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Modernismo, Masochism, and Queer Potential in Nervo's *El bachiller*

Amo más que la Grecia de los griegos
la Grecia de la Francia . . .

—Darío, “Divagación”

La chair est triste, hélas! et j’ai lu tous les livres

—Mallarmé

The habit loves the monk, as they are but one thereby. In
other words, what lies under the habit, what we call the
body is perhaps but the remainder (*reste*) I call object *a*.

—Lacan, *Encore*

That moment in Ruben Darío’s oeuvre when he declares his love for the “Greece of France” as greater than the “Greece of the Greeks” contains a particular *modernista* affectation, that is, the author is declaring his love for a mediated object rather than the object in its “natural” place or state. Greece as articulated by its citizens is just one form of representation, but Greece as the French would have it becomes an object of greater love and desire. This Darian moment has become a linchpin in Latin American *modernista* art, whereby artifice and mediation become of more value and affect to the poet. I begin by focusing on that particular experience of reading the object and self, mediated or filtered *through* the experiences and visions of others as somehow more desirable. Darío’s relationship to France (or Frenchness) has been criticized as being too “afrancesado” [Frenchified], and this quote does

not save him. But what is he in fact borrowing from the French? What is that *thing* that incites a greater love? I would argue that it is more than something tangible, a discernable style, but rather a sensibility, a way of looking at the world. Furthermore, this thing cannot be copied exactly, but it is something that Darío approaches, approximates, and transforms, something he plays with, a thing that he makes or keeps unnamable, yet personal.¹ On another note, to say that Darío is *afrancesado* is to call him mannered or “queer”—in the contemporary sense of the word. Some critics of Darío may in fact have been dismissing his writing with such a homophobic characterization—however, thinking of new templates for queer Latino American identities, I would like to take on the question of Darío’s (and the *modernistas*’) Frenchness, both as a marker of cosmopolitanism, otherness, and queerness, as something desirable, as one marker of difference that must be avowed.

When writing a book on queer narratives and identities, I choose *modernismo* as a particular event in Spanish American literary history very deliberately, and, in so doing, am quite aware that I am constructing (imposing, even) a critical genealogy for the articulation of queer Latino American subjectivities. As Gerard Aching, along with others, has noted “*modernismo* marked the beginning of a Spanish American self-reflection and the conscious literary elaboration of a cultural uniqueness.”² Moreover, “the *modernista* movement brought privileged groups in the region into a burgeoning intertextual commerce with similar reading constituencies in Spanish America, Europe, and the United States,”³ thus, *modernismo* provided a cosmopolitan context for its authors and readers. What draws me to *modernismo*, in general, is that inaugural moment to mark Spanish America’s difference along with its cosmopolitan dimension; in other words, that self-figuration accompanied by that outward gaze. In particular, *modernismo*’s linguistic and cultural mediation offer an important site for rethinking queer identities.⁴ Indeed, I want to argue that *modernismo*’s mediated representation provides a new model to situate and read Latino American queer identities; additionally, I want to make a critical displacement, that is, to dislodge how Latino American queer identities might too often be read through other hegemonic queer identity formulations, namely Anglo American queer theory. I want to advance the following thesis: what *modernista* language does is

appropriate European and U.S. discourses as other—and that appropriation as a strategy of recycling and reinvention becomes an important critical move and figure for Latino American queer identities.

Beyond the question of mediation and artifice, *modernismo* has been read through a series of clichés—from nude bodies and lust, the museum space, overwrought luxury, to the concept of the “*reino interior*” [interior kingdom or realm].⁵ I will not try to deconstruct those leitmotifs or images; rather, I want to dwell on the figure of the *reino interior* [interior kingdom] to rethink how the question of queer subjectivity might be productively elaborated out of this literary moment. In fact, I hope to present a series of models to rethink queer identity that are based on or follow from Latin American cultural and artistic experiences, this just being the first one.

“Closet” vis-à-vis “*reino interior*”

I begin by proposing a genealogy for queer Latino American identities based, not on the “closet”—often reduced to a question of positionality, of inside/outside—but rather on the *modernista* notion of a *reino interior* [interior kingdom]. If subjectivity can be understood as an interior dialogue that leads to a particular narration of identity, I would like to put forth the idea that the *reino interior* might offer us a particularly (autochthonous) model of subject formation that inaugurates the modern queer Latino American subject.⁶ I would like to examine such a thesis in Amado Nervo’s 1895 novella, *El bachiller* [The Student], a story of a sad boy who becomes an even more saddened man.⁷

The story begins with a melancholic description of our hero, Felipe:

Nació enfermo, enfermo de esa sensibilidad excesiva y hereditaria que amargó los días de su madre. Precocemente reflexivo, ya en sus primeros años prestaba una atención extraña a todo lo exterior, y todo lo exterior hería con inaudita viveza su imaginación.⁸

[He was born sick, sick of that excessive and hereditary sensibility that embittered his mother’s days. He was precociously reflexive, and early on he paid strange attention to all exteriors, and all things exterior wounded his imagination with unheard of liveness.]

This excessive sensibility gets mentioned again and again throughout the novella.⁹ Importantly, it affects how he is seen by others:

De suerte que sus dolores eran intensos e intensos sus placeres; mas unos y otros *silenciosos*.

Murió su madre, y desde entonces su taciturnidad se volvió mayor.

Para sus amigos y para todos era un enigma que causaba esa curiosidad que sienten la mujer ante un sobre sellado y el investigador ante una necrópolis egipcia no violada aún.

¿Qué había allí adentro? Acaso un poema o una momia?¹⁰

[Fortunately his pains were intense as were intense his pleasures; yet *some and others remained silent*.

His mother dies, and since then his silence became greater.

To his friends and all others he was an enigma that provoked that curiosity a woman might feel before a sealed envelope and a researcher feels before an Egyptian necropolis not yet opened.

What was inside? Perhaps a poem or a mummy? (*Italics mine*)]

These opening remarks about Felipe's way of being offer us important insight into the text's discursive linkages to a literary tradition. First, the novella is discursively framed by Latin American *modernismo*. To recap, some of *modernismo's* central features include a language that is excessively attentive to details and "all things exterior" or superficial, an interrogation of the relationship between surface and the *reino interior* of the subject. To the above quote, we may apply Gwen Kirkpatrick's insightful description of *modernismo* "as closed space, a silent theater in which rituals, gesture, and erotic ceremonies are carried out, with the body of language itself sharing this endless rehearsal of the rites of self-enclosure."¹¹ Felipe's sense of self is expressed through the language of isolation and alienation; also, he is made other—an enigma. Moreover, what this scene reveals is a protagonist whose sense of self gets doubly concealed: a poem in a sealed envelope, a mummy inside a sealed crypt; in other words, a trope tucked inside another trope, provocatively speaking, a metaphor inside another metaphor.¹² The double metaphoricity of the trope inside another trope suggest a roundabout mode of representing the object, and do something to the act of deciphering and reading it: on the

one hand, the double metaphoric structure produces an insisted-on concealment; on the other hand, I would propose that this structure, in its most absolute simplicity, evokes a desire to maintain or effect the possibility of privacy as part of subject formation. Graciela Montaldo has proposed “una estética del rodeo” [“an aesthetics of circumlocution”] to appreciate the structure of address, with which *modernista* authors articulated their object.¹³ By extension, I would argue that this aesthetic of circumlocution becomes a useful tool to read the queer figurations that we might perceive or identify. The private self vibrates inside the surface that we see. In the case of Felipe, it produces an interior monologue—again, a subjectivity—that challenges the surface-self, in this specific case the corporeal chastity that Felipe purports to own.¹⁴

This dual subjectivity—one interior and uncontrollable, the other visible and *recherché*—is precisely what explains the young man’s turbulent social, sexual, and gender vicissitudes. After his mother’s death, Felipe goes to live with his “solterón” [aged bachelor] uncle who takes charge of his education; Nervo notes clearly: “Su vida [en el Seminario] transcurrió desde entonces sin más agitaciones que las que su viciado carácter le proporcionaba; su fantasía, aguijoneada por el vigor naciente de la pubertad, iba perpetuamente, como hipogrifo sin freno, tras irrealizables y diversos fines.”¹⁵ [“His life (in the Seminary) transpired since then without any more agitation than what his stale character already afforded him; his fantasy life, punctured by the nascent vigor of puberty, moved perpetually, like an unbridled hippogriff, chasing after unattainable and diverse ends.”] We see here that Felipe’s fantasy world is “punctured” by the corporeal—and we recall the earlier characterization that “all things exterior wounded his imagination.” In this passage, I would argue that the penis, in its bulging physicality, rips fantasy asunder; however, this puncturing of fantasy moves Felipe’s self-narrative forward as well. It is as if each thump of Felipe’s pulsating pubescent body (really, his penis) pokes through his “perpetual” fantasies, propelling them into more outrageous scenarios. If we might return momentarily to the image of the “poem inside the sealed envelope” and try to overlap that image with the relationship between fantasy and the immanence of puberty, we run into some trouble. Whereas the poem-inside-the-letter image is quite clear as to the relationship of interiority versus exteriority,

defining the inside-outside structure between fantasy versus the bulging penis is more complex: Is the penis pounding the fantasy world? Is fantasy an escape from the corporeal? Is the penis about to rip fantasy or to enforce it by punctuating it—or both? In other words, in that interior monologue that sets up subjectivity, which thing lies inside the other—fantasy or corporeality? If “all things exterior wounded his imagination,” then does this mean the penis gets cast as being *exterior*—or other—to the self? This bodily exodus raises the question as to whether fantasy or corporeality takes priority? And what does this priority signify? Most importantly, what and how this relationship is read and narrated becomes a difficult task for the critic, yet one in which new (queer) narratives might be otherwise possible.

In Felipe’s religious and sentimental education, one thing becomes clear: that he worships an ideal. His objectification of the ideal takes on two forms—first, a strange heteronormative need for the perfect woman, and second, an ascetic and masochistic spiritual desire and religious fervor. An example of his attention to women appears early on in the novella, “A los trece años, habíase enamorado ya de tres mujeres, cuando menos, mayores todas que él; de esta, porque la vio llorar, de aquella, porque era triste, de la otra, porque cantaba una canción que extraordinariamente le conmovía.”¹⁶ [“At thirteen years of age, he had already fallen in love with three women, at least, all older than him: of this one, because he saw her cry; of that one, because she was sad; of the other, because she sang a song that extraordinarily moved him.”] The reasons for falling in love are weirdly uneven: love produced by a crying woman, a sad woman, and a moving chanteuse. Although we may speculate that what leads Felipe to fall in love is not the women themselves, but rather how they make him feel, what emotions they provoke in him. In fact, Felipe’s act of loving is one in which the women always get cast as objects, never as subjects: he “loves” them, though he never *is loved* by them. Furthermore, we notice that the commonality among the women is their age difference—“all older than him.” Surely this fact points to an Oedipal tension. Whatever affect that comes back to him is narcissistically produced, thereby structuring, effecting and insisting again on a self that is pure interiority, an interiority that reaches outwardly, but refuses to be tampered with or disturbed. The exterior—the body—is ascetically rejected. He longs for an ideal that is described as

[a]lgo grave. Aquel espíritu, sediento de ideal, desilusionable, tornadizo en extremo, había acabado por comprender que jamás saciaría su ansia de afectos en las criaturas, y como Lelia, la de *Jorge Sand*, sin estar muy convencido en las católicas verdades, buscaba refugio en el claustro. En el claustro, sí, porque no era el ministerio secular el que le atraía.¹⁷

[(s)omething grave. That spirit, thirsty for an ideal, disillusion-able, fickle in the extreme, had come to understand that he would never satiate his anxiety in the affect of creatures, and like George Sand's Lélia, without being too convinced by universal truths, sought refuge in the cloisters. In the cloister, indeed, because what attracted him was not the secular realm.]

So, if his introspective and hermetic life is not enough, Felipe becomes further withdrawn from a secular life, and begins privileging a spiritual world. Ironically, he compares himself with Lélia, a woman incapable of physical passion, as an example to follow and thus becomes cloistered. This comparison is quite provocative because it “feminizes” his subjectivity; in his logic, he becomes an object without affect, and this anticipates the conflicts that follow.

Una idea capital flotaba sobre el bátratro de contradictorios pensamientos que agitaban su cerebro. Tal idea podía formularse así: “Yo tengo un deseo de ser amado, amado de una manera exclusiva, absoluta, sin solución de continuidad, sin sombra de engaño, y necesito asimismo amar; pero de tal suerte, que jamás la fatiga me debilite, que jamás el hastío me hiele, que jamás el desencanto opaque las bellezas de objeto amado. Es preciso que este sea perennemente joven y perennemente bello y que cuanto más me abisme en la consideración de sus perfecciones, más me parezca que se ensanchan y se ensanchan hasta el infinito.”¹⁸

[A key idea floated over the Hades of the contradictory thoughts that shook his brain. Such an idea could be formulated thus: “I have a desire to be loved, loved in such an exclusive way, absolute, without interruption, without shadow of deceit, and I need to love likewise; but in such a way, that exhaustion never weakens me, that weariness never freezes me, that disenchantment never dims the beauties of the

loved object. It is essential that this object be perennially young and perennially beautiful, and the more I am humbled (*abismarse*) by the consideration of its perfections, the more these become bigger and bigger to infinity.”]

Initially, it would appear that Felipe wants to love and be loved, that is, occupy both position of loving subject and object of someone else’s love. However, by the end there is an insistence on defining and controlling the other (object). This inability to relinquish control over the object basically amounts to his inability to want to occupy both positions as subject and object. Rather he wishes to remain active as subject, detailing to the very end the perfections (literally, the completeness) of the object—Felipe will always privilege such an active subject position. Therefore, it makes sense that he would describe this conflict (of being both subject and object) as Hades, a hell for him. Instead of imagining multiple positions from which subjectivity and identity may unfold (this kind of creative imagining that is in essence so much a part of him), Felipe shuts out those qualities such as exteriority, being loved, or allowing the outside world to be part of him, since they are considered incompatible for a greater desire of complete control over the self.¹⁹ This is also a clear instance of rejecting relationality as constitutive of defining the subject in the world.²⁰ Indeed, we might remember that the very thing that defines our humanity, what saves us, is allowing the contradiction of multiple positions to coexist. As Frank Browning so eloquently reiterates, citing Oscar Wilde: “What the paradox was to me in the sphere of thought, perversity became to me in the sphere of passion.”²¹ Browning adds that

Reason cannot order and reconcile the multiple and competing surfaces of identity. Passion cannot map and contain the myriad forces and fault lines of desire. Only the fleeting mask, not some illusory face of permanent inner nature, captures the real. Wilde’s writing remains so powerful—and so dangerous—because he celebrates the mask as reality, artifice as nature, just as modern gay culture does.²²

Indeed, the contradiction, or the paradox of the perverse are structures too problematic for Felipe to hold on to. He seems to be trapped in that dichotomy between the imaginary and the material, thus he shuns

one at the expense of the other. Likewise, he seeks to resolve any religious and libidinal conflict through repression of sexual desire, as if that were the sole measure to allow the religious ideal to prosper. He does not realize that both the sexual and the religious operate as drives as well as ideals—and one easily converts itself into the other. We might remember that, throughout the text, the dichotomy imagination/corporeality is grafted neatly over another one, pleasure/pain. Imagination is seen as liberatory and leads Felipe into his more devastating moments of pleasure, whereas the body (or owning a body—in his mind, becoming or being seen as an object) is always considered a source of constraint and pain. The end of this passage in which Felipe expresses his desires presents a new paradox. He must be able to go into the depths (*abismarse*) of his object of desire; this penetrating gaze returns to humble (*abismar*) him. That is, the penetrating and subjecting gaze of the object *subjects* him in turn. This line reverberates with the myth of Narcissus. The gaze into the other devolves into a *mise en abyme*;²³ however, the other's perfections—really, the self's own projections—become mired in an infinite narrative of self-aggrandizement.

These two previous citations from the novella are significant because they show important practices and choices of self-fashioning. Interestingly, all attempts to reproduce a “stable” and knowable self will fail. Although there might be times when the “I” seems imperious, Felipe leaks out his desire to be an object of desire (he wants to be loved). This desire provokes his need to fix—to affix—the self in an enclosed place to secure a sense of subjective integrity.²⁴ Furthermore, Felipe must guarantee that integrity by rigorously entering a life of rituals and cultural religious performance that promise a certain sense of what may appear familiar. We see how he commits to this ritualized life at the Seminary:

Desde el primer día, Felipe dióse a la piedad con empeño tal, que edificaba y acusaba una completa conversión. El era el primero en entrar a las *distribuciones* y él último en abandonar la capilla; y el pedazo de muro que a su sitial correspondía, en ella hubiera podido dar testimonio de su sed de penitencia, mostrando la sangre que salpicaba y que se renovaba a diario, cuando durante la distribución de la noche, apagadas las luces, los acolitos entonaban el *Miserere*.²⁵

[From the first day, Felipe gave himself to being pious with such zeal, that he edified and showed a complete conversion. He was the first to receive communion and the last to leave the chapel; and the piece of wall by his assigned seat would have beared witnessed to his thirst for penance, showing the sprinkled blood that was renewed each day during the evening communion, with the lights out, when the acolytes chanted the *Miserere*.]

Quickly however, what is familiar (the assigned pew) becomes uncanny (a bloodied wall). Specks of blood on the wall begotten in the throes of prayer and ecstasy mark a place for Felipe, and out of this blood-sign we can read a shifting object of desire, no longer a weeping or sad woman, but rather God himself. How foundational it is that what moves his passion forward is no longer a bulge under his robe, but rather the intonation of the *Miserere*, the opening of Psalm 50 of the *Vulgate*, “*Miserere mei, Deus, secundum magnam misericordiam tuam; et secundum multitudinem miserationum tuarum, dele iniquitatem meam*” [“Have mercy on me, God, according to your great mercy and your many kindnesses, erase my iniquity”].²⁶ The chanting gives a context to Felipe’s passion. Felipe enters this phase of his life rejecting women as more than distractions, but as sources of evil. For instance, “[e]squivaba aún la mirada de una mujer, y cada vez que algún ímpetu natural conmovía su organismo, acudía a las mortificaciones más terribles; ya hundiendo en su cintura las aceradas púas del cilicio, ya fustigando sus carnes con gruesas disciplinas, ya llevando la frugalidad hasta el exceso.”²⁷ [“he even dodged a woman’s gaze, and every time some natural impetus moved his body, he rushed to the most terrible mortifications, whether it meant sinking into his waist the steely pins of a cilice, or whipping his flesh with thick scourges, or taking frugality to an extreme.”] Women or rather the emotions provoked in him by them are immediately replaced with self-violence: “Tal mortificación perpetua hacía que su ánima se recogiera más y más en sí misma y que su sensibilidad se volviese más delicada y asustadiza.”²⁸ [“Such perpetual mortification caused his soul to become more and more collected onto itself, and that his sensibility become more delicate and easily frightened.”] Again, we notice an alienation of the interior.

In this context of spiritual desire, Felipe declares that chastity is the virtue that he “most loves.” Through it, he sees his more direct link

with God: “¡Por fin! ¡Ya era todo de Dios; ya había roto por segunda vez el pacto hecho con Satanás; ya podía, como Magdalena, *escoger la mejor parte*, acurrucándose a los pies del Maestro!”²⁹ [“Finally, he belonged fully to God! He had broken for a second time the pact made with Satan; now he, like Mary Magdalene, could *choose the best role*, huddled at the Master’s feet!”] Breaking with sexuality is seen as a break with the demon. Although he seems to break with the devil, ironically, Felipe compares himself with Mary Magdalene—a figure of woman as the humble anointer of feet, the woman weeping at the cross, the first witness of the Resurrection, and the prostitute. It is important that Felipe wishes to “choose the best role,” as the one who lays down by Jesus’s feet, forgetting the Magdalene’s many other roles, most provocatively as a prostitute. What is essential to discern in this passage is that Felipe’s appropriation of Mary Magdalene is quite sensational: he opts to identify with she who performs the lowliest job of cleaning the feet of the “Master.” Moreover, as we have seen with Lélia, he chooses a feminine self-representation again. Together these acts give him a masochistic persona.

Felipe masochist

In fact, I cannot think of a more exemplary literary work than Nervo’s *El bachiller* to read alongside Freud’s 1924 essay “The Economic Problem of Masochism.” Writing almost thirty years after Nervo’s novella, Freud argues with certainty of a primary masochism that does not necessarily reflect the opposite of sadism, yet it is bound to it. He wants to understand “if mental processes are governed by the pleasure principle in such a way that their first aim is the avoidance of unpleasure and the obtaining of pleasure,”³⁰ how and why self-injury and self-pain result as actual aims, eventually leading into a subject formation. Hence, this constitutes for Freud an “economic problem.” *Masochism is an injury of subjectivity that paradoxically produces and culminates in subject formation.* Furthermore, Freud identifies masochism in three forms—erotogenic, feminine, and moral.³¹ It is quite striking to see how these three expressions of masochism are contained in Felipe’s persona. His sense of self is always being represented *as feminine*; for example, Felipe assumes the role of the selfless woman through his characterization as Lélia, Mary Magdalene,

and so forth; *as erotogenic* when he denies sexual pleasure, and in its place he opts for flagellation and asceticism; and, most importantly, *as moral* when he submits completely to the authority of the other and Other, God. Each act of submission permits him to take on a sense of self that is more and more “pure” or rightful. Most importantly, these different masochistic personas flow one into another; one converts into the other easily and seamlessly—most significantly, he never becomes a sadist. This last point is very important to underscore, because it contrasts sharply to Freud’s evaluation of the relationship between sadism and masochism, and their potential to convert one into the other.³²

Freud writes that “[t]he libido has the task of making the destroying instinct innocuous, and it fulfills the task by diverting that instinct to a great extent outwards [. . .] towards objects in the external world. The instinct is then called the destructive instinct, the instinct for mastery, or the will to power.”³³ Freud seems to suggest that the interplay between the libido and the death instinct plays itself out with the dominance of the libido, which diverts the activity of the death drive outwardly onto external objects. This outward expression of the death drive becomes the “destructive instinct.” In other words, in Freud’s cosmology of instincts, the libido (or sexuality) fends off the death instinct, whose expulsion (performatively) gives a subject the characteristic of the will to power. Moreover, Freud notes, that “[a] portion of the [destructive] instinct is placed directly in service of the sexual function, where it has an important part to play. This is sadism proper.”³⁴ This is an important link that Freud makes between the will to power and sexual function. From the outset, sadism is an effect of the externalized destructive instinct expressed *in* and *through* sexual acts. We can extend the argument: some sexual acts contain the will to power; some expressions of mastery may be conceived as sexual. Indeed, this folding of power and sexuality into one another is one of the basic tenets of psychoanalysis.

Freud continues that “[a]nother portion does not share in this transposition outwards; it remains inside the organism, and with the help of the accompanying sexual excitation described above, becomes libidinally bound there. It is in this portion that we have to recognize the original, erotogenic masochism.”³⁵ That is to say, erotogenic masochism is a part of the destructive instinct that becomes libidinally

bound. Thus, *as a sexual instinct*, masochism flows without a source, yet it possesses a logic that can only be discerned by observing its effects. Freud admits that

We are without any physiological understanding of the ways and means by which this taming [*Bändigung*] of the death-instinct by the libido may be effected. So far as the psycho-analytic field of ideas is concerned we can only assume that a very extensive fusion and amalgamation, in varying proportions, of the two classes of instincts takes place, so that *we never have to deal with pure life instincts or pure death instincts but only with mixtures of them in different amounts*. Corresponding to a fusion of instincts of this kind, there may, as a result of certain influences, be a defusion of them.⁵⁶ (Emphasis mine.)

It is here that Freud stresses that the instincts of life and death work together and suggests that they are inseparable. Out of this collaborative work, emerge sadism and masochism as contrasting expressions of the same mechanics. One more time, Freud gives priority to the libido as the “tamer” of the death drive—and not the other way around. But what if the death instincts cannot be “tamed”? He does conclude by stating that it is impossible to ascertain “[h]ow large the portions of the death instincts are which refuse to be tamed in this way by being bound to admixtures of libido.”⁵⁷ What happens when the death instincts are negligibly tamed as might be the case with Felipe? Or, what if the destructive instinct cannot be externalized (and become sadism)—and thus remains bound to libidinal pulsions? As I mentioned above, Felipe’s masochism never crosses over to sadism, but rather converts itself into different masochistic forms. It is easy to see how his repression of desire flows to take on different representations—sometimes as feminine, other times as moral, finally as erotogenic masochism.

If we return to that scene when “[Felipe] was the first to receive communion and the last to leave the chapel; and the piece of wall by his assigned seat would have borne witness to his thirst for penance, showing the sprinkled blood that was renewed each day during the evening communion, with the lights out, when the acolytes chanted the *Miserere*.” This scene also reminds us of Kaja Silverman’s analysis of Theodor Reik’s distinction of what might be called Christian masochism:

She notes that in this particular instance, masochism contains three general elements: first, the masochist requires an external audience encounter; second, “the body is centrally on display; and, third, behind this masochistic scene, we might find a “master tableau or group fantasy—Christ nailed to the cross, head wreathed in thorns and blood dripping from his impaled sides. What is being beaten here is not so much the body as the ‘flesh,’ and beyond that sin itself, and the whole fallen world.”³⁸ Indeed we may argue that Felipe’s masochistic scenario neatly fulfills these three elements: he situates himself as an example to others (the other brothers and choristers are his witnesses); then, his body is rendered in its fleshly physicality, the blood marks in his assigned seat are his signature; and finally, what began as a punishment for desiring a woman becomes a performance of a greater repentance.

Ecstasy

Felipe’s delirium rises to a feverish pitch one night of prayer: “haciéndose desfilar por su mente las dolorosas escenas inmortalizadas por el Evangelio.”³⁹ [“recreating in his mind a parade of painful scenes made immortal by the Gospel.”] His creative mind, often digresses from these images; however, he always returned to his “rightful path.”

Entonces ocurrió una cosa excepcional. Ante él se levantó, perfectamente determinada, una figura; pero no la del Maestro; no era la radiante epifanía del Cristo con su amplia túnica púrpura, con su corona de espinas, su rostro nobilísimo ensangrentado y sus manos heridas por los clavos; era una mujer, una mujer muy hermosa, rubia, de aventajada estatura, de rostro virginal y delicadas y encantadoras formas de núbil, que tendían sus curvas castas bajo el peplo vaporoso y diáfano.⁴⁰

[Then an exceptional thing happened. A perfectly resolute figure rose before him, but it wasn’t the Master’s. It wasn’t the radiant epiphany of the Christ with a full purple tunic, with his crown of thorns, with his most noble face bloodied, and his hands wounded by the nails; it was a woman, a very beautiful woman, blond, taller, with a virginal face, and delicate and charming nubile forms, that spread its chaste curves under the airy and sheer plenum.]

The woman who Felipe conjures up in his mind turns out to be Asunción, the daughter of the foreman at his uncle's estate. We notice that she is characterized as "virginal," "nubile," and "chaste"—triple pure. And, although such a figuration of chastity is what he most prizes, in this scene, such chastity gets inverted and becomes the very thing that awakens his desire. Felipe sees chastity both as something that he wants *in* himself as well as something he wants for himself to possess; chasteness is both an identity as well as a supplement that inaugurates desire for the other.

The woman he desires is Asunción—her name meaning assumption. Not surprisingly, the assumption or spiritual elevation Felipe is looking for is embodied in the name of his object of desire; in other words, his objective—being spiritual—becomes linked with or reified as an object that effects other consequences: "¿Por qué surgía frente a él? Debía, es claro, cerrar los ojos ante la aparición maligna, sin duda, pero ¿cómo, si eran los del alma los que la veían?"⁴¹ ["Why did it emerge in front of him? He surely had to close his eyes before such a malignant apparition, without a doubt, but how, if it were the eyes of his soul that were seeing it?"] The "it," the image that rises before him is this ghostly apparition that he refuses to acknowledge; the "it" is an idealized woman, virginal and blond. Also, the "it" is another erection, so to speak (I repeat, "Why did it emerge in front of him?"). Again, the spiritual elevation he is seeking can only be named with the signifier of a physical erection. So even in his most spiritual of moments, the penis pops up and interrupts that sense of community with the divine. In other words, the process of subjectivity (as that interior dialogue that seeks to transcend the material world) fails. This failure signifies that the arrested development of any interior dialogues—subjectivity or fantasy—is produced by a recalcitrant and ever-present body. The body is that thing which cannot be repressed. Jacques Lacan also reminds us that "the phallus is the conscientious objection made by one of the two sexed beings to the service to be rendered to the other."⁴² The phallic erection is a signifier that disrupts and blocks becoming one with the other.

The question—¿Por qué surgía frente a él?—also and perversely asks why did it *flow out* (*surgir*) before him? In other words, does Felipe cum? "Y su terror, desvaneciéndose lentamente, daba lugar a una sensación tibia y suave que llevaba el calor a los miembros rígidos y aceleraba los latidos del corazón."⁴³ ["And his horror, slowly disappearing, gave way

to a warm and smooth sensation that brought heat to his rigid members and sped up the beating of his heart.”] Felipe’s hysterical reaction to this warm feeling is to cry out, “¡Madre mía, socórreme! ¡No quiero ser malo!”⁴⁴ [“Mother, help me! I don’t want to be bad!”] One cannot help but notice the cry for the absent mother. Indeed, what is fascinating about Felipe is that his Oedipal narrative is always fractured—for example, his mother is dead, he falls in love with older women, also, the only Woman he wants is highly idealized; there is never notice of a father, we only know of his “bachelor” uncle who raises him. Felipe’s real place in the Oedipal triangle is reflected against the real absences of a father and mother; their absences highlight the fantastic nature of the family romance. It is tempting to say that the self is narcissistically or solipsistically rendered and articulated. Later sobbing, he adds, “—¡Te juro que por tu divino Hijo, que está presente, conservarme limpio o morir! ¡Morir!, repitió el eco de las amplias bóvedas, y en la cripta abierta a los pies del altar, las vibraciones sonoras dijeron también: ¡Morir!”⁴⁵ [“I swear in the name of your divine Son, who is present, keep me pure or let me die! *Die!* echoed the wide vaults, and in the open crypt by the steps of the altar, the resounding vibrations also said, *Die!*”] In other words, his (physical) *petite morte* prefigures and culminates in an echoing death sentence. The voice of God gets represented as an echo of the self. In this scene we evidence the *nom-du-père*. The name of the (absent) father emerges as the voice of God, that is, as the non-*du-père*, the chastising and condemning voice of the Father’s prohibition. I am reminded here of that scene when Echo meets Narcissus and she tries to reach out and touch him:

“Let’s meet” [echoes Echo]; then, seconding her words, she rushed out of the woods, that she might fling her arms around the neck she longed to clasp. But he retreats and, fleeing, shouts: “Do not touch me! Don’t cling to me! I’d sooner die than say ‘I’m yours.’”; and Echo answered him. “I’m yours.”⁴⁶

Like in the story of Narcissus and Echo, a narcissist, Felipe gets caught up in the aural allure of the self as other. What is important to capture here is that the voice always returns *as* difference: Felipe’s option to be kept pure or to die returns to him as a singular and devastating command that announces his own death. Felipe appealed to the mother

("¡Madre mía, socórreme!"), but in the end it is the Father who speaks. But it is a very special kind of Father who speaks back—it is the Father as Felipe projects him; ironically, it is Felipe's own voice that returns to punish him. It is as if the Father can never truly be other, but rather the Father is always a return and conversion of the self.

I would like to take up here the concept of the "conversion of the object." What happens when the desire for an object (the ideal woman) becomes replaced by (or converted into) a desire for an abstraction (God)? It is evident that the object of Felipe's desire is God; his desire pushes him to such ascetic extremes to mark, to make material, his grasp and comprehension of God; the bodily mutilation suffered during prayer is Felipe's way of making God present, in other words, of making God into an object. What happens in this "exceptional" moment of prayer is a foundational moment. If we consider that prayer is a form of desiring speech through and out of which "miracles happen," we could easily argue that prayer is a type of speech act. It is at this moment of prayer and delirium that "a perfectly resolute figure rose before [Felipe]." However, as we quickly learn, the figure is not the Christ that he so longs to see, but rather a woman. Thus, Felipe's prayer somehow misfires. His conscious desire for God is overwhelmed by an unconscious desire for Asunción.⁴⁷ Although it is essential to recognize here that both desires are not so different: if God represents a particular abstraction, so does Asunción as a particular representation of an idealized woman, a "beautiful woman, blond, taller, with a virginal face, and delicate and charming nubile forms," and so on.⁴⁸ What I want to show here is that Felipe stops desiring an object, rather he opts for an abstraction—this is what I mean by the object-conversion. An object necessarily implies a certain materiality; the inverse of such materiality generally refers to an abstraction, which when taken to its logical end means the desire for the sublime—whether represented as the divine, Truth, or beauty itself. Desiring an abstraction is really the abstraction of desire. So, in this scheme, it is possible to see that the conversion of the object—as the very institution of desire—leads to a state of indeterminacy, an aporia, to mark the material and the object. Desiring one abstraction is as slippery as desiring another: Felipe's *desire* for God is as understandable as his desire for Asunción, because, for the narcissist, in the end what matters is his desire itself. If I may push this further, the fact of the "conversion of the object" produces an

indeterminacy and replaceability of masochisms—from erotogenic to moral to feminine, and back and forth. This conversion of objects also makes it possible for us to read this text’s queerness. Queerness refers to those circuits of desire that disobey any imposed normativity; appreciating how these circuits function contributes to how new subjectivities are cast into stabilized identities.

* * *

If I have been holding back to talk about the queerness of *El bachiller*, this has to do more with trying to appreciate the textual importance of the novella’s debt to literary *modernismo*, which I argue, in the broadest theoretical terms, offers us a discursive entrance to Latino American queer narratives.

Again, *el reino interior* is about a particular obsession with interiority—as a literary sleight of hand, this trope literally turns surfaces and exteriors as means to peek into the inside of the subject. It is about representation that through a greedy centripetal force draws subjectivity. It overlaps in many ways with masochism’s *turning inwardly* of the death drive. We remember that another tenet of *modernismo* is its outward gaze, giving Latin America a certain degree of cultural import. I would like to juxtapose the inward turns of the *reino interior* and masochism, and the outward expression of *modernismo* and sadism—what we have is a fascinating dialectic between the interior space of what is Latin American proper and an uneasy cosmopolitanism, which gets read as a will to power.

If, as Jade argues, *modernismo*’s “mission is to create a spontaneous, natural, fluid, intuitive language that is truer, more authentic, more representative of the native spirit” (33), then that fluid language must work on two separate levels—one to engage with a painful (almost masochistic) meditation into the self, all the while projecting itself outwardly in a will to cultural power. Forgetting that outward gaze is a danger that leads to Felipe’s tragic undoing.

Masochism Unbound

Due to his increasing and exaggerated masochistic practices around religious fervor, Felipe’s health debilitates—first anemia, then rheumatism of his right leg—so he finally agrees to leave the Seminary and go stay

at his uncle's *hacienda* for some sun and fresh air. There he is cared for by none other than Asunción. This of course represents a spiritual and moral crisis for Felipe: it so happens that his ideal woman becomes quite real and, significantly, he discovers that she has an agency of her own. In Felipe's mind the young woman had "exacto el parecido [. . .] con su fantasma."⁴⁹ ["exactly the same look [. . .] as the phantasm"]. Asunción's own father draws for Felipe a new image of the woman: The older man notes "—Pero ¿no la ve usted que crecida? Ya no es la marimacho que usted conoció; no, no. ¡Si viera qué hacendosilla se me ha vuelto! Ella barre, ella cose, ella aplancha, y aún le sobra tiempo para cuidar de los canarios and zenzontles, a cuál más cantador."⁵⁰ ["But, can't you see how much she has grown? She's no longer the tomboy (*marimacho*) that you knew; no sir! If you just saw what a little hard worker she's become! She sweeps, she sews, she irons, and she even has time to care of the canaries and *zenzontles*, which sing the most."]

Thus, at this moment we witness that the abstraction of desire takes on a particular concreteness. Abstracted desire, repressed by the narrative operations of the Imaginary meets the Lacanian Real; in other words, the fantasy of Asunción becomes quite a Real Asunción, which overwhelms all previous apparitions that Felipe had conjured up of the young girl. Standing face to face with Asunción represents for Felipe an encounter with the Real. I would like to suggest that Felipe now has to define himself *relationally* with the other; whereas before, he had only done so with(in) himself. This encounter with the Real produces an exit from the Imaginary order, and culminates in a horrible evacuation and disappearance of the subject. I have been arguing all along that Felipe's sense of identity has been framed as a very individualistic practice, unable to relate to others. This raises some very important questions about subject formation: What are the implications of subject formation within the realm of the *reino interior*? Is such an individual and narcissistic effort possible? While it has become the prevailing practice to conceive of subject formation as a relational one, what is the significance of Felipe's more narcissistic subject-formation devoid of the presence of the other? To be sure, narcissism has been understood as one approach to theorize the homosexual; however, it might be interesting to revisit this approach. What must have been the delicate condition Felipe found himself in that the presence of Asunción (as the reification of the ghostly apparition) would break him down.

Complaining and whining about his condition, Felipe is bed-ridden. The precocious Asunción comes in and flirts with him. “Ella se le acercaba más y más, y hubieran podido oírse los latidos de ambos corazones agitados.”⁵¹ [“She got closer and closer to him, and one could have heard the beating of both agitated hearts”]. Such flirtiness makes him increasingly uneasy—and he asks her to stop and leave. In a whisper, she finally breaks down and confesses “—No te ordenes, no te ordenes . . . ;Te quiero!”⁵² [“Don’t become a priest, don’t become a priest . . . I love you!”]. The young girl not only confesses her love for him, but more importantly asks him not to become a priest. *Ordernar(se)*, to become ordained, also can be read literally, “to put oneself in order.” Might she be asking him not to submit himself to such a strict set of rules, of imposing on himself a series of “orders” and rules—religious and otherwise—that would exclude him from being with her. Of course this “ordering” of the self represents a disciplinary bond that reminds us of Felipe’s masochism. We could even go as far as to say that Asunción wants him “messy,” for such messiness is precisely the realm of the human. What does he do?

Felipe había tenido un momento para reflexionar. Se veía al borde del abismo, y todos sus tremendos temores místicos se levantaban, ahogando los contrarios pensamientos.⁵³

[Felipe had but a moment to react. He saw himself at the border of the abyss, and all his tremendously mystic fears were raised, drowning the opposite (or contrary) thoughts.]

The girl’s confession of love leads Felipe to the edge of a great fall. His sensible thoughts (here depicted as “contrary”) are drowned out by “mystic fears.” In other words, the sense of right and wrong becomes thwarted by Asunción’s love confession. The other’s love becomes a threat that shatters his narcissism. Later on,

Felipe se sentía perdido; paseó la vista extraviada en rededor y quiso gritar: “¡Socorro!”

Había caído en sus rodillas, con sus ropas, el cuaderno que leía, y la palabra *Orígenes*, título del capítulo consabido, se ofreció a una punta de su mirada.

Una idea tremenda surgió entonces en su mente . . .

Era la única tabla salvadora . . .