] by Jorge Debravo

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## Introduction and Translation of “Los amantes” [The Lovers] by Jorge Debravo

### Biography

Jorge Debravo (Guayabo de Turrialba, Costa Rica, 31 January 1938 – 4 August 1967). By the time of his death at the age of 29, Costa Rican poet Jorge Debravo had already published ten books of poetry: *Milagro Abierto* [Open miracle], 1959; *Vórtices* [Vortices], 1959; *Bestiecillas Plásticas* [Plastic little beasts], 1960; *Consejos para Cristo al Comenzar el Año* [Advice for Christ at the start of the New Year], 1960; *Devocionario del Amor Sexual* [Devotional of sexual love], 1963; *Poemas Terrenales* [Poems of the earth], 1964; *Digo* [I mean to say], 1965; and *Nosotros los Hombres* [We mankind], 1966. Two works appeared posthumously: *Canciones Cotidianas* [Daily songs], 1967; and *Los Despiertos* [The awakened ones], 1972. A collection of at least twelve other books of poetry, dating from 1960 to 1967, remain unedited. In 1989 Editorial Costa Rica published a new anthology of his work entitled *Antología mayor*, edited by Joaquín Gutiérrez. The poem, “Los amantes,” appeared in this anthology.

Born Jorge Bravo, son of Joaquín Bravo Ramírez and Cristina Breves, Debravo was the oldest child of five; his father was illiterate and both parents were agrarian farmers in the area of Guayabo de Turrialba, a mountainous farming community west of the capital of San José. In the 1940s Guayabo did not have a primary school; the closest one, in Santa Cruz, was four hours away. His mother, therefore, was the first person to teach him the alphabet and how to write his name. He worked in his dad’s plot of land, and with these earnings he bought his first book, a dictionary. At the age of 14, and after receiving a state scholarship thanks to the aid of devoted teacher in Santa Cruz, Debravo was able to finish his elementary education in the city of Turrialba.

After finishing his third-year of secondary education, he dropped from school and started working for Turrialba's Social Security Office, Costa Rican's socialized healthcare agency. While in this city he published his first poems and developed ties with other local poets belonging to the "Circle of Turrialban Poets", such as Laureano Albán, Marcos Aguilar, among others. In 1959 he married Margarita Salazar Madrigal, and in the next few years, two children, Lucrecia and Raimundo, were born. In 1961, and thanks to his good rapport with workers, he was named inspector, and the Social Security Office sent him to other agrarian cities, including San Isidro del General and Naranjo. Throughout his life as inspector, Debravo was exposed to social problems, such as access to health care, affecting working-class Costa Ricans. In the 1989 prologue to her late husband's anthology of poetry, Debravo's wife recalled an episode in which a politician in Naranjo employed close to 200 workers and refused to pay their social security work fees. Because of Debravo's close ties with the workers and the trust he engendered, he obtained all the names of the workers in the politician's payroll and was able to enroll them for medical benefits (Gutiérrez 11-12).

By 1965 Debravo had finished his high school degree, and a year later he enrolled at the university. That same year, in 1966, he bought a motorcycle, and on the night of August 4<sup>th</sup>, as he was driving back home, he was struck by a drunk driver. He died instantly.

#### Themes in Debravo's work

His working-class background, the international geo-political shifts of the 1960s, and the role of the Costa Rican intellectual inform Debravo's poetic output. In his prologue to the 1989 anthology and edition of major poems, Joaquín Gutiérrez

summarizes some of the main themes in Debravo's poetry: aesthetic principles co-existing with humanitarian ideals; the poet as creator and as active participant in social movements; the effects of anguish and love; the incorruptibility of a good conscience; and the realities of oppressed peoples (33). In a May 1967 interview, three months before his death, Debravo remarks on the various systems which oppress marginalized peoples: "Las oligarquías nacionales, las compañías extranjeras, el colonialismo cultural y las religiones, que han sido, en la mayoría de los casos, instrumentos para adormecer la justa rebeldía de los Hombres" (31; National oligarchies, foreign companies, cultural colonialism and religions, have been, for the most part, instruments to subdue the just revolt of Man). Such a remark is as surprising now as it was then; Debravo critiques three pillars of Costa Rica's economic and cultural life: coffee, Catholicism, and foreign capital. Specifically, Debravo questions the involvement of Costa Rica's coffee-family oligarchies in national politics and economic incentives, the impact of repressive religions, and finally, the on-going neo-colonization of Costa Rican flora and fauna by foreign companies. Today, foreign capital and desires perversely foster Costa Rica's infamous sexual tourism trade involving minors as well as young working-class men and women.

In translating Debravo's "Los amantes" [The Lovers] and in offering this concise biography, I cannot help but recall the life of another working-class intellectual, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937). In his *Prison Notebooks* (written between 1929 and 1935), Gramsci reminds us how organic intellectuals have roots in the working class and represent their realities. Jorge Debravo emerged from a working-class family, and in his work and in his poetry he strived to represent the various ways of achieving liberty.

Liberation in his poetry can be reached by challenging dominant poetic and social conventions: “Soy hombre, es decir, / animal con palabras. / Y exijo, por lo tanto, / que me dejen usarlas” (“Hombre” [Mankind], 80; I am man, in other words / an animal with words. / I demand, therefore, / to be allowed to use them). In “Los amantes,” translated here for this issue, lovers are free from discrete genders, sexual orientations, and from ethnic, class, or racial origins; instead, they have a close kinship with the divine, and with nature on this earth and in the universe. It is a poem about finding kinship with each other not only in life, but also in death. A kinship, as his poetry sadly predicted, that would arrive all too soon for the writer Jorge Debravo.

## Los amantes

Son grandes, venturosos, como hechos de luna, en medio de la noche.

Arden como maderas. Destilan un agua fresca y deliciosa, como savia de los grandes árboles.

No parecen llegar de las rocas terrestres: los imaginamos brotados de las cuevas más salvajes y profundas. O salidos tal vez de un foso oceánico donde han aprendido de las sirenas el arte del abrazo hasta lograr que los brazos se transformen en culebras.

Si no tuvieran nombres como nosotros, no los creeríamos humanos. Los pensaríamos habitantes de estrellas desconocidas, de planetas de trigo.

Entre la sombra se confunden, a veces, con los dioses. Resbalan y se asustan como animales, que es otra manera de parecerse a los dioses.

No osan la palabra: usan el gemido y el arrullo. Las palabras más cortas de la tierra y más palabras, sin embargo.

Cuando regrese a casa le pediré a la Muerte que no venga por ellos. Bello sería que los dejara libres para siempre y que salieran a la calle enlazados, como profetas de un rito vegetal y poderoso.

Nosotros les cantaríamos canciones de alegría y les pondríamos collares de hojas frescas. Grandes collares que les sirvieran como almohadas cuando se hallaren sin almohadas en algún sitio amargo de la tierra. (131-132)

## The Lovers

They are impressive, fortunate, made of moon, in  
the middle of the night.

They burn like timber. They exude fresh and  
delicious water, like the sap of large trees.

They don't seem to come from terrestrial rocks: we  
imagine them sprouting from caves more savage and  
deep. Or rising perhaps from an oceanic pit  
where from sirens they have learned the art of embracing  
until arms achieve the transformation into snakes.

If they had names like us, we would not  
believe them to be human. We would think of them as inhabitants of  
stars unknown, from planets of wheat.

Among shadows they mingle, sometimes, with the  
gods. They slip and are frightened like animals, which is  
another way of appearing like gods.

They don't dare use the word: they moan and coo. The  
shortest words on the earth and more words,  
nevertheless.

When I return home I will ask Death not to  
come for them. Beautiful it would be for them to be free for  
ever and for them to emerge out into the streets joined, like  
prophets of a powerful and vegetative ritual.

We would sing them songs of joy and we  
would dress them with garlands of fresh leaves. Large garlands  
that would comfort them when they find themselves  
without pillows in some bitter place upon the  
earth.

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