

Frida and Frida: From colors to words¹

Graciela Martínez-Zalce*

Like letter-writing, diaries long provided a refuge for the creativity of women deprived of other modes and outlets for literary expression. Very different kinds of people have kept diaries because they wanted to keep a written record of how they spent their days, of their conversations and events ranging from the memorable to the banalities of daily life. A diary can be a genuine memoir of one's most intense and imagination-filled moments, or of the least important ones.

A diary is a hidden, secret text, which strikes us as all the more authentic since it is intended for the diarist's eyes alone. Its fate is an uncertain one: nobody knows whether anyone else will ever read it. Thus we gain access to those which have ceased to be private and have become public writing, thereby revealing the mystery. We gain knowledge of them by vio-

lating their principle: diaries are conceived without thought of publication. This is why they are not considered "works" in the proper sense of the term, since they lack the finish characteristic of other literary texts. Only in some cases, long after they were written, do they go through the vicissitudes involved in publication, distribu-

tion and entry into the commercial circuit. While they may end up in the form of a book, they always retain the characteristic freedom and lack of form that bear witness to their origin. All of this is now the case with the dazzling diary of Frida Kahlo. A door has opened so that we can enter and take a curious look around.

For Kahlo a diary was a form of expression running parallel to her main vocation, painting.



Photo: Eduardo Sepúlveda

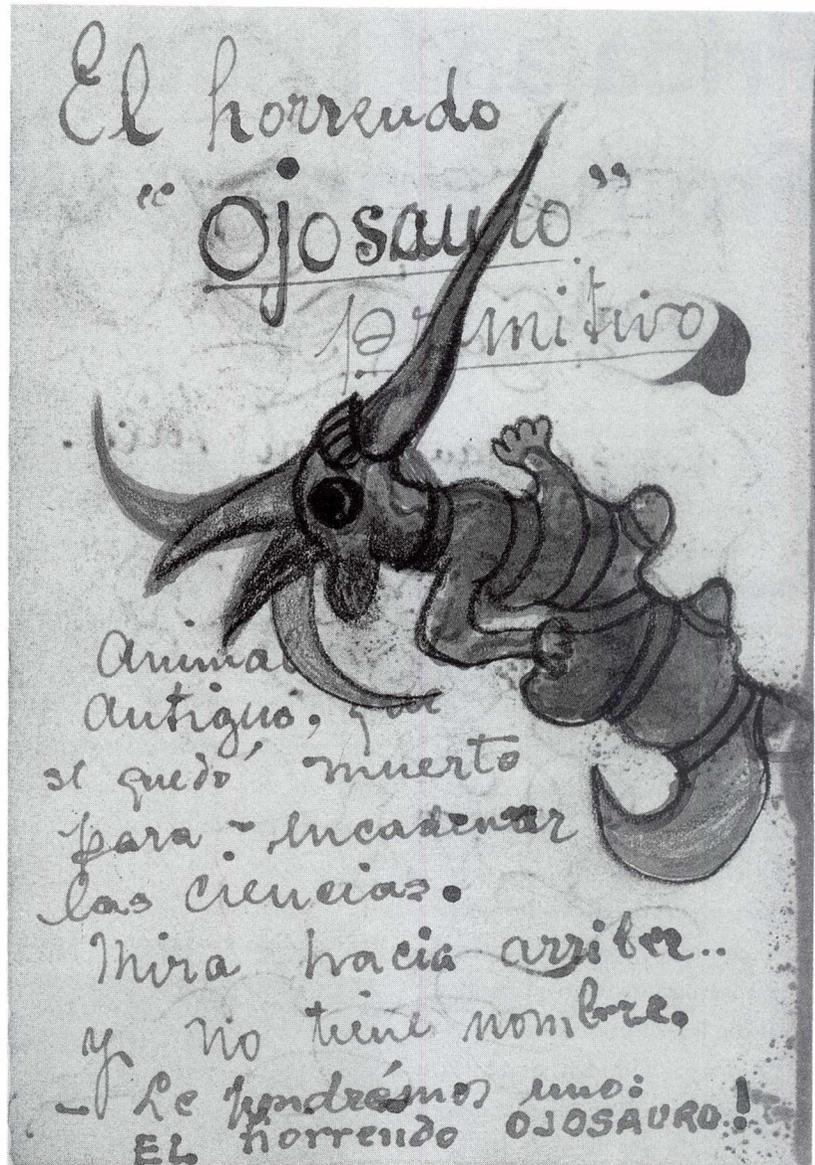
* Researcher on Canadian issues at CISAN.

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The notion of intimacy has always been linked to diary-writing. Is it considered intimate writing because it should evade the indiscreet scrutiny of others? Because it is concerned with private life? Yet in the case of an artist like Frida Kahlo, can one view her diary as the voluntary product of complete confinement? How can we draw the limits of what lies within and without, above all in a text such as this?

Upon reading the text we discover that the internal is but the presence of an "I," a view belonging to the diarist alone, ensuring the continuity and coherence of the text: the personal stamp of the author herself. As is the case with many other artists, for Kahlo a diary was a form of expression running parallel to her main vocation, painting. It was a place for recording her experiences, her projects, even the outline for a theory of art. Opening the diary at random, one immediately sees that it is a kind of chronicle of her creative activity. The text's time frame is a real one (in other words, it is not an artificial reconstruction put together all at once to justify her work), and, for the reader, this makes its intimacy almost irritating, since in these colored pages we find ourselves spying on what is most intimate for the author: her relationship to art. Thus, at first approach, the text is an answer to Kahlo's other work and exists in relation to that work.

More than personal and detailed biographical testimony, Frida's



Diego, "The Ojosaurio."

diary is in essence a dialogue with herself: it is a soliloquy, a privileged place for secrets, a refuge for the woman as individual. This may make it disappointing for those who consult it with *a priori* expectations, since readers are often more attracted to diaries which set forth experiences that can be easily followed. Nevertheless, while it lacks concrete data, names, dates and details, it provides us with

something which makes it invaluable and saves it from the time-worn feeling it would have were it simply a description of its author's daily life. Kahlo's diary tells us about her internal experience. Shut within its pages is a movement of ebb and flow; the text flows easily as the product of confinement, at the same time as it serves as the place where Kahlo took refuge in writing. As a chronicle

of the author's spiritual voyages, it traces the paths traveled by her imagination. In its pages we perceive a tone, a spirit that distinguishes it from a mere essay or book of days. It is a place transformed into sensation.

Frida Kahlo's diary defies scholastic pigeon-holes. Written by a non-professional, it contains a dual movement: the diary makes for coherence, and the very fact of keeping it is a sign of continuity, or at least a certain will to continuity on the part of its author. Where, then, does this coherence lie? The text recognizes no real rules or limits, remaining open to anything and everything. Page after page is given over to composition: drawings, portraits and relics are incorporated, since Kahlo valued them as memorable determinants. But it is possible to find a leitmotif: the coherence of the "I" which writes itself, which draws itself in words and pictures, in letters and colors. The lack of delimitation explains why the diary is marked simultaneously by monotony and great variety: it reflects the tiresome repetition and the infinite diversity that characterize its creator's life. Like all diarists, Frida repeats herself: from one page to another, from month to month and year to year problems return (as is well known by those familiar with her life as well as her work). The characters inhabiting her worlds are identical, her reactions to them are the same, her thoughts are similar.

Thus, the coherence of the "I" manifests itself in the obsessions Frida records in ink on paper, where the pen sometimes refuses to write. Among them are the image of herself, built with words and images, letters and lines; the overwhelming presence of Diego Rivera, made into the noun par excellence, infinitely described in disproportionate terms —Diego the "*Ojosaurio*" [roughly, "Eye-asaurus Rex"], the beloved; illness narrated and portrayed as an extension of oneself. This coherence is also displayed in the fidelity to a vocation: while in her diary Kahlo uses writing, she constructs the text as a work of art and obeys the aesthetic imperatives which play a very important role in it. This is not an illustrated diary; it is a fragmentary text on the verbal level, while visually it is closely related to the rest of the artist's work. While situated on the margins of her abundant artistic expression, the diary itself is a double achievement: it is a theoretical and practical register, a painter's diary mixed together with spiritual meditations as well as extremely free, naked confidences which pass back and forth from one time to another —the time of the experience itself, those of the first draft, the final draft, the successive drafts. Because of its basically discontinuous nature, at times it resembles a set of notes in telegraphic style.

How does Frida Kahlo express herself in the diary? She uses different colors of ink, gives a differ-

ent typographical weight to the words she wants to stress, superimposes some texts on others and illustrates her words; the visual characteristics reinforce the content. But in the final analysis, choosing to keep a diary means something: here, that which is expressed through language matters.

And what does she say? A playful spirit runs throughout this flow, which begins with a list of words. These lists keep appearing: enumerations which are, in the first instance, games of sound, but which may also become games of syntax and even semantics, recalling the linguistic-poetic inventions of the Surrealists. These are poems, at times close to pure musicality, at others to unfettered metaphors and purely verbal imagery.

There is also a series of letters. As a genre, a diary is distinguished from correspondence in that —while neither has well-defined borders— the nature of their relation to "the other," the implicit reader, is quite different. Frida Kahlo was a passionate writer of letters, which have become known as a result of being published in full or in part.² There is a notable difference between such letters, which were sent to someone who would read them, and those included in the diary. The former seem part of an agreeable conversation: they are filled with the picturesque colloquial turns

² Hayden Herrera's biography contains numerous and representative examples of these letters.

characteristic of Mexico City's urban speech, and they relate concrete events from Kahlo's daily life. The latter are introspective; they set forth an analysis of thoughts and emotions in the abstract, without connection to specific events. Many are love letters that make use of poetics, lyrical images constructed with words and directed at the other, Diego, the "you" before which the "I" continuously unfolds in order to refer to itself, sometimes moving into the background. Here the word *Diego* may be found written in different sizes, with different dramatic intentions, as if the diary opened itself to the presence of the other as subject, as a look. Underlying the way this word is written there is the supposition that the text could be read by the person it is addressed to, and this seems to influence the diarist's attitude in portraying this constantly-evoked person. This paradoxical presence, this possible gaze of the other stimulates at the same time as it may annihilate.

Diary-writing always implies a tendency to reflection. In Kahlo's case this manifests itself with regard to her painting: "Who would say that stains live and help others live? Ink, blood, odor." There are literary metaphors directly related to the visual: "I don't know what ink I would use which would want to leave its mark." An outstanding example is the marvelous page with lines of colors: a game in which there is a direct relation between what is said and the color in which

it is written. This is a chromatic and semantic experiment referring both to concrete things (brown is used for the words *mole* [a typical Mexican sauce] and *earth*, green for leaves) and feelings ("distance—tenderness can also be blue"). While less frequent, there is also reflection regarding her ideological and political concerns, as well as about her emotional situation—the latter marked by a strong erotic impulse; the pages are peppered with such words as *alive*, *full*, *sex*, *happiness*, *love*, *tenderness*, and references to fruits, abundance and the enjoyment of life.

Lastly, we encounter stories. Some are fiction, such as the one about a couple who have been taken away from "the country of dots and lines"; this story begins with a balance between written text and pictures and ends as an illustration annotated with just a few words. In the fiction, words are displaced; it is the images which speak with a devastating eloquence.

There are also autobiographical stories, like the one about the origin of the "two Fridas," a childhood story mixing fantasy and reality; or the outline of her life, a text in pure blue, tracing her genealogy. The diary's characteristic tone, belonging to the mode of discontinuity, disappears, giving way to the rhythm of the autobiography, where memory plays an organic and organizing role. Then there is the story of her operations, scrawled in disfigured calligraphy; a prisoner of her illness and a voyager in

her own abyss, the sick Frida keeps a diary which helps her get well. In this case the distance between the events and the time of writing is particularly important. In the midst of her crisis, what remained of her vision? How much of the story has been changed? Because she was an artist, the way in which Kahlo develops all these autobiographical elements—so clearly present in her other, public work—has even more weight.

Nevertheless, I believe it is very important that we not come away with the idea of a Frida made martyr by physical pain. As she notes on one page: "Feet, what do I want you for/if I have wings to fly with?" Wings which gave her a sense of humor. The diary is full of ironic passages such as the one making fun of romanticism: "classic love'... (without arrows), just with spermatozoids." This text is bordered on top by a clothesline with angelic figures hanging from it, and on the bottom by a flock of spermatozoids which travel across the paper towards a winged siren. "Laughter is worth more than anything. Strength is laughing and letting oneself go. Being light" —a proposition that might seem quite post-modern.... And play is ever present, at all levels—artistic and linguistic—throughout the text.

A diary. Writing in freedom. A place where the absence of aesthetic laws established by some "poetic art" allows a more fluid play of the mechanisms of writing. In

these pages, Frida Kahlo is free to say everything, according to the form and rhythm that suits her, with no rule or limit other than those implied by the word *diary*, the discipline of an exercise carried out day after day (despite the interruptions and variations in regularity). The diary is the place where the artist opens herself: a mute confidant which allows her to say everything, paint everything, speak of herself and paint herself completely, to make the leap from colors to words.

What is the impulse we discover in Frida Kahlo's diary? What basic drive pushed her to make this reckoning of her days? It may have been something as simple as the need to write, to write to herself. The need to fulfill a whim which pleased her and which, in itself, was the resolution of her desire. An open form, kaleidoscopic with images and discourse, where the word is more than ever *graphy*, Frida Kahlo's diary is the result of a creative vocation: a symbol of fecundity, a text engendering other texts, a permanent genesis. It is a space of solitude, a solitude at times frightening but indispensable to creation, which, as readers, we enter as voyeurs and leave enlightened, in the company of its final phrases: "I happily await my exit — and hope never to return, Frida." In this mirror writing Frida painted the portrait of herself, that of the other Frida and the same Frida, she of sonorous images, she of words. ^V_M



"Feet what do I want you for / if I have wings to fly with?"

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