

HOMOTEXTUALITY IN THE WRITING OF ÁLVARO POMBO:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON
EXISTENTIAL DISSONANCE AND AUTHENTIC BEING

by

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Abstract

In this study I examine the literary and philosophical engagement with homosexuality (“homotextuality”) of the Spanish writer Álvaro Pombo (1939). Pombo spent eleven years in exile in England from Franco’s National-Catholic Spain, and he returned to his homeland at the dawn of its transition to democracy in 1976. Pombo’s literary efforts coincide with a re-emergence of Spanish homotextual writing (Goytisolo, Moix, Cardín, de Biedma, et al.) before and during the *Transición*. Although homosexuality as a central leitmotif encompasses all phases of his prodigious literary output, Pombo’s homotextuality has been, with few notable exceptions, dismissed by gay critics as self-loathing and homophobic, and has been all but ignored by mainstream critics. This omission, I argue, owes to a fundamental misreading of Pombo’s dialectical and philosophical approach to homotextuality.

In my analysis I show that Pombo’s opulent, eclectic writing style emerges as an interrogational dialectic that deconstructs the nature of the existential alienation that has perennially shaped the lives of homosexuals living within the preponderant domain of heterosexuality (“heteronormativity”). Pombo’s dialectic is in trenchant engagement with a historical epistemological discursivity (and literary tradition) that essentializes homosexuality as a perversion of the “natural, truthful order” (what I call “heterologocentrism”). Using the deconstructive methodology of queer theory (Edelman, Butler, Llamas, Dollimore, Hocquenghem, et al.) and the philosophical frameworks of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Taylor, among others, I demonstrate that Pombo’s homotextual narrative radically challenges and unsettles heterologocentric discursivity related to “unnatural” homosexual Being (or homosexualisms in all their manifestations). At the same time, I show that Pombo’s

dialectic characterizes as “inauthentic” what he perceives to be the frivolous, hedonistic (Dionysian) behaviours of homosexual solipsism. Furthermore, I argue that Pombo’s dialectic forcefully prescribes an authenticity of Being, which confronts the fear and degradation of the homosexual’s historical situatedness and impels the subject to engage truthfully, ethically, morally, and without prevarication or dissemblance with the subjective Other. Pombo’s narrative concerning authentic Being compels the subject to “overcome” the shackles of oppression inherent in the situatedness of a denaturalizing morality and alterity and “to be who one is,” as Nietzsche says, while simultaneously rejecting inward-turning nihilism.

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List of Abbreviations

Provided below is a list of abbreviations for the titles of Álvaro Pombo's novels and short stories that I analyze in this study:

CN	<i>Contra natura</i>
ECR	<i>El cielo raso</i>
EP	<i>El parecido</i>
HA	<i>El hijo adoptivo</i>
HMM	<i>El héroe de las mansardas de Mansard</i>
LDI	<i>Los delitos insignificantes</i>
MPI	<i>El metro de platino iridiado</i>
RFS	<i>Relatos sobre la falta de sustancia</i>

Notes and List of Terms

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of non-English texts in this document are mine, and I assume all responsibility for the contents and accuracy thereof.

Throughout this manuscript I generally refer to the homosexual subject in the masculine gender, using masculine pronouns. While it is true that Pombo's writing focuses almost exclusively on the experiences of male homosexuals, I use the masculine gender and pronouns only for the sake of convenience.

Provided below is a compilation of the most commonly used technical theoretical terms in this manuscript. A more detailed discussion of these terms, and their applicability to Álvaro Pombo's writing, is contained in the body of my study.

Authenticity: Authenticity describes an existential state of Being in a world of spatial and moral orientation where life is structured according to certain frameworks of "meaning." Within these frameworks of meaning there must be a perception of "mattering" in respect of how one engages Others and life's experiential situations. Authenticity embodies a recognition on the subject's part of his responsibility in the shaping of his own existence, irrespective of the historical and social circumstances in which he finds himself. With regard to Pombo's homotextuality, authentic existence means "overcoming" abjection, being true to oneself, and resisting the denaturalizing discourses of heterologocentrism.

Existential dissonance: Existential dissonance describes the sense of alienation and invisibility that a person feels as a result of existing phenomenologically and experientially within a realm that considers his existence to be unnatural, perverse, and not in conformance with “normative” society. This state of dissonance often results in prevarication and dissimulation of the self in one’s engagement with Others. With regard to Pombo’s homotextuality, existential dissonance refers to a state of nihilistic and solipsistic abjection related to the homosexual’s alienation within heteronormativity. However, existential dissonance can also refer to a deliberate subversive or transgressive state of resistance (by virtue of homosexual Being) to heterologocentric discourses concerning homosexual denaturalization.

Heterologocentrism: Derived from Derrida’s conception of logocentrism, heterologocentrism represents the overarching epistemological discursivity (religious, social, political, and cultural) related to ideas, writings, and systems of thought about homosexuals that is fixed and sustained by some authority or centre external to them, whose meaning, validation and truth it conveys. The discursivity of heterologocentrism regards homosexuality as an unnatural perversion and distortion of “authentic” human existence—authentic in this case being heteronormative.

Heteronormativity: Heteronormativity describes the institutionalization of sexuality, including eroticism (sexual attraction), sexual intercourse, and social conventions such as marriage, raising a family, etc., as issuing “naturally, universally, and monolithically” from and existing exclusively within a relationship between a man and a woman.

Homographesis: Homographesis is a term coined by Lee Edelman (*Homographesis : Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (1994)) and relates to the depiction of homosexuals in Western literature from the perspective of their “unnatural” alterity, i.e., homosexual men are conceived as (or as wanting to be) women and homosexual women, as men. Homographesis describes the Western tradition of writing that names homosexuality as an essentialized, secondary, sterile, and parasitic form of social and sexual representation that stands in abject relation to heteronormativity.

Homotextuality: Homotextuality has come to be a standard term in the description of homosexually themed literature, that is, literature where homosexuality (intentional, experiential, phenomenological) as leitmotif occupies a central protagonistic role. Homotextuality is a writing of deviance, founded on a notion of textuality, that subverts traditional heteronormative narrative paradigms and the norms they support. The transgressive component of homotextuality challenges,

disrupts, and disturbs the hegemonic tenets of heterologocentric discursivity.

Intentionality:

Intentionality is a term taken from phenomenological philosophy. Intentionality refers to the essential character of consciousness itself and posits that every act of consciousness (i.e., our perceiving of all natural phenomena of existence) has an intentional object towards which consciousness itself is directed. In other words, we must have something of which we are conscious in the act of experiencing our existence (our Being-in-the-world). Intentionality is the fundamental characteristic of relatedness, that is, the intersubjectivity that binds us to one another within our experiential realm.

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Dedication

To my Beloved Mother

María García Fajardo

of Blessed Memory

Introduction

Theoretical Framework

Homosexuality is based on a fundamental lie. There can be no good (the object of ethics) that is not based on truth (the object of ontology). In a homosexual relationship between men, one of them assumes a female role; in a homosexual relationship between two women, one of them assumes a male role. Furthermore, even the masculine man in a male homosexual relationship is not relating to a real woman, but rather, to his male alter ego. Even the feminine woman in a female homosexual relationship is not relating to a real man, but, rather, to her female alter ego. And even if each participant in a male homosexual relationship asserts he is wholly masculine to the other, and even if each participant in a female homosexual [sic] asserts she is wholly feminine to the other, this celebration of absolute masculinity or absolute femininity belies the very biological truth of the essentially intersexual relatedness attested by the fact that the sexual organs and the organs of procreation are the same. (David Novak, "Some Aspects of Sex, Society, and God in Judaism," in *Contemporary Jewish Ethics and Morality*, p. 276)

Heterosexuality, I now think, is invented in discourse as that which is outside discourse. It is manufactured in a particular discourse as that which is universal. It is constructed in a historically specific discourse as that which is outside time. It was constructed quite recently as that which is very old: heterosexuality is an invented tradition. Heterosexuality, claims our dominant hypothesis, is emphatically not just a norm, not just one possible vision of the place of *Eros* in the intimacies of different sexes, not just one ideal that should or should not continue to rule in practice. It is not just one particular historical sex-differentiated erotic system. The discourse that heterosexuality just is denies the politics and history of this truth's production. Finally, this discourse asserts that, because heterosexuality just is, there's nothing we can do about it. (Jonathan Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, p. 182)

The Writing of Homotextuality

Álvaro Pombo (Santander, 1939) is a contemporary Spanish writer who has in recent years achieved tremendous notoriety and acclaim for his writing. In the initial stages of his career, Pombo toiled in relative obscurity—perhaps owing to his almost exclusive focus on a homosexually themed narrative. However, in the latter part of the twentieth and beginning of the

twenty-first century, Pombo has emerged as one of the most accomplished authors in contemporary Spanish letters. Pombo has won numerous accolades for his writing and was elected in 2004 as a member of the Real Academia Española. Pombo spent his formative years in a Spain that was unfettering itself from the legacy of a repressive, homophobic dictatorship, as well as from a bitterly divisive civil war that had dominated virtually every aspect of Spanish cultural and intellectual life for decades. Pombo's phenomenological philosophy and homosexual-centric narrative were profoundly influenced by these circumstances, and the transition from a National-Catholic dictatorship to democracy allowed him to give free rein to this voice.

In this study I look at three fundamental aspects of Álvaro Pombo's writing concerning homosexuality: (1) the exploration of the homosexual's existential situation as an expression of homoerotic intentionality;¹ (2) the exposition of homosexual existential dissonance² as a manifestation of the homosexual's sense of dislocation and marginalization within the cultural and social realms of heteronormativity; and (3) the interrogation of the moral and ethical consequences of living an authentic life³ in view of the difficulties and "moral displacement" inherent in homosexual alterity. In my study I show that Pombo is exceptional—and in this regard is one of the few writers of his generation—for the way that (and the extent to which) he

¹ I use homoerotic intentionality to refer to the manner in which the individual subject experiences the phenomenon of same-sex eroticism, as expressed in the consciousness or the physical praxis of such. Intentionality is a term taken from phenomenological philosophy, and is generally attributed to Husserl. Intentionality refers to the manner in which phenomena are perceived as aspects of the "lived experience" of the individual subject. See Robert R. Magliola, *Phenomenology and Literature* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1977), p. 35. See also Hugh J. Silverman, *Inscriptions: Between Phenomenology and Structuralism* (New York: Routledge, 1987), p. 17.

² Existential dissonance is a term that I use to describe the sense of alienation—as self-erasure—and invisibility that resulted from the oppression that homosexuals experienced in Francoist Spain and, to a significantly lesser extent, as the country transitioned to democracy. I also use "homosexual existential dissonance" more generally, to refer to the sense of abjection, degradation, dislocation, and denaturalization that the homosexual experiences within the realm of heteronormativity. For Pombo, this condition often gives rise to pervasive solipsism and nihilism.

³ Authentic existence refers to the act of living a life without fear, trepidation, prevarication, and dissimulation with regard to one's relationship to oneself and the external world. According to Nietzsche, it is essential that one free oneself from guilt, resentment and rage against the contingency of life. The following Nietzschean aphorism comes from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: "Whoever is dissatisfied with himself is continually ready for revenge, and we others will be his victims, if only by having to endure his ugly sight." (274). See Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 4th ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 330.

expounds on the phenomenology of homosexuality in his writing. I contend that Pombo inscribes homosexuality in Spanish letters in an original, transgressive, and dialectical manner that refutes and contravenes denaturalizing “heterologocentric”⁴ discourses concerning homosexuality that have historically characterized Western literature, and no less Spanish literature.⁵ Pombo’s transgressive inscription of homosexuality in Spanish literature is essential to my analysis because it addresses Pombo’s preoccupation with the need to overcome (in the Nietzschean sense) the overwhelming degradation and abjection that fixity in existential dissonance brings and that only authenticity in Being can remedy.

Pombo has inscribed homosexuality in his writing (short stories and novels) from the very outset of his literary production. In writing about homosexuality, or rather the phenomenological experience in consciousness of homoerotic intentionality, Pombo directly confronts this phenomenon and how this experience transforms, or profoundly affects, the subject’s existential realm, in particular the way the subject engages intersubjectively with Others. Thus, Pombo’s narrative explores the phenomenon of homoerotic intentionality as problematic, as dissonant, as requiring a new epistemological conceptualization in the face of a predominant culture that views it as unnatural and as essentially irreconcilable. Pombo’s narrative about homosexuality needs to be viewed as a continuum and as an intensely self-reflective conceptualization of the authentic self. Moreover, Pombo presupposes authenticity to exist in a dialogical formation with the Other in order to be significant—what Charles Taylor

⁴ I use the term “heterologocentrism” (and “heterologocentric”) to refer to, for the most part, religiously inflected ideas concerning homosexuality, which perceive homosexuality as essentially and perversely insidious, and in violation of (God’s) natural law. I derive the term from Derrida’s concept of “logocentrism.” See Valentine Cunningham, “Logocentrism,” in *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory*, ed. Irena R. Makaryk (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), pp. 583-584.

⁵ My intention is not to survey the history of homosexuality in Spanish or Western literature. That is clearly the topic of another study. I am merely referring to how homosexuality has been treated as a literary subject in Western literature, to the extent that it is dealt with at all.

calls our entangled “horizons of significance.”⁶ At the heart of Pombo’s narrative about homoerotic intentionality is the exploration of the consciousness of Being in one’s experiential field: how the subject reacts to and acts upon his erotic intentionality in the face of what seems to be, at times, unremitting societal opprobrium based solely on the homosexual subject’s desire and willingness to engage in a range of different sexual, and to be sure as well, cultural and social practices. This is the novelty of Pombo’s philosophical approach to literature from the perspective of the homosexual experience, and what makes his writing so compelling for an audience that has had so little exposure to this literary subject.

Another crucial aspect of my analysis of Pombo’s writing about homosexuality is the concept of “homotextuality.”⁷ I borrow this term from Richard Ellis, who speaks of the “homotextual narrative” as a kind of self-conscious writing about homosexuality where the author directly transcribes personal experiences dealing with homoeroticism. Homotextuality has come to be a standard term in the discussion of homosexually themed literature; that is, literature where homosexuality as leitmotif occupies a central protagonistic role, and where homosexuality itself is frequently autobiographical. Homotextuality, then, is a means for analyzing how Pombo approaches the subject of homosexuality within his texts. For Pombo this means situating homosexuality within the larger context of humanity and exploring how the homosexual inserts himself into the vortex of heteronormativity as an Other, as a visible representation of alterity. I am not referring to the autobiographical elements of Pombo’s narrative per se—these, in any event, are irrelevant to my analysis—but rather to how Pombo considers authentic behaviour in light of the degraded historical situatedness of homosexuality. I consider Pombo’s homotextual

⁶ According to Taylor, the horizon of significance is the formative criterion of “self-determining freedom” that our free will confers: “Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order *matters* crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial. Authenticity is not the enemy of demands that emanate from beyond the self; it presupposes such demands.” See Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 38-41.

⁷ See Robert Richmond Ellis, *The Hispanic Homograph: Gay Self-Representation in Contemporary Spanish Autobiography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), p. 43.

narrative beginning with the transition to democracy in Spain in the mid-1970s and explore its evolution throughout the subsequent decades of the twentieth century to the present. I contend that through his homotextuality, Pombo is elaborating a different kind of homosexual existential leitmotif that is by and large morally grounded. By using the term “existential leitmotif,” I am referring to the literary and philosophical poetics that Pombo uses to rewrite the subject of homosexuality, and specifically how Pombo uses homosexuality, from its position of marginalization and objectification, as a metaphor for subaltern resistance to heterologocentrism.

I address some of the following questions in this study: (1) What is transgressive about Pombo’s inscription of homosexuality in Spanish letters; what is distinctive about Pombo’s narrative technique in this regard? (2) In what ways is Pombo’s writing phenomenological; what does Pombo’s phenomenological homotextual writing say about epistemological schemes of “homonormativity”? (3) How does Pombo’s narrative construe homosexuality as existentially dissonant? (4) What does Pombo mean by “overcoming” the degradation and abnegation that give rise to existential dissonance; how is existential dissonance a means of ideological or subversive resistance to heterologocentrism? (5) What are the ethical and moral dimensions of Pombo’s depiction of authentic Being; how does authenticity in Being relate to homosexual existential dissonance? (6) How is it possible for an authentic homosexual existence to subsume itself within the greater heteronormative paradigm, however subversive or harmonious the case may be?

This monograph does not look at Pombo’s writing in precise chronological sequence, although one will generally be able to perceive a chronological progression in the intensity and scope of the homotextual discourse throughout the novels in this study. Among the novels that I include in this study, listed in chronological sequence, are: *Relatos sobre la falta de sustancia* (1977), *El héroe de las mansardas de Mansard* (1983), *El hijo adoptivo* (1984), *El parecido*

(1985), *Los delitos insignificantes* (1986), *El metro de platino iridiado* (1990), and *Contra natura* (2005). I make occasional references to *El cielo raso* (2001) in chapter V when I discuss Pombo's polemic with religious heterologocentric discourses.

Not all of Pombo's writing deals with homosexuality, and there are several novels in his corpus that only remotely speak to the subject. Consequently, I exclude the non-homosexually themed texts from my study, except in instances where I make specific reference to a text that elucidates homotextual aspects of another text under discussion. The excluded novels include: *Aparición del eterno femenino* (1993), *Telepena de Celia Cecilia Villalobo* (1995), *Donde las mujeres* (1996), *Vida de San Francisco de Asís* (1996), *Cuentos reciclados* (1997), *La cuadratura del círculo* (1999) and *La fortuna de Matilda Turpín* (2006).⁸ I intend to demonstrate that throughout Pombo's writing there is a perceptible progression in the intensity and philosophical scope of his homotextual discursivity with regard to how the homosexual subject situates himself—historically, culturally, socially, and experientially—within the greater heteronormative domain of his existence.

In this chapter I define the theoretical and methodological framework for analyzing Pombo's writing as homotextual fiction. In the course of analyzing the literary motifs of the author's novels, I also delineate the various philosophical and deconstructive modes of analysis that I believe are most pertinent to Pombo's densely textured writing in respect to a problematic, existential homosexual Being. I also look at the state of the contemporary criticism (the State of the Question) that concerns Pombo's texts, focusing principally on existing homotextual criticism. I organize the subsequent chapters in this study in the following order:

⁸ Only two of the novels from this excluded group (*La cuadratura del círculo* and *La fortuna de Matilda Turpín*) even remotely evoke a homosexual theme: in *La cuadratura*, which takes place in medieval times, there is an allusiveness to the rampant and promiscuous bisexuality among the novel's protagonists. In *La fortuna de Matilda Turpín*, one of the story's main characters, Fernando Campos, is homosexual, and some existential strife concerning his homosexuality does emerge, but by and large the predominant homotextual themes and premises of previous texts are absent.

Chapter II: The second chapter describes the emergence of the homosexual trope as homotextuality in the early writings of Pombo. In this chapter, I deal with the early novels and short stories (*Relatos sobre la falta de sustancia* (1977), *El héroe de las mansardas de Mansard* (1983), and *El parecido* (1985)) that Pombo wrote prior to, during, and in the midst of the transition to democracy in Spain.⁹ Rather than provide an extensive analysis of each of the short stories and novels, as I do for more primary texts in later chapters, I focus on the delineation of particular motifs concerning the homosexual existential condition; viz., homosexual alienation, moral abrogation, conflation of reality and irreality, nascent homoeroticism in children, avuncular love,¹⁰ *puer-senex*¹¹ erotic entanglements, etc., and show how these motifs inform the texts in question. I pay particular attention to the narrative and the philosophical underpinnings of Pombo's homotextual discourse in these texts as the first steps towards Pombo's more substantial effort at phenomenological inscription of homosexuality in Spanish literature.

Chapter III: The third chapter focuses on the novel *Los delitos insignificantes* (1986). This novel represents a marked evolution from the introspective and highly stylized representations of the homosexual subject that Pombo produced in his early writing. In *Los delitos insignificantes*, Pombo exposes the ravages internalized homophobia has had on its principal protagonist, Gonzalo Ortega, and shows how this state of self-imposed existential repression eventually consumes him and leads him to take his own life. Pombo unleashes the full force of philosophical scrutiny to penetrate the degraded nature of this profoundly troubled man. As is the case in the early novels, *Los delitos insignificantes* takes place in a predominantly "heterorelational" environment. I use heterorelational following Richard Ellis to refer to a

⁹ I omit from this study any extensive analysis of *El hijo adoptivo* (1984). Although this work does bear on Pombo's homotextual endeavours, it is not significantly demonstrative of the narrative techniques that Pombo uses to explicate homosexuality as a literary phenomenon. Nevertheless, I make references to this work where appropriate.

¹⁰ Avuncular love is a persistent leitmotif in Pombo's homotextual writing. It relates specifically to an unrequited love of uncles for nephews.

¹¹ *Puer-senex* (from the Latin *puer* for boy, and *senex* for old) is another Pombian homotextual leitmotif that relates to quasi erotic relationships between older men and, more often than not heterosexual, younger men.

situation wherein the homosexual is completely subsumed in and acts entirely in accordance with his sexuality and homosexual desire as a spurious approximation of heterosexual behaviour.¹²

Chapter IV: The fourth chapter deals with Pombo's most highly acclaimed and well-received text, *El metro de platino iridiado* (1991). From the perspective of Pombo's homotextual evolution, this story provides an in-depth exploration of the consequences of interiorized homosexual solipsism, which results from a deeply felt sense of oppression and general misanthropy. *El metro de platino iridiado* exemplifies the convergence of a number of motifs that are crucial to the delineation of the Pombian homotextual protagonist: the quest for authenticity in homosexual being, along with issues of ethics and morality associated with living life intersubjectively; unrequited avuncular love; diverse manifestations of homosexuality; and irresolvable estrangement within heteronormativity as a result of unrelenting homophobia.

Chapter V: The fifth chapter explores Pombo's contemporary text *Contra natura* (2005). In this chapter, I describe the full evolution of Pombo's homotextual enterprise, where homosexuality is no longer conceived as a form of ontologically based, self-conscious abjection and where ethical and moral consequences in the subject's striving to lead a consequential, authentic life, irrespective of sexual orientation, become paramount.

Contra natura is Pombo's magnum opus with regard to the homosexual question. *Contra natura* takes place in a context almost entirely devoid of cultural or epistemological references to heteronormativity. From a narrative perspective, the novel deals with homosexuality as if it were its own predominant reality. There is scant reference to heteronormative oppression, and the characters all assume their homosexual inclinations as if this were the standard, and unproblematic, norm of their existence. Nevertheless, in spite of the

¹² See Robert Ellis, *The Hispanic Homograph: Gay Self-Representation in Contemporary Spanish Autobiography*, p. 41.

relative “free universe” in which the novel’s subjects operate, the homosexual subject must ultimately find his own ethical and moral moorings in a world of postmodern dissolution and moral relativism. This novel evinces in every respect the great Pombian obsession with the fundamental importance of moral agency that is complicated by yet transcends any historically and culturally determined relationship. In *Contra natura* the postmodern homosexual has transcended abject homosexualisms but inhabits nonetheless a decentred universe informed by heterologocentric discourses, driven largely by religious dogma pertaining to homosexual objectification. In this text, Pombo exhibits his most trenchant ideological and philosophical writing with regard to homosexual identity, as well as how the homosexual manifests this identity within the rapidly evolving circumstances of postmodernity.

Conclusions: In the conclusion to the monograph I summarize my principal theoretical and critical analyses in respect to the Pombian homotextual enterprise.

Theoretical Perspectives

In order to understand the type of phenomenological inscription of homosexuality in literature that Pombo is undertaking, which I consider to be the fundamental thrust of his homotextual writing, I must first make clear what I understand this philosophically grounded undertaking to consist of. I define “phenomenological homosexuality” as an expression of conscious homoeroticism that imparts an identity to the subject through his sexual praxis, as well as the social, cultural, and historical circumstances of his situatedness in the world as existentially dissonant. This state of existential dissonance is expressed in the intentionality of the text, which itself reflects the historically and culturally rooted experiences of the author who reveals them. I rely mostly on the phenomenologically oriented texts of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Gadamer for my analysis, but also on other philosophical perspectives (Taylor, Kant, Nietzsche, Spinoza, and Plato) where appropriate.

From the perspectives of “queer” criticism, I draw upon Lee Edelman’s concept of homographesis, which describes homosexuality’s reduction in mainstream literary discourse to a type of metaphorical essentialism for the way homosexuality as Being is ascribed to the subject’s sexual praxis and bodily nature (*physis*)—the subject’s “sexual orientation” as existential ontology, as it were. I use Edelman’s notion of homographesis to examine Pombo’s depiction of different types of homosexual signifiers—camp, drag, and promiscuous sexual behaviour, among others—that have stood as metaphorical symbols of homosexual identity. I rely as well on Jonathan Dollimore’s concept of transgressive homosexual inscription, which deals with the incongruence of the homosexual within the larger social, cultural, and epistemological domain of his existence. Dollimore’s transgressive inscription relates to homosexuality’s incongruous but necessary existence alongside heteronormativity as a form of proximate dissonance that disturbs the established epistemological order of heterologocentrism by virtue of its inescapable presence.

There is also a Spanish analysis of “queer” literature that, while largely influenced by many of the critical and theoretical movements emanating from North America (principally) and other parts of Europe, has a unique cultural and historical perspective on the situation of homosexuality and literature about it in Spain. Although there is a dearth of critical queer studies writing that has materialized from within the Hispanic realm, a cadre of writers has come forth in recent years (Ricardo Llamas, Óscar Guasch, Alberto Mira, Juan Vicente Aliaga, et alia) who have attempted to frame the discussion of “queerness” from a distinctly Hispanic perspective. Aliaga’s book *Identidad y diferencia* (1997) was a milestone in Spanish homotextual criticism for its thorough investigation of trends, influences, and manifestations of homosexual art, literature, and film in Spain. Although aspects of Pombo’s writing come off rather unflatteringly in this book, there is a superb analysis of the 1980s in Spain when especially interesting homotextual literature was being produced. Aliaga pays particular heed to the drifting from a

traditionally “feminized” tendency in male homosexual culture to a much more masculine culture strongly influenced by North American movements (60-73). The Hispanic perspective on homosexuality, particularly as articulated by Llamas, overwhelmingly rejects any notions of essentialism in the discursive construction of homosexuality as an ontological phenomenon. Llamas sums up the prevailing Hispanic perspective which is largely influenced by poststructuralist and particularly Foucaultian conceptions of heterologocentric discursive and power-based constructions of sexuality. This perspective, Llamas suggests, eschews notions of homosexual identity as inhering in “sexual orientation.” He argues that such models conform with essentialist notions of subjectivity as autonomous Being, and as a result the homosexual remains in a state of ineluctable abjection.¹³ In his book *La sociedad rosa* (1991), Óscar Guasch writes of a “homosexual transition” in Spanish society with specific reference to pre-gay modes of behaviour during the dictatorship and post-gay modes that coincided with the dynamic literary and artistic movement called *La Movida* and the transition to democracy (*La Transición*) in Spanish society. Guasch’s analysis is particularly useful for understanding the society and culture to which Pombo was addressing his writing when he returned from “exile” in England and published his first work of prose.

Homographesis and The Reinscription of Homosexuality

In order to contextualize the epistemological framework of Pombo’s inscription of the homosexual in literary discourse, I use Lee Edelman’s deconstructive framework of homographesis (*Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory*, 1994), which centres the notion of “homosexual identity” on the Western epistemological premise of

¹³ Llamas says in this regard: “El régimen de sexualidad establece el sexo como condición de inteligibilidad del sujeto. El sujeto, pues, se constituye en la encarnación y reiteración de unos principios establecidos según una matriz de signo heterosexual. Es en ese proceso de abyección donde se define ‘la homosexualidad’ como requisito para la viabilidad de una subjetividad precisa.” See Ricardo Llamas, *Teoría torcida: prejuicios y discursos en torno a “la homosexualidad”* (Madrid: Siglo XXI de España Editores, 1998), p. 30.

inscription through metaphorical significance. Edelman uses the term “homographesis” to describe how the homosexual, as ontological subject, has been conceptualized through a normative discursive practice, articulated in a rhetorical or tropological framework, through which the concept of sexuality, in particular denaturalized sexuality, is produced. The thrust of Edelman’s argument is that the twentieth century has insisted on reading the body as a signifier of sexual orientation and that to this extent “homosexuality in its literary representation is massively overdetermined” (4). Moreover, according to Edelman, homosexuality in its homographetic portrayal in literature is (has become) the signifier of every sexual deviance. By this I understand Edelman to mean that the discourses of heterologocentrism have reduced homosexuality to a metaphoric essentialism by virtue of its recognizable, visible “traits”; whereas, by Edelman’s reckoning, homosexuality is characterized by an indecipherable metonymic displacement towards difference and alterity by virtue of the unstable sexual signifiers that have come to denote it.¹⁴

Following Edelman, homosexual “difference” is posited in terms of its visual representation: (male) homosexuality is conceptualized as female (or non-masculine), not only because the regnant heterologocentric mythology interprets homosexual men as implicitly wanting to be like women, but also because this discourse posits that the homosexual man is in fact like a woman to the extent that his difference can somehow be discerned through or inscribed on his body. Consequently, so the homographetic model informs, the ideological contours within which homosexuality can be recognized remain those of inauthenticity,

¹⁴ Edelman says the following in this regard: “With this transition we enter an era in which homosexuality becomes socially constituted in ways that not only make it available to signification, but also cede to it the power to signify the instability of the signifying function per se, the arbitrary and tenuous nature of the relationship between any signified and signifier. It comes to figure, and to be figured in terms of, subversion of the theological order through heresy, of the legitimate political order through treason, and of the social order through the disturbance of codified gender roles and stereotypes. As soon as homosexuality is localized, and consequently can be read within the social landscape, it becomes subject to a metonymic dispersal that allows it to be read into almost anything.” (6).

dissimulation, and disguise, and even the most emphatically “masculine” aspects of male homosexuality are susceptible to conceptualization in terms of an occluded effeminacy (12).

Edelman’s poststructuralist idea of homosexuality’s literary conceptualization as metaphor or essentialism is mostly convincing, at least by Edelman’s definition of the term “homographesis,” and this can certainly be corroborated in most depictions of homosexuals in mainstream Spanish literature.¹⁵ However, Edelman’s concept of homographesis appears to be constricted by a narrow conception of homosexuality as existing only through a medium of visibility that involves sexual praxis or visible idiosyncrasies or modes of behaviour. In this instance Edelman’s homographetic model reduces writing about homosexuals to mere anthropological imagery. In other words, only effeminate (“nelly”) homosexuals conform to this description, or men who engage in sex with other men, presumably, but clearly literature has provided other depictions of homosexuality that do not involve these visibly “anatomically encoded” homosexuals. Moreover, Edelman’s model ignores instances of homoerotic intentionality that are merely reflected as consciousness of desire for the same (gender that is), and which never translate into praxis—Gustav von Aschenbach’s unrequited, desperate longing for young Tadzio in *Death in Venice* comes to mind, to name just one example. I would argue that Edelman’s model of homographesis exhibits a perceptible reductionism in its conception of homosexual inscription only by means of the homosexual’s corporeality and modes of sexual expression. Moreover, Edelman’s model excludes, almost dogmatically, other modes of conceiving sexuality as different manifestations of Being, notwithstanding his insistence on the slippage and indeterminacy of the signifier, as well as the possibility that heterosexuality, too,

¹⁵ Ricardo Krauel provides a richly textured analysis of homographetic depictions of homosexuals in Spanish literature. See Ricardo Krauel, *Voces desde el silencio: heterologías genérico-sexuales en la narrativa española moderna, 1875-1975* (Madrid: Ediciones Libertarias, 2001).

has been constructed historically and culturally—albeit from a hegemonic perspective—in much the same way, as Jonathan Katz asserts in his study of the “inscription” of heterosexuality.¹⁶

Nevertheless, Edelman’s concept of metonymic versus metaphoric literary inscription of the homosexual is important in my reading of Pombo, for I argue that in his homotextual inscription of homosexuality, Pombo uses the tropology of homosexual essentialism as visible alterity, as a means of debunking the reification of the infinite complexity of Being to mere metaphorical displacements—the homosexual as defined by his outward idiosyncrasies. For Pombo, sexual praxis (for the same or different object-of-desire), and consciousness of sexuality go to the heart of primordial human existence. As a result, homoerotic intentionality as phenomenological consciousness has a wrenching impact on the subject who feels inherently denaturalized in his experiential realm. Pombo uses homographesis, then, subversively and ironically, as a sardonic reformulation (one could even say parody or lampoon) of prevailing heterologocentric notions of homosexual essence, which sees homosexuality as inhering strictly in the way the subject acts or behaves—that is, in the metaphorical reduction of the homosexual to an essence of Being that visibly embodies “queerness” itself. Pombo accomplishes this through his frequent caricatures of the effeminate “queen” in “En falso” in *Relatos sobre la falta de sustancia*, *Los delitos insignificantes*, and *El metro de platino iridiado*.¹⁷ By the same token, Pombo uses homosexual awareness of self (as identity), which inheres in the expression of sexuality towards the same gender, as a type of dissonant consciousness of Being that, while informed ineluctably by its subversive expression of sexuality, nevertheless tries to insinuate

¹⁶ Katz says the following in this regard: “The initial appearance of ‘heterosexual’ in a discussion of homosexuality is a typical practice of Freud’s that later becomes typical of others. Heterosexuals, it turns out, most often owe the explicit, public mention of their existence to talk of homosexuals. Though the heterosexual category came to signify the dominant standard, it remained oddly dependent on the subordinate homosexual category. Heterosexual and homosexual appeared in public as Siamese twins, the first good, the second bad, bound together for life in unalterable, antagonistic symbiosis.” See Jonathan Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (New York: Dutton, 1995), p. 65.

¹⁷ Concerning lesbians, the homographetic image relates to grotesquely mannish behaviour, but lesbianism as a literary subject has very little visibility in the Western canon of literature, even from this angle. This is an important subject for another occasion.

itself in the larger vortex of heteronormativity. Pombo does this through his dialectical expositions of the subject who desperately attempts to “slough off” his homosexuality, as something alien and perverse to his sense of self and existential identity, but who knows all the while that he will never “fit in.” I am referring to the various Gonzalos in *El parecido*, *Los delitos insignificantes*, and *El metro de platino iridiado*, and even to a certain extent Salazar in *Contra natura*.

As a corollary to the deconstruction of homographetic discourse, I use Jonathan Dollimore’s notion of “transgressive homosexual inscription” from his excellent work *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (1991). Homosexual inscription refers to a specific literary praxis whereby homosexuality is elaborated as a central protagonistic element in narrative fabulation. It finds its place in literary discourse by virtue of what I refer to as “metonymic shadowing.” Metonymic shadowing is a term that I use (following Dollimore’s concept of transgressive inscription) to refer to homosexuality as an incongruous, subversively mimicking, and disquieting presence operating insidiously on the periphery of compulsory heterosexuality. Dollimore uses the term transgressive inscription in reference to a discourse that challenges received notions of homosexuality as an essential perversion of nature that falls outside the realm of “normal” human sexuality (23). According to Dollimore, the perverse dynamic of homosexuality signifies that fearful interconnectedness whereby the antithetical inheres within, and is produced partly, by what it opposes, which is the concept of the (metonymic) proximate (33). Transgressive inscription, then, may be seen as the emergence of the repressed and/or suppressed and/or the displaced Other via the proximate. Dollimore’s basic premise is that perversion, in the form of deviant sexuality as a kind of behaviour that subverts heteronormative practices, takes us to the heart of a fierce dialectic between domination and

deviation, law and desire, and transgression and conformity (103). Dollimore's arguments derive from the Foucaultian concept that modern epistemological ideas of sexuality are based on a perceived connection between sex and truth, with sexual deviance conceived as corruption of the truth.¹⁸ This Foucaultian model posits that the autonomous self has largely vanished, and the repression that results from the obliteration of the autonomous self (ironically) infiltrates and constructs a consciousness that resists the overweening force of the hegemonic discursive power. I wager that Pombo would not entirely agree with Foucault's (or Dollimore's) proposition that the autonomous self has disappeared, at least in the sense that they conceive it, although he would certainly agree with Foucault's idea of resistance to hegemonic (heterologocentric) power through counter-discourses. A basic philosophical underpinning of Pombo's work relates to the articulation of the authentic self as a means of resisting the trend towards annihilation of homosexual subjectivity through heterologocentric erasure.

Unlike Edelman's rather constricted binary that attempts to reify homosexuality through literary homographesis, Dollimore takes a considerably more nuanced perspective of the inscription of homosexuality, alluding to writing of the abject as a form of subversive or transgressive resistance to heterologocentric discourses. Dollimore's model of transgressive inscription is especially instructive in relation to two basic arguments that I make about Pombo's writing as it relates to homotextual discourse and the discursive regimes of heterologocentrism: (1) Following Dollimore, transgressive inscription posits that deviant desire disrupts and displaces from within, and changes the very fabric of the acceptable status of, the symbolic order, because the deviant inscribes himself within this order and relentlessly inverts the binaries upon which that order depends. In Pombo's writing this is evident through the constant dialectical clashes of modes of Being of the homosexual and heterosexual protagonists, who continually

¹⁸ See Jonathan Dollimore, "Different Desires: Subjectivity and Transgression in Wilde and Gide," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Barale, and David Halperin (New York, London: Routledge, 1993), p. 309.

struggle in their attempts to deal with one another, destabilizing traditional hierarchies and conceptions of “normality” and deviance. (2) Dollimore argues that homographetic qua homotextual writing becomes a form of transgressive mimesis which reproduces itself in terms of its exclusion—what I referred to earlier as metonymic shadowing. According to Dollimore, this mimesis demystifies the production of a knowledge of the homosexual by the dominant discourse that excludes it—knowledge of the homosexual, that is (288). As Jonathan Katz theorizes, heterosexuality exists as its own invented discourse, and posits its ascendancy through a purported historicity, which is itself a discourse.¹⁹

Writing by homosexuals about homosexuals is by its very nature a form of transgression in that the homosexual establishes the framework for the dissemination and manipulation of knowledge about the homosexual subject. Along these lines, I believe that Dollimore’s concept of transgressive inscription aptly describes the type of homotextual writing that Pombo is undertaking in the texts under consideration in this study. For Pombo, the writing of homosexuality as manifestly complex and “different” destabilizes the field of writing about Being itself, and the way that literature has dealt with sexual alterity generally, to the extent that it has done so at all.

Phenomenological Homosexuality

In my analysis of Pombo’s homotextual narrative I rely on a philosophical methodology of criticism associated with phenomenological and hermeneutical criticisms of literature. In the case of Pombo’s narrative, I combine a variety of phenomenological and hermeneutical methodologies of interpretation in an attempt to define his literary endeavour of inscribing homosexuality, or to be more specific homoerotic intentionality, into his writing. I use the philosophical model of phenomenology and intentionality, as articulated initially by Edmund

¹⁹ See Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, p. 182.

Husserl and then further significantly elaborated and expanded upon by Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as the basis for analyzing Pombo's complex interrogation of the nature of Being—how the subject's erotic intentionality impinges on the construction of identity and the place of that individual in an intersubjective world. For Pombo, our existence is contingent on a complex set of dialogical interactions—influenced by history, culture, and other intangible forces—that individuals have with one another as they attempt to make sense of their existence, and this is reflected in the tortuous nature of the intersubjective engagements that constitute his narrative.

The fundamental premises of Pombo's homotextuality are based on various interpretations of the human dialectic, or how the subject situates himself in the world; that is, in his experiential field. At the heart of the phenomenological literary enterprise is Edmund Husserl's notion of intentionality. In Husserl's interpretation, intentionality refers to the notion that phenomena are real insofar as they are intended by consciousness and are aspects of the world.²⁰ I appropriate the notion of intentionality and apply it to the realm of homoerotic (same-sex) desire in the context of the subject's experience of sexual desire, and engagement with the subjective Other. When I describe Pombo's literary inscription of homosexuality, I am referring to the manner in which Pombo's literary imagination portrays homoerotic intentionality as a manifestation of conscious Being for those who experience it, and particularly how this homoerotic intentionality affects the subject's ultimate engagement with his experiential field. Because the subject in Pombo's narrative is ineluctably thrown into his environment and is thus confronted with the necessity to act upon his moral precepts within the contingency of his historically determined nature, he must learn to engage the Other as a radically unique and inalienable countersubject.

²⁰ See Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, trans. J.N. Findlay (New York: Humanities, 1970), p. 25.

In his literary exposition of homoerotic intentionality, I maintain that Pombo argues for the necessity of rational autonomy in the conduct of one's moral and ethical actions (irrespective of historical circumstances) with regard to the Other. It is clear that Pombo draws heavily on Heidegger's notion that consciousness is radically dependent on contingent events in nature and history, and that it is not (as Kant would have it) completely free and thus subject to a form of universal Reason. Heidegger's notion of humanity's setting within an experiential field issues from the concept of *Dasein* (there-being); a concept of existence that insists upon the contingent situatedness of the subject's condition in space and time.²¹ Pombo's basic moral philosophy, rooted in Heidegger's notion of Care or *Sorge*, positions the subject in a natural world that is not of his making, but upon which he is dependent in all his acting and suffering. Pombo's homotextuality interrogates the homosexual within an historically determined situatedness of existential dissonance that is occasioned by objectifying heterologocentric discourses; and it is ultimately within the context of this struggle that the subject seeks to find an authentic purpose of Being.

In my analysis of Pombo's homotextual writing, I draw heavily upon the phenomenological model of Merleau-Ponty who radically reinterprets Husserl's notion of intentionality by asserting that all consciousness is a unified subject-object relation. According to Robert Magliola, Merleau-Ponty's notion of subject and object combines in a reciprocal implicitness and defines the relation between subject and object as analytically inseparable.²² In order to understand Pombo's conception of morality and ethics, it is first necessary to understand the inviolability of the subject and the Other in the breadth of human discursivity and the gestural acts of goodness, virtue and compassion that entangle the disembodied Other in the same nexus or web of subjectivity as the self. For the self to act alone and only in his interest and

²¹ See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper, 1962), p. 38.

²² See Magliola, *Phenomenology and Literature*, p. 13.

well-being is the greatest breach of his integrity. This is the major focus of much of Pombo's writing that deals with intersubjectivity, particularly in his texts *Relatos sobre la falta de sustancia*, *Los delitos insignificantes*, *El metro de platino iridiado*, and *Contra natura*.

State of the Question

Because of the critical importance that feminist criticism plays in the origin of gender criticism, I consider some apropos remarks on feminist theory by Jonathan Culler. Culler points out that "reading as a woman" is of utmost importance to avoid reading as a man. This importance rests on the ability to impart a perspective that avoids the situation of a male misreading. Feminist theory, then, investigates the way our notions of the rational are tied to, or are in complicity with, the interests of the male.²³ For Culler, the task of the feminist critic is "to investigate whether the procedures, assumptions, and goals of current criticism are in complicity with male authority, and to explore alternatives."²⁴ Culler's characterization of the purpose of feminist criticism vis-à-vis male-centred criticism is particularly instructive in the discussion of mainstream (read heteronormative) criticism of texts about homosexuality. The examples used by Culler in his illustrations are mainly didactic and verge at times on the tendentious and reductive: to speak undifferentiatedly or axiomatically of "the male," or a "male misreading," or "the male's interests" is clearly problematic; moreover, this posture admits the possibility of a superseding, genuine "female reading." Nevertheless, Culler's observations serve to underscore an essential point about hegemonic attitudes that consider topics such as sexual normalcy based in binaries of gender difference, and male ascendancy, from a perspective of male or heterologocentric prerogatives.

²³ See Jonathan D. Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 58.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

Critics who focus primarily on homotextual literature are often confronted with the same (or similar) attitudes to those encountered by early feminists in their analysis of texts from a feminist perspective. According to Luce Irigaray, studies of women's writing by mainstream (mainly male) critics are dominated by a presumptive epistemological framework that views women as essentially and radically different, and in subordination to men who are imbued with superior rationality, abstract reasoning, and intellectuality.²⁵ One could, of course, make analogous, although not entirely similar claims concerning critical studies of homotextual writing, particularly as they concern homosexuality as essentialist abjection. A critical difference, however, stems from the dearth of writing about homosexuals in Western literature, or at least any homotextual writing that does not have as its central premise homosexual abjection.

With regard to mainstream criticism of Pombo's homotextual writing, I suggest that the following shortcomings must be taken into account: (1) there is a general disinclination—deliberate or not—to acknowledge the salient homotextual elements that not only inform, but in many cases predominate in, Pombo's early and later texts; (2) there is a tendency among mainstream and homotextual critics to disregard Pombo's posture as a writer of homotextual texts. In other words, rarely does Pombo rate mention in most anthologies of Spanish homotextual literature.²⁶ Although the second point may seem a redundant recapitulation of the first point, it is in fact distinct and relates to Pombo's relative ostracism in many critical circles of homosexually themed literature. This distinction is important when one considers that so few writers of Pombo's stature incorporate any homosexual themes into their texts, and clearly Pombo has made this endeavour a cornerstone of his writing. The inevitable consequence of this

²⁵ See Luce Irigaray, *Speculum, de l'autre femme* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1974), p. 74.

²⁶ I should say that this was certainly the case in the 1980s and 1990s, to the extent that such anthologies existed. In recent years one can find all of Pombo's works prominently featured in Spanish bookstores that cater to gay and lesbian audiences. Nevertheless, the point I am stressing here is the reluctance, indeed aversion, to consider Pombo to be a writer of "politically correct" homotextual literature.

trend is that Pombo is generally considered to be a writer who writes about homosexuality as would any Spanish writer on the subject. I argue, therefore, that Pombo is often not considered to be a “queer” writer, or a writer of transgressive “queer-themed” literature. Thus, Pombo’s writing is not enshrined in any homosexual canonical context, either by mainstream critics or the homosexual critical media, however, this omission only serves to make his homotextual writing all the more compelling.²⁷

The predominant critical perspectives on Pombo, from notable mainstream critics such as Juan Antonio Masoliver, José Carlos Mainer, Wesley Weaver, Javier Alfaya, Luis Suñén, Overesch-Maister, and González Herrán, tend to focus on Pombo’s mastery of narrative form. Virtually all of Pombo’s critics recognize his skilfulness as a narrator of fantastically complex, poignant stories, replete with scathing wit, complex metaphysics, and mellifluous prose, which can also by turns be exceptionally harsh and disconcerting. Moreover, his critics allude to Pombo’s very eclectic writing style that liberally intermingles different literary genres, such as realism and irrealism. Amongst Pombo’s mainstream critics one finds occasional cursory references to the homotextual aspects of Pombo’s narrative, although there is invariably a tendency to reduce these occurrences to a mere footnote of his opus: it is often the case that the words homosexual or homosexuality are entirely omitted in the assessments of his writing. A case in point is the eminent contemporary Spanish critic, Santos Villanueva, who in fact does not discuss the topic at all in his analysis of Pombo’s texts. Rather, Villanueva focuses almost exclusively on what he terms Pombo’s “psychological realism,” a term that Pombo himself, I suggest, would find considerably off the mark.²⁸ In this regard, I concur with Alfredo Martínez

²⁷ It should also be noted that Pombo himself never actually acknowledged himself to be homosexual in any official publication until quite recently, and that the practice of outing (whether voluntary or not) is a practice that is much less common in Europe (generally) and in Spain particularly.

²⁸ I discussed this point with Pombo in 2007. Pombo does not view his writing strictly speaking as realism in any sense of the word, nor does he strive for any depiction of correspondent realism in his narrative. In fact, there is a great deal of his writing that corresponds to the irrealism of the fantastic and the imaginary. In addition, Pombo steadfastly rejects any associations with psychologism in his writing. See Santos Villanueva, *Historia de la novela*

who attributes this observable fact to the tendency within traditional Spanish literary criticism to reduce homosexual themes to an infelicitous occurrence; what he calls a “dehomosexualization” of homotextual literature.²⁹ Consequently, while there is consensus that Pombo is a master of densely philosophical prose, there appears to be very little understanding of his attempt to come to grips with homosexuality as a predominant leitmotif in his texts; or of Pombo’s attempt to narrate the profoundly disquieting sense of alienation of the homosexual experience in a predominantly heterosexual world. In my analysis of the texts in the following chapters, I consider the various contributions of mainstream critics to the critical corpus of Pombo’s writing; however, in this section I limit my observations to homotextual perspectives on his narrative.

In his excellent anthology of the history of homotextual writing in Spanish letters in the twentieth century, *De Sodoma a Chueca* (2001), Alberto Mira provides the most comprehensive view of homosexuality as a predominant leitmotif in the texts of mainly homosexual writers. Mira does not limit himself to gay writers—he also chronicles the pervasive homophobia of writers in the Francoist era who were ostensibly not homosexual, and who advocated for an explicitly censorious treatment of homosexuality in their texts. Moreover, he does not attempt to formalize any type of canon of homosexual writing in Spanish letters. Nevertheless, as Mira points out, there is unmistakably a genre of homotextual writing that has, surreptitiously at times, insinuated itself into Spanish letters, beginning for the most part in the early twentieth century, when social morals were changing in Spain and a renewed literary flourishing was enveloping the country. It is on this span of time (roughly the entire twentieth century) that Mira focuses his

social española (1942-1975) (Madrid: Alhambra, 1980), p. 85. See also Santos Villanueva, "Ejercicios literarios de Álvaro Pombo," *Ínsula* 469 (1985). For Pombo’s assessment of the aspects of realism in his work, see Álvaro Pombo, "De las narraciones y sus filosofías furtivas," *Revista de Occidente*, no. 44 (1985), p. 10.

²⁹ Martínez says the following: “La actitud más extendida ante una gran obra de contenido homosexual consiste en una inmediata y tenaz des-homosexualización de la misma: la obra es grande por otros motivos, se señala, y la temática homosexual ni quita ni pone a su grandeza.” See Alfredo Martínez, *Escrituras torcidas: ensayos de crítica "queer"* (Barcelona: Editorial Laertes, 2004), p. 12.

study. It is surprising, however, that Mira fails to include a significant entry of Pombo's writing, and in fact Pombo merits a scant reference in Mira's great opus concerning homotextual writing in Spain. This I attribute to the general perception among these critics, as I have stated previously, that Pombo is in fact not a writer of "queer fiction," but rather a writer who focuses on the more negative and, indeed, self-lacerating aspects of homosexuality in his writing. Nevertheless, there are some critics who treat Pombo's homotextual endeavour as a serious and momentous contribution to "queer" writing. The two homotextual critics who have dealt most extensively with Pombo's homotextual writing are Alfredo Martínez and Dieter Ingenschay, and I consider each in turn.

Alfredo Martínez writes in *Escrituras torcidas* (2004) that the reasons for the unstable conceptualization of homotextual literature as a movement in Spain derive from the following circumstances: (1) a lack of a stable semantic vocabulary for homosexuality as a sexological, political or ideological concept; (2) the fact that the Spanish literary canon generally does not accept homosexuality as an appropriate theme, and insists on evaluating any aspect of an author's literary text, other than the homosexual one; (3) the homosexual literary canon, such as it exists, is being conceptualized only within the homosexual community itself, with scant participation from other sectors of academia; and (4) the postmodern commercialization (or *fagotización*—literally consumption—as Martínez calls it) of homosexual culture has imposed its own brand of standardization on the collective homosexual community and thus determines what type of literature needs to be produced (23-27). There is much to commend in Martínez's assessment of the obvious reluctance of mainstream criticism to treat homosexuality as a suitable subject. I would add that there is also a tendency among many critics of homotextual Spanish literature to qualify any move towards standardization or canonization as a sellout to postmodern

consumerism. This type of attitude is prevalent among many of the emerging theorists and critics of gay culture and literature in Spain.³⁰

Pombo is, to be sure, a victim of the indeterminacy of the gay Spanish literary canon, but more often than not he is faulted, on the one hand, for lacking any specific ideological verve or political activism in his literature; and, on the other hand, he is condemned for being party to homosexual self-loathing for his brutally frank portrayal of abject homosexuality. Unlike many of the prominent homosexual writers of his generation (Goytisolo, Moix, et alia), Pombo's early writing is characterized by a philosophical interrogation of the homosexual self that, for the most part, eschews any specific ideological or political pontification with regard to the historical situation of homosexuals within mainstream society. In Pombo's later writing, the situation changes considerably: Pombo's narrative adopts a considerably harsher ideological tone with regard to not only the homosexual's ethical and moral situation within his social domain but also the attitudes of institutions, such as the Catholic Church in Spain, in the formulation and perpetuation of heterologocentric discourses. Of course, Martínez and, to a much lesser extent, Dieter Ingenschay consider Pombo's writing sufficiently homotextual to merit serious consideration, and Martínez attributes Pombo's ostracism from the gay "cenacle" to a form of cultural myopia on the part of the self-anointed arbiters of Spanish gay culture. Martínez's analysis of Pombo's homotextual writing elucidates the characteristics of his writing that have

³⁰ I was witness to a discussion of this trend in a colloquium on Spanish gay culture that I attended at the University of Madrid's summer program at El Escorial (August 2005). Pombo, and a number of contemporary Spanish writers, participated in one of the sessions of this conference. The general consensus among many of the esteemed panel members seemed to be that Spanish gay culture was evolving into a blatant marketing forum—gayness as a brand; the general point being that any pretence to radicalism or social activism is rapidly giving way to superficial consumerism in the wake of advancing societal acceptance. For a more detailed treatment of this subject, see Juan Vicente Aliaga and José Miguel G. Cortés, *Identidad y diferencia: sobre la cultura gay en España* (Barcelona: Editorial Gay y Lesbiana, 1997). See also Oscar Guasch's critique of "gay consumerism" in Óscar Guasch, *La crisis de la heterosexualidad* (Barcelona: Editorial Laertes, 2000). On gayness as brand, see Ricardo Llamas and Francisco Javier Vidarte, *Homografías* (Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 1999). For a more extensive treatment of the dissolution of gay identity, see Alberto Mira, "La cultura gay ha muerto. Viva la cultura gay," *Archipiélago* 67 (2005).

given rise to such a negative perception, namely, the persistent obsession with homosexual guilt and abjection and the habitually macabre fate of his homosexual protagonists.

Martínez asserts that Pombo's approach to homosexuality as text is rooted in the circumstances of a homosexual self-awareness that occurred in tandem with his existential literary awakening. Martínez sees the evolution of Pombo's homotextual narrative as part of a generational trend in narrative that occurred in the 1970s, where homosexuality, traditionally viewed as a societal aberration, was aspiring to a sense of "normalcy" and which often emerged in the guise of a utopian discourse. Mira alludes to the group of Spanish writers who belonged to the "homophilic" strain (influenced by Gide) and names writers such as Alberto Cardín, Juan Gil-Albert, and Manuel de Pedrolo, among others, as the principal advocates of a "naturalistic" conception of homosexuality, often associated with but not necessarily based on an essentialist notion of gay identity (332). From Martínez's perspective, Pombo is writing about homosexuality as a natural, albeit problematic phenomenon associated with the existential dissonance to which I referred earlier. The basic premise of Pombo's homotextual undertaking, and undoubtedly the most important one from Martínez's point of view, is his writing about homosexuality in the face of resistance from the mainstream literary establishment:

Álvaro Pombo no es, como pudiera parecer quizá a primera vista, un narrador tradicional; no es simplemente un escritor homosexual obsesionado con su propia homosexualidad (o homofobia, perfectamente asumida e internalizada). La toma de postura de Pombo hacia el relato del estatus homosexual es muy diferente a lo que nos ofrecen los narradores tradicionales. El contexto literario en que Pombo sitúa a sus homosexuales importa más que su peripecia homosexual, que no sólo es anodina sino, como se puede notar (sobre todo en los primeros relatos) tópica.³¹

Moreover, Martínez characterizes Pombo's homotextual narrative style as a self-conscious, philosophical—what I call phenomenological—homosexualism. According to Martínez: "El carácter intimista de los relatos de Pombo favorece que los personajes, aislados del mundo por

³¹ See Martínez, *Escrituras torcidas: ensayos de crítica "queer"*, p. 148.

efecto de la narración, vivan sus propias peripecias subjetivas, individuales, en una acción que transcurre fundamentalmente en sus conciencias.”³² Martínez is alluding to the Pombian tendency to sublimate and interiorize the existential discourse of homosexuality as an imaginary event, as a form of narrative portrayal—its *présentification* in the words of the phenomenologist critic Serge Doubrovsky³³—of the grotesque and the sublime. The lives of Pombo’s homosexual protagonists are unusually fraught, but the existential struggle occurs principally within the consciousness of his subjects who are, to all appearances, caught up in their insignificance. Martínez is the first critic of Pombo’s writing to recognize that Pombo is in fact striving to inscribe homosexuality as an existential experience that transcends the lives of its actors. Pombo is, according to Martínez, the author of a postmodern poetic where themes of religion, philosophy, and the meaning of life cohabit in a maelstrom of unhappiness, repressed sexuality, and meaningless triviality. Martínez further characterizes the Pombian homotextual narrative as a means of resurrecting the homosexual protagonist from the morass of insignificance:

La aproximación literaria y filosófica de Pombo nos presenta un nuevo tipo de escritura (conforme a una nueva fase epistemológica): dota de voz a quien nunca la había tenido, inaugura la posibilidad de una negociación cultural en torno a un tema que jamás había sido negociado, amplía la esfera de lo autobiográfico homosexual (la autoficción), y sobre todo, legitima un nuevo tipo de discurso social que, por el mero hecho de nacer, modifica el marco ideológico que hasta entonces regía los discursos sociales y literarios sobre la sexualidad.³⁴

Martínez’s most salient observation about Pombo’s writing is that Pombo, through his probing narrative exploration of the lives of homosexuals, does in fact change the ideological landscape of writing with regard to the sexuality of its protagonists.

³² Ibid., p. 149.

³³ See Doubrovsky in Magliola, *Phenomenology and Literature*, p. 86.

³⁴ Martínez, *Escrituras torcidas: ensayos de crítica "queer"*, p. 155.

Pombo's "writerly"³⁵ musings about homosexuality in the context of homophobic, National-Catholic Spain are subversive to the extent that they stand poignantly and nakedly before the discomfited reader and serve to, as Barthes describes it, "make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text" by plunging the reader into the existential turmoil that afflicts his homosexual protagonists as they navigate the confines of their "condition." Thus, Pombo's discursive narrative constitutes an assault on the deliberate attempt to quash the subject of homosexuality in literature. Pombo does this, moreover, from the viewpoint of a deeply repressed homosexual whose knowledge of the subject is characterized by the text that we are reading. Pombo's homotextual narrative is sharp, personal, and by all measures intensely self-critical. Moreover, this ironical, self-deprecatory approach reflects the excruciating personal trauma that those many years of homosexual alienation had inflicted on Pombo the individual—as Pombo himself intimates in the epilogue to his most forcefully homotextual text, *Contra natura*.

In his analysis of Goytisolo's autobiographical writing, Richard Ellis suggests that the homosexual author's homotextuality is not so much an attempt to normalize homosexuality as a literary construct, but rather consists in a relentless attack on dominant cultural sexual norms launched in the mid 1960s. According to Ellis, Goytisolo's life writing is thus "heterobiographical" in that he positions his homosexual self in opposition to a preponderantly heteronormative society.³⁶ No doubt Martínez would say that Pombo's attempt to write homosexuality in his narrative also corresponds to an attempt to "articulate" a homosexual voice against the heterologocentric narratives of homosexual exclusion.

³⁵ Barthes' description of the writerly text is particularly à propos: "The writerly text is a perpetual present, upon which no consequent language (which would inevitably make it past) can be superimposed; the writerly text is ourselves writing, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages." See Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 5.

³⁶ See Ellis, *The Hispanic Homograph: Gay Self-Representation in Contemporary Spanish Autobiography*, p. 40.

Dieter Ingenschay is another prominent critic of homotextual writing in Spain who considers at some length Pombo's writing about homosexuality, albeit far less comprehensively and systematically than Martínez. Ingenschay argues that Spain really has no suitable or referenceable historical models for the homosexual protagonist or homosexually themed literature, and that this fact has contributed to the elusiveness, indeed, the impossibility of determining a Spanish homosexual literary canon or homotextual paradigm.³⁷ According to Ingenschay, the flourishing of homotextual Spanish literature emerges with the demise of the Francoist dictatorship and the concomitant emancipation of the body and its literary thematization, which of course is the epoch of Pombo's emergence onto the literary scene. Ingenschay posits, moreover, that homosexuality became one of the dominant literary motifs of the post-transitional literary boom that occurred in Spain in the late 1970s and 1980s—a claim that seems highly improbable and that the corpus of literature does not in reality corroborate. Indeed, there are some mainstream non-homosexual authors writing during the *Transición* (Millás, Montalbán, Montero, Umbral, et al.) who incorporate homosexuality into their narratives, but it seems farfetched to claim that this becomes a predominant, or highly popular trend.³⁸

Ingenschay's study looks at the texts of Eduardo Mendicutti, Luis Antonio de Villena, Terenci Moix, and Pombo, among others. The Pombian texts that Ingenschay examines in any detail are *El héroe de las mansardas de Mansard* and *Los delitos insignificantes*. Ingenschay comes away with the conclusion that *El héroe de las mansardas de Mansard* is not really a homotextual novel at all; at least according to the criteria that he has defined for it. With regard to *Los delitos insignificantes*, Ingenschay is decidedly more disparaging in his criticism and

³⁷ See Dieter Ingenschay, "Homotextualidad: Imágenes homosexuales en la novela española contemporánea," *Antípodas* XI (2000), pp. 49-53.

³⁸ In fact, Montalbán, particularly in his scathing critique of the failure of Spanish artists to mobilize against Spanish authoritarianism, remorselessly chides the "gay movement" for its political indolence and puerile foppishness. See Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, *Crónica sentimental de la transición* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1985), pp. 151-164.

considers the text to be—in accordance with much of the criticism by homotextual critics of this text—essentially homophobic. Ingenschay considers Pombo's writing with regard to its "homobiographical" attributes, and focuses principally on its obsession with the often tortuous and asymmetrical relationships between younger and older men,³⁹ what I call the puer-senex relationship, and a topic that figures prominently in *Contra natura* (2005). Ingenschay considers the depiction of puer-senex relationships to be an atypical form of writing in gay Spanish letters and much more suggestive of the Gidean or Proustian school. *Contra natura* is a text that, given the timing of its publication, Ingenschay does not take into consideration, but given the novel's obsessive focus on puer-senex relationships, it would certainly be interesting to see Ingenschay's perspectives on it. A similar motif surfaces in Roig Roselló's autobiographical text (*Todos los parques no son un paraíso: memorias de un sacerdote*) on his own coming out story, to which Ingenschay makes reference in comparison with Pombo.

In my analysis of Pombo's texts in this study I frequently allude to the tremendous esteem in which Pombo's mainstream critics hold his writing. These critics heap lavish praise on Pombo's narrative dexterity, which combines a rigorous sense of aesthetics and mesmerizing (often disconcerting) prose with a philosophical narrative style that plumbs the depth of human existence as "Being-in-the-world." With regard to Pombo's homotextual enterprise, which admittedly most of his mainstream critics are loath to undertake, I concur with many of the conclusions of Pombo's most fervent critics (Masoliver and Mainer, especially) who characterize his usage of the homosexual motif as a means of juxtaposing irreconcilable dilemmas in the experiential realm of life that the subject is ineluctably thrown into and that require some type of resolute action or decision on his part. In this sense, I believe that critics such as Masoliver and

³⁹ See Dieter Ingenschay, "'El héroe de las mansardas de Mansard' Sobre el problemático hallazgo de la propia identidad y la grácil disolución de la realidad," in *Abriendo Caminos*, ed. Dieter Ingenschay and Hans Jörg Neuschäfer (Barcelona: Editorial Lumen, 1994).

Mainer have accurately gauged that much of Pombo's writing about homosexuals, particularly in respect of homosexual abjection, is a means of depicting a situation in the intercultural discursivity of society wherein self-annihilating victims often fall prey to ruthless executioners who hold above them a kind of psychological, political, and cultural ascendancy. As a result, the abject subject remains inauthentic and invariably "insubstantial." This situation of existential nihilism constitutes, then, Pombo's deepest reflections on the homosexual dialectic of abjection in the face of heteronormativity. Nevertheless, one cannot help but be perplexed by the casual detachment, even glibness, with which so many of Pombo's mainstream critics assess the prevalence of the homosexual motif in Pombo's writing—especially Masoliver and Mainer, and particularly Wesley Weaver who wrote a monograph on Pombo's writing that considers Pombo's take on insubstantiality.⁴⁰ Pombo himself has stated unequivocally that homosexuality is one of the predominant themes of his writing and the principal means by which he examines the nature of Being, ethics, and morality as experienced and perceived through a condition of societal (and existential) degradation. In fact, Pombo devotes a great deal of his literary contemplation to the notion of homosexual alienation and intersubjectivity: he devotes whole sections of his books, and one entire book, to the consideration of this subject. That the entire spectrum of Pombo's literature (in effect the entire *ciclo de la falta de sustancia*) has a significant homotextual component to it, and that this aspect of his writing should merit only cursory observations by mainstream critics, is indeed unfortunate. What is perhaps most regrettable about the oversight with regard to Pombo's homotextuality is the consequent impoverishment of much of the analysis of his writing. By reason of the superficial discussion of the homotextual element of Pombo's writing, many of the mainstream critics deprive themselves of a key to his philosophical interrogation of Being, which is one of the pillars of Pombo's narrative enterprise. In fact, much of Pombo's writing that does not explicitly deal with the

⁴⁰ See Wesley J. Weaver, *Álvaro Pombo y la narrativa de la sustancia* (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Press, 2003).

homosexual question—the series of texts that Pombo wrote after *El metro de platino iridiado* and before *El cielo raso*—exhibits a style of writing and content that are radically different, and uniformly less compelling (in this author’s opinion), in comparison with Pombo’s homotextual writing. Masoliver and Mainer do eventually come to recognize the importance of the homosexual leitmotif in Pombo’s writing, albeit somewhat belatedly, and to the extent that they do, their critical observations of Pombo’s writing become significantly more compelling.

Because the homotextual aspects of Pombo’s writing are treated so casually, many mainstream critics also seem to misapprehend Pombo’s inscription of homosexuality. Moreover, these critics fail to grasp the extent to which Pombo’s homotextual inscription is fundamentally counter-dialectical to, and challenging of, heterologocentric discursive regimes that keep this subject matter in abeyance. Ultimately, many of Pombo’s mainstream critics only broach the homosexual aspects of his writing in the context of their thematic relevance to the narrative content, and for this reason, the sway and power of Pombo’s textual imagery becomes diluted, almost vitiated of its deep resonance in conveying a facet of the human condition that has had so little visibility in works of great literature. Pombo’s attempts to inscribe homoerotic intentionality as phenomenological consciousness into narrative brings a dimension of expressiveness to Spanish literature that has been absent for some generations, but that is beginning to re-emerge in the texts of young writers of homotextual and also mainstream narratives.

The historical transition to democracy in Spain, while by no means seamless or consistent, afforded homosexuals the possibility of expressing themselves in literature, cinema and art in ways that had not been heretofore conceivable—at least not under Franco’s regime—as Ricardo Llamas surmises in his assessment of the evolving aspect of homosexuality in Spanish culture

and its literature.⁴¹ I am not suggesting that this practice of omission with regard to Pombo's homotextual writing is a deliberately conscious undertaking on the part of these critics. I am merely referencing a pattern of negligence that has persisted throughout Western literature, and this has certainly been the case in Spanish criticism for as long as people have been engaged in literary analysis, as Alfredo Martínez has so cogently pointed out. The persistence of heterologocentric discourses on homosexuality in Spain—even in circumstances of relative openness during the periods of modernity and postmodernity when homosexual writers began to convey less inhibitedly in their writing aspects of their homosexual experiences—has, if nothing else, imposed a pall of delegitimization concerning the expression of the homotextual narrative.

With regard to the homotextual approaches to Pombo's writing, I am in fundamental agreement with Alfredo Martínez's contention that Pombo's narrative places him squarely in opposition to prevalent heterologocentric discourses; not so much through its subversiveness (à la Goytisolo), but rather through its discomfiting revelation of a metonymic presence of alterity. Where I tend to disagree with Martínez is concerning his assertions that Pombo's texts, particularly *Los delitos insignificantes* and *El cielo raso*, are homophobic for the manner in which they focus on the theme of guilt as a confluence (and direct result) of religious fervour and homosexual self-identity. From Martínez's perspective, the notion of guilt in the Pombian narrative is a constant that issues from Pombo's profoundly conflicted religiosity and homosexuality. This conflict surfaces, according to Martínez, in the numerous religious allegories that appear throughout Pombo's narrative and in Pombo's enduring preoccupation with the existential homosexual self and ethical propriety. For Martínez these concerns are

⁴¹ Llamas says the following in respect of gay invisibility: "Las realidades gays y lésbicas han sido y todavía son realidades atomizadas; sólo son legítimamente estructurables desde fuera, porque todo viso de colectividad está predeterminado por el modelo de la no conformidad con la ley natural, divina o lógica, o bien porque rompe los requisitos de secreto y clandestinidad que le permiten funcionar como ámbito de localización de las ansiedades. Las realidades lésbicas y gays se estructuran precisamente en los límites de un régimen de la sexualidad rígido y, por lo tanto, frágil. Un régimen, en todo caso, no inexpugnable, sino en constante evolución." See Llamas, *Teoría torcida: prejuicios y discursos en torno a "la homosexualidad"*, p. 34.

predominantly moral, in the religious sense.⁴² My claim is that, while there are frequent allusions in his writing to religiosity as a mainstay in moral discourse, Pombo is using religiosity as a metaphoric, thematic digression that underpins his own philosophical precepts of ethical and moral behaviour. Religion, per se, as a guide to moral and ethical life does not occupy a central place in Pombo's writing, although he trenchantly deconstructs the impact of religious discourses (particularly in his later texts *El cielo raso* and *Contra natura*) on the discursive and epistemological framework of morality. This is a topic that I discuss in chapter V. All the same, Martínez quite forcefully argues that Pombo has brought homosexuality to the forefront of Spanish letters, as a compelling form of narrative discourse and cultural consciousness.

Dieter Ingenschay has done much to broaden the discussion of homotextuality in contemporary Spanish letters and has articulated convincing observations and insights into the writings of many of the pre-eminent writers of the homotextual narrative. Nevertheless, where Pombo is concerned, I am of the impression that Ingenschay has succumbed to the widespread prejudices and preconceptions against Pombo's style of mordant, ironical, and self-referential writing, which focuses on homosexuality not exclusively as a cultural and social phenomenon, but also as a philosophical, or to be more precise, phenomenological one, with all its deep implications for living intersubjectively in the world. In many respects Pombo remains, still to this day, a kind of pariah within this community of readers; that is, where "queer-oriented" literature is concerned. Ingenschay's somewhat cavalier dismissal of Pombo's writings as steeped in, for lack of a better conceptual frame of reference, antediluvian modes of homosexuality (the preponderance of puer-senex relationships, internalized homophobia, homosexual patriarchy, misogyny, etc.) suggests, more than anything, a lack of critical reflection on the part of this esteemed critic on the primary aspects of Pombo's writing. Ingenschay does not suitably acknowledge Pombo's homotextual writing, which explores with conscientious

⁴² See Martínez, *Escrituras torcidas: ensayos de crítica "queer"*, p. 152.

scrupulousness the historical and epistemological situatedness of a subject whose homoerotic intentionality stands (has stood) him on the fringes of literary discourses concerning humanity and sexuality.

In focusing on Pombo's presumed homophobia and "obsession" with outmoded tropes of same-sex expressiveness, Ingenschay, much like his contemporaries in mainstream criticism, has misconstrued the principal thrust of Pombo's homotextual writing. The latter involves the inscription of homosexuality in Spanish letters, in all its various manifestations. Pombo's deeply personal inscription of homosexuality itself provides the strongest measure of Pombo's genius as a writer, and his unflinching devotion to the discovery and revelation of an authentic, significant Being is testament to this. This is a vital issue that informs every aspect of Pombo's writing, and by ignoring the philosophical nuances and complexity of Pombo's homotextual interrogation, Ingenschay, and many of his colleagues in the field of homotextual criticism, have failed to appreciate the significance of Pombo's literary contribution. Part of the problem, where Ingenschay is concerned at least, is the paucity of texts by Pombo that he analyzes in his criticism—for instance, he does not seem to comment on any other of the texts from the *ciclo de la falta de sustancia*, other than *El héroe de las mansardas de Mansard* and *Los delitos insignificantes*—but also more significantly problematic is the manner in which Ingenschay reads the texts. That is to say, the phenomenologically critical enterprise of reading the text, however disturbing and seemingly homophobic the text (or author) may seem, needs to be dissociated from the empirical ego⁴³ of the author, which is merely reflecting, after all, the author's *parole*, as it were. In other words, the author's worldly experiences in his own experiential field perhaps point towards instances of abject degradation in the author's own life,

⁴³ The term "empirical ego" derives from Kant (also later expanded upon by Husserl) and refers to the self of everyday life and experience. It is, according to Hugh Silverman, the "self which loves, which desires, which hopes ... the self which decides that a clear, pure, and transcendental understanding is necessary for a full knowledge of itself." See Silverman, *Inscriptions: Between Phenomenology and Structuralism*, p. 15.

and these no doubt inform the semiotic range of the text. But these experiences are at a remove from the vital juncture of the hermeneutical interrogation where reader and text engage in dialectical exchange—as Barthes would call it, the ground zero of reading.⁴⁴ Thus, I submit that Pombo’s method of inscribing homosexuality phenomenologically through the experiences of the homosexual subject in the periods of Spanish history in question are too frequently interpreted as reflecting the author’s own fraught relationship with homosexuality. Although this supposition may engage some critics, such speculation has little bearing on the ultimate “animism” of the homotext, which is my focus, and does not do justice to the scope of Pombo’s homotextual enterprise.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed the state of the question with regard to the homosexually themed writing of Álvaro Pombo. I have presented the theoretical foundation of my argument concerning Pombo’s homographetic depiction of homosexuality in his narrative, based on Lee Edelman’s concept of the metaphorical homosexual, which is a deconstructionist reading of the writing of homosexuality in Western literature. In the same vein, I have elaborated a literary, theoretical concept of subversive homosexual inscription, as articulated principally by Jonathan Dollimore, to describe the act of writing the homosexual into Spanish literature that Pombo is undertaking in his writing. I have defined the various difficulties and challenges inherent in attempting to articulate Pombo’s engagement with the homosexual situation in his narrative, as something that goes against the grain in respect to previous portrayals of homosexual

⁴⁴ Hugh Silverman uses Barthes’ notion of the ground zero of writing to highlight the confluence of writing and the act of its interpretation from a conceptual groundwork of nothingness, as *tabula rasa*. In his well-suited interpretation of this distinction, Hugh Silverman says the following: “Whereas phenomenological description is concerned with the contents of experience (whether transcendental or existential), phenomenological interpretation (or hermeneutics) stresses the act of mediation between an interpreter and the interpreted. Interpretation is a placing-between: like the path delineated by Hermes the messenger who travels between Zeus and the other gods.” See Hugh J. Silverman, *Textualities: Between Hermeneutics and Deconstruction* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 11.

protagonism in Western literature, or in Spain, in any event. I have also discussed the theoretical framework of phenomenological homosexuality, based on the phenomenological and hermeneutical philosophies of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, among others.

In the following chapters I sketch the evolution of Pombo's discourse of homosexuality in literature—from the most abject to the most virtuous and altruistic; and from the early days of the *Transición* to the contemporary period. Pombo's literary evolution on homotextuality takes many turns, and while it begins rather modestly with Pombo introducing homosexual existentialism as the principal theme or leitmotif of his writing, it evolves in a decidedly more ideological fashion as he confronts the very viability (and desirability) of different types of homosexualisms in the postmodern era.

Chapter II

The Emergence of the Homotextual Voice in Álvaro Pombo's Early Narrative

In this chapter I examine the early stages in the evolution of Pombo's homotextual aesthetic. I describe in some detail the influences on and circumstances of Pombo the writer, including his return to Spain after many years of exile in England, where he honed his narrative skills and worked extensively in the field of phenomenological and hermeneutical philosophy. It was during this exile period that homosexuality would develop as a predominant motif in his early, and also of course, his later writing. To summarize, the primary homotextual leitmotifs that dominate Pombo's early writing, and that he develops more extensively in his later writing, are the following: (1) the narrative construction of (mainly homosexual) existential dissonance; that is, his writing of homosexual abjection as a phenomenological reflection of the subjective self in the context of a heterologocentrism that views the homosexual as intrinsically unnatural, and as a result of which the homosexual shrinks away into a kind of solipsism that removes him from authentic engagement with his experiential realm; (2) the narrative interpretation of homosexuality as a form of phenomenological intentionality; that is, the perception of the homosexual experience as related through the narrative discourse of homoeroticism as a form of consciousness of Being; and (3) the aesthetics of conflating representational reality and its recitation through narrative, as an interrogation of the existential dualism between consciousness and apperceptive reality; that is, the great chasm of chaotic phenomenological existence that confronts the subject whose experiences of life are represented simultaneously through the real and the imaginary.

I begin with a discussion of Pombo's first text, *Relatos sobre la falta de sustancia* (1977), which is a series of twelve short stories that was published upon Pombo's return to Spain after a long exile. I then provide an analysis of Pombo's early texts *El héroe de las mansardas de Mansard* (1983) and *El parecido* (1985). I am omitting a later text from the early period, *El hijo adoptivo* (1984), although I do make reference to this novel during the course of my analysis. *El hijo adoptivo* unquestionably falls under the rubric of homotextual narrative in that it has many of the leitmotifs that I associate with this type of narrative; however, for the purposes of this study, it is very similar in style to *El parecido*, and much of my analysis of this novel will suffice to adumbrate the homotextual narrative techniques that Pombo uses in both these novels. I focus on the most salient leitmotifs that constitute Pombo's homotextual narrative, and show how these themes manifest themselves in Pombo's early writings. All of the texts under discussion in this chapter are associated with Pombo's insubstantiality series (*el ciclo de la falta de sustancia*), and the most common thread throughout these early texts is the philosophical motif of inauthenticity, and I examine this in significant detail. Insubstantiality is for Pombo a mode of Being that he describes as interiority or solipsism. As Pombo himself describes it: "en parte, la falta de libertad, que se convierte en un hueco, y el personaje gira sobre sí mismo y no es capaz de salir fuera de sí. Todos los problemas de mis personajes son problemas de interior, es decir no quieren salir fuera."⁴⁵ Thus, insubstantiality represents for Pombo a moving away from authenticity of Being by means of a refuge into an interior space where the subject is shielded from the chaos and mayhem of the lived experience, and from which the subject is unable to confront, and overcome, the sources of his oppression.

⁴⁵ Pombo states further on: "Es lo mismo del cartesianismo: pienso, luego existo; siento, luego existo; tengo emociones, luego existo. Pero esta «vuelta hacia sí mismo» propiciada por el cartesianismo y, en última instancia, por el subjetivismo, acaba en un vacío, porque el yo, la autoconciencia o conciencia empírica de uno mismo, no es en cuanto tal directamente perceptible para nosotros. Quien se busca en sí mismo, o no encuentra nada en absoluto o encuentra un caos espantoso; si es un santo, quizás encuentra a todos los demás, a Dios, es decir, al tú. Pero es un mal camino empezar por el yo para encontrar el tú, a los demás." See Pombo's interview with Gregorio Morales Villena, "Entrevista con Álvaro Pombo. Tan precioso licor," *Ínsula* 476-477 (1986).

The Exile Experience

When *Relatos sobre la falta de sustancia* appeared in 1977, it marked the beginning of Pombo's journey out of relative obscurity and into the mainstream of Spanish literature. Pombo had lived in England for the eleven years prior to the publication of this text, and his experiences outside of Spain had a profound impact on his writing, not only as a homosexual writer of fiction about homosexuals, but also as a writer of fiction about Spain and about Spaniards. Because of his situation in "exile," Pombo was able to escape the intense scrutiny he had been under as well as the profound social anxiety caused by years of living under Franco's dictatorship, and he was also able to reflect on Spain from the perspective of an outsider who knew Spanish culture and society so intimately.

Pombo's experience as an expatriate in England also had other unforeseen consequences on his literary output: it gave him a measure of social freedom that he had not heretofore known, and undoubtedly allowed him to experience his homosexuality in a relatively unencumbered manner, which would have been inconceivable in Spain. To be sure, homosexuality was not fully decriminalized in the United Kingdom until the late 1970s, and, according to Jeffrey Weeks, anti-homosexual law in Britain was indeed draconian in certain aspects of its application.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, in comparison with Spain in the same epoch, where one could conceivably end up in a concentration camp for behaviour even remotely suspected of being "degenerate," the English experience must have been something akin to paradise for Pombo.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ For instance, the perceived corruption of a minor (or social inferior) could result in long prison sentences, as was the case for Wilde after his infamous trial. British society was presumably no less homophobic than Spanish society; it merely had the good fortune of not being under a National-Catholic military dictatorship. See Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (London: Quartet Books, 1977).

⁴⁷ For a more detailed analysis of the repression of homosexual behaviour under Francoist Spain (frequent police roundups and detentions in work camps in Huelva) see Arturo Arnalte, *Redada de violetas: la represión de los homosexuales durante el franquismo* (Madrid: Esfera de los Libros, 2003). In a personal interview with this author (April 2007), Pombo declared that he had taken flight from Spain in 1967 because of persistent harassment by police in Madrid.

The self-imposed exile experience in England provided Pombo with various perspectives on existential interiority/exteriority that would come to dominate much of his writing about the human experience—principally the psychosexual anxiety of homosexual existence, but also the anxiety and dread of other subjects who were trapped in the morass of, as Pombo conceived it, “inauthentic existence.” Because of his personal experiences, Pombo had a keen awareness of the outsider—these experiences greatly informed the narrative of estrangement and alienation that would characterize the marginalized Other in his writing. In addition, Pombo returned to Spain with a newfound sense of urgency to expound on the phenomenological experience of homosexuality, that is, to depict the experiential field of homoeroticism in literature. This desire to write homosexuality coincided with a profound liberalization in Spanish mores concerning the expression of different forms of human sexuality. As Alfredo Martínez affirms, Pombo had taken it upon himself to lift the expression of homosexuality in literature from its taboo status by incorporating his own experiences into his own writing:

La estrategia de Pombo no parece consistir simplemente en la relativamente inocua introducción de personajes homosexuales en sus relatos. Podríamos preguntarnos si ese aparente aire casual con que se nos deja olfatear una sexualidad atormentada no persigue, en realidad, un objetivo más ambicioso que el simple morbo. Ese objetivo, que bien pudiera ser un intento de airear el infame tema tabú de la homosexualidad, tendría entonces mucho que ver con dos series contradictorias de consideraciones: el hecho de que el propio Álvaro Pombo viviera su sexualidad en condiciones sociales y culturales muy adversas, y el hecho de que su regreso a España en 1977 coincidiera con los comienzos de la liberación sexual.⁴⁸

Pombo’s first text, *Relatos sobre la falta de sustancia*, is noteworthy for Spanish letters, not only because it deals openly and universally with homosexuality, but also because it takes place in locales outside of Spain: in England to be precise.⁴⁹ Most of the protagonists are

⁴⁸ See Martínez, *Escrituras torcidas: ensayos de crítica "queer"*, p. 166.

⁴⁹ This point is especially intriguing because there is so little peninsular literature, in any particular epoch, that takes place outside the confines of the Peninsula. I exclude Latin America and France from this category because of the very special cultural, linguistic and social bonds that exist between Spain and Latin America, and to a lesser extent, France. Pombo’s decision to go to England, instead of France or Latin America, is unusual for a Spanish writer going into exile, and I believe that the English experience came to have a profound impact on Pombo.

Spaniards residing in England who have some relationship (amorous or otherwise) with English persons. The overriding sense of displacement in *Relatos* reflects the existential loneliness experienced by Pombo (or any exile) as a Spaniard residing in a foreign country;⁵⁰ that is, a cultural and sociological alienation impinges greatly on their Being-in-the-world and affects their interaction with the subjective Other. This alienation, which Masoliver calls *desdoblamiento* (splitting or fracturing), largely accounts for the philosophical interrogation of solipsistic interiority that is undertaken in the Pombian narrative, not only about homosexuality with regard to heteronormativity, but also about the experience of not belonging in an alien setting.⁵¹ As Masoliver explains, *desdoblamiento* can refer to a psychological condition of alienation or estrangement within a particular social or cultural setting. In the case of Pombo's narrative, it's clear that *desdoblamiento* refers mostly to the homosexual existential dissonance resulting from unrelenting social ostracism.

Development of the Homotextual Narrative

In the epilogue to *Contra natura* (2005) Pombo provides revealing and perspicuous insights into the methodology and motifs of his homotextual narrative. Pombo divulges, for the first time in any noteworthy publication, the circumstances and the nature of his experiences growing up as a homosexual in Francoist Spain. Moreover, Pombo reveals explicitly the existentialist and phenomenological underpinnings of his philosophy concerning homosexual alienation,

⁵⁰ Pombo says of this experience: "Me encontraba muy aislado en Londres en 1968. En comparación con otros novelistas contemporáneos míos, como Javier Marías o Vicente Molina Foix, y no obstante haber obtenido yo un título de licenciado en filosofía por la Universidad de Londres, no acabé nunca de romper el aislamiento de mis años londinenses. Siempre he considerado que yo fui el único culpable de mi aislamiento y relativa incomunicación ... Tuve muchas oportunidades de relacionarme con todos ellos, que sólo no aproveché en parte debido a mi absurdo solipsismo sentimental y timidez de aquellos años." See Álvaro Pombo, "Recordando a Iris Murdoch," *Album, letras, artes*, no. 82 (2005).

⁵¹ See Juan Antonio Masoliver, "El hijo adoptivo de Álvaro Pombo: la irónica melancolía de lo fantasmagórico," *Los Cuadernos del Norte* 24 (1984-85).

authenticity in the moral and ethical experience of our humanity, and the rejection of a frivolous, insignificant life:⁵²

Gentes de mi generación nacidos alrededor del año 39 del pasado siglo no tuvimos la experiencia de la Guerra Civil y —a menos que fuésemos hijos de exiliados— no tuvimos tampoco la experiencia del exilio exterior. Tuvimos, en cambio, la profunda experiencia del nacional-catolicismo en su doble vertiente subjetiva (pedagógica) y objetiva (sociopolítica). Vivimos una niñez y una juventud severas. Fuimos educados con severidad, con cierta urgencia por crecer y convertirnos en *personas mayores*, y fuimos también educados, al menos el sector más inquieto de mi generación, en el existencialismo poético y filosófico. Una de las ideas de entonces fue la de *autenticidad*. Frente a la existencia inauténtica (*el célebre decir lo que se dice, hacer lo que se hace, heideggeriano y sartreano*), nosotros vivimos la *ética de la responsabilidad personal, del compromiso*. Para quienes, como yo mismo, la experiencia amorosa se presentó desde un principio en términos de homoerotismo, la exigencia de responsabilidad tendía a eliminar toda sombra de superficialidad e, incluso —debo reconocerlo—, todo juego ... Yo vivía en Inglaterra por aquel entonces: pensé ya desde entonces que había llegado un poco tarde para practicar el principio del placer: *para mí seguía siendo en líneas generales más verdadero y más profundo el criterio de la acción real, comprometida, única e irrepetible, auténtica*. De aquí que viera mis propias inclinaciones homosexuales en estos términos y no en términos de entretenimiento o de búsqueda de pareja o parejas. No digo que esto fuera lo mejor o lo más inteligente o la única posibilidad: sólo digo que, en mi caso, autenticidad y realidad se presentaron siempre enfrentadas a irrealidad estética (gozo, felicidad) y superficialidad. *Esto significa que yo viví (y creo que en esto coincido con la experiencia de toda mi generación) la homosexualidad como un difícil y enredoso asunto que, en virtud de mi sentido del compromiso y de la autenticidad, yo estaba obligado a hacer mío a toda costa ...* Aquí es donde mi preocupación por la superficialidad cobra un nuevo impulso. Frente a los años de lucha por los derechos gays hemos llegado a un tiempo —admirable en muchos sentidos— en que lo gay comienza a trivializarse. Hay un proceso trivializador que afecta a nuestras juventudes y que se confunde con el consumismo y con el hedonismo de nuestra sociedad española actual ... *Se olvida que la experiencia homosexual es, tanto numérica como cualitativamente, una experiencia rara. Propia de un tanto por ciento muy reducido de ciudadanos y que se presenta históricamente y también intrínsecamente con aspectos dramáticos, trágicos y absurdos. Decir esto no es excluir del homoerotismo ni la felicidad ni la posible satisfacción ni, sobre todo, un profundo anhelo de universalidad.* (CN 558-9). (italics are mine).

Given that the passage is an epilogue, one would need to be privy to the story that has just unfolded to comprehend what Pombo is alluding to. Even so, Pombo's affirmations here

⁵² Insignificant in the sense intended by Merleau-Ponty, where all of our actions have consequences, and where my Being is a situation of mattering to the Other. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 78.

have tremendous relevance to his entire homotextual output, including notably his early texts. The gist of Pombo's epilogue sums up incontrovertibly what Pombo has tried to accomplish in his homotextual narrative: the expression of the existentially dissonant homosexual experience within the context of heteronormativity and, notwithstanding this abjection, the need to comport oneself with resolute determination and "decisionism"⁵³ in fulfilment of the authentic self.

The first noteworthy topic in the *Contra natura* epilogue involves the tribulations of growing up as a homosexual in National-Catholic Spain, in a society in which non-conformity with heteronormativity brought severe consequences. The vilification, unmentionableness, and invisibility of homosexuality during Pombo's formative years were undoubtedly decisive factors in his quest to write about homosexuality. According to Alfredo Martínez, the only posture for the expression of homosexuality in Franco's time was complete silence, or explicit religious condemnation.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, Pombo's experiences under the dictatorship, and the influences that these experiences had on his writing, particularly with regard to homosexuality, are rarely commented upon by his mainstream critics. For this reason, I believe these mainstream critics misapprehend Pombo's (ultimately philosophical) objective of educating homosexuality as a means of explaining a religious-moral paradox: the oppression of a minority society based on motives of religious piety, a topic I cover in extensive detail in chapter V.

The second noteworthy topic in the *Contra natura* epilogue relates to Pombo's philosophical influences, namely, existentialism and phenomenology with explicit emphasis on engagement and personal authenticity, particularly as they regard moral ethics. One of the

⁵³ Decisionism is a concept of existentialism relating to the manner in which the subject engages authentically in matters of ethics in accordance with an "ideality of values." That is, with regard to a moral agency that is incumbent in the relationality that exists between any individual and his environmental realm. See Eugene F. Kaelin, *An Existentialist Aesthetic: the Theories of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1962), pp. 103-108.

⁵⁴ Martínez points out in his analysis of thematic homosexual literature in Spain that the only option for expression of sexuality in Franco's Spain was religious: "La dictadura recupera las viejas figuras de la sexualidad religiosa: la homosexualidad como pecado, proscrita por las leyes humanas y divinas. La literatura del franquismo podría estudiarse a partir de un tema único: el silencio." See Alfredo Martínez, "El poder de la imaginación: literatura española de temática homosexual," *Archipiélago* 67 (2005), p. 80.

principal touchstones of Pombo's narrative is the quest for "truth"—in the sense of an unimpeded quest to discover what is at bottom the foundation of one's existence as meaningful and significant—and for the attainment of the authentic self in spite of the significant obstacles and vicissitudes of a degraded life. Pombo's aversion to superficiality is a tenet of Pombo's philosophical narrative with regard to the hedonism and moral relativism that he finds so prevalent in some sectors of contemporary gay culture.

In the early period of his writing, matters were of course entirely different for homosexuals, particularly in Spain. In his early texts Pombo focuses considerable attention on homoerotic consciousness. Being homosexual in a homophobic society, and living a life mired in invisibility and existential insignificance were considerable burdens that Pombo expresses poignantly, albeit at times scathingly, in his homotextual narrative. There is very little mention of frivolity or wanton profligacy in Pombo's early writings because little of this was apparent in the homosexual cultures emerging from the shadows of the profound political and social oppression of the Franco years. Thus, Pombo's early prose about homosexual abjection is infused with philosophical flourishes about the nature of abjection and the quest for a meaningful existence. Moreover, Pombo is one of the first Spanish writers, after perhaps Juan Gil-Albert, to undertake the naturalization of homosexual expression in his writing.⁵⁵ However, whereas Gil-Albert's texts can be seen in a more essentialist light—along the lines of Gide—in their portrayal of a "deterministic" homosexuality, Pombo's texts emerge as vastly different—they do not consider homosexuality as ontology of Being but rather as the heterogeneous manifestation of homoerotic consciousness.

For Pombo, notwithstanding considerations of homosexuality as a naturally occurring phenomenon, homoerotic intentionality remains an idiosyncratic experience that, relatively

⁵⁵ Juan Gil-Albert assumes a very Gidean style (from *Corydon*) in his seminal work about the naturalness, and one could even say aesthetic desirability, of same-sex eroticism. See Juan Gil-Albert, *Heraclés, sobre una manera de ser* (Madrid: J. Betancor, 1975).

speaking, a very small percentage of the human population experiences as their primary mode of sexual expression, and for this reason, it puts those whom it epitomizes at substantial risk for degradation. Nevertheless, Pombo's final statement, "by saying this, I do not exclude the possibility of experiencing through homoeroticism either happiness, satisfaction, or a profound longing for universality" ("decir esto no es excluir del homoerotismo ni la felicidad ni la posible satisfacción ni, sobre todo, un profundo anhelo de universalidad") speaks volumes about the guarded optimism that Pombo holds for the humanity of those who, because of these experiential differences, are relegated to marginalization. It is precisely to these people that Pombo, as Alfredo Martínez cogently observes, is trying to give voice in his early texts. For Pombo, the process of writing, as inscription and as a means of literary expression not only of the homosexual condition, but of the entire human condition in all its chaotic complexity, is an act of self-revelation and bringing into significance. The phenomenological aspect of literary expression, and in particular literature about homosexuality, is the mediation of language with the reality of the subject in his experiential realm. Daniel Frank Chamberlain describes the phenomenological literary enterprise in the following terms:

Language, understood as a mode of being in the world rather than as a closed system, is "prior to everything else" in the hermeneutical study of narrative perspective. The structure and character of consciousness can be understood in terms of a dialectic of question and answer as well as a conversation with the world through discourse.⁵⁶

For Pombo, writing about homosexuality, then, involves a dialectical interrogation concerning the fundamental nature of Being and, in particular, the form of existence as consciousness that is unsettled by its alienating situation within heteronormativity. Derrida described writing (*écriture*) as the unfathomable between the absent and the present, as graphic

⁵⁶ Chamberlain says further: "Following the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, awareness is divided into four levels: perception, representation, illusion, and hallucination, and all vary in degree from an open and shared awareness of the world and one's self to a closed and private one." See Daniel Frank Chamberlain, *Narrative Perspectives in Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), pp. 4-5.

sign, and speech as verbal sounds. Like *écriture*, the text operates at the interface between oppositional polarities.⁵⁷ It is in this sense that the dialectical discourse embodied in Pombo's homotextual writing exposes the precarious liminality in homosexual existence. By this I mean that Pombo's narrative describes the invisibility that arises in the suppression of a conscious experience of sexual intentionality as a primordial aspect of Being, an invisibility that keeps the subject at an unhealthy and nihilistic remove from authentic engagement with the messiness of humanity. Pombo's obsession with authentic engagement, however brutal and degrading, gives contour to the dramatic situatedness of his protagonists. It is his fixation on personal integrity that leads Pombo to construct narratives that are trenchant in their depiction of humanity in all its demeaning cruelty and corruption, as well as in its resilient capacity for redemption: authentic self-revelation in opposition to servility and self-loathing in *Los delitos insignificantes*; intersubjective communion in opposition to solipsism, and self-directed homophobia in *El metro de platino iridiado*; and goodness and the pursuit of compassionate love in opposition to dissolute hedonism and cruelty in *Contra natura*. Pombo's homotextual writing is consistent with the debunking of the very motives and intentions of heterologocentric (read homographetic) discourse in respect to homosexual consciousness: the reduction of homosexuality to metaphoric insignificance—homosexuality as sexual anthropology (read homographesis). Pombo's writing evolves in a society in the throes of a major transition, the consequences of which would transform the very epistemological foundation of Spanish literary discourse. With the emergence of a new generation of post-dictatorship homosexual writers in Spain, no longer would homosexuality (as literary discourse) be reduced merely to a binary tropology of abjection and ridicule, as had been the case for Spanish writing concerning homosexuality for decades and centuries.

⁵⁷ See Derrida in Silverman, *Textualities: Between Hermeneutics and Deconstruction*, p. 84.

It is not coincidental that *Relatos sobre la falta de sustancia* appeared when Spain, and Madrid in particular, was in the midst of *La Movida*.⁵⁸ Spain was pulsating with the vibrancy of a burgeoning cultural and artistic scene that saw the dismantling of many taboos from the Francoist era. One of those taboos was the expression of homosexuality, which from a practicable standpoint meant that persons could liberally practice homosexuality without fear of criminal incarceration, but in terms of societal acceptance and “tolerance” of homosexual culture meant significantly less.⁵⁹ According to Antoni Mirabet i Mullol, continually evolving societal upheavals in Spanish society did not significantly alter the perception that homosexuality was degenerate and “unnatural,” and these attitudes persisted in the conceptualization of a “gay aesthetic,” which was significantly circumscribed to isolated urban ghettos.⁶⁰ An equally damning perspective of the superficial acceptance of transgressive sexuality surfaces in Soriano Gil’s account of persistent homophobia in transitional Spain.⁶¹ Thus, when Pombo published *Relatos sobre la falta de sustancia* he was still operating in an environment that did not readily accept the expression of a homosexual aesthetic, nor the frank portrayal of same-sex eroticism. For Pombo to have done so was a significant act of pluck, and he was subjected to not insignificant opprobrium and ostracism in the mainstream, and also in gay circles where his opus was often viewed as nothing more than self-censuring, homophobic literature.

⁵⁸ Actually, many of the first moves towards liberalization of attitudes and “tolerance” towards gays in Spain began in Barcelona, in particular with the Catalan movement (Front D’alliberament Gai de Catalunya) in the late 1970s. See Alberto Mira, *De Sodoma a Chueca: una historia cultural de la homosexualidad en España en el siglo XX* (Barcelona: Egales, 2004), p. 125.

⁵⁹ The infamous “Ley de peligrosidad y rehabilitación social”, which had initially been set up as a means of controlling “social deviancy”—to wit, principally homosexuality, but other “noxious” forms of social behaviour as well, often through incarceration or internment in “rehabilitation camps”—by the Franco regime in 1969, was officially rescinded in 1979.

⁶⁰ See Antoni Mirabet i Mullol, *Homosexualidad hoy: ¿aceptada o todavía condenada?* (Barcelona: Herder, 1985), pp. 167-204.

⁶¹ See Manuel Ángel Soriano Gil, *La marginación homosexual en la España de la Transición* (Barcelona: Egales, 2005), p. 15.

Relatos sobre la falta de sustancia

I now turn to Pombo's early texts and provide an analysis of the various homotextual motifs that appear in each of them. Each text merits a separate monograph of its own, given their complexity and dense symbolism; however, in this section I focus on each text by providing a brief summary of the narrative context, and then I analyze the text's most salient homotextual motifs. I also attempt to link these motifs to other strands of writing in the early *ciclo de la falta de sustancia* to show the progression that Pombo makes with regard to his homotextual poetics. From a homotextual perspective, the most complex and fraught text in the *ciclo de la falta de sustancia* is *Los delitos insignificantes*, which is analyzed in extensive detail in chapter III. *Relatos sobre la falta de sustancia* is composed of twelve short stories, the majority of which I classify as homotextual fiction. The stories from this collection that have the most significant homotextual content are "Tío Eduardo," "En falso," "Luzmila," and "Sugar Daddy." In this study, I limit my focus to "Tío Eduardo" and "Sugar Daddy".

In the prologue to *Relatos sobre la falta de sustancia*, Pombo's philosophical mentor, José Luis Aranguren, writes the following with regard to the appearance of homosexuality as a narrative leitmotif in this text:

La relación homosexual, escondida o clandestinamente llevada, por la fuerza de las circunstancias de una existencia oficialmente presentable, es vivida por dentro como una tranquila, dulce, cotidiana necesidad de "estar" con el otro; y es significativo que los cuentos con mayor ajeteo sexual sean paradójica y precisamente los heterosexuales. No creo que se trate sólo de pudor, del cual, en el hondo sentido de la palabra, hay mucho en este libro. Se presenta, sobre todo, como la aspiración a una "normalidad"... (RFS 7-8).

When taken at face value, Aranguren's introduction comes across as sympathetic and well-meaning, particularly with regard to Pombo's authorial initiative in taking on this controversial subject. However, I contend that Aranguren has read the homotextual texts in this collection of short stories from a decidedly sanguine, almost casual perspective, and that Aranguren, in a similar fashion to many progressives (*progresistas*) like him, is perhaps oblivious to the

circumstances of the emergence of homotextual writing that I have elaborated earlier in this chapter. This was 1977, after all, and one would expect that Aranguren and *progresistas* generally should have been supportive of the ambitions of writers, such as Pombo, who were writing openly and unabashedly about homosexuality. Nevertheless, despite the presumed natural affinities between left-wing movements and the “gay liberation” movement, attitudes towards homosexuality in the former had not substantially evolved. Alberto Mira writes in *De Sodoma a Chueca* that left-wing receptiveness to homosexuality during this time of transition was considerably different than what one finds today when there appears to be an implicit solidarity (203-207). Initial reactions were far more unsympathetic and condemnatory, and homosexuality was often equated with bourgeois depravity, deviant (unnatural sexual) behaviour, and inconsequential sexual hedonism.

Aranguren treats Pombo’s approach to homosexuality in narrative almost cavalierly, and he does so with almost complete disregard for what the experience might have constituted for Pombo at any number of levels, which Pombo clearly evinces in the narrative. Aranguren’s attitude is not entirely surprising given the general tendency (historically), and certainly in the early days of the *Transición*, to treat homosexuality as a discomfiting social and literary phenomenon. Aranguren’s assertion that homosexuality is experienced internally as a serene, daily necessity to be with the Other (“vívada por dentro como una tranquila, dulce, cotidiana necesidad de ‘estar’ con el otro”), or that what Pombo sought through his depiction of interior homosexuality as a form of “normality,” is mystifying, to say the least. Surely there is nothing sweet or tranquil about the constant affliction Pombo’s homosexual protagonists experience in their usually existentially dissonant state. Normality is precisely what Pombo rejected about this condition, as the text clearly bears out and as I argue in this study. Nonetheless, there is much to glean from Aranguren’s perceptive comment concerning the need “to be with the Other,” for this

is one of the major philosophical tenets of Pombo's depiction of intersubjectivity as a touchstone for authentic Being.

"Tío Eduardo" is the opening (and perhaps most frequently commented upon) short story in *Relatos sobre la falta de sustancia*. It is a tale that has some of the salient traits of the Pombian homotextual narrative that appear in many of Pombo's subsequent texts; namely, it is a story about unrequited love on the part of an older man for a younger man and, more importantly, it involves an uncle and a nephew. This recurring motif is prevalent in *El parecido*, *El metro de platino iridiado*, and to a lesser extent in *El hijo adoptivo* and *El cielo raso*, although in the latter two the relationship is more oblique, as the relationship does not involve directly an uncle and a nephew, but rather a guardian and his ward. In *El metro de platino iridiado* the motif of love between uncle and nephew plays a significant role in the story, a topic that I discuss extensively in chapter IV.

"Tío Eduardo" is narrated from the first person perspective of another nephew. The narrator nephew provides a bemused account of the unrequited yearning of Eduardo for his nephew Ignacio. The whimsical perspective of the narrator in "Tío Eduardo" provides an intimate, almost spectatorial view of the emotional tribulations that envelop the family patriarch Eduardo, who is in mourning over the recent deaths of his wife and daughter (Adela and Adelita). On the surface, Eduardo fulfils the role of patriarch with utmost aplomb, exercising his duties as head of household with imperious alacrity and haughty disdain. However, the one aspect of his existence that Eduardo cannot act upon, in the National-Catholic Spain of the Franco years, is his homoerotic intentionality, particularly as it extends to Ignacio. The object of Eduardo's lust, his nephew Ignacio, is depicted somewhat phantasmically in the tale—much like the deceased nephew Jaime in *El parecido*—and Ignacio's "unreality" and etherealness provide the substance

of the story, as related by the narrator: “Sólo recuerdo la irrealidad e instantaneidad de todo aquello y el haber pensado (con extraña envidia infantil entonces) que tío Eduardo e Ignacio hacían buena pareja.” (RFS 22) The arrival of Ignacio unsettles everything, not only in the family household, which the narrator nephew perceives as essentially moribund, but also in the life of Eduardo who is slowly wasting away in spiritual and physical degeneration. In a sudden transformational moment, Ignacio’s arrival sends Eduardo into a state of euphoria; it is as if Ignacio’s arrival has unfettered Eduardo from a dour, perennially unhappy existence, related no doubt to his repressed sexuality: “Tío Eduardo, de hecho, parecía encantado con Ignacio. Pasaban muchas horas juntos charlando, embebidos, según parece, en el pasado fantasmal que tío Eduardo había ido construyendo durante toda una vida.” (RFS 19) The *pasado fantasmal* relates, of course, to the affective life—that is, his desperate longing for male erotic companionship—that Eduardo has vicariously constructed for himself, mainly in his imagination. Eduardo, like many of Pombo’s tortured homosexual protagonists, leads a sexual life that is characterized by its spuriousness, as expressed in the reverie of imagined sexual escapades with the object of his desire.

There is a seismic narrative shift, however, when Eduardo’s newfound joy is shaken after Ignacio disappears from the household unexpectedly for a period of weeks. The equilibrium of the household is thrown into turmoil as Eduardo fulminates over the loss of his newfound bliss. As Eduardo grows increasingly manic, there is a tense and foreboding atmosphere that descends upon the house:

Detenido en medio de la habitación no sabía yo si reír o llorar, si aquella falta de Ignacio era, como parecía serlo en aquel momento, de verdad una quiebra en la estructura de las cosas o sencillamente una broma de mal gusto, una crueldad innecesaria. Pero, a la vez, ni siquiera el concepto mismo de crueldad podía aplicarse puesto que implica una cierta deliberación e intención por parte del verdugo —una cierta división del universo en víctimas y verdugos ... (RFS 23)

The register shift is a typical Pombian narrative device that highlights the instability of the emotional terrain that his fragile protagonists navigate in their daily routines and experiences. A type of vexing cruelty descends upon the unsuspecting victims of life's vicissitudes, much as an executioner's axe blade does upon the head of a victim—life as executioner and subject as victim. The motif of executioner/victim in this tale—a frequent theme in Pombo's schematic of domination/subjugation throughout his texts—is related to a dramatic reversal of fortunes within the household. The sardonic narrator alludes to the transformation of the autocratic patriarch into a whimpering and hapless fool over the sudden disappearance of his beloved nephew, who does not so much spurn his love—it never existed in any patently prurient fashion—as be oblivious to it. The one situation that the imperious Eduardo cannot control is the unrequited love that he feels for the unattainable Ignacio. Ultimately Eduardo perishes never having experienced in any significant way love, which according to the narrator is an illusion, in any event: “La palabra amor, a fuerza de aplicarse a millares de sentimientos heterogéneos, no significa nada en absoluto. Decir que tío Eduardo, a sus sesenta años, se enamoró de Ignacio es no decir gran cosa” (RFS 24).⁶²

As Pombo's first story, “Tío Eduardo” establishes the pattern of the irreconcilable existential alienation of a protagonist who is unable to unshackle himself from the constraints of an existence that depletes and stifles him. Eduardo is unable to proclaim his love for his nephew because he is a victim of the inescapable circumstances of his life situation (his historical thrownness) as a spurious (inauthentic) heterosexual and blustering patriarch whose role it is to rule unassailably over his minions. Pombo often juxtaposes situations of moral complexity with one another—love for a nephew, unreciprocated love generally (usually by homosexuals for

⁶² Pombo states in a newspaper interview (“La alegría y las narraciones”, *El Mundo*, 23-VII 1992) that Spinoza characterizes happiness as a passion through whose virtue the soul passes from a state of minor perfection into a state of major perfection. Pombo also states that for him there are no people in love, but rather intense relationships that last for a lifetime; in an interview with Lola Díaz (*Cambio 16*, 4-III-1985). (in Spanish “en mis libros no hay personajes enamorados, sino relaciones intensas que duran toda la vida.”).

heterosexuals), psychological abuse and exploitation and domination—to underscore the precarious, asymmetrical nature of existence, and to draw attention to the need for the subject to act always in a manner that is in keeping with his authentic, moral, and ethical agency. “Tío Eduardo” conveys exquisitely Pombo’s notion of existential dissonance in the manner in which it relates the solitude of existence: the absolute desperation and hopelessness of the older, sexually repressed man, who in a moment of unbridled euphoria in the love of his nephew succumbs to the tragic reality of his situation. Eduardo suffers inconsolably in the impossibility of his love for his nephew. In any event, there is no circumstance, social or otherwise, that would permit the consummation of such a relationship. Indeed, unrequited love of the type represented by tío Eduardo for Ignacio is the metaphorical bridge that spans an existential abyss; the chasm of unattainability, which, owing to the historical situatedness of the circumstances, is unavoidable: Spain in the 1960s, under Franco’s rule, inhabited by vastly diverging generations of Spaniards—the old and the new, just like the old and the new Spain—moving inexorably in different directions. The last lines of the tale neatly sum up the progression of this inevitable temporal and generational change: “Tío Eduardo murió al año siguiente. Tía Adela y tío Eduardo se han vuelto el símbolo nostálgico de una generación y de una época” (RFS 24). “Tío Eduardo” encapsulates in its succinct, rugged prose the desperation that informs lives that coexist in close spatial proximity but that remain existentially leagues apart. Moreover, it is this incisive notion of existential interiority/exteriority that lends such force to Pombo’s narrative of alienation.

“Sugar Daddy” is the most ethereal and philosophically complex story in *Relatos sobre la falta de sustancia* and deals extensively with homosexual consciousness as an inherence of phenomenological Being. This story concerns a homosexual Spanish protagonist, Manuel, who

is living in some form of exile in England with a love interest whose existence we know of, but whose actual presence is never fleshed out in the narrative, and who is referred to cryptically throughout as “the boy.” In fact, the love interest hovers as an ancillary backdrop to the central protagonism of the story, which takes place, for the most part, in the mind of Manuel. “Sugar Daddy” is an example of a Pombian dialectical narrative that explores the confines of the inner and outer realms of Being and consciousness in terms of the subject’s engagement with his experiential realm; a narrative technique that comes to perfect fruition in *El metro de platino iridiado*. Manuel is intensely engaged with his homoerotic intentionality and it seems to consume his every waking moment. His conscious awareness of his homosexuality—his revelation (*aletheia*) of Being in erotic intentionality; the falling into existence (*Dasein*) of his homosexuality, as Heidegger describes it—is the underlying trauma of his existential angst: he is thrust into a situation of homoerotic sexuality that stands him in subversive tension with long-standing epistemological and semiotic signifiers of sexual difference as constitutive of heteronormativity, or sexual normalcy. Pombo’s narrative uses Heidegger’s concept of thrownness, particularly the case in “Sugar Daddy,” to expose the irretrievable existential situation of his protagonists who are in constant struggle with the experiential realm of their Being where they confront, in a kind of *anagnorisis*,⁶³ their authentic engagement with this realm as actantial persons.

Manuel is the first Pombian protagonist whose experience of conscious, sentient homoeroticism is explored extensively. In Pombo’s homotextual narratives in *Relatos sobre la falta de sustancia*, there are only occasional allusions to homoerotic intentionality as sexual praxis; usually the emphasis falls on the subject’s emotional and metaphysical engagement with

⁶³ *Anagnorisis* is the Aristotelian concept of discovery (from the Greek ἀναγνώρισις), I use it in conjunction with Heidegger’s concept of *aletheia* as a fundamental precept in the subject’s awareness of the inevitability of his existence with regard to his experiential realm. This is a key concept for Pombo whose literary thrust is the subject’s emergence from solipsism into a recognition of their struggle with the forces of their oppression, some of which are self-generated, of course, and against which they must achieve a type of self-overcoming.

this intentionality as desire. To be sure, there is tremendous existential conflict, but this conflict relates principally to the subject's state of mind. It isn't until *El metro de platino iridiado* that Pombo deals with a subject who is so deeply caught up in his conscious homoeroticism as a fundamental aspect of his Being-in-the-world, and who comes to see his homoerotic intentionality as praxis as a threshold that he crosses with great trepidation. It is noteworthy that Manuel bears some resemblance to Gonzalito in *El metro de platino iridiado*, whose situation I analyze in detail in chapter IV. Manuel, like Gonzalito, stands aloof from any intersubjective encounter with his sexuality, because it terrorizes him and renders him a mere estranged spectator in the sexual gratification that he stealthily pursues in the public spaces of London. It is as if the nocturnal trysts that constitute same-sex sexuality occur in the nebulosity of disembodied experience—the blurred lines that constitute the indecipherable realms between the real and the imaginary in Pombo's narrative:

Se encontraron una tarde en Hyde Park. Hacía quince años del terror aquel que había cambiado su vida por completo. Manuel tenía cuarenta y cinco. Había aprendido a aburrirse y consideraba esta sabiduría con el orgullo que otros ponen en haber aprendido a dominarse, o a jugar bien al ajedrez. Pensaba con una cierta piedad desdeñosa —porque el miedo, la distancia, se le había vuelto falta de respeto— en esos homosexuales de su edad que veía al anochecer ir y venir entre los árboles, muy ajustados los pantalones claros, en vano intento de procurarse una silueta joven, traicionados, al caminar, por la rigidez sin gracia de los años ... para dejarlos luego languideciendo hasta bien entrada la noche en los bancos y en los paseos o merodeando en torno a los retretes públicos como animales tímidos que se enzarzan, de pronto, en sus selvas imaginarias. (RFS 128)

Manuel is a subject for whom the experience of same-sex eroticism has little subjective value, and he goes about his nocturnal wanderings not so much in pursuit of intersubjective fulfilment, but rather in ravenous pursuit of quarry—like other homosexuals his age who wander aimlessly, and pathetically, in search of a lingering morsel of human flesh (in their tightly fitting jeans in search of younger prey). In fact, the narrative makes metaphoric allusions to the animality of the encounters among the furtively “skittish animals” that become entangled with one another in their imaginary jungles. This poetic language conforms to a homographetic image of

homosexuality that, as I discuss in other chapters, constitutes a resounding reproof of the back alley sex that Pombo's narrative unfailingly depicts as objectifying and nihilistic.

Pombo's narrative explores the topic of subjective disengagement in sexual relations in many of his texts—a sense of falling away, which is expressed as a lack of Care in the Heideggerian sense, from authenticity in existence⁶⁴—but most particularly in *El metro de platino iridiado*. Following Heidegger's interpretation of Care, Manuel lacks the proper awareness of himself to apprehend the aspects of his sexuality that give force and meaning to his intersubjective existence before the morass of chaotic and unruly humanity that is unfurling before him. Manuel is disoriented from his own primordial needs for love and affection (visibility and recognition), for himself and towards the Other:

El muchacho le siguió al dormitorio y los dos se desnudaron a la vez en silencio sin mirarse, con una cierta torpeza que era (visto desde fuera) a la vez solemne y cómica. Luego Manuel se volvió y al ver desnudo al muchacho se acercó a él y le acarició con la indecisión de un escolar que descubre la sexualidad del cuerpo propio —como un dato— acariciando el cuerpo de un compañero ... La hiriente vanidad del muchacho, su belleza un poco femenina. La propia vanidad de Manuel que le había hecho creer que dominaba la situación justo hasta el instante mismo en que la situación le dominó por completo. Sin apagar la lamparilla, contemplando el cuerpo delgado, anónimo, del muchacho dotado de la gracia sosa de los adolescentes altos, le venció el sueño. Se despidieron con unas cuantas frases triviales. Manuel respiró aliviado. (RFS 131)

The boy (*muchacho*) retains anonymity throughout the entire story; in fact, it is the anonymity of the relationship: the flitting, obscure nature of the encounters that characterize the sexual relationship between him and Manuel. In the end, Manuel feels a tremendous sense of release to be finally unburdened of the responsibility that the recognition of the Other entails. The *muchacho* in this scene is the embodiment of Sartre's alien gaze of the Other (*le regard d'autrui*) for the manner in which his existence disrupts and disorients Manuel's Being-in-the-world, and

⁶⁴ For Heidegger, it is Care (*Sorge*) that signifies a subject's existence and makes it meaningful, because the subject is conscious at all times of precisely that which makes life fragile and indecipherable, and which make him all too aware of his existence. Being-in-the-world in an authentic existential pretext is to be "careful." Heidegger concluded that "care" is the primordial state of Being as *Dasein* strives towards authenticity. See Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 83. See also J. Glenn Gray, "Heidegger's 'Being'," *The Journal of Philosophy* 49, no. 12 (1952), p. 416.

for this reason, Manuel symbolically (metaphorically) snuffs him out in a primordial conflict of wills. Their relationship plays out, in effect, as a manifestation of Sartre's concept of consciousness as subject/Other as object, as Sartre spells out in *Being and Nothingness*.⁶⁵ Sartre's attitude in this regard is anathema to Pombo's philosophical stance, for Pombo clearly sees the subject's existence inextricably linked to the subjective Other—following Merleau-Ponty's concept of intertwining relationality: the primacy of mutuality of subjects in an intersubjective exchange.⁶⁶ The narrative's representation of the *muchacho*'s existence as invisible is, in this instance, an illustration of Manuel's dire subjective nihilism.

Manuel seeks to conform to a situation of normalcy that his paralyzing fear in the face of homoerotic intentionality invariably prevents him from attaining. From Manuel's perspective, he is invisible, and as a result he attempts to dissimulate the signifiers of his sense of dissonance; that is, he tries to blend in and become visibly "normal," although at every turn the force of homoeroticism betrays him and reveals his natural impulses:

Como si tratara de compensar lo que Manuel consideraba relativa singularidad en sus inclinaciones sexuales mediante una especie de conformidad en los actos moralmente indiferentes. Pensar que se vestía y se cortaba el pelo como la inmensa mayoría de los hombres de su edad, le parecía a Manuel un tributo a la comunidad imposible y le tranquilizaba cada vez que, a pesar de todas sus cautelas, le traicionaba la primavera o la cerveza o sus nervios y le intranquilizaban los adolescentes que veía en las calles. (RFS 134)

Manuel attempts at all costs to allay the gnawing sense of the incongruence of his situation as homosexual within the day-to-day flowing together of events, by participating in activities that would distinguish him as a "normal" man in the routine of life (cutting his hair, dressing in a particular manner). Nevertheless, for him there would always be the knowledge that, however hard he tried to dissimulate his "reality," he would know consciously what his situation was.

⁶⁵ See Sartre in James Schmidt, *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Between Phenomenology and Structuralism* (London: MacMillan Publishers Ltd., 1985), pp. 78-79.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

When Manuel decides that he is capable of entering into some type of relationship with his young lover, he and the boy begin to live a life of simulated heterosexual conformity. Nevertheless, to Manuel it appears that theirs is not a relationship of the “conventional” domesticity that a typically heteronormative coupling entails, and in his disillusionment, Manuel contemplates whether any type of loving relationship with a man is in fact attainable, or even desirable (another topic that I discuss extensively in chapter V with regard to *Contra natura*):

«Es imposible que esté enamorado de mí o que me quiera realmente» decía entre sí. No hay deseo, atracción espontánea entre nosotros. Le parecía a Manuel que la falta de deseo sexual preciso o continuo o, por absurdo que parezca, heterosexual, determinaba una como falta de realidad en su relación. (Quiere decirse que qué es lo que se hace con los objetos sexuales que uno elige e incluso qué sea lo sexualmente deseable es en gran parte fruto de la imitación y el aprendizaje) ... Manuel calculaba siempre la intensidad de los deseos ajenos por la vacilante y ambigua (aunque quizá, sin advertirlo él mismo, perfectamente adecuada) intensidad de los propios, sin descontar, como hubiera debido en cada caso concreto, el hecho de que sus deseos se habían desfundido con los años, habían casi perdido (sin perder, en cuanto intensidad, vigencia) su explícita referencia a objetos. (RFS 137)

From Manuel’s perspective, the only authentic representation of sexual desire issues from the heteronormative status of difference (“the lack of continuous or concrete sexual desire, or however absurdly it might seem, heterosexual”), which, by Manuel’s reckoning, inheres in the learned behaviours of sexual intersubjectivity; his sexuality remains a tawdry imitation that does not conform to the epistemological certainties of his conception of heteronormative sexual practice. As a result Manuel’s relationship with the *muchacho* dissipates in a warp of dissimulation and inauthenticity in which the objective signifiers of his existence—embodied in his sexual desire—elude all authenticity before the subjective Other.

With a story that is as imaginary and esoteric as this one—the story takes place after all in the mind of its angst-ridden protagonist—Pombo embarks on a literary exploration into the innermost reaches of the mind of a conflicted and disaffected protagonist who is in flight from his own subjectivity, which occur through the affective relationships that Manuel has with the

boy—his only touchstone of reality. This simple story probes the depths of a transgressive and subliminal love that is recounted as a type of allegory of same-sex eroticism, where there is no decipherable reality other than what befalls in the chief protagonist's troubled consciousness. The final line of the story makes fittingly plain the blurry boundaries between reality and imagination, or rather, the evanescence of reality as it fades from the consciousness of Manuel in his contemplation of the yawning breach that exists between him and the man he longs to, but is unable to love: "Hubo por un instante la falta del muchacho en la habitación como una súplica. Luego fue como una silueta que se desdibuja" (RFS 142). The fading silhouette of the boy betokens, in effect, Manuel's falling away from himself.

El parecido

In the short novel *El parecido*, Pombo once again takes up issues of interiorized homosexual alienation and the unattainability of same-sex love. Pombo also undertakes, but in a decidedly more lugubrious and menacing setting, the conflation of the real and the imaginary in the consciousnesses of his protagonists, and in the very instance of his writing. *El parecido* is Pombo's first venture into the detective novel genre, and the text has an overlying texture of the sordidness associated with a criminal underground. This text has a gloomy and sombre patina that reflects a melancholy period in the early Pombian narrative, where all the protagonists are involved in nefarious activities of one form or another against a pervasive background of malicious intentionality. In *El parecido* the protagonists navigate the seediness and squalor of Letona's (a surrogate for the author's hometown of Santander) grimmer areas, and never seem able to climb out of the town's muck. As the title suggests, the story deals with the nature of appearances, that is, the perception of reality as experienced by the protagonists whose very existences are depicted in the narrative as fleeting and insubstantial and, in every sense of the word, disconnected. Throughout Pombo's writing there exists a rigid dialectical tension between

“truth” as a representation of eidetic events and phenomenological consciousness as a representation of the imagination. In this early phase of Pombo’s writing, it is in the latter (the imaginary) where the vast majority of Pombo’s conflicted homosexual protagonists seem to spend much of their apperceptive time—as I have shown previously in my analysis of “Sugar Daddy.” Pombo employs a similar narrative mode in his depiction of Pancho García, the forlorn writer in *El hijo adoptivo* who is being extorted by his erstwhile lover (his former secretary) and his lover’s rapacious wife. García is incapable of distinguishing “reality” from his own tormented perceptions of such; as a result, he engages in hallucinatory conversations with his dead mother and his uncle Matías in order to reconstruct his past, which he relates, autobiographically as a quasi diary, in the novel that unfolds before the reader.

The main protagonist in *El parecido* is the writer Gonzalo Ferrer, a writer of significant stature and notoriety in his hometown of Letona. Ferrer is in love with his nephew Jaime, a person of tremendous mystery, as well as a very “colourful” past. Jaime never appears in the novel—we learn early on that he has recently died in a motorcycle accident—but through a series of flashbacks we are able to reconstruct his shadowy life, including his involvement with a criminal underground that seems to deal, curiously enough, in the bartering, among other things, of homosexual sex. In fact, the story in *El parecido* concerns everyone’s relationship with Jaime but, most importantly, that of his uncle Gonzalo. The uncle’s love for Jaime is an unrequited affair and for the uncle a profoundly troubling reflection of—in fact, an obsession with—the purposelessness of his life. Although there is rampant speculation concerning the alleged homosexual relationship between Gonzalo Ferrer and Jaime, it is clear that nothing of the sort actually happens:

Jaime sabía que Gonzalo no cruzaría nunca por sí solo el fertilizante espacio verbal —la nueva y brillante irrealidad— del sobrentendido donde ambos eran a la vez cómplices y no-ejecutores de acto sexual ninguno. Visto desde fuera, visto con los videntes ojos de Chuli Herrera y de Letona en general todo eso parecía

una relación amorosa más o menos absurda, pero fría ... De hecho y visto desde dentro, Gonzalo Ferrer se quedó solo: se enamoró de su sobrino. Pero, tal y como su sobrino había adivinado, sin poder, por sí solo, ni regular —describiéndola, por ejemplo— la creciente irrealidad en que vivían, ni negarla—acostándose con su sobrino, por ejemplo, o mandándole al cuerno— y pensar en otra cosa. (EP 52)

The above passage illustrates that the relationship between Gonzalo and Jaime subsists in a semiotic void of irreality (“the prolific verbal space ... of the understanding where both were at once accomplices and non-actors in nonexistent sexual acts”) that conveys the very impossibility of love between them, and magnifies the ethereality of Gonzalo’s existential realm. As was the case with “Tío Eduardo,” and as will be the case later with Gonzalito and his nephew Pelé in *El metro de platino iridiado*, the theme of unrequited love between uncle and nephew stands as a metaphor for the unattainability of love. This is a common Proustian theme that Pombo no doubt picks up on, particularly as it concerns homosexuals and heterosexuals—the most particular instance involves the fumbling protagonist Marcel and his lesbian lover Albertine in *A la recherche du temps perdu*.⁶⁷ Unrequited (unattainable) love, particularly between uncle and nephew, is a type of metaphorical discourse in the Pombian narrative that reflects not so much a moralism associated with incestuous love between uncle and nephew, nor even *contra natura* homosexual love, but rather the failure of the subject to move beyond (to overcome) his sense of existential dissonance. In Pombo’s narrative, unattainable love, particularly in circumstances over which the subject has no control, stands symbolically in diametrical opposition to the fulfilment of the authentic self.

In the existential philosophical scheme, the essence of authentic existence resides in the true attainment of the self through resolute actions of self-making and self-affirmation which

⁶⁷ Gilles Deleuze writes that love in Proust’s oeuvre is most significant (that is, charged with signifying character) when it relates to the love affairs between Proust’s homosexual characters (Charlus and Jupien, for example) and that it is most ethereal and unachievable when it involves heterosexuals, such as Swann and Odette. This is an interesting perspective, to be sure, but still significantly at odds with Proust’s portrayal of homosexuality as significantly outside the realm of “normal” relationality. See Gilles Deleuze, *Marcel Proust et les signes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964), pp. 5-8. A comparison of Proust’s and Pombo’s use of love could be the subject of another study: there are many interesting parallels, which Pombo alludes to in a discussion of Proust. See Pombo’s article “De las narraciones y sus filosofías furtivas.”

constitute the foundation of one's morally and ethically engaged Being-with-an-Other through love, and also an overcoming of the fear and abasement that keeps the subject perennially stuck within himself. For Pombo, this principle of authenticity has, as I have argued, tremendous significance, and it informs much of his writing. Throughout the *ciclo de la falta de sustancia*, and even into the early subsequent phase of Pombo's narrative, beginning with *El metro de platino iridiado*, love itself (in the Platonic form of *Eros*) becomes the paradigm of true human character. This is a type of love, which, as Donald Levy illustrates in his discussion of Plato's *Symposium*, has as its objective—through probity and morality in one's actions towards Others—fulfilment of the self through the pursuit of self-perfection.⁶⁸ Gonzalo Ferrer is unable to move forward in his need to feel his life authentically, for his entire identity and purpose of Being is enfolded in the signifying energy of Jaime's phantasmal existence. At bottom, Ferrer's love for his nephew is symptomatic of the fear that he feels of moving beyond the comfortable existence of the impossibility of this love.

The homotextual elements in *El parecido* tend invariably towards the seedy, as much of what transpires as homotextual narrative (nocturnal trysts in parks, homosexual prostitution, homoerotic flirtation) occurs within the bosom of the criminal underworld of Letona. Both *El parecido* and *El héroe de las mansardas de Mansard* deal with the decadence and corruption of the upper class families of this fictitious city, where superficial appearances are what seem to matter most, where allegiances are fleeting, and where the compass of moral conduct is almost nonexistent. Gonzalo Ferrer struggles valiantly to come to terms with the vacuousness of his life—a loveless marriage to a devoted wife, and the unattainable love of his nephew—and he uses the medium of writing as a means of giving flesh to this void:

Gonzalo Ferrer vivía relativamente aislado en Letona. Una relativamente común mezcla de timidez y orgullo le hizo retirarse muy pronto del ajeteo social de la

⁶⁸ See Donald Levy, "The Definition of Love in Plato's *Symposium*," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 40, no. 2 (1979), p. 287.

literatura. Gonzalo Ferrer logró transformar en fecundidad narrativa su sexualidad ambivalente. Su sentimiento de culpabilidad respecto a Rosa no respondía, por supuesto, a infidelidad ninguna ... (EP 50)

Ferrer transcribes his ambivalent sexual Being into narrative (“logró transformar en fecundidad narrativa su sexualidad ambivalente”), much as Pombo’s other sexually tormented homosexual writers do (Gonzalo Ortega in *Los delitos insignificantes*, Pancho García in *El hijo adoptivo*), as a means of masking the unreality of his emotional and affective life. Ironically, it is in the end the transformation of homosexual existential dissonance into literary material that Pombo achieves in his own homotextual narrative.

Ferrer’s existential travails take place in the seedy world of corruption, pimping, and extortion of the underworld of the city, involving notably Nando Ferrán, the closeted gay son of a local aristocrat who is involved (we later find out) in machinations of a disreputable sexual nature with Ferrer and Jaime. Ferrer also has truck with the handsome albeit corrupt Pepelín, also gay (or at least bisexual), who is Jaime’s family’s chauffeur and who bears an uncanny resemblance to Jaime. Pepelín comes to represent all that is illusory and factitious—he is in fact, by virtue of his impersonation (both figurative and substantive) of the allegorical Jaime, the metaphoric representation of *el parecido*, albeit a grossly insubstantial fill-in for the adulated Jaime. Pepelín erupts into the narrative as a kind of amorphous creature who, in addition to cavorting with the criminal underworld, acts as a virtual sexual and psychic medium for the various actors who pine away inconsolably for Jaime. Pepelín is a degraded being, a person whose indeterminate subjectivity is emblematic of the existential inauthenticity of all the protagonists in this story: in fact, Pepelín embodies the very notion of insubstantiality, for he inhabits neither reality nor the imaginary and subsists as a kind of lascivious intersexual nymph. Pepelín is continually derided as a “faggot” by Mati, Jaime’s former girlfriend who once was pregnant with his child. For Mati, Pepelín serves as a flawed surrogate for Jaime and she belittles him maliciously while having sex with him: “Eres raro tú también. Te pareces a Jaime un poco.

También era raro Jaime. ¿Eres marica de verdad?” (EP 62). And she goes on in another instance of love-making, as if to reinforce the point: “Dicen que eres mariquita —murmuró Mati—, es mejor así ... —¿Qué es mejor que qué ... ? —preguntó Pepelín con los labios bordeando ya el oído de Mati. —Lo de las mariquitas es muy rollo” (EP 143).

In the final act of the drama, Gonzalo Ferrer is in a local bar attempting to recoup a letter and photos belonging to Jaime—the last vestiges of his nephew, and the only means by which he is able to conjure him. In his desperate, irrational pursuit of Jaime, Ferrer wanders into the seediest of neighbourhoods in crime-ridden Letona, in what amounts to a death-wish. Ferrer’s relationship with Jaime, like that of the other protagonists in this tale of unrequited love, is reflective of a relationship which the prominent literary critic Javier Alfaya characterizes as “more imagined than real and that reflects a relationship of domination that governs all of human life” (“más soñada que genuina y que refleja una relación de dominación que parece regir toda la vida humana”).⁶⁹ As Alfaya sees it, Ferrer’s life is trampled underfoot by his complete subjugation to the fading memory of the deceased love-object, and ultimately it is the ghostly spectre of Jaime that drives Ferrer to this irrational behaviour. Another critic of this text, Lynne Overesch-Maister, describes Ferrer as the victim of his own illusions and superficiality, who, because of his obsession with his “unreal” life, is ultimately driven to despair and self-annihilation.⁷⁰ Ferrer’s self-erasure is, to be sure, testament to the force of the nihilistic sublimation and the desire for subjugation that characterize his fanciful, inauthentic relationship with Jaime, and also to his unwillingness to move beyond his own life-draining interiority. Ultimately Ferrer is accosted by two underworld thugs, posing as hustlers, who, in a botched robbery attempt after they have unsuccessfully lured him into a tryst, murder him. The murder is brushed aside as a squalid affair involving a notorious “faggot” (*un maricón*) by the local police.

⁶⁹ See Javier Alfaya, “Notas para una lectura de Álvaro Pombo,” *Los Cuadernos del Norte* 24 (1984), p. 53.

⁷⁰ See Lynne Overesch-Maister, “Echoes of Alienation in the Novels of Álvaro Pombo,” *Anales de la literatura española contemporánea* 13, no. 1-2 (1988), p. 56.

Notwithstanding the distinguished writer's notoriety, his existence is reduced to a mere footnote of abject alterity, an inconvenient and embarrassing degeneracy that the town must deal with:

Del Ferrer se decía lo de siempre: que era maricón. En Letona no somos especiales: mala leche a punta de pala. Eso se decía: que en fino, pero que sí, que maricón. Y era ... El informe, escueto. Ni «contra natura», ni a favor, ni maricón. Se sospecha que el crimen tiene relación con la homosexualidad de la víctima. Nada. Fuera toda la frase ... Nada público nunca, ninguna ficha, nada. Se desconoce motivo del crimen. Era decente de verdad. ¿Y yo qué sé? Déjate de rollos, cabo. Era un ciudadano ejemplar, un escritor ilustre, ¿y qué? A lo mejor peor que las dos locas que tenemos ahí. No fallan noche. Vienen por ti, yo creo, anda con ojo. Gracia tienen. Mariconas, putas lo que quieras. (EP 190)

The jarring, staccato tones of the police enquiry narrative leap off the page in explosive, discontinuous bursts: “neither ‘*contra natura*’ nor normal; not even a faggot ... No public notices, no police record, nothing” (“ni contra natura, ni a favor, ni maricón ... Nada público, ninguna ficha, nada”). Moreover, they are articulated in a tone of dispassion with regard to the consequences or the motives of the crime, as if to signal the unholiness of the situation, not so much because of the beastliness of the crime, but rather owing to the writer's nefarious reputation as a homosexual, which, in the eyes of the local police, is seemingly as degenerate (and consequential) as the murder itself.

Ferrer is the first of Pombo's homosexual characters to die for something vaguely associated with his homosexuality. In this case his death is attributable to a robbery with no direct association, apparently, with homophobia, although clearly the assailants had some inkling of the victim's reputation and his predilection for Letona's seedier establishments. Nevertheless, Ferrer's death is particularly poignant for what it does not tell us about his life. Unlike Gonzalo Ortega in *Los delitos insignificantes*, for example, who takes his own life as a result of his all-consuming fear and reluctance to confront his homoerotic intentionality, the events and circumstances of Ferrer's insubstantial life are considerably murkier. Ferrer's moral integrity is unquestionably suspect, and his participation in some of the goings-on in this macabre tale of skullduggery and criminality does not stand him in a particularly favourable light. It is not that

his actions should be the cause of his death, but in Pombo's dialectical narratives involving questions of ethics and morals, there is invariably some tragic end that befalls those whose behaviour towards themselves and Others is ethically and morally untoward. Ferrer is singularly incapable of living his own life; he lives vicariously through unrequited love for his nephew, whose resonance in death (as spectre and apparition) is seemingly more powerful than any love or sustenance he may have provided Ferrer in life. Thus, Ferrer's death, like Ortega's, is also a form of suicide: self-annihilation related to his morbid existence.

The murkiness and film noir character of the robbery and murder are largely symbolic of the decadence of Letona, and ultimately Spanish society in its fraught transition to democracy. Pombo's manipulation of the film noir atmosphere in this detective-like novel gives the text a cinematographic hue that he uses to juxtapose countervailing worlds of ethereality, precariousness and false hope. The glum narrative of *El parecido* depicts the lugubrious world of protagonists whose lives are mired in a state of illusory and wretched reality, and who are never able to move authentically forward in their lives through love and a vital engagement with their Being; they never come to a "yea-saying" (in the Nietzschean sense⁷¹) about their lives (particularly in the case of Ferrer) against the negative forces that seek their annihilation. Juan Antonio Masoliver's observations on this topic are apropos when he states that Pombo's narrative provides a "setting wherein his insubstantial personages live their lives, not so much tragically as pathetically."⁷²

The narrative style of *El parecido* is replete with language that reveals a shadowy underside of Spanish society in Santander—or its fictitious representation Letona, in any event—at the dawning of an era of profound transformation. The narrator's glib, enigmatic tone reveals

⁷¹ Nietzsche's famous dictum comes from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: "Yea! louder than the Ass. Anti-Hegelian man must affirm Self as against a negation by the Other; he must affirm difference rather than circumscribe with negation; he must engage in a transvaluation of values, instead of justifying established ones." See Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Graham Parkes (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁷² See Juan Antonio Masoliver, *Voces contemporáneas* (Barcelona: Acantilado, 2004), p. 45.

piecemeal, and through proleptic flashbacks, the peripeteia of the protagonists, including the most corrupt details of their past dealings. From a homotextual perspective, *El parecido* is unique for its casual and naturalistic treatment of homosexuality, as well as for the latter's frequent juxtaposition with criminality. The curious coincidence—one could even say confluence—of homosexuality and criminality reflects to a certain degree Pombo's early obsession with the subversive (existentially dissonant) nature of homosexuality in Francoist Spain, but in some respects the commingling of underworld criminal figures and homosexuals is another clear example of Pombo's efforts to reinscribe homosexuality into mainstream narrative—the homosexual as notorious for something other than his homosexuality, however abjectly the latter may be portrayed.

El héroe de las mansardas de Mansard

El héroe de las mansardas de Mansard is another novel set in the fictitious Letona and, like *El parecido*, the novel chronicles the profligate and decrepit world of the Spanish aristocracy in the aftermath of the Civil War. The story touches on a number of familiar topics that Pombo deals with in his homotextual texts of the early cycle: homosexual insubstantiality and existential estrangement in a heteronormative world; themes of domination and exploitation of an abject subordinate by a pitiless overlord; and unorthodox sexualities generally (curiously involving heterosexuals in this case).

The predominant theme in this text is the wickedness of a corrupt aristocratic society that ruthlessly exploits those whom it is supposed to safeguard, and the typical pattern of exploitation is one of extortion, either for sexual favours or out of sheer malice. In addition, and quite unusually for any writer of contemporary narrative (in any language), Pombo provides a glimpse into the mystifying world of adolescent homosexuality through the main protagonist, Nicolás, who wields his prurient adolescent charms insidiously in order to wheedle the adults in his midst.

The motif of adolescent malevolence pervades—and even predominates—this text and provides a sinister backdrop for the various exploitative relationships that inform the story. Pombo uses malevolence, and evil in general, as the dialectical underpinning of his philosophical argument: the subject’s authentic engagement in a world, where intentionality of action must lead to a circumstance where the subject is able to recover himself from his own alienation (his own existential dissonance). That is to say, the subject’s situation of abjection, or subjugation, is a condition that may have historical or social circumstances that are not of his choosing, but it is a situation against which he must be in constant struggle, lest he fall away into insignificant (inauthentic) Being. Although *Los héroes de las mansardas de Mansard* has considerably less of the malice and skullduggery that characterizes *El parecido*, there is nonetheless a pervasive sense of evil-doing as a consequence of a loss of recognition or love of the Other, and concomitant with this, a desire to subjugate and dominate the Other that degrades both the oppressor and the oppressed.

Thus, much of Pombo’s narrative involves existentially dissonant, or insubstantial homosexual characters and *El héroe de las mansardas de Mansard* is no exception: the dialectical juxtaposition of resistance versus oppression involves protagonists who, to varying degrees, submit to the situatedness (thrownness) of their oppression, or else move beyond it to a sense of overcoming. I am referring to the Nietzschean sense of the overcoming (*Überwindung*) of a sense of guilt imposed by a slavish devotion to custom. It is the “morality of custom” which cultivates in man a memory and makes his behaviour predictable.⁷³ Pombo derives much from

⁷³ To quote Nietzsche (in Ansell-Pearson) from *On the Genealogy of Morals*: “‘Conscience’ is to be understood not simply as the superior moral faculty which makes each one of us uniquely human but as an interiorized form of social control, the disciplined product of the civilizing process of ancient morality. The paradox is this: the process by which man becomes moralized is one which, in its beginnings, operates by coercion and violence; but once the human animal has become disciplined it is, at least potentially, capable of living beyond morality (*Sittlichkeit*) and autonomously.” I argue that Pombo does not advocate through his writings on authenticity an abandonment of morals but rather a revaluation of the subject’s position with regard to these morals, with an aim to change them because ultimately they do not recognize his subjectivity or significance. See Nietzsche in Keith Ansell-Pearson, *On the Genealogy of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 21.

the Nietzschean concept of reaching for the sublime through a revaluation of what the subject finds noble and virtuous in his actions (his yea-saying), in fierce resistance to the forces of historical religious oppression. In a somewhat eclectic manner, Pombo blends this notion with his phenomenological conception of authenticity. The presence of evil, and particularly evil intentionality in light of the different choices that the subject is able to act upon, forms the basis of much of Pombo's later text (*El cielo raso*, *Contra natura*) where the consciousness of homosexual alterity is largely overcome, but where solipsism and invidiousness prevail in a world in which moral choices are not unambiguous.

El héroe de las mansardas de Mansard is a novel in the vein of Henry James where deception and intrigue abound in a setting with flourishes of the fantastical surreal. In this text, Pombo juxtaposes the hugely divergent worlds of the imperious Santanderian aristocracy, ensconced within its privileged position in the Francoist oligarchy, and the Spanish working class riffraff.⁷⁴ *El héroe de las mansardas de Mansard* is set in the waning era of the Franco dictatorship and involves a remarkably precocious but malevolent adolescent, Nicolás (also known as Kus-Kús), his licentious and eccentric aunt, Eugenia, the butler, Julián, Eugenia's ruggedly handsome love interest, Manolo, and a nefarious couple with the improbable biblical names of Esther (Manolo's sister) and Rafael.⁷⁵ Kus-Kús manages to inveigle confidences from all the adults in his midst by virtue of the threat of disclosure: Eugenia's affairs with the strapping Manolo and Julián's homosexuality. The malevolent adolescent is commonplace in

⁷⁴ This novel has some similarities, although not many, to James' *Turn of the Screw*. Javier Alfaya's analysis in particular sees a number of similarities between James' short novella and all the grim implications of skullduggery, ghostly apparitions, and the overlying malice of intent. See Alfaya, "Notas para una lectura de Álvaro Pombo," p. 17.

⁷⁵ Ill-suited, it seems, because in the biblical story Esther is the Jewish queen who saves the Jewish people from annihilation at the hands of the evil Haman in the court of the Persian king Ahasuerus. Rafael is the name of an archangel who appears in one of the apocryphal books of the Bible. Pombo rarely, if ever, chooses biblical names for his protagonists, and thus this one stands out as particularly conspicuous, perhaps ironically so.

English and American cinema⁷⁶ but is rarely found in literature, least of all in Spanish narrative. Because of his precociousness, Kus-Kús is hyperconscious of his budding (homo)sexuality, in particular his obsession with men, as in this scene where he reveals his predilection for male-gazing to his aunt Eugenia:

Pues hago como que se me ha caído un lapicero debajo de los pupitres y a gatas voy mirándoles las piernas a los de quinto, que son ya los mayores, ¿y sabes por qué lo hago?, porque he aprendido un huevo de las piernas, las peludas y las no peludas, gracias a ti, tía Eugenia, y también hago otras cosas ... (HMM 182)

Kus-Kús is mostly ambivalent about his homoerotic feelings, and he is not afflicted by an abiding sense of abject homosexual identity, or its consequent self-flagellating remorse or resentment—the innocence of childhood against the strictures of humiliating religious morality—a topic Pombo also takes up in a later text, *El cielo raso*. Kus-Kús is far more interested in carrying out his extortionist machinations, as well as the manipulation and subjugation of subaltern characters, to indulge in any morbid self-reflection about his sexuality. In fact, Kus-Kús is startled by the revelation, made by the meddlesome housekeeper Josefa, of the prevalence of so much “faggotry” (*mariconería*) in the household, including his own:

Los gestos que hace, si ése no es marica ya me dirás tú, le tenías que ver los gestos que hace, todo fino, ¿sabes quién yo creo que también es marica?, vamos, yo eso es lo que creo, pues Julián, yo no es que lo sepa, a ver si me entiendes, pero que me daba a mí así una cosa, que no le veía yo muy claro, no es que hiciera nada, en casa por lo menos, pero que le veía yo ... no sé, así muy aparente de maricón de los ocultos, siempre solo ... ¿Qué tiene que ver Julián? — interrumpió Kus-Kús, enrojeciendo, parte por las alusiones y las maneras de Josefa y parte por lo cerca que se hallaba el objeto de semejantes malignidades. (HMM 120)

The homographetic language used by Josefa to describe the effeminate mannerisms and “indiscreet anatomy” (to use Lee Edelman’s term⁷⁷) of Julián, and by extension Kus-Kús—the

⁷⁶ I am referring specifically to Mervyn LeRoy’s *The Bad Seed* (1956), where a young girl commits a number of undetected (and unsuspected) murders before succumbing ignominiously to death herself, by burning, in a botched murder attempt.

⁷⁷ According to Edelman, citing Foucault’s definition of “indiscreet anatomy”: “The homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was

visual attributes of homosexuality that she perceives as inscribed on the body—greatly unsettles the anonymity and subterfuge of the homosexual presence in the household. Josefa's revelation unleashes a torrent of homosexual self-consciousness, which had been heretofore only simmering under the surface, that now consumes the adolescent. In the aftermath of his discussion with Josefa, Kus-Kús becomes incessantly curious about other men, and is remorseless in his interrogation of Julian's sexuality, in whom the adolescent does not really see a bedfellow, but rather an object of derision and subjugation. Like many of Pombo's seedy protagonists, Kus-Kús is irremediably evil for the sheer maleficent intentionality of his actions towards the Other, and for his desire to watch the Other squirm under his oppression. Kus-Kús's youth is no impediment to his penchant for depravity, and he seems to be entirely devoid of guilt, not the religious guilt of a "slave morality," but rather the prescience of guilt that, according to Pombo, is essential to natural and juridical law concerning ethical engagement with Others.⁷⁸

Kus-Kús assiduously interrogates Julián about his sexual past, and he even goes so far as to give his unqualified approval to the notion of same-sex love, while casually making mention of his concupiscent appreciation for the strapping Manolo:

Manolo se llama. Es el nuevo gigoló de mi tía ... Me hace gracia cómo lo dices, ¿qué sabes tú lo que les gusta a las mujeres? Manolo les gusta. Eso lo sé seguro. A mí me parece un tipo grosero. Me parece que sé quién dices, si es el mismo Manolo, debe ser ... Sí, el de La Cubana, es un chico guapo, le recuerdo bien ... ¿También a ti te gusta? (HMM 128)

Kus-Kús makes further enquiries concerning Julian's relationship with the insidious Rafael who, along with his lover Esther, are frequently on the wrong side of the law. Esther is blackmailing

unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away." See Lee Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 7.

⁷⁸ Says Pombo: "El concepto de culpa —la amartía—, el de pecado (no católico) está en nosotros. Y creo que si nos desprendemos de todo esto, nos desprendemos de una parte de nuestra personalidad. Al desaparecer el concepto de culpa, desaparece, por ejemplo, también la significación del acto sexual (lo que desgraciadamente sucede en una sociedad de amor libre). El concepto de culpa es, pues, esencial no sólo al acto sexual, sino a cualquier acto jurídico." See Pombo's interview with Gregorio Morales Villena, "Entrevista con Álvaro Pombo. Tan precioso licor," p. 19.

Julián, who has some sexual history with Rafael—although it is clear from the context that it is another case of unrequited (unattainable) love—in order to get Rafael out of jail where he is facing a felony charge:

¿Os besáis Rafael y tú? Tía Eugenia le dio un beso al chico de la tienda Manolo, el martes pasado, dice que no pudieron remediarlo ninguno de los dos. ¿Cómo le voy a dar un beso a un hombre? Yo no he dicho nada de eso, me oyes, yo no he dicho eso, es una guarrería ... No veo por qué ... si tanto le quieres —dijo Kus-Kús ... (HMM 132)

The apparent facility with which Kus-Kús is able to extract intimate information from, and potentially incriminating evidence against, the adults is testament to the pusillanimity that characterizes their behaviour, as well as the general dissoluteness of the personages in this decaying, stifling household. Kus-Kús is also aware that Julián has stolen money from his father in order to secure the bail of Rafael, and, in order to protect Julián when the police come to investigate, Kus-Kús forces Eugenia to shelter him in her upstairs apartment in exchange for remaining silent about her nocturnal trysts with Manolo. Each deceit engenders another until finally everyone is beholden in one form or another to the child executioner, who has total mastery of his victims. Kus-Kús becomes, in effect, the adolescent overlord of the household of insignificant underlings. His aunt Eugenia describes him as: “el peor de todos, el niño que iba con cuentos a su abuela, a las criadas, a cualquiera, con tal de contar algo, con tal de hacerse el personaje interesante ... él era inteligente pero falso” (HMM 82). Eugenia’s allusion to Kus-Kús’s intelligent duplicity enframes the moral paradox of the story: does the innocence of childhood preclude adherence to an overarching moral code, and in the scheme of authentic engagement, does the behaviour of children, even those endowed with so much precocity, conform to a striving for a higher and more virtuous form of Being? It is curious to note that until the appearance of *Contra natura* in 2005, there is no homosexual protagonist in Pombo’s

texts who is so resistant to any kind of self-overcoming behaviour⁷⁹ as Kus-Kús; he acts out of sheer malice and cunning and seems to have no control over his evil impulses or awareness of the implications of his actions.

El héroe de las mansardas de Mansard plays strongly on the theme of victim-executioner, a common motif in many Pombian tales, and frequently involving asymmetrical relationships in terms of age or social status. Pancho in *El hijo adoptivo* is blackmailed by his former secretary, and lover, who has returned with his son, expecting the wealthy Pancho to adopt the son as his heir. Likewise, Quirós in *Los delitos insignificantes* blackmails the older Ortega, who is besotted with him. In her analysis, Overesch-Maister describes the inverted asymmetrical relationship of exploitation as invariably consisting of an older subject exploiting a more naïve, younger one.⁸⁰ However, my reading of this master-slave/victim-executioner relationship in these examples of Pombo's text is precisely the opposite. The role of victim-executioner has no fixed position, that is to say, exploitation by one class of another, or one type of individual by another, nor does it necessarily conform to exploitation of a younger, more innocent victim by a more experienced and older "executioner." In each of the books mentioned by Overesch-Maister, the younger person seems to acquire dominance, typically by flaunting some type of sexual enticement, explicit or otherwise, in order to obtain some concession from the older, usually homosexual victim. In an attempt to seduce, and thereby blackmail Manolo, Kus-Kús threatens to reveal his nightly visits to Eugenia's room—scenes that are observed with keen lubricious interest by both

⁷⁹ I use "overcoming" (*Überwindung*) in the sense of giving "style" to oneself, sublimating one's impulses, and organizing the chaos of one's passions, as Nietzsche apparently intended it. Nietzsche says the following in this regard: "Self-overcoming is not accomplished by a man's saying to himself: I would rather sublimate my impulses. First he must, as it were, burn a No into his own soul; he must brand his own impulses with contempt and become aware of the contradictions of good and evil." See Nietzsche in Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, p. 253.

⁸⁰ Overesch-Maister says: "In all three of these novels (*El héroe de las mansardas de Mansard*, *El parecido*, and *El hijo adoptivo*), Pombo seems to insinuate that the younger generation has been unfairly victimized by the older and their development stunted or warped accordingly. Often the victimizing has sexual overtones, although these are more spiritual than physical. In any case, Pombo's adult characters appear singularly ignorant of the full extent of their effect on their charges." See Overesch-Maister, "Echoes of Alienation in the Novels of Álvaro Pombo," p. 58.

Julián (he does not have any choice) and Kus-Kús—only to be rebuffed by the aggressively assertive Manolo, the only adult in the household, it seems, not cowed by the adolescent's extortionist schemes:

Sintió prenderse la ternura otra vez en sus miembros, las ganas de tocar a Manolo como antes; se sintió excitado. Era parecido a querer, en clase, masturbarse y correrse. Era divertido aquel estado de ánimo, como una fulgurante exaltación instantánea. Agarró con las dos manos el brazo de Manolo; sintió el movimiento rápido de la musculatura, la bola de Manolo; sentía ahora la necesidad vehemente de llevarse a Manolo a su propia casa, a su propio cuarto de dormir ... Chaval, joder, me estás sobando, mucho ya, joder ¿es qué no puedes hablar sin sobarme?, y dale no hace falta sobarse, entre un hombre y otro ... es una mariconería, además ... (HMM 199)

The banter in this scene between the hypermacho Manolo and the ostensibly subordinate Kus-Kús is revelatory of another leitmotif in Pombo's narrative, often related to an asymmetrical relationship of dominance and subjugation, that involves a heterosexual male who is the object of (unattainable) desire of a forlornly yearning homosexual man (or child in this instance). This is the case in *El parecido* with Gonzalo Ferrer in desperate pursuit of his nephew Jaime, in *El metro de platino iridiado* where Gonzalito also chases after his nephew Pelé, and in *Los delitos insignificantes* where Gonzalo Ortega pines for Quirós. According to Alfredo Martínez, the asymmetrical relationship of subjugation/domination, generally involving a "weaker" homosexual "victim" and his "stronger" heterosexual "executioner," is a paradoxical means for the homosexual to transcend his abject, interiorized state of consciousness by virtue of his engagement with his tormentor, however exploitative the situation may be.⁸¹ In the case involving Kus-Kús and Manolo, however, it is the older heterosexual man who is the object-of-desire, and the homosexual adolescent approaches him with unabashed prurience, and it is not unambiguously clear who is exploiting (or subjugating) whom. The narrative of this interaction

⁸¹ According to Martínez: "La relación homosexual es, en la narrativa pombiana, una situación extraordinaria, fuera de lo ordinario, que saca al personaje que la vive, el personaje *débil*, de su tranquila y dulce cotidiana conciencia de sí, y que ofrece al que se aprovecha de ella, al personaje *fuerte*, una posibilidad de engrandecer su condición social, su posición económica, o su egoísmo." See Martínez, *Escrituras torcidas: ensayos de crítica "queer"*, p. 131.

is redolent of seduction and homoeroticism; after all, Manolo had allowed himself to be massaged and groped by the adolescent for some time before snapping to. Nevertheless, the abrupt intrusion of Manolo's protests quickly brings the highly charged homoerotic moment back to "normality" through Manolo's assertion of his heterosexual prerogative in what Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick calls a "male homosexual panic."⁸²

El héroe de las mansardas de Mansard constitutes perhaps one of Álvaro Pombo's more natural portrayals of homosexuality. In terms of Pombo's elaboration of the dialectic of authentic Being, homosexuality seems to play only an ancillary role. Homoerotic intentionality is prominent and figures in the unfolding of an assortment of asymmetrical relationships of exploitation and domination, but it is not critical to the manner in which the protagonists come to the revelation of their authentic Being-in-the-world. Both homosexuals and heterosexuals in this novel are equally abject, and devoid, it seems, of a commonsense ethical and moral orientation. There is no shattering homosexual "problematic" in this text; no single individual is tormented by a sense of homosexual angst owing to his sexual proclivities, nor does Pombo make this the overriding focus in the delineation of insubstantial behaviour. The most abject homosexual individual is without question Julián, but his abjection (while stemming from a fear of homosexual revelation) is also the result of his unrequited love for Rafael, his status as ignominiously exploited servant in the employ of the household's imperious masters, and, most notably, in his subjugation to its youngest occupant, Kus-Kús. Ultimately, it is aunt Eugenia, bereft, insubstantial, and dwelling perpetually in a world of illusory fancy, who dies in a final act of self-immolation, and that is where the novel concludes, with Eugenia's suicide, her body found floating in the harbour. The revelation of her tryst with Manolo, as well as having to

⁸² Kosofsky describes intimate male bonds as existing in two categories: the homosocial and the more reprobate homosexual. In order to enforce distinction between the two, homosexual panic acts as a means of preserving the inviolate separation of desire and camaraderie. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 185.

harbour the fugitive Julián, prove too much for her as the fantasy world she has constructed for herself comes to a crashing end. Pombo himself says, concerning the fate of those who dwell too deeply in their fantastic world of interior consciousness: “Como seres humanos no podemos soportar, aguantar demasiada realidad; entonces vivimos de las apariencias, de las figuraciones, y esto tiene que traer consigo efectivamente una catástrofe.”⁸³ And so it is for Eugenia, for whom living reality has become far too unbearable, and who, like many of Pombo’s solipsistic homosexual protagonists, takes her own life.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown how Álvaro Pombo burst onto the Spanish literary scene at the dawn of renewed democracy in Spain and in a period when the taboo subject of homosexuality was beginning to be expressed again. Pombo’s emergence in Spanish letters brought with it a new and dramatically different perspective on the motif of homosexuality in Spanish literature of the period, a leitmotif that had been for the most part disregarded, or considered generally unbecoming publication. The introduction of homosexuality as a predominant literary theme through Pombo’s narrative—presented as a dialectical, philosophical enquiry into the nature of Being as a form of dissonant consciousness (or radical alterity)—engendered radically new perspectives on the topic, and allowed other writers to express themselves (at the very least) more uninhibitedly on the subject.

Pombo’s principal contributions with regard to the enterprise of homotextuality in Spanish letters are the following: (1) Pombo’s narrative presents homosexuality per se—that is to say, homoerotic intentionality as phenomenological consciousness—as a central protagonistic element in his writing. Pombo endows his homosexual characters with a variety of human virtues and flaws completely unrelated to their sexual proclivities, and he situates them in

⁸³See Pombo’s interview with Gregorio Villena, “Entrevista con Álvaro Pombo. Tan precioso licor.”

complex moral situations wherein these proclivities impinge on their agency with regard to Others in their experiential realm. (2) Pombo's narrative explores homoerotic intentionality as a vital life force in the experience of humanity. That is to say, he probes the very nature of homosexual phenomenological consciousness to grasp the experiential field of the self as informed by the domain of same-sex eroticism. Pombo's existentially estranged homosexual protagonists inhabit their own interiority, in which they take refuge from the reality of their existence—against their authentic feelings, and often with tragic consequences. Pombo explores, as perhaps no other writer in the Spanish language has done, the fundamental legacy of living homosexuality as a radical dichotomy of Being-in-the-world; as oppositional modes of consciousness brought about by homosexuality's taboo status. Pombo achieves this through a narrative approach that conflates the real and the imaginary (irreality) as existential ambiguity. Existential ambiguity implies living in a liminal space that has no connection to a particular realm and that keeps the subject in a state of radical alterity and unremitting fear of oneself, and thus, the subject is removed from the possible attainment of a sublime aesthetic experience of Being.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Hugh Silverman describes the Heideggerian conception of existential ambiguity in the following terms: "Existential ambiguity does not help to bring an understanding of something into the world, of our being-with-one-another, or of *Dasein's* Being towards itself. Existential ambiguity (*Zweideutigkeit*) for Heidegger involves our inability to distinguish one meaning from another. Therefore it is to be left behind in the move towards more authentic modes of existence." See Silverman, *Inscriptions: Between Phenomenology and Structuralism*, p. 31.

Chapter III

Homosexual Existential Dissonance as Heterorelational Sublimation in *Los delitos insignificantes*

In this chapter I analyze the last novel in Pombo's insubstantiality series, *Los delitos insignificantes* (1986). This text signifies a departure from Pombo's earlier writings in the cycle on insubstantiality in that we are situated in a narrative where homosexuality is not simply a major theme, among many others, but rather the fundamental leitmotif of the story, and the basis on which Pombo weaves a fierce dialectic on the nature of homosexual existential dissonance. In Pombo's earlier texts, the homosexual protagonist merely happened to be a character in the story; his homosexuality was somehow significant to his existential dilemma but only insofar as this situation contributed to the story's unfolding. However, in *Los delitos insignificantes* Pombo begins to address the question of homosexuality as a mode of Being. That is to say, homosexuality as homoerotic intentionality becomes the crux of phenomenological consciousness and the manner in which the subject engages (or does not engage) his experiential realm.

The principal question that I will address in this chapter concerns homoerotic intentionality: the relationship between this state of consciousness and the subject's situatedness within the realm of heteronormativity. For the beleaguered homosexual protagonist in *Los delitos insignificantes*, the disjuncture between his homoerotic intentionality and his feelings of disorientation within the overarching environment of heteronormativity inevitably gives rise to a state of existential dissonance. Is this existential dissonance that comes to dominate the life of the chief protagonist simply another form of interiorized homophobia on Pombo's part, as many

of his gay critics contend, or more precisely a subversively ironic means of repudiating this heterologocentric paradigm, via transgressive inscription? I contend that Pombo's narrative oscillates between the two; that is, it traverses ambiguously both sides of this binary opposition. My principal hypothesis is that *Los delitos insignificantes* contains some rather disquieting, even degrading images of homosexual abjection that relate fundamentally to the subject's perception of, and engagement with his homoerotic consciousness. However, in portraying these scenarios of abjection, I assert that Pombo merely deconstructs and complicates the notion of abjection as a matter of wilful volition, as a direct consequence of the subject's failure to engage his life authentically, and to confront the abjection imposed on him by his environment, as well as his inability to overcome this abjection. Furthermore, and in consonance with the idea of existential dissonance in this chapter, I address what Robert Ellis has described as a "heterorelational" relationship between the self-loathing homosexual and his heterosexual tormentor and Lothario figure.⁸⁵ This relationship subsumes the homosexual subject's identity and his homoerotic intentionality within a framework of compulsory heterosexuality, thereby sowing the seed of his own nihilistic self-destruction. By this I mean that the homosexual protagonist views his homoerotic intentionality as so fundamentally denatured that he cannot conceive of his existence as having any significance within the larger context of human social intercourse.

The historical context of rapidly evolving cultures and society in the Spain in which *Los delitos insignificantes* is situated would have seemed to favour a more propitious portrayal of the

⁸⁵ Heterorelationality is a term that comes from Robert Ellis' excellent work on homosexual autobiography in Spanish letters. In reference to the intercalation of compulsory heterosexuality as a grounding framework for the understanding of homosexual "difference," Ellis states: "In the homo/hetero binary, each term is mediated by its contrary, with the homo signalling the non-hetero and the hetero the non-homo. In this scheme of 'heterorelationality' both the homo and the hetero are other-directed. Although an essentialist gay logic might endeavour to detach the homo from the binary in an effort to ground it in a hypostatized sameness, the homosexual remains 'heteroized.'" By "other-directed" I understand Ellis to mean that the homosexual and the heterosexual define themselves by what they are not; that is, not the other in this dichotomy. See Ellis, *The Hispanic Homograph: Gay Self-Representation in Contemporary Spanish Autobiography*, p. 6.

homosexual than occurs in this text, but I argue that extolling homosexuality was decidedly not Pombo's intention.⁸⁶ *Los delitos insignificantes* concerns an elderly writer, Gonzalo Ortega, mired in a constant state of anguish and fear owing to his presumed failure as a writer, and a self-identified homosexual, falling in love with a young heterosexual man, César Quirós, after being assiduously courted by him. The story is essentially a tale of unrequited love, the nature of love between men—the precariousness of love between men, in any event, and the possibility of living one's homoerotic intentionality in a realm of heteronormativity—and the tragedy of an unfulfilled, fear-ridden life of the kind that affected so many homosexual men in Franco's Spain and its immediate aftermath.

This story, much like other Pombian tales, involves a number of highly fraught triangular, and even quadrangular, relationships involving various protagonists: Ortega, Ortega's love interest César Quirós, and Quirós' girlfriend Cristina; Quirós, Cristina, and Quirós' mother and step-father; and Ortega, his flamboyant friend Hernández, and Quirós. In *Los delitos insignificantes* Pombo interrogates the social, historical, and personal circumstances of a homosexual man who had grown up under Franco's oppression, and has yet to unshackle himself from the legacy of his own sexual repression and existential nihilism. Pombo's obsession with liminalities of various sorts—the transition from dictatorship to democracy and its effect on Spanish culture; from degraded, invisible homosexual to “liberated,” hedonistic gay; and from insubstantiality to authenticity—are key to understanding the subtleties of Pombo's homotextual writing strategy. Ortega is one of the protagonists in the recitation of these transitional epochs, and also one of its victims, as the unfolding events in the story show. More than anything,

⁸⁶ *Los delitos insignificantes* certainly corresponds to a period of writing in Spain where homosexuality was increasingly deproblematized. Nevertheless, the deproblematization of homosexuality appears to be a rather anachronistic project in this respect. My contention is that Pombo had the particular strategy in mind, in keeping with his grand philosophical, literary scheme, of delineating homosexual abjection as insubstantiality. One must take into consideration that when Pombo was writing this text in the 1980s, the HIV-AIDS epidemic was raging full-bore, and there was considerable antipathy towards (and fear of) homosexuals in many quarters, all of which made homosexual “self-revelation” significantly more problematic.

however, Ortega's tragic life is a reflection of his inability to see himself as anything but insubstantial. The solipsistic world Ortega inhabits precludes confrontation of the fear of, and engagement with the chaos inherent in, human existence—following Merleau-Ponty, Ortega is invisible to himself and to others, and he lies outside of what Merleau-Ponty calls the insertion into a sovereign vision that existence requires: “every relation with Being is simultaneously a taking and a being taken.”⁸⁷ In an interview with Gregorio Morales Villena, Pombo discussed the notion of insubstantiality in relation to his writing beginning with *Relatos sobre la falta de sustancia* and ending with *Los delitos insignificantes*. For Pombo, insubstantiality is related to the individual's inability to free himself from his own suffocating existential interiority.⁸⁸ An individual who remains ensconced in his subjective solipsism is unable to engage the world authentically: in keeping with his natural instincts and impulses and, more importantly, with his existential orientation towards Others as a feeling, thinking, and hurting being.

In *Los delitos insignificantes* homoeroticism is depicted as a sphere of consciousness and existential intentionality: it leers at us with tremendous expectation, and the reader is titillated into believing from the outset that Ortega and Quirós will come together. Nevertheless, given their discrepancy in age and their differences in respect to appearances—Quirós as the randy, young heterosexual icon, and Ortega as the dowdy older homosexual man—a certain salacious illicitness lurks in the encounter between the two. In *Los delitos insignificantes*, homosexuality is weighed down by ample doses of moral abasement, for this is the normal situation for homosexuals in National-Catholic Spain, especially in a Spain emerging from the throes of a noxiously homophobic dictatorship. In his own way, Pombo is merely recounting the lives of homosexuals living in a society where homosexuality was indeed an affliction, not merely owing to homophobic oppression, but also because of the subjective nature of existential dissonance. If

⁸⁷ See Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 266.

⁸⁸ See Villena, “Entrevista con Álvaro Pombo. Tan precioso licor.”

homosexuality is perceived as afflictive, in Pombo's narrative it is clear that this torment derives from homosexuality's objectification in heterologocentric discourses dealing with sexuality and gender difference. Following Foucault, it is these discourses, particularly concerning biological reproduction as the teleological rationalization for sexual difference, that portray homosexuality as essentially sterile and unnatural.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, while Pombo's homotextual narrative focuses on the anomalous nature of a homosexual's existence within heteronormativity, in the analysis of *Los delitos insignificantes* that follows, I show that it is precisely this sense of unnatural degradation that gives impetus to Jonathan Dollimore's notion of the counternarrative of resistance and transgressive homosexual reinscription.⁹⁰

The Homotextual Critique of *Los delitos insignificantes*

The artistic and cultural environment into which *Los delitos insignificantes* emerged was a time of prolific artistic and literary creativity in Spain, and there was, to be sure, a not insignificant corpus of literature that dealt with homosexuals and homosexuality.⁹¹ With *Los delitos insignificantes*, Pombo's initial dabbling with homosexual existential dissonance and guilt is superseded in dramatic and controversial fashion. The critical reception of this open and candidly dismal homotextual discourse was mixed and generally tended to conform to the prevailing modes of critique of the Pombian opus. On the one hand, the mainstream critics scrupulously avoided any direct engagement with the homotextual discourse; on the other hand, a smaller coterie of gay critics, keenly attuned to the homotextual content of any literary

⁸⁹ Foucault alludes to teleological "truths" inherent in a natural "sexuality of reproduction" and which correspond to scientific notions of normality. In light of this, homosexuality, because of its intrinsic "sterility," constitutes a gross violation of this plan. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (London: Allen Lane, 1979), p. 54.

⁹⁰ See Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 145.

⁹¹ There were a number openly gay writers, including Eduardo Mendicutti, Alberto Cardín, Vicente Molina Foix, Luis Antonio de Villena, Goytisolo, Moix, et al., who were writing prodigiously in this period about gay or homoerotic themes. In addition, there were non-homosexual writers, such as Vázquez Montalbán, who were also incorporating gay themes into their writing.

publication, found the explicitly self-loathing implications in *Los delitos insignificantes* troubling, and even deeply offensive.

Alfredo Martínez sees *Los delitos insignificantes* as an unequivocal reflection of homosexual shame and humiliation. From Martínez's perspective the novel conforms to the prevailing homographetic and heterologocentric practice of (male) homosexual denaturalization; that is to say, *Los delitos insignificantes* is a text in which homosexuality is characterized as an inescapable failing for which the only possible resolution is death (both metaphorical and physical). Thus, from Martínez's perspective, Ortega's suicide in *Los delitos insignificantes* could be read more as an execution than as a crime against the self.⁹² At first glance, Martínez's reading of the text does not seem to differ greatly from the reception accorded the novel by other notable gay Spanish critics such as Vicente Aliaga and José Cortés, who were appalled by the unabashed portrayal of Ortega's abjection and subsequent suicide. Aliaga and Cortés say the following with regard to Ortega's fate in this novel:

En un Madrid ambientado, *grosso modo*, entre finales de los setenta e inicios de la década siguiente, la caracterización de Ortega no puede resultar más antipática, incluso repulsiva: un personaje atormentado, débil y sexófobo que tras ser penetrado por vez primera, en medio de un angustioso tira y afloja con Quirós, acaba suicidándose.⁹³

While critics such as Aliaga and Cortés seem to read the text as a realistic portrayal of homosexual abjection in post-Franco, 1980s Spain, Martínez's interpretation seems to read the text more as an allegorical musing on the nature of abjection, albeit one clearly associated with homosexual self-loathing. Although Martínez does not equivocate in his characterization of *Los delitos insignificantes* as an essentially homophobic narrative, he also sees the text as a type of narrational catharsis related to Pombo's upbringing in National-Catholic Spain. Martínez recognizes Pombo's importance in dismantling the taboo subject of homosex and homophobia as

⁹² See Alfredo Martínez, "Perenne mediodía: la homosexualidad y sus reciclajes en los cuentos de Álvaro Pombo," *Alpha: revista de artes, letras y filosofía*, no. 16 (2000), p. 23.

⁹³ See Aliaga and Cortés, *Identidad y diferencia: sobre la cultura gay en España*, p. 78.

motifs of his narrative argument. In addition, Martínez views Pombo's characterization of Ortega as "ontologically" flawed, in the context of the prevailing religious morality of the day, and he conceptualizes Ortega's portrayal as a confirmation of Pombo's narrative of degradation that reflected the situation of many men in Ortega's shoes. Thus, Martínez qualifies the abject depiction of Ortega as a consequence of the literary "naturalness" that inflects Pombo's writing about homosexuality.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, Martínez differentiates between naturalness and normalcy, which are etymologically dissimilar concepts, as I discussed in the previous chapter (concerning *Relatos sobre la falta de sustancia*). Homosexual normalcy is most assuredly not what Pombo was striving for in his narrative and, in this respect, I am completely in accord with Martínez's views. In fact, as I argue in the introduction, Pombo has always seen homoerotic intentionality as a naturally occurring phenomenon within the realm of human sexuality, although invariably dissonant and fraught in its relationship with heteronormativity.

The portrayal of the homosexual protagonist in *Los delitos insignificantes* differs substantially from previous depictions of the homosexual protagonist in the contemporaneous literature of 1980s Spain. According to Martínez, Pombo is one of the first writers of his generation to broach a homosexually themed discourse from the perspective of the homosexual.⁹⁵ Although he certainly is not the first to do so, Pombo also confronts the essentializing nature of homosexual writing—as it occurs in traditional forums of literary discourse about homosexuals, that is, from a heterologocentric perspective.⁹⁶ Pombo's characterizations of his homosexual protagonists, however ominous and disturbing, differ greatly

⁹⁴ See Martínez, *Escrituras torcidas: ensayos de crítica "queer"*, p. 167.

⁹⁵ See Alfredo Martínez, *Los escribas furiosos: configuraciones homoeróticas en la narrativa española* (New Orleans: University Press of the South, 1998), p. 23.

⁹⁶ The homosexually themed novel *Un amor fora ciutat* by Manuel de Pedrolo, written in Catalan in the late 1950's but not published in Castilian until the late 1960's, also deals with anguished homosexual identity in relation to compulsory heterosexuality. In this novel the main protagonist (Lluís) berates himself—in almost abject prostration as an irredeemable homosexual—before his unsympathetic and scandalized wife. The novel attained very little notoriety, and is all but unknown today, except by a few specialists in Catalanian gay literature. Ultimately de Pedrolo was jailed for this work (deemed subversive and in contravention of *La ley de Peligrosidad Social*) by the Francoist morality police.

from those of his mainstream (i.e., heterosexual) contemporaries, Torrente Ballester and Camilo Cela, for instance, whose portrayals of homosexuality issue seemingly from a heterologocentric perspective.⁹⁷ Unlike Cela's or Ballester's characters, about whom we know nothing other than that they are "queers" (*maricones*), the reader is able to penetrate the fraught, existentially wrenching condition of Ortega's character and to understand his motives for his reclusiveness.

Other "queer" perspectives concerning *Los delitos insignificantes*, and Pombo's homotextual endeavour in general, also tend to view the narrative about homosexual abjection as a rather curious occurrence in liberated Spain. In an article that he wrote about homosexual imagery in contemporary Spanish letters, Dieter Ingenschay makes a cursory comment on Pombo's contributions to the field of homotextual literature, without explicitly extolling them. He provided a more detailed analysis of *Los delitos insignificantes* in a prior article wherein he examines themes of repressed and adolescent homosexualities.⁹⁸ In Ingenschay's interpretation, *Los delitos insignificantes* is a text whose central motifs concern (almost exclusively) homosexual morbidity.⁹⁹ He also views the text as devoid of the subtlety, irony and levity that had characterized so much of Pombo's previous writing, such as *El héroe de las mansardas de Mansard*.¹⁰⁰ Ingenschay, like so many critics of Pombo's homotextual writing, does not seem to

⁹⁷ Ballester wrote *Off-side* and Cela wrote *San Camilo, 1936* in the same year (1969), which situates them in the Franco years. In *San Camilo, 1936* Cela depicts two homosexual characters whose "identities" are conspicuously delineated as "queer." The two homosexual characters (Matiíñas and Pepito Zabuela) are written in accordance with prevailing essentialized depictions of homosexuals: "A Matiíñas le gustan los hombres, como a las mujeres o más bien como a los maricones, pero le gustaría que no le gustasen los hombres, como a los hombres, a las tortilleras y a las maricas viciosas, debajo de la ventana hay una mancha que parece la bola del mundo, aquí América, aquí África, aquí Asia Menor, y al lado una bailarina que da un brinco, se ve muy bien, llenan la memoria de sobresalto, Matiíñas es un marica decente, él responde de la decencia, lo de marica le vino solo como el bigote que empieza a salir a los muchachos, un marica amargo y sin verdadera vocación, un marica a la fuerza y a contrapelo." (117) Matiíñas's singular defining idiosyncrasy is his inverted "queerness," over which he has no control, and which is consistent throughout the entire narrative. In the end Matiíñas ends up committing suicide by shooting himself in the anus—a none too subtle metaphorical displacement of his "queerness" into death. No doubt, Cela's narrative is often inflected with great irony and depictions of *tremendismo* (or grotesque imagery), but I suggest that in this case the two homosexual characters are caricatures of homographetic imagery.

⁹⁸ See Ingenschay, "Homotextualidad: Imágenes homosexuales en la novela española contemporánea," p. 59.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ See Ingenschay, "El héroe de las mansardas de Mansard' Sobre el problemático hallazgo de la propia identidad y la grácil disolución de la realidad," p. 68.

be able to look past the pervasiveness of the homophobia that infuses the text from the perspective of the novel's principal narrational argument. However, the most salient shortcomings in Ingenschay's appreciation of *Los delitos insignificantes*—and of Pombo's homotextual writing generally—stem from a failure to appreciate the dialectical and epistemologically oppositional nature of Pombo's narrative. Pombo focuses extensively on homosexual abjection because he admittedly has experienced it firsthand—from a phenomenological literary perspective, the author's experiences inevitably pervade the substance of the text—and he uses these experiences in this text to dramatize the pitfalls of an unexamined and inauthentic life of self-repression. As my analysis of the text demonstrates, there is a remarkable subtlety in what Pombo is attempting to show by virtue of a philosophical investigation of abject Being, as it relates to insubstantiality, and the invisibility of the homosexual subject.

A more interesting and nuanced perspective comes from Janett Reinstädler, another German critic of Pombo's writing, who perceives in *Los delitos insignificantes* a juxtaposition between two diverging strata of post-Franco Spanish society. On the one hand, the young randy Quirós, a ruthlessly imperious "Latin lover," represents a supremely self-assured, breezy Spain, more confidently integrated into Europe and no longer self-conscious about its status as a "politically and socially regressive" *Latin* nation.¹⁰¹ Ortega, on the other hand, stands for an antediluvian Spanish society still mired in the rigid hierarchical structures of patriarchal and National-Catholic Spain. According to Reinstädler, Ortega is unable to integrate into the new Spanish society and thus languishes in his own debasement and self-pity. I am mostly in agreement with Reinstädler's assessment of the gist of the novel, and I find her insights to be very compelling, although the strict dichotomies that she alludes to concerning different Spains,

¹⁰¹ See V. Janett Reinstädler, *Stellungsspiele-Geschlechterkonzeptionen in der zeitgenössischen erotischen Prosa Spaniens (1978-1995)* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 1996), p. 156.

as represented by generational differences between the protagonists, are less persuasive. Ortega is fully engaged in the newly emerging Spanish culture and society, and he even possesses admirable literary credentials, but his personal life is another matter. Reinstädler characterizes the conflict in *Los delitos insignificantes* as a confirmation (and problematization) of a compulsory heterosexist ideology, which, even in the new Spain, did not differ significantly, at least in the initial stages of the transition, from what had existed before.¹⁰² From Reinstädler's perspective, Ortega's relationship with Quirós is a perpetuation of a paradigmatic relationship of objectification and ridicule that has not changed, even within a "liberated," democratic society.

Much of the mainstream criticism of *Los delitos insignificantes* focuses, predictably, on just about every conceivable aspect of the text except the homosexual. Typical of this posture is Jean Tena's critique wherein he characterizes homosexuality in *Los delitos insignificantes* as a "superstructural incidence" (*una peripecia superestructural*) in a novel whose central problematic are insubstantiality, deconstruction, and insignificance.¹⁰³ It should be noted that Tena, who has also written extensively on the texts of Goytisolo, Moix and other homosexual Spanish writers of the post-dictatorship boom, invariably ignores the homotextual aspects of these authors' texts as well. One could claim that Tena, as a poststructuralist critic, ignores homosexuality as a serious theme owing to its epistemological problematization, or its typically essentialized portrayal as identity inhering in a subjectively based "sexual orientation." It would be imprudent to speculate about Tena's motives, but if indeed this is the basis of his superficial treatment of the homosexual motif, then his analysis of the text is problematic, and perhaps even disingenuous. Tena's claim that the homosexuality about which Pombo and other homosexual authors write is merely a superstructural motif suggests a misapprehension on his part concerning the depth and personal poignancy of homosexuality for those who write about it, as

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 157.

¹⁰³ See Jean Tena, "Reseña de Pombo, *Los delitos insignificantes*," *España Contemporánea* 3, no. 1 (1990), p. 147.

well as for those who read it—Jonathan Culler's admonition to avoid reading the text like a man where feminist literature is concerned comes to mind.¹⁰⁴ This claim by Tena, who is a prominent contemporary critic of Spanish narrative, is baffling, but not altogether surprising, as I have argued previously in my assessment of mainstream critical voices concerning Pombo and his homotextual writing.

In his monograph on Pombo (*Álvaro Pombo y la narrativa de la sustancia*, 2003) Wesley Weaver focuses on the narratological aspects of *Los delitos insignificantes*, analyzing the narrative techniques of free indirect discourse to frame the exploitative relationship between Ortega and Quirós. While Weaver recognizes that *Los delitos insignificantes* is unquestionably a novel about a failed homosexual relationship between the two men, he finds greater resonance in the metaphysical aspects of the novel, where interiority in the form of excessive self-reflectiveness, psychic doubling, and insubstantiality come into play.¹⁰⁵ Weaver views the novel as a reflection of the allegorical cave of Plato, and he sees in Ortega's insubstantiality the quandary of interiority; Ortega is insubstantial because he fails to engage his own reality, and lives his life fleetingly and as an almost invisible (or allegorical) reflection of himself. Weaver's analysis is compelling, to be sure, however, once again it seems that he does not appreciate the deeply problematized homosexual existential dissonance that pervades this text. In other words, Ortega's interiority and abjection do not occur randomly; they are the result of his historical situatedness in the society of his time. On the whole, Weaver, Tena, Villanueva,¹⁰⁶ and other

¹⁰⁴ Would it not be ludicrous to say, for example, that in Carmen Martín Gaité's poignant novel about feminine consciousness (*El cuarto de atrás*)—or any novel that purports to broach topics in feminism—the central premise of femininity and female objectification in the Franco period is merely a superstructural vicissitude about patriarchy and misogyny in general?

¹⁰⁵ Weaver finds resonance in Luis Aranguren's characterization of Pombo's homotextual narrative as an unrequited need to be with the subjective Other—a topic I deal with in chapter II—, but he insists that the homosexual angle in *Los delitos insignificantes* is merely an allegorical device to convey the failings of both Ortega and Quirós. See Weaver, *Álvaro Pombo y la narrativa de la sustancia*, pp. 83-93. See also José Luis Aranguren, "El mundo novelesco y el mundo novelístico de Álvaro Pombo," *Los Cuadernos del Norte* 24 (1984-85), p. 44.

¹⁰⁶ Villanueva fails to discuss homosexuality at all as an aspect of Pombo's narrative, particularly this text, in his analysis. See Villanueva, "Ejercicios literarios de Álvaro Pombo."

mainstream critics fundamentally misapprehend the centrality of homosexuality as existential alienation in *Los delitos insignificantes*, or that it constitutes the core of the novel's philosophical and narrative dialectic and Pombo's first real articulation of a self-overcoming of self-repression and abjection related to heterologocentrism.

The Unbearable Heaviness of Homosexual Being

Los delitos insignificantes deals with the following philosophical and cultural themes associated with various aspects of male homosexuality: the eroticization of young males; the homosocialism and homoeroticism between young males and older men (puer-senex desire); homorelational vs. heterorelational paradigms of power/weakness as expressed through sexual domination and subordination; and epistemologies of homosexual desire, i.e. the workings of homoerotic intentionality as a form of consciousness that inheres in the construction of an existential identity and as a result of which the subject feels invisible in the heteronormative context of his experiential realm.

The two main protagonists become entangled in a web of "homosocialism" that will ultimately determine the tragic fate of one of them (Ortega), and have practically no consequences for the other (Quirós). The novel follows the so-called "Socratic love" motif of the other novels in the *ciclo de la falta de sustancia*.¹⁰⁷ However, whereas the first novels in the series dealt with homosexual desire (and homosexual consciousness) primarily as an

¹⁰⁷ Socratic love is the term frequently used to describe a sexual relationship between an older man and a younger man in which some mutually beneficial exchange takes place and the older man derives sex from the younger. As noted earlier, I call this a *puer-senex* model, and I don't believe that this type of relationship has anything to do with the pedagogical *eromenos/erastes* relationship in the Greek sense—as Weaver claims in his analysis of this novel (74). In the paederastic tradition of Classical Athens, the *eromenos* (Greek ἐρώμενος, pl. ἐρώμενοι, "eromenoi") was an adolescent boy who was in a love/pedagogical relationship with an adult man, known as the *erastes* (ἐραστής). As David Halperin amply demonstrates in his study of same-sex love in ancient Greece, the relationship between two men was generally one of stewardship involving an older man (*erastes*) of high social standing and a younger man of similar social standing (*eromenos*). A relationship between a man of higher social standing and a slave, or even between men of similar age and rank, was unimaginable. Although the act of sexual penetration was generally performed by the *erastes*, there is no evidence that this act imputed in any way to the participants a homosexual love relationship. See David M. Halperin, "Is There a History of Sexuality," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David Halperin (New York, London: Routledge, 1993), p. 419.

instantiation of ontological Being, *Los delitos insignificantes* juxtaposes same-sex eroticism and desire with the shifting paradigms of heterorelational conformity. Eroticism, as a form of homoerotic intentionality, becomes one of the key elements in *Los delitos insignificantes* for the manner in which the conflicting and countervailing notions of the epistemological and sociological boundaries between heterosexuality, homosexuality, or homosexual sexual desire play out in a sinister game of domination and subjugation.

In *Los delitos insignificantes* César Quirós is the young, preternaturally handsome heterosexual *cachas* (hunk) who stalks and ultimately subdues his prey, the elderly and struggling writer, Gonzalo Ortega, who, having abandoned his writing pursuits, toils drudgingly and without existential purpose as a lowly bank teller. Quirós, whose most proficient qualities seem to be his ability to cadge sums of money (a finely honed skill related solely to his amply endowed physical attributes), is a protagonist whose sense of self-importance and worth is evidently circumscribed by his emasculation at the hands of the women in his life (his girlfriend Cristina and his mother). His insubstantiality (his degraded masculinity) informs his relationship with Ortega, whom he feels compelled to subject to an analogously inverted form of degradation and subjugation, while also extorting “pay-offs” for mostly non-sexual services rendered.¹⁰⁸ Ortega, for his part, is portrayed as a victim of the degraded status that characterizes the existence of any homosexual person living in the post-dictatorship period in Spain. The overarching mode of Being for him, in his cloistered and decidedly asexual homosexual life, is his paltry subsistence as a lowly clerk.

¹⁰⁸ The concept of the inversion of dominant/subordinate roles, and the feminization of Ortega as the passive, recipient partner in this relationship will greatly affect the scope of my analysis. This is the most saliently transgressive aspect of Pombo’s writing: although the entire saga of Quirós’ seduction occurs ostensibly as a simulacrum of a “normal” heterosexual courtship, the very nature of male-to-male homosocial interaction makes the work more subversive. While on the surface Pombo appears to succumb to a rather antiquated notion of homosexuality as a type of inversion of the typical male-female dimorphism in sexual intercourse, what unfolds is a tale that juxtaposes self-effacing nihilism with naked malice, with large doses of homoeroticism thrown in.

Los delitos insignificantes is narrated entirely in third person, with frequent use of free indirect discourse. The narrator takes us directly into Ortega's and Quirós' thoughts as we decipher the sordid world of homosexual abjection and emasculated insignificance. This is the first Pombian text to be set outside of London or Letona.¹⁰⁹ *Los delitos insignificantes* is set in the Madrid of the early 1980s, in the sweltering asphyxiation of summer, and the capital city's bustling culture provides a startling contrast to the tedium of Ortega's fusty existence. The novel's *locus fabulae* is in the vicinity of the Gran Vía (the main artery of the downtown core of Madrid) in a tight radius of streets that are described in punctilious detail, and which Pombo uses as a metaphorical girding—in the form of an executioner's noose—for this fateful narrative. This cloistered spatiality sets the stage for Pombo's tale of fatal seduction, self-discovery, and ultimate tragedy, an atmosphere that is so tightly constricted (much like a warren or a cage) that its protagonists have no escape from one another. Pombo deftly employs the metaphor of the sweltering heat of the Madrid summer to stoke the impassioned flames of desire and naked male sexual aggression. Quirós is frequently described taking languorous showers or lying about lasciviously in the nude, and it is ultimately Quirós' sultriness that informs the passion and fervour of this text. Pombo is thus setting the context for a torrid novel in which the culminating scene is a combustion of sex and suicide.

At their first meeting, Gonzalo Ortega appears flustered, like a coy schoolgirl, by the physical beauty of Quirós. The flirtatious banter of the charismatic young man and the solicitous attention he pays to Ortega, stoke the fantastical musings of this aging homosexual man, whose ultimate fantasy is to become the young Adonis's object of attention. In a premonition of what is to occur later, Ortega notes Quirós' perfunctory dismissal of his girlfriend: "Ella es secretaria, trabaja hasta las siete. A Ortega le divertían el tono de la contestación más que nada. Todo

¹⁰⁹ As noted earlier, Letona is the fictitious name for Santander (Pombo's birthplace), and is the principal setting for many of the works in the *ciclo de la falta de sustancia*. Madrid is a new locale and offers all of the hedonism, excitement, and cultural effervescence of the changes affecting the new Spain.

aquella tarde era cuestión de tonos de impulsos. Un acontecimiento estrictamente musical” (LDI 9). The introductory dialogue between Quirós and Ortega sets the stage for what eventually becomes a deadly game of hunter and prey. The hunter and prey motif permeates this text as the psychosexual underpinning of the relationship between the two men. It is immediately clear that Ortega is not the first quarry that this rapacious hunter has set his gaze upon. As in other tales in the *ciclo de la falta de sustancia*, the impending relationship between these two unevenly matched protagonists conforms to a frequently occurring paradigm in Pombo’s texts involving asymmetrical relationships: they invariably end in circumstances of domination/subjugation and tragedy. Quirós’ homoerotic banter with Ortega is unabashed and aggressive; moreover, Quirós uses the pre-eminent force of his off-limits heterosexuality as a lure for the sexually diffident Ortega. At the level of heterorelationality—that is, the context in which the self-assured heterosexual alpha male asserts his dominance over the obsequious and fawning older homosexual man—Quirós’ flippant dismissal of his girlfriend, and his penchant for scarcely concealed homoerotic flirtation, verge on the misogynistic. Nevertheless, Quirós exploits his heterosexual status, using his girlfriend as bait and surreptitious decoy in his machinations to entrap the sycophantic homosexual.¹¹⁰ The condition of homosexual lust for the heterosexual object-of-desire reflects the dualism of the existential dissonance that fully pervades this decidedly asymmetrical relationship. In the scheme of lust/desire that Pombo delineates in this tale, the (male) homosexual’s lust for the “unattainable” heterosexual object-of-desire represents an irreconcilable existential abyss that results from the homosexual’s internalized abjection; that is, the dichotomy results from Ortega’s sexual invisibility as self-negation and his need to be

¹¹⁰ If I may permit myself an intertextual digression, a similar scenario plays itself out in the film *Rebel Without a Cause*. In this movie, the protagonist Jim Stark (James Dean) manipulates his intensely sensuous relationship with his girlfriend to lure the unsuspecting and hopelessly naïve object of his homosexual fatal attraction, Plato (Sal Mineo). The character of Plato in *Rebel Without a Cause* resembles, despite the age disparity, Ortega in *Los delitos insignificantes*, and we have a premonition that his fate will be a tragic one owing to his unbridled lust for the “unattainable” heterosexual.

subsumed in the heterosexual vortex of desire, however abjectly. A similar scenario plays out in *El parecido*, which I discussed in chapter II, although in the case of Gonzalo Ferrer and his deceased nephew Jaime, the relationship is portrayed phantasmally.

Pombo's imperious, alpha male protagonists frequently emerge as predators who, tormented by their own inadequacies, seek some measure of retribution through the humiliation or subjugation of a subaltern—generally a homosexual man who may not necessarily be a love interest. This is the case between Quirós and Ortega, to be sure, and also, as I elaborate in a subsequent chapter, between the imperious brother-in-law, Martín, and Gonzalito in *El metro de platino iridiado*. In a further development of the domination/subjugation motif, the narrative portrays Ortega's burgeoning attraction to Quirós as an incipient recognition of deeply repressed homosexual yearning, and he is inexorably drawn into the maelstrom of Quirós' irrepressible and portentously lethal beauty:

Más aun: le había alegrado advertir en Quirós una inteligencia despierta que, con entera independencia de su buen aspecto físico (Ortega encontraba a Quirós francamente guapo aquella tarde), le hacía valer al muchacho por sí mismo ... Por eso que la revelación de Quirós, la identidad de sus «dos mujeres», hubiera resultado ser una sosería al fin y al cabo ... Nada, nada, que ya veo que vas de guapo por la vida —resumió Ortega, por ver con qué salía su nuevo compañero. Quirós se echó a reír satisfecho. En aquel momento se sintió el amo del mundo y más adelante, cuando pasó el tiempo y la relación fue perdiendo simplicidad y claridad, los dos habían de volver muchas veces al recuerdo de aquella risa, aquella hora populosa del atardecer de julio que parecía no transcurrir apenas, que parecía no ser uno de esos raros momentos dichosos de la vida y que de hecho, lo hubiera sido si el tiempo no hubiera proseguido su indiferente tránsito. (LDI 25)

The above passage serves as an ominous premonition of the co-dependence that will characterize the interactions between Quirós and Ortega. To be sure, this is a relationship based on the confluence of mutually fulfilling, albeit contrasting, human emotions. In Ortega's case, the long suppressed need to acknowledge and experience an unfettered eroticism towards an object of beauty (and surely Quirós represents the epitome of masculine pulchritude for him); and for Quirós, the need to be the unconditional object of worship by another.

Quirós is keen to exploit the force of attraction that he has on the older man; this is a practice that is not unfamiliar to him, and one that he performs with great aplomb, as is evident in the seductively smooth manner in which he wheedles the older man's adoring attention. Moreover, as alpha male, Quirós is also averse to predatory, aggressive males his own age, who harbour similar intentions towards their sexual quarry: "A Quirós le gustaban las mujeres jóvenes (algo mayores que él, como Cristina), pero en cambio detestaba a los muchachos de su edad. Las muchas cosas que por razones obvias tenía en común con ellos era lo que más le repelía" (LDI 18). Quirós' distaste for the predatory masculine aggressiveness he embodies evinces an aversion for the object of beauty that he represents, and in an attempt to sublimate his neurosis, he seeks gratification in the unstinting adoration of the older man. Quirós' instinctive anti-narcissism reflects a repudiation of the imaginary self and a means by which he grieves the loss of his masculine status. It becomes evident that Quirós' sense of degradation is the result of his sense of humiliation at the hands of the women in his life. Quirós' misogyny, resulting from the inadequacy (and perceived degradation) of his relationships with women, leads him to seek solace in the adoring gazes of older men who caress him lasciviously with their eyes:

Pero es que además, a la tardía aparición del concepto de belleza, se unía un gusto instintivo por lo avejentado o torcido o marcado por la edad, no sólo en el aspecto físico sino, sobre todo, en la textura anímica de los hombres de la edad de Ortega. Y había como otra cosa más: que con frecuencia Quirós sentía que le admiraban. Sus miradas le recorrían sigilosamente el cuerpo entero como caricias, como labios. (Quirós estaba absolutamente seguro de esto.) Y así sentía ahora que Ortega, al mirarle, se le había enredado en el cuerpo aquella tarde calurosa como una mosca en una tela de araña. (LDI 18)

Quirós' narcissism, in the form of solipsistic self-reflection, is never far from the surface, and he reveals himself brazenly as a sponger, living parasitically off the two women who have sustained him for most of his young adult life. Quirós' considerable charms enable him to ensnare Ortega, who allows himself to be carried away by the insidious cajolery of this young Adonis.

Nevertheless, and in spite of the "intrusion" of the girlfriend, Ortega clings to the desperate hope

that perhaps Quirós is amenable to his lust. The illusion of mutual attraction is deferred, but the process of entrapment, Ortega's ensnarement in the spider's web ("como una mosca en una tela de araña"), is a metaphor—often rendered as a predator in possession of and about to consume its prey—that Pombo's narrative frequently uses to illustrate a situation of master/slave objectification.

Both Quirós and Ortega are intoxicated by the first meeting, but for obviously different reasons. Quirós is keyed up because he is consumed with a need to assuage the "castration" he feels is related to the dependency on the women in his life; this he accomplishes by titillating the sexually ravenous (but repressed) older man. Ortega, like so many of Pombo's protagonists in the *ciclo de la falta de sustancia* series, is frozen in a state of existential ambiguity, and his engagement with the beautiful Quirós unleashes deeply pent up emotions. Existential ambiguity is like the "morality of the herd" for Nietzsche, or like the "world of appearances" for Plato. In the case of Ortega it represents the limbic state of his sexual self-repression and conformance with a regressive morality that impedes his true revelation, which can only be attained by the overcoming of his subjective nihilism. Merleau-Ponty refers to existential ambiguity as the instance where many meanings are experienced together, but where only singular outcomes can emerge. If the subject is in a constant state of indecision with respect to the circumstances he experiences and the influences in his life, he/she will never achieve a sense of significance, of true meaning in an ambiguous universe.¹¹¹

If Ortega's condition can be characterized as existential ambiguity (another word for inauthenticity) because of his inability to move past his solipsistic interiority, it is, ironically, Quirós who takes the initiative and attempts to gratify his own autoeroticism by coaxing the pathetic older man into a state of erotic self-awareness. Ultimately, however, despite his bravado, Quirós is also mired in the existential ambiguity of his own solipsism; he is only too aware of his

¹¹¹ See Merleau-Ponty in Silverman, *Inscriptions: Between Phenomenology and Structuralism*, p. 33.

deep-seated dependence on others for his psychological and vital sustenance, and is trapped in his all-consuming ego:

Se seguía sintiendo bien [Quirós], pero el impulso inicial, la deliciosa embriaguez autoperceptiva, había decaído. Y le había dejado como con los sedimentos amargos de la autopercepción ... Y Quirós se sentía ahora inquieto, necesitado de Ortega (que había actuado, sin proponérselo, como una dosis de anfetaminas) para alejar de sí el ambiguo pasado y el complicado, el incierto futuro ... su interioridad se deshacía invadida por las bruscas generalidades externas, las opiniones de los demás, los papeles que en general le correspondían, sus fracasos ... ¿Qué soy yo al fin y al cabo? Había resultado estimulante contar a Ortega que vivía de las mujeres. (LDI 35)

Pombo's depiction of Quirós' decisiveness with regard to his initial stirrings for Ortega depicts the perversely transgressive nature of the heterosexual/homosexual binary that infuses this text. Compulsory heterosexuality is circumvented by means of a perverse disruption of the dominant force: the perversity, that is, of this homoerotic initiation. The juxtaposition of the oppositional binaries of interiority/exteriority stands metaphorically and symbolically for the subversiveness of the homoerotic intersubjectivity between Quirós and Ortega.¹¹² As the title of the novel suggests, an element of illicitness infuses the very premise of this relationship, both from the perspective of Ortega's flirtations with Quirós and the flaunting of the boundaries of heterosexual appropriateness on the part of Quirós:

Es una nueva naturaleza que tiene que ver con el aliento de la noche, con la malicia de la noche ... La noche en nuestro mundo occidental se ha hecho para el descanso porque hay que levantarse a trabajar por la mañana. Pero, ¿y si no hubiera que levantarse nunca a trabajar? Entonces todo cambiaría. Todo es un poco una cacería por las noches ... Somos cazadores y cazados porque no se distingue claramente nada ... (LDI 44)

¹¹² Diana Fuss describes the concept of interiority and exteriority and its relation to homosexual identification as abjection in the following terms: "Those inhabiting the inside can only comprehend the outside through the incorporation of a negative image. This process of negative interiorization involves turning homosexuality inside out, exposing not the homosexual's abjected insides but the homosexual as the abject, as the contaminated and expurgated insides of the heterosexual subject. Homosexual production emerges under these inhospitable conditions as a kind of ghost-writing, a writing which is at once a recognition and a refusal of the cultural representation of 'the homosexual' as phantom 'Other.'" See Diana Fuss, *Inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 4.

Quirós thrives on the foreboding of the mysterious darkness of the night—the murkiness of night, which is a constant of fantastical nocturnal trysts in gay literature and pornography—which reinforces the sense of homoerotic titillation that pervades the first encounter between the two. Like Ortega, Quirós feels ill at ease in his skin, despite all the privileges of his heterosexual “iconicity,” and he feels much more at ease lurking in search of his victims in the cover of night. Quirós’ sordid rank compels him to prey on his victims, as evinced in his allusions to the themes of predation and depravation common in the films of Pier Paolo Pasolini. Thus, the narrative uses the diametrical motif of night/day as a backdrop to the recurring topos of hunter/prey.

Los delitos insignificantes, like many of Pombo’s texts, contains a number of intertextual allusions in the dialogues between Ortega and Quirós: to Pasolini (44); T.S. Eliot (70); Hölderlin (101); Saint Augustine (101); Barthes and Sartre (174); and even to Pombo himself (68). These intertextual exchanges between Ortega and Quirós show Quirós to be not only seductive but also exceptionally literate, which is part of Quirós’ attraction for Ortega. Ortega himself receives accolades from no less than Gil de Biedma¹¹³ for the audacious homotextualism in his recently published book *Relatos lentos*—its similarities to Pombo’s text *Relatos sobre la falta de sustancia* are obvious:

Sus *Relatos lentos*, doce relatos realistas que habían causado auténtico furor en Barcelona. Recordó la carta de felicitación de Jaime Gil de Biedma. Se habían carteadado durante algún tiempo ... Pero, ¿es que había renunciado a algo? Ortega había contado, por ejemplo, desde que dejó de escribir, con irse amoldando a su soltería asexual. ¡Cuánto se reiría de él Gil de Biedma si le viera ahora! (LDI 96)

However, it is clear that Ortega’s transgressive literary output is a misleading reflection of his cowardly engagement with his own homoeroticism. While leading a life of homosexual celibacy,

¹¹³ Gil de Biedma was in the heyday of his notoriety as a writer who had openly acknowledged his homosexuality. He had not, however, published any poetry with overtly homosexual themes. Many of Gil de Biedma’s works were written during the Franco years and were extremely circumspect in their depiction of any overt homosexuality, and with good reason. Pombo seems, in some respects, to be (tongue in cheek) chiding the deep admiration and respect that Gil de Biedma generally commanded in the world of gay letters, despite his veiled homotextual output, while Pombo, for the most part, suffered disparagement.

Ortega also cultivates assiduously, through his writing, an image of himself as a doyen of sorts of homotextual writing.

The eroticization of Quirós is one of the central homosexual motifs of the novel and is continually reinforced by the numerous allusions to his virile pulchritude.¹¹⁴ This particular motif suggests that Pombo is giving full rein to his more lascivious homotextual narrative techniques. The thematic recurrence of mention of Quirós' attractiveness reinforces a commonplace in gay erotic literature regarding the homosexual male's craving for erotic gratification, particularly as it involves comely, young heterosexual men. There are very few instances in contemporary Spanish fiction where same-sex male prurience is so conspicuously expressed, and for Pombo this seems slightly out of character given the rather stoic descriptions of male eroticism that define his early novels. Nevertheless, whatever dominance and sway Quirós may hold over Ortega owing to his physical beauty is vitiated by his status of utter submissiveness and infantilization in the presence of his mother and his girlfriend. Quirós' existence is one of co-dependency and subservience in the face of persistent humiliation:

«Contigo esto es la primera vez.» Y Quirós se había reído. Los dos se habían reído. Recíprocamente inspirados, admirándose desnudos en la cama ancha de Cristina ... Y Quirós recordaba ahora cómo tres años atrás se había sentido endiosado con aquello, reafirmado. Como si el atractivo sexual que evidentemente inspiraba en Cristina fuera un espejo inmaculado y grandioso ... Y así habían seguido tres años, sin que las cosas cambiaran mucho en la cama, pero sintiéndose Quirós un poco menos seguro cada vez. Cristina toda entera ayer noche, que le había humillado, sin proponérselo quizá, recordándole tan sólo la ambigüedad de su condición, su dependencia. (LDI 50-51)

¹¹⁴ The number of references to male beauty that one finds in *Los delitos insignificantes* is unusually frequent for a major narrative of Spanish literature. It is not until the publication of Terenci Moix's campy, homoerotic novel *Garras de astracán* (1991) with its depictions of voluptuous (mainly heterosexual) men, that a trend re-emerges in contemporary Spanish letters. I say re-emerges because there are unquestionably examples of this type of homoerotic literature involving heterosexual men that were published in the early twentieth century—I am referring to the works of Retana, d'Hilmar, Catá, et al. I do not mean to imply that *Los delitos insignificantes* is campy in any respect but merely that it presents a form of physically sexual literature involving same-sex eroticism that had not been visible in Spanish literature since the early 1900s.

In the context of the homosocial tryst in which they are involved, Quirós and Ortega perceive Cristina as an appendage to their relationship, as an interloper, albeit the ballast that keeps the relationship tenuously anchored within the boundaries of the heteronormative. Quirós' heterosexuality provides an impediment that decentres, or perhaps subconsciously promotes, the tryst; the insinuations of impending heterosexuality act as a destabilizing force that keeps the possibility of homosocial or homosexual bonding on fleeting and ephemeral terms, and in a general state of abeyance:

Le habrás contado a tu novia que te encontraste con un tipo extraño en la Gran Vía, ¿no? Pues no —la verdad, contestó Quirós. Y le complació ver que la respuesta había complacido a Ortega. ¿Por qué no? preguntó Ortega. ¿Y por qué iba a contárselo? Nuestra relación es muy especial. Los dos somos muy independientes. Hoy en día una novia es como un compañero, como un amigo. Yo lo veo así por lo menos. Son mundos separados. ¿Es que no tienes confianza en ella? Ortega sintió haber hecho esta pregunta que le pareció decididamente demasiado personal. Quirós sin embargo, no daba la impresión de sentirse ofendido. Ni siquiera interrogado. (LDI 58)

Quirós' feints of heterosexuality impinge on the very real possibility of a homosexual consummation. The notion of compulsory heterosexuality as obstacle is the force that, for the moment, keeps the two antagonists apart. Quirós' flagging attempts to cleave to what Judith Butler terms a "normative phantasm of compulsory heterosexuality" is in dialectical juxtaposition with Ortega's attempt to accede to his own homosexuality.¹¹⁵ Butler refers to the constructed character of sexuality that is frequently invoked to instil the notion that sexuality has a normative and natural shape, one that approximates in its only natural incarnation the "natural" state of heterosex. Butler elaborates further: "The efforts to denaturalize sexuality and gender have taken as their main enemy those normative frameworks of compulsory heterosexuality that operate through the naturalization and reification of heterosexist norms."¹¹⁶ As I alluded to earlier in my discussion of the heterorelational positioning that Pombo frequently uses in his

¹¹⁵ See Judith P. Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 94.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

texts to describe the subordinate status of his homosexual protagonists in relation to the force of heterosexual ascendancy, homosexual abjection is often a consequence of self-imposed “libidinous” evanescence. By this I mean that Pombo’s scheme of homosexual difference in the context of heteronormative hegemony necessarily relegates the homosexual to a state of invisibility (insignificance). Ortega, in an effort to sublimate the rousing of his homoerotic libido, relishes in Quirós’ status as consummate heterosexual. Ortega’s refusal to acknowledge his own erotic impulses, by sublimating them within the heterorelational realm of Quirós’ relationship with his girlfriend, magnifies his abjection and keeps him, to borrow a term from Lee Edelman, “metaphorically displaced.”¹¹⁷ Thus the narrative sets up the conjoining of Quirós and Ortega as a form of metaphoric displacement, as evinced in Ortega’s sublimation of his homosexual desire through displacement of heterosexual difference, that is, Ortega’s vicarious identification with Cristina, Quirós’ girlfriend.

Homotextual Homographesis

Pombo’s homotextual writing is replete with instances of archetypal homographetic characterization; that is, following Edelman, the homosexual body is idiosyncratic in that it betrays essential sexual “orientation.”¹¹⁸ In *Los delitos insignificantes*, the character Hernández symbolizes the recurring Pombian motif of the “nelly” (*amanerado*) homosexual prototype: effete, caustically irreverent, and, because of the transgression of boundaries of accepted male performance, deeply unsettling to heteronormativity. The Pombian *amanerado* is obsessed with youthful male beauty—Hernández’ only means of sexual gratification is masturbating to images of young men—and is generally *soso* (literally without salt, but figuratively insubstantial) and

¹¹⁷ Metaphorical displacement is a condition of indeterminacy in the positioning of the subject within the shifting metaphoric domain of essentialism. Because the homosexual, in this case, identifies himself through the “sexual orientation” that heterologocentrism has conferred upon him, he can find no specific locus in which to “channel” his sexual desire for men. See Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory*, p. 11.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

self-deprecating. In the Pombian manner of transgressive inscription, Hernández represents another facet of homosexuality that is to all intents and purposes more visible, albeit endowed with egregious homographetic markings.

Despite Hernández' portrayal as the homographetic queen, he is somehow more authentic to himself because ultimately Hernández' insubstantiality derives from a complete disregard for and concern with his representation within heterologocentric discourses as profoundly unnatural. Pombo's depiction of the homographetic queen, as is the case here with Hernández, constitutes a critical reflection from a position of ironic detachment and self-conscious marginalization—that is to say, the subaltern's view of the subaltern. Hernández, unlike Ortega, is considerably more intentional in his homoerotic proclivities—he makes no attempt to dissemble them, notwithstanding his unwillingness to engage in any intersubjective sexual praxis. Moreover, Hernández, unlike Ortega, openly self-proclaims his homosexuality and is unabashedly perverse. Nonetheless, Hernández is insubstantial: everything to him is camp and foppery, and he is inconsequential in his actions towards Others. Hernández stands as a foil to Ortega's melancholy irresoluteness, but he is an abased and pathetic figure:

Hernández llegó por fin. Llegaba siempre muy puntual. Ortega le vio llegar desde lejos, la figura pesada, cuadrada, fofa, la tez aceitunada, los labios gruesos, las gafas de concha, veinte dioptrías. Daba la impresión de moverse como un figurón de cartón piedra en una procesión de gigantes y cabezudos. La imagen le pareció barata a Ortega, fácil. Porque la impresión que daba Hernández no era la de un muñeco sino, exactamente, la de un ser humano envuelto en la tela de araña de sus obsesiones ... Ortega pensó: «Su soledad es mayor que la mía. Su desesperación es mayor que la mía. Nada que yo diga o haga puede entrar o transformarse en la conciencia de este hombre que habla como un adolescente, que se masturba pensando en chicos jóvenes a quienes nunca ha tocado.» (LDI 81-82)

The narrative's caustic tenor corroborates, in a sardonically complicitous way, Ortega's revulsion at Hernández. Hernández' self-absorbed hedonism, consumed as he is with his onanistic rituals using images of young men, is a denigrating image of homosexuals who indulge

wantonly in disembodied sexual gratification, and whose solipsistic tendencies keep them at a distance from engagement with the world around them.

Pombo's depiction of insubstantial homosexuals, such as Hernández, reflects three recurring Pombian philosophical perspectives on abject homosexuality: (1) Hernández is a piteous apparition who represents the existentially insignificant being whose sexual expression is interiorized and wholly homonarcissistic and related exclusively to his obsession with and fetishization of young men. (2) Hernández clearly manifests characteristics that Pombo, the philosopher writer, finds to be morally objectionable: he is a recluse who has withdrawn from society and any intersubjective engagement with the Other, and he remains mired in a puerile and self-seeking universe—this is the defining characteristic of Martin Bowra in “En falso” in *Relatos sobre la falta de sustancia*, as well of Gonzalito in *El metro de platino iridiado*, who ironically is not an *amanerado*, and whose foil is an *amanerado* (Vélez), whose behaviour and actions are admirable and altruistic, in stark contrast to Gonzalito's. (3) Hernández's mannerisms represent a spurious femininity that he affects as a way of dissimulating, albeit transgressively, his intentional self. Clearly Pombo is taking aim at a particular manifestation of homosexuality that is prevalent in many cultural and social settings within the larger gay community of his time, which sought outlet in campy, fetishized and effeminized (*locaza*) forms of behaviour. The narrative depiction of the *locaza* in Pombo's homotextual writing is a polemic against a constructed “feminine” inversion for male homosexuals—homosexual man as feminized, metaphorical Other—which in a sense reinforces and reconstructs the gender dichotomy inherent in phallogocentric discourse concerning objective male-female difference. Pombo rejects binarisms of behaviour that condone or reinforce abjection—his narratives reflect an acute disquiet with these types of abject manifestations—and no doubt his interpretation of the *locaza* remonstrates with Judith Butler's assertion that “the binarism of feminized male homosexuality

on the one hand, and masculinized female homosexuality on the other, is itself produced as the restrictive spectre that constitutes the defining limits of symbolic exchange.”¹¹⁹ For Pombo, the symbolic exchange devolves into a monadic reconstruction of abjection (the *locaza* as a paltry reflection of subversiveness), which in itself is a form of self-effacing dissimulation and inauthenticity.

Through the juxtaposition of the effete Hernández with the inauthentic Ortega, Pombo provides an insight into the world of two homosexual men living in Spain in the 1980s, both of whom are marginalized because of their visible homographetic marks, that is, their “queerness.” However, Hernández, in stark contrast with Ortega, manifests (rather unconcernedly) his own indeterminate and unorthodox homosexuality:

Nunca me han gustado las mujeres. La única mujer que he conocido, con quien he tenido relaciones ... me trató muy cruelmente. A mí no me gustan los chicos afeminados. Yo no soy homosexual. ¿Cómo se llama lo que yo soy? La belleza de los efebos es la única belleza que entiendo. Me gusta mirarles. Pienso en ellos todo el tiempo. Pero nunca he tenido relaciones con ninguno. Yo soy impotente. Desde el principio mi vida ha sido un fracaso. Salgo a la calle, no tengo nada que hacer, bebo demasiado. Me paso todo el día en casa, masturbándome ... (LDI 82)

Pero no siento ningún interés por su caso. Solo compasión en la que se entrecruza una especie de repugnancia como ante las heces fecales. Es como si me pidiera que le mirase mientras caga. Que oliera sus pedos. Que lavara sus pañuelos rígidos de mocos y esperma seca. Si amara esta criatura como a mí mismo, me abandonaría ahora en los brazos de su desvarío, en la monotonía de sus obsesiones ... Mi egoísmo es infinitamente superior al egotismo de esta pobre criatura indefensa. Y lo único que se me ocurre hacer para salvarle es venir una vez al mes a darle conversación. (LDI 83)

Hernández is loath to effeminate men, and in an act of self-repudiation, he lusts after that which is diametrically opposed to himself as a means of sublimating his inversion; his “impotence” as he puts it.¹²⁰ Hernández does not feign to be anything but a wretched “queen” who spends the

¹¹⁹ See Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, p. 104.

¹²⁰ The effeminate homosexual rejection of sameness is a commonplace in homosexual culture, and is ubiquitous in the texts of Spanish writer Álvaro Retana, who wrote in the early 1920s. Retana's work consisted mostly of camp, and portrays a decidedly subversive, self-effacing side of underground homosexuality; a sort of *Boys in the Band* of the 1920s. See Retana's *Las locas de postín* and *El diablo con faldas*. Similarly, Proust's great histrionic “queen” in

entire day masturbating, drinking and skulking. The ironic juxtaposition of Hernández and Ortega punctuates the dialectical tensions that mark the contrapuntal dualisms of Pombo's narrative: Ortega is at once repulsed by and empathetic towards the pathetic creature Hernández, in whom he sees a reflection of himself for all that is egregious in his self-image; in other words, Hernández represents the fragmentary doubling (*parecido*) of interiority/exteriority of Ortega's dualistic, fragmented life, as Juan Antonio Masoliver describes it.¹²¹ Hernández and Ortega symbolize the murky materializations of homosexualities, as indistinct manifestations of states of Being: one written on the body, that is, homographically, as in the case of Hernández, and the other experiencing his homosexuality as a disturbing existential consciousness. Thus, each is both an affirmation and a negation of an indeterminate homosexual identity.

Despite his obvious distaste for Hernández, Ortega himself feels inexorably drawn to his sublimated degeneracy. After all, his entanglement with Quirós is nothing less than an enactment of the very fantasies that Hernández uses for his own onanistic rituals. Both Ortega and Hernández embody another common leitmotif in Pombo's homotextual narrative: to wit, the older homosexual's lascivious yearning—generally unrequited and unattainable—for youthful male beauty, more often than not young heterosexual men, who are in some instances related to them—as evidenced in the stories I have previously discussed (“Tío Eduardo” in *Relatos sobre la falta de sustancia*, and *El parecido*), and as I discuss in chapter V concerning *Contra natura*. Nevertheless, unlike Ortega, who remains enmeshed in his self-abasement, Hernández does to a certain extent subsume himself within this heteronormative framework, albeit operating transgressively and perversely on its periphery as a dissonant metonymic presence.

A la recherche du temps perdu, the Baron de Charlus, so conspicuous in his effeminacy, ironically rejects anyone who looks or acts as he does as inauthentically male.

¹²¹ Masoliver notes that Pombo is the consummate writer of fragmentary dualisms concerning nature, morality and ethics, substance and insubstantiality, heterodoxy and blasphemy, particularly as these reflect intersubjective relationships. See Juan Antonio Masoliver, “Álvaro Pombo: agonía y resurrección de la novela,” *Quimera: Revista de literatura* 209 (2001), pp. 19-23.

Compulsory Heterosexuality and Nascent Homosexuality

A frequently occurring theme parallel to the topics of abjection as existential dissonance and asymmetrical relationships of power is the motif of domination and subjugation that occurs in these types of relationships. Pombo uses this motif to reflect the degradation that inheres in inauthenticity, that is, the failure to overcome abjection. In *Los delitos insignificantes*, the mismatched relationship between Quirós and Ortega quickly degenerates into one of master/slave. Quirós relentlessly seduces Ortega in imagery that is rendered metaphorically as an act of feral devouring and sexual penetration. The theme of sexual conquest as an act of brutal male dominance is another of the primary motifs of this text, and it serves to reinforce the homoerotic dimensions of sex and power that *Los delitos insignificantes* undoubtedly are:

Porque Quirós se fue a su casa llevándose los libros como piezas cobradas en una cacería ilícita. Tenía Quirós una sensación de ilicitud que era regocijante. Haber entrado, de repente, por la pura fuerza de sus encantos corporales (porque Quirós a estas alturas estaba persuadido de que Ortega le amaba más que nada por lo guapo) y haber roto la virginidad del fracaso y haber roto el himen de la soledad (que Quirós entendía, a su manera, porque era avispado, aunque trivial), haber, en menos de tres días, de tres veces, o cuatro, entrado a saco, sin comerlo ni beberlo, por la cara, en el corazón de Ortega, le parecía un triunfo. Y era un triunfo, un triunfo sangriento como el de los cocodrilos, que según dicen, arrastran al fondo a sus presas. Y ahí devoran. (LDI 97)

The hunting metaphor foreshadows the perilous confrontation where the victim (Ortega) will fall easy prey to the rapacious hunter (Quirós) in Pombo's most melancholy depiction of predatory gay sexual encounters.¹²² The asymmetry in power status and disparity in ages and social standing of many of the homosexual protagonists of the Pombian narrative reflect Pombo's obsession with the existential dissonance of homosexual relationships generally and also the problematic status of same-sex desire in the context of unequal poles of power—in this case the blustery heterosexual Quirós in relation to the submissive homosexual Ortega. Quirós exudes the typical masculine hubris of having metaphorically “ruptured” Ortega's virginity. In effect,

¹²² Alfredo Martínez refers to this as the weakness or morbid insubstantiality of the older homosexual; *la debilidad* as he calls it. See Martínez, *Escrituras torcidas: ensayos de crítica "queer"*, p. 129.

Ortega has assumed the posture of the feminine in this game of seduction, and by virtue of this inversion of roles (the attribution of conventional “feminine weakness” to Ortega), he (Ortega) has become game for Quirós’ insatiable (heterosexual) masculine appetite for domination. The narrative presents Ortega’s submissiveness as a violation of (falling away from) his authentic subjectivity, a fall that arises from his metaphoric displacement. Exploitation and subjugation (not always sexual) are common in the Pombian narrative, but Ortega’s characterization as emasculated and denatured (to wit, feminine)—a condition that Luce Irigaray characterizes as the immobilization and domestication of the “subject within the feminine function”¹²³—is Pombo’s most egregious portrayal of a subject’s inauthentic objectification.

Quirós’ flirtatious banter with Ortega reflects a misogynistic desire on his part to objectify the women who have tormented him. Quirós in a sense “outs” Ortega, and this “revelation” sets the stage for the metonymic transference of roles, wherein Ortega assumes the “traditional” submissive female role to Quirós’ masculine ascendancy. Luce Irigaray describes this behaviour—male objectification of the female via homosocial intersubjectivity with other men—as “*l’hommeosexualité*” in reference to the narcissistic and self-gratifying posture of male homoeroticism via the deliberate exclusion of the female subject.¹²⁴ I find Irigaray’s term particularly apropos in this instance given the homosocial bonding that occurs between Ortega and Quirós, both of whom exclude the feminine in their cajolery, and one of whom (Ortega) sublimates the feminine in his comportment. Thus, by virtue of his radical alterity as a feminized homosexual, Ortega becomes symbolically relegated (in Lacanian terms) to the non-phallic imaginary. Moreover, Ortega becomes the surrogate in the transfiguration (metamorphosis) of the sexual object, from anatomical man to metaphorical woman, and as such is relegated to a

¹²³ Ortega’s inverted posture conforms in many respects to Irigaray’s characterization of feminine interiorization that results from a sense of objectification, or subsumption within the masculine realm. See Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 135.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

status of “non subject.”¹²⁵ I suggest that Pombo is undertaking a dialectic within the prevailing hegemonic discourse in respect of homosexual “feminine” alterity. In so doing, Pombo challenges the homographetic attribution of homosexual femininity that, owing to the phallogocentrically grounded, asymmetrical balance of male-female relationships, necessarily attributes a dominance/submission (male/female) paradigm to a same-sex male relationship. This is a topic that I discuss at length in chapter V with regard to *Contra natura*.

Ortega’s subliminal metamorphosis into a woman exposes the existential dissonance that lies at the heart of a heteronormative domain of difference. In depicting Ortega as the “unnatural” homosexual Other, Pombo is challenging ironically (and subversively) the very crux of the epistemological argument of sexuality as necessary binary difference. To wit, in view of Ortega’s unnatural inversion, which in the context of Pombo’s dialectic with regard to homosexual abjection relates to an inauthentic self-actualization, he views himself as incomplete. Ortega’s self-awareness as sexual homosexual is fraught from the outset by virtue of his metaphoric evanescence into non-masculinity, which itself is a refuge from his deeply aggrieved subjectivity:

se hallaba incapacitado para juzgar con objetividad a Quirós. Si es que ha acertado, el muy cabrón, el pobre crío. Si es que me ha dicho la verdad. Me ha preguntado lo único que hay que preguntarme a mí: que qué me falta. Y eso es lo que me falta: un par de huevos. Y esto no es una vulgaridad: es la verdad. Hay casos, como el mío, en que la incapacidad de ver a la mujer como lo que es, en su belleza, es un trastorno metafísico, es una impotencia ontológica, es un no poder ser, llegar a ser quien eres desde siempre. Tiene razón el pobre chico, lo que a mí me falta son cojones. Y tenía razón Antonio Machado: «Dicen que el hombre no es hombre / hasta que no oye su nombre de labios de una mujer / puede ser.» (LDI 103-104)

¹²⁵ According to Edelman: “Male homosexuality, in other words, must be conceptualized in terms of femaleness, not only because the governing heterosexual mythology interprets gay men as implicitly wanting to be like women, but because the heterosexual himself wants to believe that the gay man is in fact like a woman to the extent that his difference can somehow be discerned through or inscribed upon his body.” See Lee Edelman, “Tearooms and Sympathy,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David Halperin (New York, London: Routledge, 1993), p. 559.

Ortega's self-imprecating diatribe confirms his sense of insignificance, his incongruence in the face of compulsory sexual difference, and, moreover, his homosexuality as "ontological impotence." Ortega ascribes his invisibility to a transcendent ontological limitation that is his non-conformity to the epistemological certainties (and necessity) of heterosex. Ortega's self-deprecating discourse mimics (metonymically) heteronormative conformity in respect to "authentic masculinity." In quintessential sardonic Pombian discourse, the notion of ontological authenticity as opposite-sex copulation is subject to a satirical dialectical interrogation: is the "real" man, that is, the one in possession of "balls," only capable of achieving self-fulfilment of his manhood and sexuality through a woman? The narrative's recourse to sardonic commentary, along with the intertextual reference to Machado, who is certainly not known for his macho writing style, highlights the fragmentary duality of consciousness of Being for the degraded and insubstantial Ortega. Pombo's harsh, remorseless prose, in its depiction of the abject states of consciousness of protagonists such as Ortega, or Ferrer in *El parecido*, or Gonzalito in *El metro de platino iridiado*, conforms precisely to Dollimore's definition of the perverse dynamic¹²⁶ in its depiction of the metonymic shadowing discourse of insubstantiality.

Pombo's writing is replete with language that foreshadows phenomenological self-becoming as an act of intentional engagement in the events that most traumatize and destabilize us: in the case of Ortega, homosex and writing. Moreover, Pombo's writing of Ortega as a vaporous, insubstantial Being who, because of existential cowardice with regard to his homoerotic intentionality, chooses to live his sexual life ignominiously and invisibly, is trenchantly self-mocking and constitutes a scathing literary act that interrogates the significance of such a life. Ultimately, it is the dialectic of confrontation with the hegemonic rhetoric of homosexual abnegation that sets Pombo apart from some of his Spanish contemporaries in

¹²⁶ Dollimore states: "Perversion is a concept that takes us to the heart of a fierce dialectic between domination and deviation, law and desire, and transgression and conformity; a dialectic working through repression, demonization, displacement and struggle." See Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*, p. 103.

respect to a philosophically grounded narrative of the homosexual. I am referring to writers such as Terenci Moix, Vicente Molina Foix, Eduardo Mendicutti, Javier Marías, Ana María Moix, Esther Tusquets, et al., writers who are writing at the same time as Pombo and whose texts establish, to varying degrees, a homosexual consciousness by virtue of a counter-discourse that unveils homosexual existentialism and culture. Nevertheless, the texts of these writers do not significantly address, as Pombo does in this text, a hegemonist, heterologocentric discourse that is founded on the asymmetry of the subject/object discourse of homosexual abjection, what Bourdieu calls the “masculinist symbolic exchange.”¹²⁷ Pombo explores, at times disparagingly, the homographetic nature of metaphorization as emasculation that is associated with the repudiation of the homosexual self, and in this respect he is distinctive in Spanish letters.

Ortega begins to feel his first stirrings of fervent sexual excitement towards Quirós—oddly enough, Quirós’ humiliating treatment has awakened Ortega’s long dormant erotic intentionality: “Fue en ese instante, al tocarle, cuando Ortega por primera vez sintió la urgencia sexual de acariciarle, consolarle acariciándole que hasta ahora Ortega no había sentido. Hasta ahora, por raro que parezca, no lo había experimentado” (LDI 127). Ortega’s emergent lust is a catalyst for his transformation from asexual being to sexually aroused man and represents a radical shift in his libidinous consciousness; it also brings in its wake a renewed sense of existential significance:

Ortega se levantó un tanto bruscamente. La situación se había enfriado mucho, congelado y fijado, como si todos los reverberantes espejos que la animaban antes, ahora se hubieran reunido en una sola superficie rosa oscuro, traslúcida, que les reflejaba apenas, y que apenas dejaba ver ninguna luz. Ortega se sentía ahora confuso. Dio un par de pasos por la habitación sin saber qué decir. La verdad es que la única ocurrencia de la tarde había sido un pequeño sablazo. Y que el sablazo viniera acompañado, como una mueca oscura, indefinida y grotesca, de la

¹²⁷ Of course, Bourdieu’s work has little to do with homosocial types of engagements and refers almost exclusively to male/female exchanges, but it is telling to note that the same dynamics work themselves out in these asymmetrical pairings, where power, and the force of self-abnegation, conspire to cede to the masculine symbolic ultimate authority and power. See Pierre Bourdieu, “La dominación masculina revisitada,” *Archipiélago* 67 (2005), pp. 20-21.

frase «después de lo de ayer» sólo sirvió para aumentar su melancolía, en la oscuridad reinante Ortega encendió todas las luces de la sala. (LDI 148)

The metaphoric juxtaposition of light and darkness and coldness and heat reflect the interiority/exteriority dichotomy that characterizes the existential void of Ortega's irresolution. Diana Fuss calls this void "homosexual interior exclusion,"¹²⁸ a term that aptly describes Ortega's encounter with the immediacy of his sexual hunger (the light) vis-à-vis the suffocating sense of self-abnegation (the darkness) that has always characterized his homoerotic Being-in-the-world. Quirós, on the other hand, is titillated by the metaphoric transference—Ortega's new role as feminized sexual victim—which manifests itself in his insatiable lust for further gratification (sexual and psychological). The intensity of the scorching Madrid summer becomes the backdrop—a sort of inferno—for Ortega's "coming out," and his subsequent immolation. Pombo's narrative often betrays portentous moments through subtle allusion; Quirós' titillating flirtation with Ortega presages the ultimately tragic end that awaits Ortega: "Quirós abría y cerraba las piernas de Ortega lentamente. ¿Quién es el seductor? preguntó Quirós. Tú. De eso nada. Si quieres lo dejamos. Entonces, yo. Eso sí. Es una palabra desagradable ... Seducción. Una mariconada" (LDI 164). The faggotry (*mariconada*), as we saw earlier with Manolo and Kus-Kús in *El héroe de las mansardas de Mansard*, relates to a "seduction" that can only happen between men and women, or "fags," but not real men.

The depiction of Ortega's sexual initiation with Quirós mimics a number of very stylized homoerotic fantasies that are common to popular homosexual literature. The seduction of the intoxicated, oblivious heterosexual who in a state of inebriation submits to his subjacent homosexual tendencies (his polymorphous Freudian perversity) is reminiscent of the homoerotic

¹²⁸ According to Fuss: "The homo in relation to the hetero, much like the feminine in relation to the masculine, operates as an indispensable interior exclusion—an exclusion which is inside interiority makes the latter possible, a transgression of the border which is necessary to constitute the border as such." See Fuss, *Inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, p. 3.

fantasies of Tom of Finland—minus the leather.¹²⁹ Homoerotic fantasies of this type are the stock and trade of certain types of salacious gay iconography and are seemingly out of character for Pombo's heretofore subdued homotextual narrative. Nevertheless, the unambiguously sexual narration in *Los delitos insignificantes* is an indispensable element in the dialectic that Pombo uses to differentiate the ponderously metaphysical state of homosexual Being that characterizes the predominantly asexual characters in his early narrative—Pancho in *El hijo adoptivo*, Gonzalo Ferrer in *El parecido*, or any assortment of characters in *Relatos sobre la falta de sustancia*—from Ortega, who is on the verge of giving in to his erotic intentionality. Ortega's conceptualization of sex, and particularly sex with another man, is ultimately informed by notions of what Dollimore (citing Foucault, and as I stated in the previous chapter) calls "truth" and "nature" as it relates to the epistemological undergirding of the naturalness of heterosexuality in Western literature.¹³⁰ Ortega does not perceive his attraction to Quirós as natural, and for this reason he begins to sublimate his tenuous masculinity in submissive femininity. From Quirós' (and presumably Ortega's) perspective, the *mariconada* of their homosocialism conforms to a perversion of heterosex, with the inversion of roles conforming to the homographetic concepts of degradation and feminization of the passive, objectified victim (in this case Ortega):

Ortega seguía de rodillas. Abrazado ahora a las piernas de Quirós. Quirós se puso en pie. Descalzo. Ortega le besaba los pies. Se agarraba a los tobillos, apretándolos. Había una luz difusa, verde o rosa. Una cerrazón fehaciente. Poderdante. ¿Qué hora sería? Quirós dejó caer los pantalones. No llevaba calzoncillos. Se sentía joven. Se acordaba de Cristina y de su madre, allá al otro lado del mundo, torpes y miserables. Ortega le había soltado los tobillos y le sujetaba ahora, de nuevo, las caderas. La cara de Ortega quedaba a la altura del pene de Quirós. Chúpamela si quieres, dijo Quirós. Y él mismo le metió la verga en la boca, casi ahogándole. Quirós pensó: «Tiene gracia» (LDI 166)

¹²⁹ Tom of Finland, born Touko Laaksanen in 1920 in Finland, was the author of highly stylized, quasi pornographic images of heavily muscled (generally leather clad) men engaging in various forms of erotica. Eventually Tom of Finland became the de facto standard for this type of art and is memorialized in numerous anthologies of erotic gay art.

¹³⁰ See Dollimore, "Different Desires: Subjectivity and Transgression in Wilde and Gide," p. 309.

Pombo's graphic homoerotic prose represents a significant shift in his narrative style, and in modern Spanish prose in general in the homotextual novel. To be sure, depiction of graphic sex is not at all uncommon in Spanish narrative, but this scene undoubtedly qualifies as unusual for a mainstream novel for its portrayal of graphic fellatio between men. Pombo endured some contumely—and in some cases complete neglect—from the mainstream critics for his brazen treatment of same-sex eroticism, however blithely they might have tried to dissimulate their discomfort. An older man sucking a younger man's penis would generally be considered taboo in any form of high literature, and certainly it was taboo in Spanish literature of this period. One has to go back to the stylistically salacious literature of the Avant Garde, in the texts of Antonin Artaud, Henry Miller, Jean Cocteau, Jean Genet, and to a lesser extent Juan Goytisolo, in the contemporary period, to find texts of similar expression. Mainstream Spanish critics of this novel—even the most liberal and sympathetic of them, including Masoliver, Mainer, Herrán, et al.—avoid any reference to the overtly physical homoeroticism of the final climactic scenes. Those literary critics who were discomfited by the scatological references and sodomitic imagery so distinctive of Goytisolo's lurid novels, were nonetheless blasé towards these images in the end for their stylistic subversiveness.¹³¹ Nevertheless, the representation of male-to-male fellatio would have been unpalatable in the extreme.¹³² The general discomfiture exhibited by critics towards *Los delitos insignificantes* stems perforce not so much from prudishness about homosex, but rather from the act itself which is considered so beyond the pale, so imbued with visceral psychosexual dread as to disrupt the very premise of the logocentric imperative of heteronormativity. This narrative style, which, as it turns out, Pombo would not return to until his

¹³¹ Goytisolo's writing seems to have had less to do with homoerotic textuality than with a desire to "épater les bourgeois." The sodomitic, homosexual allusions in *La reivindicación del conde Julián* and *Juan sin tierra*, while quite graphic in terms of the language used to describe the metaphoric imagery of sexuality, are singularly devoid of erotic significance.

¹³² It is not until the emergence of the later bawdy homotextual works of Terenci Moix *Garras de astracán* (1991), to which I alluded earlier, and the works of Eduardo Mendicutti *Los novios búlgaros* (1993), *El palomo cojo* (1991), etc., that we begin to see similar depictions in highbrow literature of the later twentieth century.

graphic homotextual novel *Contra natura*, typifies the increasingly transgressive nature of his writing, particularly of his writing of sex as a phenomenologically intentional experience.

From a purely philosophical perspective, both Ortega and Quirós are engaging in intentionality inherent in any sexual act; an intentionality that Merleau-Ponty describes as being fundamental to authentic human existence, although, evident in this instance, an act that does not involve a reciprocally intersubjective experience.¹³³ Ultimately, it is the objectification of Ortega by the subliminal need of Quirós to degrade that emerges as the crux of their engagement. Nevertheless, in representing (unflinchingly) homosex as a protagonistic argument, Pombo undertakes to “reterritorialize” the disruptive and disquieting nature of homotextual writing by exposing the different territorialities—to borrow and manipulate somewhat Deleuze’s phrase—of the different hierarchies of status that issue from the asymmetrical power and sexual positions of the abject homosexual Ortega and his tormentor Quirós.¹³⁴ After Pombo, the depiction of homosex in highbrow Spanish literature would become significantly more mundane, if not significantly less risky.

The erotic physicality of the fellatio scene is the climactic build-up towards Ortega’s awakening as an intentional, sexual Being, with all that this entails. The experience of sex itself represents Ortega’s deflowering, as it were, his psychic release from a masked self-abnegation. Indeed, the experience of being almost throttled by Quirós’ penis, forces him to confront the visceral reality of homosexual praxis. This scene juxtaposes as well the metonymic slippage from compulsory heterosexuality, as evinced by Quirós’ indignant repudiation of his

¹³³ According to Merleau-Ponty, sexuality is an integral and foundational part of human identity, human thoughts, and the subjects’ relation to their world and their interactions with Others and themselves. Merleau-Ponty emphasizes and develops the idea of sex as a dialectical interaction between the subject and his or her experiential realm. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Humanities Press, 1962), p. 78.

¹³⁴ Deleuze refers to the necessary preliminary step of “deterritorialization,” or the scrambling of all codes which are per force undertaken in the deconstruction of a metaphysics that has as its basis (heteronormative) hierarchy and dialectical opposition (*différance*). The process of reterritorialization involves the redefinition of a space wherein the possibility of a transgressive inscription of homotextuality can take place. See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Capitalisme et schizophrénie 1: L’Anti-Oedipe* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1972).

psychological servitude to Cristina (and his mother). Following Bourdieu's schematic of a masculine unmooring from the feminine womb, Quirós has broken free of his "quasi symbiosis" with his mother and Cristina to reassert his ascendant masculine sexuality; and this he has accomplished via the "remasculinization" that his tryst with Ortega has afforded. Quirós revels in his new power as a seducer of men, and this he does through barren attempts at symbolic domination, which are inherent in the male social order.

Domination/Subjugation in Homosocialism

Pombo juxtaposes compulsory heterosexuality (heterorelationality) and emergent homosexual consciousness as a means of deciphering the sexual tension associated with Quirós' exploration of his homoerotic side and Ortega's newfound homoerotic expression. There is in this story of domination and subjugation, and awakening homoerotic consciousness (on the part of both protagonists), a fundamental dialectic within the narrative concerning the nature of abasement and power that pushes the protagonists in diametrical directions with respect to their existential situatedness: Quirós moves ever more stealthily towards dominance, and Ortega becomes increasingly passive. This situation plays out in paradigms of executioner/victim, or what Lynne Overesch-Maister (among others) have called the *víctima/verdugo* complex in the Pombian narrative structure. According to Overesch-Maister, this situation arises in instances where the subject, afraid of being hurt by others, ends up hurting himself and Others by turning the conflict inward—a classical form of punishment of sin.¹³⁵ In *Los delitos insignificantes*, it is clear that both protagonists, Quirós and Ortega, suffer from an extreme case of wounded *amour propre*. Both are equally degraded and, from the perspective of moral and ethical behaviour, behave insubstantially: Ortega towards himself, and Quirós towards the subjective Other. In the end, they choose to go down the path of this degraded relationship; Ortega knows that he is being

¹³⁵ See Overesch-Maister, "Echoes of Alienation in the Novels of Álvaro Pombo," pp. 61-62.

exploited by Quirós, and yet he goes along willingly, and he ultimately finds no redemption from the self-abasement that his sexual “revelation” yields. As for Quirós, despite his exalted status as heterosexual icon, he derives existential sustenance from his exploitation and domination of the increasingly submissive and weak Ortega. In the end, Quirós takes refuge from his world of masculine privilege by flouting the boundaries of the hetero/homo dimorphism: “Quirós se acarició los genitales ahora y se acordó de Ortega. Algo profundamente satisfactorio había tenido lugar aquella tarde en Ríos Rosas. Ortega de rodillas, implorante, admirándole” (LDI 178). Quirós is the instigator of the perversion in this manifestation of sexual dissidence; obviously he himself is using perversion to subvert the heteronormative paradigm of misplaced masculine prerogative and dominance (that has resulted in his subservience) via the subjugation of another man.

It is in the aftermath of the tryst, and in the curious shifting of roles between the two men, that Pombo juxtaposes the diffidence of homoerotic intentionality with the domain of heteronormative prerogative. However, Quirós’ sense of dominance is circumscribed by his sense of “heterosexual melancholy”—Judith Butler’s term—owing to his inability to reclaim his aggrieved heterosexual masculinity, even through the emasculated Ortega.¹³⁶ The resolutely heterosexual Quirós has ironically become the galvanizing force behind Ortega’s homopraxis. Quirós is inebriated with the power of his seduction of the older man, which in some measure alleviates his own stinging humiliation, but he is also, by virtue of his status as sexual dominator—and penetrator—still the initiator of his own radically discontinuous heterosexuality. Quirós perceives the act of homosex as a transgressive tryst; however, he remains untainted by

¹³⁶ Judith Butler uses this phrase to describe liminal and transgressive wanderings “on the wild side,” as it were, usually by heterosexuals who compensate for their homophobia by enacting something that resembles a homosexual moment. According to Butler: “Melancholia in Freud’s sense is the effect of an ungrieved loss — a sustaining of the lost object/other as a psychic figure with the consequence of heightened identification with that other, self-beratement, and the acting out of unresolved anger and love.” See Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”*, p. 234.

the experience owing to his masculine ascendancy in the seduction of an effeminized homosexual. Following Tomás Almaguer, Quirós has no stigmatizing homographetic markings in this relationship, for he is the figurative, heterosexualized “top.”¹³⁷ Quirós’ behaviour reflects also his metonymic displacement from the source of his oppression—his precariously faltering, presumptive heterosexual male dominance in relation to women—to the sublimation of his latent homosexual inclinations:

Todo había cambiado. Para Quirós, sin embargo, la situación se había vuelto fascinante. Mucho más que nunca. Pensándolo bien, la violencia de sus propias reacciones de la pasada noche había sido sorprendente. Asustar a Ortega, manipularle, le había excitado sexualmente. Y esto era una novedad. La gran novedad de la situación era el terror que había conseguido infundir en Ortega. Se sentía rejuvenecido. En condiciones de enfrentarse ahora de igual a igual con Cristina, con su madre. (LDI 192)

The conflation of existential malaise and intense physical homoeroticism completes the tableau that Pombo has been constructing in this tale of tormented homosexual subjectivity. The initial innocent encounter in the café eventually leads to this inauspicious conclusion, and both lives are ineluctably changed; tragically, as it turns out, in the case of Ortega:

Para Ortega, porque había vuelto a la superficie de su cuerpo una concupiscencia que, si bien nunca le había abandonado (y que siempre, en su fuero interno, había considerado lícita), siempre había logrado subordinar a su voluntad de guardar las apariencias, su preeminente deseo de parecerse a la inmensa mayoría, vivir en paz su vida gris de bancario, su fracasada existencia literaria ... Tras tantos años de vivir apagado, no se sentía Ortega dueño ahora de la intensidad de sus afectos, que gesticulaban alborotados y como en las afueras de su propio ser, como trajes de una moda excesiva. Convertir a Quirós en su amante y vivir con él —aunque fuera en secreto— le resultaba a Ortega tan fantástico, tan peligroso y tan confuso como alterar repentinamente todo su vestuario o verse obligado a hablar en público o salir en la televisión. (LDI 191)

¹³⁷ Tomás Almaguer states the following: “Although stigma accompanies homosexual practices in Latin culture, it does not apply equally to both partners. It is primarily the anal-passive individual (the *cochón* or *pasivo*) who is stigmatized for playing the subservient feminine role. His partner (the *activo* or *machista*) typically is not stigmatized at all, and, moreover, no clear category exists in the popular language to classify him.” This is a topic I take up extensively as well in chapter V in my discussion of *Contra natura*. See Tomás Almaguer, “Chicano Men: A Cartography of Homosexual Identity and Behavior,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 257.

The metaphorization of Ortega's "unveiling"—as the narrator describes it: "Convertir a Quirós en su amante y vivir con él —aunque fuera en secreto— le resultaba a Ortega tan fantástico, tan peligroso y tan confuso como alterar repentinamente todo su vestuario o verse obligado a hablar en público o salir en la televisión"—is the crux of his existential inherence in the world. Ortega's intentional homosexual experience has forced him to confront the ineluctability of his homosexual subjectivity, to wit, his transformation from ontological homosexual to intentional homosexual. This transformation reflects the mutation from a state of homosexual interiority, in which Ortega experiences his homosexuality metaphysically (as a state of abstract consciousness), to a state of homosexual phenomenology, in which Ortega experiences his homosexuality as an engagement with his sentient, conscious, and actantial self.

Nevertheless, the sense of fear and dread of this intentional erotic engagement never leaves him, and Ortega constantly questions the existential thrownness of his newfound concupiscence, and more stringently his entanglement with Quirós, which becomes like a noose around his neck. Ortega contemplates flight as the only solution to his newfound existential "dilemma":

Esta idea le reanimó. Le hizo sentirse menos humillado y menos confuso. Había algo limpio en aquella idea. Al fin y al cabo, desprendiéndose de todo, quedándose sólo con su sueldo, como de joven, podría empezar otra vez ... Librarse de Quirós. Librarse de sí mismo. Todo eso aparecía junto, como un proyecto posible, una posibilidad recién descubierta ... «Llevo así muchos años. Entregado a las emociones y a las imágenes. No soy responsable de mí mismo.» Y la emoción dominante ahora era la de que recuperando a su hermana y a Hernández, estaría salvado. Y, al pensar esto, otra nueva poderosa emoción se abatió sobre él como una gran ola: la cobardía que aquel gesto, aparentemente salvífico, implicaba. No había nada noble o digno en aquel repentino acordarse de dos criaturas que le habían necesitado que todavía le necesitaban. Todo se reducía a tratar de servirse de ellas para escapar de Quirós. (LDI 194)

Ortega's relationship to Quirós is now one of servitude in the master/slave paradigm of objectification.¹³⁸ Ortega is overwhelmed at the thought of his inherence in his homosexual praxis, and his position of psychological dependency on and physical submission to the rapacious Quirós grows ever more desperate. Quirós, for his part, begins to demand money and sexual gratification from the increasingly terrified Ortega. Ortega, meanwhile, becomes consumed with foreboding and dread at the thought of committing himself to the exigencies of a relationship with another, no less the increasingly overweening Quirós:

Y luego había la terrible presencia de aquellas amenazas que Quirós inequívocamente había formulado y que ningún posterior pedir disculpas podía hacer olvidar. Habían quedado en verse de nuevo aquella tarde. Y Ortega, a medida que transcurría lentísimamente la mañana laboral, iba sintiendo cada vez con más y más urgencia la necesidad de apartar a Quirós para siempre de su vida. (LDI 192).

In the culminating scene, as Ortega attempts to bribe his way out of the relationship, and Quirós angrily squelches all attempts at flight and evasion, we are privy to Ortega's conclusive desubjectification. He is brutally raped by Quirós in a final act of possession and subjugation. For Quirós the decisive subjugation of Ortega represents a fulfilment of his unquenched desire for substantiality, as retribution for his subservience to women who have humiliated and subjugated him:

Estuvieron así quizá dos o tres minutos. «Ten piedad de mí, ten piedad de mí,» decía Ortega una y otra vez. Quirós jadeaba. Él mismo estaba sorprendido de la intensidad de sus deseos. «Quiero darte por el culo. Es lo único que quiero. Es lo único.» Y mientras decía esto, jadeante, iba arrancando la ropa de Ortega. Rompió el cinturón por la hebilla. Quirós sentía el peso muerto de Ortega entre sus brazos como un triunfo. Y era una novedad. Una sensación que no se parecía a ninguna otra y al ritmo de la cual todo su cuerpo se acoplaba hambriento, ferviente—Ponte de rodillas. Baja la espalda, bájala. No te va a doler ... Ortega aulló, mordiendo las manos hasta hacerse sangre. Quirós cabalgaba sobre el culo de Ortega como un crío. Una escena reproducida casi exactamente así en cualquier colección de fotos pornográficas. No tiene ya la menor gracia. Quirós por fin se ha corrido ... (LDI 198)

¹³⁸ I discuss this paradigm more extensively in chapter V in conjunction with Hegel's notion of the master/slave objectification (or desubjectification) complex.

The climactic scene is replete with erotogenicity and depicts homopraxis—as in Ortega’s deflowering—as fulfilment of masculine hegemony.¹³⁹ The brutality and physical lustiness of the scene is at once graphically homoerotic and reminiscent of a sadomasochistic subgenre of gay pornographic literature. It is the mastery of Ortega that gives ultimate substance to Quirós, not merely as compensation for his (Quirós’) ritual emasculation, but also as a form of sublimation of the homosexual, albeit heterorelational, “intercourse” that has dominated the relationship between these two men. In subverting Ortega, as a homosexual conquest, Quirós puts to rest the demons of his own inadequacy and Quirós senses a newfound sense of empowerment in his dealings with Cristina and his mother, obtained no less at the cost of Ortega’s subjective annihilation:

En condiciones de enfrentarse ahora de igual a igual con Cristina, con su madre. Y de la misma manera que la sensación de frustración de impotencia se le había representado días antes como un viscoso objeto exterior que podía sostener con ambas manos, ahora tenía la sensación de que su recién descubierta capacidad de estimularse sexualmente mediante un acto (impensado, espontáneo) de brutalidad, o crueldad también era exterior a sí mismo. (LDI 192)

The rape/seduction scene underscores the objectification of Ortega as the submissive, reified Other whose function is the appeasement of Quirós’ voracious pursuit of power characterized by his ruthless, sexually aggressive behaviour. Ortega remains at best a marginalized, insubstantial non-entity—he is effectively the “bottom” in the hierarchical power paradigm of transgressive heterorelationality, and Quirós, as the ultimate symbol of heteronormative ascendancy, is the “top.” The depiction of Ortega’s rape and his apparent dread at committing himself to a physical, sexual relationship with Quirós—he is raped for refusing Quirós’ advances—was the cause of much consternation and hand-wringing on the part of gay

¹³⁹ I use the word “erotogenicity” in the Freudian sense, as articulated by Judith Butler, to describe the use of the phallus as an instrument of domination and subjugation. According to Butler: “displacement of the phallus results in a removal of the hegemonic symbolic of (heterosexist) sexual difference and the critical release of alternative imaginary schemas for constituting sites of erotogenic pleasure.” See Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”*, p. 91.

critics, such as Aliaga/Cortés, whose reaction I mentioned earlier, who were appalled at the narrative's portrayal of Ortega as a "sexophobic," self-loathing homosexual. Ortega's portrayal is decidedly pathetic, and he is unquestioningly sexophobic and "weak," but the narrative clearly nudges the reader to conclude that these are the precipitating reasons for Ortega's demise. Moreover, this moralism conveys what Pombo has intended: Ortega's fall from grace is entirely self-induced, and it is because he has failed to recognize his life as authentically valid and significant and because he chooses to remain in his wretched interiority, entirely subsumed in the cruel, desubjectifying world of the ignoble Quirós, that he expires.

In addition to the number of issues that greatly troubled Pombo's gay critics generally (and in particular concerning this text), the jarring ending of *Los delitos insignificantes*, with the suicide of Ortega, particularly troubled them. Was Ortega's suicide motivated by his self-loathing as a homosexual? Was it motivated by his fear of sex? Is suicide, or death, the ineluctable outcome for a homosexual whose existential dissonance within the heteronormative realm is irreconcilable? The questions are apropos, particularly given the frequently grisly fates of the homosexual protagonists in Pombo's writing. Not all the deaths or mishaps are related to the subject's homosexuality—because of homophobia or some extraneous occurrence that impinges on his homosexuality—but the preponderance towards death for his homosexual subjects suggests that in Pombo's homotextual narrative, homosexuality—or more accurately the subject's extreme trepidation before it—is frequently associated with morbidity. For Alfredo Martínez, this morbidity derives not only from the irrationality and incoherence of abjection, but also from natural causality. By Martínez's reckoning, homosexuality in Pombo's narrative is not unavoidably linked with morbidity; the devastation that is associated with homosexuality is almost always the direct consequence of some extraneously imposed societal or cultural

opprobrium, or a self-destructive nihilism.¹⁴⁰ The case of Ortega's death has to be seen in the context of his self-inflicted oppression:

Se cerró la puerta de un portazo. La puerta de la calle. No podía pensar nada. Logró pensar por fin: «Esto es lo que buscaba, ¿no es esto? Un final feliz.» Salió a la terracilla y miró al sol. Un sol todavía fuerte. Todavía con tiempo por delante. Las losetas de baldosín rojo estaban cálidas como la piel de un animal apacible. Se encaramó a caballo sobre la barandilla, como de niño. Se abalanzó al vacío, ladeado como un saco de noventa kilos de carne. Ilegible es el sol desvinculador del mundo. (LDI 199)

Ortega becomes, in the end, a lump of human meat weighing ninety kilos, devoid of the weightiness and significance that any real engagement with life would entail. Ironically, Ortega takes his life during daylight in the refulgence of the sun, which in the Pombian metaphorical taxonomy is normally a good time, but in this instance daytime merely provides a convenient temporal space for Ortega to find an agreeable ending, “un final feliz,” to his unbearable lightness of Being.

Conclusion

Los delitos insignificantes, like the majority of the earlier Pombian texts, is framed in a heterorelational model. Ortega's mode of relating to his homoerotic consciousness of Being is within the context of a heteronormative culture and society that perceives his “condition” to be perversely unnatural. Heterorelationality, as discussed in the opening chapter, describes a framework wherein the homosexual is completely subsumed by and acts entirely in accordance with his homoerotic intentionality as a spurious approximation of heterosexual behaviour. The homosexual thereby sublimates his desire and projects it through an alien (normative) identity that usurps his voice and delegitimizes his Being. In the end, Ortega perceives his own situation (experientially) as discordant and inauthentic, as a result, he is seemingly incapable of breaking out of his suffocating interiority.

¹⁴⁰ See Martínez, *Escrituras torcidas: ensayos de crítica "queer"*, p. 166.

Pombo's conceptualization of phenomenological homosexual existence is at the heart of this study, and it figures extensively in *Los delitos insignificantes*. Pombo addresses the problematization of homosexuality as an experiential phenomenon, its moral and ethical significance as radical alterity, and, above all, its inharmonious contextualization within heteronormativity and the greater context of humanity. I demonstrate that Pombo's transgressive inscription is anything but an apologia for homosexual exceptionalism; it is, rather, because of the oppressiveness of compulsory heterosexuality, as Jonathan Dollimore contends, that homosexuality remains in an inescapable state of existential dissonance.¹⁴¹ It is with this reality that Ortega wrenchingly and fatally grapples.

Álvaro Pombo, the writer, employs writing as a medium for exploring the nature of intersubjective humanity, in particular the phenomenon of homosexual interiority. Pombo's writing reflects the type of affliction he himself was subjected to as a "self-aware" homosexual in the Spain of Franco's era, where he experienced firsthand the crushing circumstances of homosexual "invisibility."¹⁴² Pombo turns literature itself into narrative substance to reveal tormented consciousnesses, not only of Ortega in *Los delitos insignificantes* for his unrelenting sense of guilt and self-loathing, but also of many of his homosexual protagonists, who through their self-abjection remain alienated from a forceful and significant engagement with life. In Pombo's case (as a homosexual in Francoist Spain) authenticity and reality were always opposed to aesthetic unreality (unhappiness) and superficiality. Pombo reports that he experienced homoerotic intentionality as a difficult and agonizing affair, and he seeks to revitalize and "reterritorialize" this experience through his writing. Pombo lived his childhood in a National-

¹⁴¹ Jonathan Dollimore describes the discordance of an alienating homosexual experience in the context of heteronormativity as a fundamental aspect of a disembodied Being-in-the-world; a split personality complex, as it were. See Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*, p. 103.

¹⁴² See the epilogue to *Contra natura* (2005). This is but one instance; there are a number of interviews where Pombo speaks of the harsh and oppressive conditions of living underground in the most repressive Franco years. See also Pombo's interview with Villena, "Entrevista con Álvaro Pombo. Tan precioso licor."

Catholic Spain where the predominant theology conceived of homosexuality as an indelible transgression against nature and God, but Pombo has always adamantly maintained (and this is strongly visible in his writing) that we construct our own nature, in spite of the historical situatedness of our Being. Pombo states the following in this regard in the epilogue to *Contra natura*:

El hombre es una existencia abierta que se da a sí mismo libremente una configuración a lo largo de la vida. La naturaleza única que yo estaba dispuesto a aceptar era aquella construida por cada uno de nosotros. Esta imagen de una existencia creadora, abierta al futuro, en trance de darse a sí misma su propia configuración esencial, me parecía también una fecunda ocurrencia cristiana que ha encontrado, supongo, un eco en estas páginas. (CN 559)

Pombo's protagonists, and Ortega is certainly an apt example, represent Pombo's attempts to construe a spectrum of reality through narration. The resemblance (real or imagined) to the actual experiential realm constitutes the key of his text, and the narrative, by its force of creativity and moral suasion, transforms itself into a transcendent ethics or aesthetics. Ortega's fate, then—according to Pombo's philosophical and moral scheme—is precisely the life predicament that should be expunged.

What I have shown in this chapter is that Pombo very consciously and deliberately writes the experience of homosexual abjection and humiliation as homotextual narration. Pombo allows us to look into the heart of this despair. The conclusions that we draw from this image are that it is a desperate and forlorn existence that ultimately depletes the life of its subject. The picture that Pombo paints is decidedly ugly, and Ortega's character inspires pity and reprobation more than anything, but it is precisely the *writing* of his degradation that opens our eyes to the oppressiveness of the heterologocentric discursive epistemology that reduces him to invisibility and insignificance. Pombo is unique in his approach to literature about homosexuals in that his writing has a philosophical underpinning that warns us about our innate ability to subvert our own humanity by failing to understand and react vigorously and exuberantly to our life force—

something he views as a moral and ethical responsibility. In the end, Pombo's portrayal of Ortega in *Los delitos insignificantes* did nothing to enhance his position among his gay critics, and if anything, it further promoted his reputation as a writer of homophobic, homotextual fiction. But I have shown that these critics have fundamentally failed to understand the deeper philosophical purpose of Pombo's homotextual writing, which has a strong moral and ethical component. If one peels back the layers of the astringent prose that Pombo uses to describe this abjection, one discovers the starting point for a different path to authentic Being.

Chapter IV

An Exploration of Interiority, The Love of Nephews, and Homophobia in *El metro de platino iridiado*

Having explored Pombo's homotextual narrative strategies in his early texts (chapter II) and homosexual abjection as a major source of existential dissonance in *Los delitos insignificantes* (chapter III), in this chapter I delve further into Pombo's philosophical exploration of existential dissonance through an analysis of *El metro de platino iridiado*. My analysis in this chapter looks more closely at existential dissonance, however this time, I consider it from the perspective of a protagonist who becomes so deeply enmeshed in his own interiority that he loses touch with his humanity and his own "reality." The protagonist becomes disconnected from any intersubjective engagement with Others to the extent that he descends into a sociopathic malevolence that destroys his own life and ultimately wreaks havoc on everyone in his experiential realm. Moreover, as a result of the protagonist's attempt to "escape" from himself, he becomes enmeshed in the life of his nephew, on whom he becomes so existentially (and amorously) fixated that he is ultimately unable to lead his own life. However, the protagonist's descent into solipsism and nihilistic disregard for those around him does not occur in a vacuum; it is inextricably connected in no small measure to the traumatizing effects of the extreme homophobia that he experienced in his youth. Homophobia, then, becomes a primary contributing factor to his sense of existential alienation and subsequent reclusion.

According to Pombo, *El metro de platino iridiado* (1991) belongs to a new phase of writing, following on the heels of the *ciclo de falta de sustancia*, which deals primarily with topics of magnanimity, generosity, and virtue—in short, the good—as well as the ability of the

subject to deal with the most excruciating and agonizing of circumstances in life in order to achieve authenticity in Being.¹⁴³ In *El metro de platino iridiado*, Pombo seeks to come to terms with the historical situatedness of Being, where the subject is thrust into situations of extreme pain, suffering, hatred, or malevolence, and which he must, at all costs, confront in order to conform to the indispensable need to remain an ethical Being. In this chapter, I look at the three essential aspects of *El metro de platino iridiado* that relate to phenomenological homosexuality, namely: (1) homosexual existential dissonance, similar in many respects to what I have discussed before, but dealing more trenchantly with the subject's inability to move beyond his atomistic, egocentric self; (2) avuncular love as expressed through Gonzalito's amorous and "ontological" obsession with his nephew Pelé, whose very existence represents a form of Being that the nihilistic and solipsistic Gonzalito is unable to achieve for himself, except through narcissistic love; and (3) homophobia as a form of heterologocentric oppression that desubjectifies the homosexual and itself engenders solipsism and self-destructive, malevolent behaviour.

In *El metro de platino iridiado*, interiorized homosexuality is treated as a refuge into the self and a disengagement from the "significance" of life that is only ever attainable through interdialogical subjectivity. Pombo ratchets up the discursive intensivity with regard to his repudiation of a solipsistic hedonism that seeks fulfilment only through the self, and thus abdicates responsibility for the Other, in a universe of seeming moral relativism. Pombo's writing is unequivocal in its condemnation of the types of behaviours it considers inimical to authentic existence. The narrative of *El metro de platino iridiado* represents, above all, an exploration of what Charles Taylor describes as inwardly-directed, atomistic individualism, that

¹⁴³ According to Pombo: "Para mí comienza ahora un segundo ciclo, el de los valores positivos: el valor físico, la magnanimidad, la generosidad ... Se trata de examinar de frente el tema del bien. Y no entiendo aquí la sustancialidad en el sentido del «en sí» sartreano, sino en el sentido de que el bien es difusivo en sí, según la teoría escolástica de los trascendentales. Es también la idea de cómo se ve el bien o si es posible representarlo." See Pombo's interview with Gregorio Morales Villena (19).

is, a fleeing into an empirical consciousness that only knows the self and is unable to see the world as a confluence of interdependent and inalienable subjectivities.¹⁴⁴ *El metro de platino iridiado* fashions a coarse narrative weave of deception, malevolent solipsism, but also ultimately ethical altruism, that reflects the many facets of a complex historicity of individual existence where actions and words matter, and where the failure to consider consequences is quite often deadly.

The Narrative Structure of *El metro de platino iridiado*

El metro de platino iridiado is a story that takes place in two different epochs: the first coinciding with the dictatorship of Franco and the second with the transition to democracy when Spanish society was evolving at a breathtaking pace. The chief protagonist, Gonzalito, embarks on a journey of self-discovery to England where he takes leave of the claustrophobic family household, his tormented experiences with homosexuality, and his anguished associations with Spain. Later on, the forlorn protagonist Gonzalito returns to the home in which he grew up, and from which, in effect, he never left.

The primary setting of the story is in the vast, rambling family household in Madrid (La Moraleja), which, in the context of Gonzalito's existential morass, represents the emasculating, stifling atmosphere of his inconsequential past. The name of the household means "the moral," and stands as a none too subtle reminder of the didactic intent of the narrative. In La Moraleja, despite a long absence from the household and the years of wandering in London after the death of his father, Gonzalito never stops being the coddled, preternaturally beautiful child who never lived up to his promise; he remains, as his nickname suggests, the infantilized *Gonzalito*.

As outlined above, there are three distinct narrative threads in the story—homosexual existential dissonance (and within that realm, moral and ethical behaviour), avuncular love, and

¹⁴⁴ See Charles Taylor, *Malaise of Modernity* (Concord, Ontario: House of Anansi Press, Ltd., 1991), p. 69.

homophobia—that deal with different aspects of Gonzalito’s existential journey. In the first narrative stream, Gonzalito’s existence is characterized by a disturbing misanthropy and solipsism that remove him from all engagement with Others. Gonzalito’s perturbed existence is one of irreconcilable alienation, and his ultimate descent into dementia results from his aversion to his own Being-in-the-world, both physical and metaphysical. Gonzalito’s early life bears many similarities to that of other Pombian homosexual protagonists in the *ciclo sobre la falta de sustancia*, in that their journeys begin in the homophobia of National-Catholic, Francoist Spain, where feelings of homoeroticism (and self-discovery) induce an abiding sense of fear and self-loathing. Gonzalito begins to emerge as a complex, fraught creature who has caring interactions with his sister, to whom he is exceptionally close and who ultimately suspects his sexual inclinations, his nephew, and his brother-in-law, who initially exhibits some measure of forbearance towards Gonzalito, but ultimately ends up psychologically eviscerating him. In due course, Gonzalito reveals his homosexuality to a “flamboyant” homosexual character, Arturo Vélez, who exhibits a starkly contrasting ethical selflessness to Gonzalito’s misanthropy and becomes in the end one of this tragic story’s redemptive characters.

Gonzalito eventually escapes the stifling atmosphere of Spain and La Moraleja and goes to London, where he discovers a world unlike any he had experienced in terms of his burgeoning homosexual consciousness. This journey, however, has disastrous consequences for him when he returns to Spain and re-engages with his family. As Gonzalito becomes increasingly alienated from himself, and those who surround him, he develops an intense narcissistic obsession with his nephew Pelé, the son of his sister María. Gonzalito appears to be in love with the boy, and he ultimately kills him (accidentally or not is not certain) in a fit of jealous rage owing to the nephew’s growing attachment to Vélez. In the first narrative thread, Pombo meticulously describes the self-excoriation and other psychic traumas related to Gonzalito’s sense of

alienation. Gonzalito fits in no particular world (either heterosexual or homosexual); however, unlike Gonzalo Ortega in *Los delitos insignificantes*, Gonzalito's homosexual angst derives not so much from a sense of shame and self-effacing guilt as from a sense of solipsistic disengagement. Gonzalito's reclusion, we come to learn, is a direct result of his all-consuming misanthropy, not only towards humanity in general, but even more so, perhaps, towards his own physical and metaphysical existence.

The second narrative strain (dealing with Gonzalito's love for and "ontological convergence" with his nephew's Being) is perhaps the most interesting aspect of this story because it is where Pombo's narrative is most audacious and edgy. Gonzalito's deep-seated infatuation with his nephew is a singularly important discursive thread in the story because it deals with two recurring aspects of Pombo's homotextuality: the nature of incestuous love (between uncle and nephew) and the unattainability of love in general as an allegorical superstructure related to interiority, solipsism, and the existential dissonance of his homosexual protagonists. Gonzalito's love affair with his nephew goes to the heart of the rejection of his own nature (*physis*) and metaphysics and leads to his subsequent submersion into existential reclusion. As discussed in chapter II (relating to "Tío Eduardo" and *El parecido*), the quasi amorous, consanguine relationship between uncle and nephew gives rise to deep psychological and emotional repercussions, complicated by a matrilineal bond. The trauma of the relationship, especially for the uncle, who is invariably the victim of the unrequited nature of this affair, is related to feelings of love for someone who is "beyond his reach." The inaccessibility of this love relationship derives not only from the taboos associated with incestuous relationships but also, at a deeper level perhaps, from the uncle's inability to seek a relationship with someone who removes him from his solipsistic (narcissistic) circle.

The third major narrative thread (relating to homophobia) is the story of Gonzalito's brother-in-law, Martín, who is struggling to put to the page aspects of his own phenomenological ego. Martín does this by attempting to expunge himself through writing as a form of literary catharsis. Martín is the author of a novel that reflects in parallel what is going on in the story (a *mise-en-abyme* of sorts). He ends up deceiving María with her best friend, Virginia, a vacuous figure of aristocratic bearing who has taken refuge in La Moraleja after several unfruitful relationships, including a disastrous marriage to a randy Argentinean. The narrative depicts Martín as a pedantic, insecure intellectual, whose deep sense of failure both as a writer and as an academic (and consequent damage to his *amour-propre*) renders him incapable of loving and respecting his wife or affording any emotional and fatherly companionship to his son, who adores him. Martín's festering contempt for Gonzalito is one of the cornerstones in the narrative's exploration of homophobia as a determining factor in the immiseration of Gonzalito's life, and his subsequent regression into solipsism.

There is another tangential narrative stream (involving the pious portrayal of María) that interweaves with the other three, and that many critics have highlighted as most fundamental to the reading of this text. This thread involves the delineation of the story's redemptive characters: María, the virtuous, ethical and morally upright protagonist, who is unlike most other characters in Pombo's repertoire in that she seems untainted (in the moral sense) by any malevolent motives; the young, physically robust, and precocious Pelé, who is the diametrical opposite of Gonzalito; and finally, Arturo Vélez, Gonzalito's homosexual friend, who encourages Gonzalito to seek escape from the drudgery of his cloistered, solipsistic existence in La Moraleja by going to London on a voyage of sexual self-discovery. Vélez is in love with Gonzalito, but the love is entirely unreciprocated, and Gonzalito ultimately comes to see Vélez as a rival for the affections of his nephew—Gonzalito goes so far as to accuse Vélez, falsely, of sexually corrupting Pelé. As

the events in the story come to their dramatic conclusion, with the revelation of the betrayal of María and the death of Pelé, Vélez becomes the sole source of comfort for the aggrieved María, and they ultimately form a compassionate and loving friendship.

María is often singled out as the key protagonist of this text and the axis around which the narrative's moral underpinning turns. Juan Antonio Masoliver conceptualizes *El metro de platino iridiado* as a hagiographic essay on the life of María. From Masoliver's perspective, María's hagiography is the overriding theme of the text; her goodness (her asceticism and piety evocative of Mary, the mother of Jesus) and her unimpeachable saintliness serve to mitigate the misery that eventually engulfs the lives of the other protagonists:

La grandeza de María ... representada como "el valor oro, el metro de platino iridiado que medía todos los metros, las irregularidades de todas las demás identidades," impide que podamos hablar aquí de una novela sobre la homosexualidad, sobre el adulterio, sobre el amor, sobre la felicidad, sobre la conciencia, sobre la interioridad o sobre una clase social en decadencia, porque es cada una de ellas en armoniosa o conflictiva relación con las demás y vividas a través de la herida felicidad de María.¹⁴⁵

There is no question that María is the basis for the philosophical exploration of the good in this text. Nevertheless, while my reading of *El metro de platino iridiado* certainly considers the magnitude of María's virtue (as well as that of Vélez and Pelé), her "saintliness" is less critical to my interpretation of the homotextuality of the text per se, except insofar as it serves to underscore the depravity and treachery of the narrative's immoral characters. For this reason, I devote less attention to this aspect of the text.

The Interiority of Homosexual Being

El metro de platino iridiado is Pombo's most profound examination of the psychological and emotional condition of alienation and solipsism with regard to the subject's experiences with Others, and the subject's place in the world. The two key protagonists in this tableau of

¹⁴⁵ See Juan Antonio Masoliver, "La ironía de Álvaro Pombo," *Ínsula* 531 (1991), p. 27.

alienation and struggle (Gonzalito and Martín) have vastly different life-circumstances, and they are drawn into the maelstrom of their disaffection from humanity for different reasons. In this section I explore the extremely interiorized world of Gonzalito, starting with his existential disengagement and continuing into his slip into dementia. I conclude by looking at the consequences of his failings.

Gonzalito is unquestionably one of the more enigmatic and least sympathetic characters in Pombo's repertoire of insubstantial protagonists. Unlike many of the homosexual characters in Pombo's early stages of homotextual inscription, however pathetic, Gonzalito is an oddball. He is seemingly devoid of any sense of meaning in his life; he is not, in the Sartrean sense, involved in the existential struggle to define himself against the nothingness of his fragmentary and nihilistic existence.¹⁴⁶ Gonzalito has no apparent vocation and has no interest in inserting himself into the texture of life, or to get messy in his engagement with the Other. Gonzalito, like Pombo's other similarly troubled protagonists (namely, Gonzalo Ferrer in *El parecido*, Gonzalo Ortega in *Los delitos insignificantes*, and Pancho García in *El hijo adoptivo*), is consumed by his fear and trepidation in the face of his existential homosexuality. Nevertheless, the aforementioned characters (the two Gonzalos and Pancho) are writers deeply immersed in writing who know firsthand the self-torment, as well as the utter sense of hopelessness and failure that writers often experience in their artistic struggles. These protagonists also grapple mightily with a consciousness of themselves as beings consumed with erotic intentionality towards men, but they are incapable of expressing their desire, or of acting upon that desire in an authentic way. Each of them also has some type of relationship with a younger man who is

¹⁴⁶ According to Maurice Natanson, Sartre's philosophy is defined as "the constant struggle of *man's* attempt to define himself in a dialectical relationship with non-human being, the 'stuff' of nature. The outstanding characteristic of this dialectic is the dynamic, changing, and flux-like status of human consciousness, which nowhere can find permanence, surety, or absolutes, but must continually define its condition and nature through the choices it makes in life." See Maurice Natanson, *Literature, Philosophy and the Social Sciences: Essays in Existentialism and Philosophy* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968), p. 66.

ostensibly heterosexual, and thus anchored in “normality.” Gonzalito is also, to some extent, consumed with his existential condition as a homosexual and the “situation” of his homoerotic intentionality towards men. However, Gonzalito’s problem surfaces as a fundamental rejection of his nature (his *physis*) or corporeal self, the means by which he experiences phenomenologically an intentionality (whether it be sexual, emotional, or psychological) towards the Other. For Gonzalito, the body is a form of oppression: a cage for his mind from which he wishes to escape in order to avoid human engagement altogether.

From his early years Gonzalito is smitten with his aloof, haughty brother-in-law, Martín, who in no measure returns his affection. To the contrary, Martín begins to loathe Gonzalito to an astonishing degree. As the extent of Martín’s homophobia becomes more evident to him, Gonzalito internalizes Martín’s homophobia as a reflection of his own insignificance, and engages in a protracted struggle with Martín that dominates (subtextually) the rest of the novel. Gonzalito and Martín reflect and nurture each other’s most insidious and misanthropic postures; the subject-object binary of heteronormative privilege and homosexual diffidence is clearly in evidence here as Gonzalito constantly fends off Martín’s homophobic onslaughts. Martín is consumed with his literary exploits and a presumption that his writing (as fabulation) substitutes for authentic human intercourse; however, it is his failure to grasp the consequences of his (in)actions that leave him morally and ethically adrift, and, ultimately, inconsolably vanquished. Gonzalito is at times so obsessed with and consumed by his rage towards Martín that he is seemingly incapable of any interaction that does not involve trying to subvert his previously adored brother-in-law.

Gonzalito’s sense of estrangement begins to emerge in his late adolescent years, where he is depicted skulking at clandestine rendezvous points—the hidden alcoves for homosexual trysts—in Madrid’s parks. Gonzalito is a strange, incommunicative creature who roams the

seedier haunts of Madrid's public spaces under the constant influence of amphetamines and other psycho-stimulants. Gonzalito is a nocturnal vampiric waif (*una criatura noctívaga*) who has casual encounters, although not necessarily of a sexual nature,¹⁴⁷ with various men who wander the park in the early hours of the morning, and with whom Gonzalito feels scant connection. In fact, the mass of humanity that Gonzalito encounters in these nocturnal perambulations represents all that is hideous (*inguapo*, as he calls it). *Inguapo*, then, comes to stand, metaphorically, for all that is devoid of art or musical refinement and substantiality—the noble artist in Nietzsche's conception of the overman:¹⁴⁸ "Gonzalito había inventado esta expresión, «inguapo,» para designar a toda la inmensa masa de quienes no pudiendo ser llamados feos o imbéciles, no alcanzan, sin embargo la suma condición de ser músicos, es decir, guapos" (79). Gonzalito's lowly opinion of his fellow creatures is testament to his burgeoning misanthropy, in particular towards other homosexuals whom he finds surreptitious and exceedingly hungry in their nocturnal jaunts. Gonzalito fashions and inhabits his own solipsistic world, abetted by a constant state of drug-induced euphoria and disillusionment that are the result of the exaggerated *amour propre* that props up his unreal existence; that is, his *existencia inverosímil*:

A Gonzalito le gustaba imaginarse que sus pensamientos constituían un sistema que, algún día, tal vez no muy lejano, expresaría por escrito ... Y consistiría en una descripción cuidadosa y en un análisis de las paradojas de la música ... todo este pasearse por la noche por Madrid imaginándose que componía un sistema filosófico más original y mucho más completo que todos los sistemas filosóficos anteriores ... Gonzalo se dijo a sí mismo, en aquel momento, que tomando tanta anfetamina no engañaba a nadie: todo lo que hacía era recurrir a la única posible clase de embriaguez inteligente: sólo tomando simpatina tenía sentido hablar o vivir con *sobria ebrietas*. (MPI 79-80)

¹⁴⁷ Throughout *El metro de platino iridiado* Gonzalito is depicted as an asexual individual who eschews contact with most other Beings. The only indication we have that he has had a sexual past emerges in the narrative flashbacks of his troubled legacy of self-discovery in London.

¹⁴⁸ According to Walter Kaufmann, Nietzsche posits that there are three kinds of Being who achieve what is most noble and perfect in human striving for natural harmony, and who as a result are immeasurably separate from ordinary man: the artist, the saint, and the philosopher. The allusions to Nietzsche are apt in this case as the narrative seems to be setting Gonzalito up as a consummate nihilist by virtue of his repudiation of humanity. See Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, pp. 175-176.

Gonzalito's fascination with himself along with his ability to create the conditions of his own subjective universe reflect the "sober drunkenness" that is the basis of his ecstatic hubris. Gonzalito's narcissism—bound up in the religious imagery of revelation and communion with God, whence derives the notion of *sobria ebrietas* (taken from Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*)—creates the conditions for his increasing estrangement from life, and his cynicism towards Others. Gonzalito's self-aggrandizing delusion is not remarkably different from the idle vanity that characterizes Martín, who ultimately shows signs of similar egocentrism and misanthropy in his dealing with Others. But Martín wields considerably more power, following the death of Gonzalito's father, as patriarch in the household. Although the behaviours of Gonzalito and Martín conform to the prototypical narcissistic, malevolent behaviour of protagonists, for example César Quirós in *Los delitos insignificantes*, in Pombo's earlier writings, the utter misanthropy—the uncontrolled, unsublimated Dionysian passion that characterizes Nietzsche's will to power—of Gonzalito and Martín towards Others foreshadows the manifestly nefarious protagonists who come to dominate Pombo's later writing.¹⁴⁹

At the behest of Vélez, who has befriended him and become a confidant of sorts, Gonzalito eventually moves to London in order to escape the stifling environment of La Moraleja, where he attempts to come to grips with the inexorable homoerotic intentionality that dominates his feelings towards men, in particular, but also that informs his very engagement with his sexual and physical self. At first, Gonzalito feels a visceral repugnance towards Vélez: to begin with, Vélez has fallen in love with Gonzalito; and secondly, Vélez is not "musical" and he is an overtly effete man of the type that Pombo frequently uses as a foil to the self-denigrating

¹⁴⁹ There are a number of works that appeared after *El metro de platino iridiado* where the principal protagonists can be characterized by their extreme misanthropy, solipsism, and callousness towards their fellow Beings: The Duque de Aquitania in *La cuadratura del círculo* (1999), Leopoldo de la Cuesta in *El cielo raso* (2001), Javier Salazar and Juanjo Garnacho in *Contra natura* (2005) and Juan Campos in *La fortuna de Matilda Turpin* (2006)—all male characters, as is generally the case in Pombo's work, and with no apparent redeeming social qualities. These characters always have a counterpart, as is the case in this text as well, who redeem their villainy in one way or another.

tendencies of his homosexual protagonists. Although Vélez is clearly a magnanimous individual who ultimately displays tremendous affection for and altruism towards Gonzalito—and of course later on, towards María and Pelé—Gonzalito sees in him only the “insubstantial” affectation, so common among “queers” of his generation: “Era agradable estar siendo mirado y como relamido por los amanerados ojos de aquel Vélez que era, a todas luces, de su clase, sólo que mariquita” (150). In the end, Vélez represents all that Gonzalito finds reprehensible (and terrifying)—by virtue of his homographetic markings (to wit, his affected mannerisms), his very visibility—in the homosexual, which Gonzalito seeks to escape at all costs.

Over the course of time, Gonzalito settles into his routine in London and begins to slink about the grimy haunts of London’s gay scene, in the remotest spaces of public parks and public washrooms. There are many similarities between the experiences of Gonzalito in this story and those of the character Manuel in the short story “Sugar Daddy” from *Relatos sobre la falta de sustancia*¹⁵⁰ relating to themes of sordidness and nihilism that characterize the cruising scene so typical of the homosexual culture in these texts. Gonzalito ultimately comes to experience homoerotic sex in London, although his initiation into sex is described as a wayward descent into self-degradation and humiliation. There is not a single instance of satisfactory sexual experience, and Gonzalito’s sense of alienation from sexual praxis becomes, in effect, a means of obliteration of the subjective self:

La frontera de poner a prueba si era posible en Londres, en efecto, satisfacer todos sus deseos y, por consiguiente, de algún modo también todos sus afectos y alcanzar, en suma, la felicidad por vez primera. Hasta aquel momento Gonzalito había mantenido con su cuerpo una relación contraída e inestable. Su cuerpo era un admirable objeto que negaba constantemente su condición de objeto para confundirse con la conciencia y cobrar, como ella, carácter absoluto. Y en su cuerpo, impregnándolo todo entero con movimientos de sístole y diástole análogos a los del corazón, muy por encima, por debajo de sus reacciones genitales e incluyéndolas a título de cimas o resúmenes instantáneos, la sexualidad como un fruto continuamente equívoco. Toda la fascinación con que Gonzalito era consciente de su cuerpo parecía provenir de su carácter sexual. En

¹⁵⁰ I analyze “Sugar Daddy” in chapter II of this study.

cualquier caso, Gonzalito no había logrado trabar con su sexualidad una relación coherente y ahora sus incoherencias se confundían con su timidez en un único gesto ahogado. (MPI 236–237)

Gonzalito is the first of Pombo's homosexual characters whose sense of physical erotogenicity becomes the topic of a philosophical dialectic: sexuality as experienced through the body is clearly part of Gonzalito's intentional eroticism but it has no connection to the symbolic significance of subjective engagement that sex can entail with another. Thus, Gonzalito becomes a kind of unconscious desiring machine, in the Deleuzian sense. He goes about the execution of his nocturnal trysts as a kind of impassive, rapacious incubus who preys on his victims through the machinic force of his will to power.¹⁵¹ Gonzalito's relationship with his body, which is the experiential locus of his sexuality, happens in a void of emotionless, nihilistic indifference and misrecognition—misrecognition of himself and of the object-of-desire, which occupies no particular space in his psychosexual ruminations. In effect, the Other is conceived as a stranger (*el desconocido*), the diabolical Other (*autrui*) in Sartre's conceptualization of the existential loneliness of being with oneself,¹⁵² and a phantasmal creature that Gonzalito stalks in a kind of death watch:

El desconocido se descubrió primero y Gonzalito sólo tuvo que seguir, o repetir, sus mismos pasos. Era la primera vez que Gonzalito se entregaba a una aventura erótica. Lo resolvieron emprendiendo una larga caminata por los Royal Parks que acabó depositándolos en la parte más frondosa de Hyde Park, frente a Bayswater Road. Era ya de noche. Y la noche les envolvió en el intenso abrazo finalmente delator y bastante torpe que añadió una chispa de inocencia, a la vez perdida ... Aquel no aparecer en el lugar acordado y a la hora acordada convirtió ese lugar y esa hora en un lugar y un tiempo imantados que atraían a Gonzalito como un lobo.

¹⁵¹ In *Capitalisme et schizophrénie: l'Anti-Oedipe* Deleuze characterizes a human sexuality that is predicated on a notion of machinic unconsciousness, that derives from pure sexual expression and sensation, that is unbound by any notion of linguistic unconsciousness, as Freud, for example, would have us believe. Guy Hocquenghem takes up a similar notion in his work *La dérive homosexuelle* where he discusses the machinic unconsciousness of homosexual desire as a type of unquenchable life force that subsumes that with which it comes in contact. I contend that Pombo finds these notions radical and nihilistic in the extreme, and in stark contrast to his notion of intersubjective authentic engagement, which recognizes the subjective Other (following Merleau-Ponty) as a distinct and vital force that cannot be subsumed but rather must be recognized and engaged as an intrinsic part of the subject's Being.

¹⁵² In Sartre's conceptualization, the Other exists as a confirmation of the for-itself, but exists always in the abyss that reinforces the solitary seclusion (aloneness) that is existence. See Sartre in Schmidt, *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Between Phenomenology and Structuralism*, p. 95.

Con una especie de regularidad animal acudía Gonzalito al mismo sitio, en parte esperando y en parte temiendo la reaparición de su desconocido. Pero ahora el desconocido había cobrado un aura sentimental inusitada, su imagen, yéndose y viniéndose, se fue llenando de memoria y de superlativas resonancias que en sus paseos acunaba y en la cama, como un asesino que acunara la inverosímil cabeza de su víctima. (MPI 240)

The image of Gonzalito lulling his prey—he is depicted as a rapacious wolf, who comes regularly to stalk readily available quarry—serves as metaphor for the ritual slaughter of the Other; the predator licking his prey as he prepares to consume it. Thus, Gonzalito is a classical executioner in Pombo's taxonomy of pitiless predators: César Quirós in *Los delitos insignificantes*, Pedro García in *El hijo adoptivo*, Kus-Kús in *El héroe de las mansardas de Mansard*, Leopoldo de la Cuesta in *El cielo raso*, Juanjo Garnacho in *Contra natura*, and Martín in this story, each who batten on the Other in order to nurture their own tortured existence. The paradigm of victim/executioner is the ultimate bondage, in the scheme of Pombo's dialectic with regard to domination/subjugation, hegemony/abjection, power/defencelessness, and good/evil, from which the subject must unshackle himself in order to attain authenticity. Oftentimes the victims in Pombo's narrative taxonomy are equally blameworthy and bring upon themselves—through their fear, their self-loathing, their self-inflicted suffering: their resentfulness, as Nietzsche would characterize it—the misery that so oppresses them.

Although at first experienced as a sort of liberation from the oppressive environment of Gonzalito's experiential realm, the adventure in London ends up being a type of trauma that inalterably disrupts Gonzalito's psychic equilibrium:

Londres fue humillante. Londres acabó siendo para Gonzalito la abreviatura de una experiencia unitaria y completa que comenzó en broma y un poco por capricho —o por lo menos, sólo por probar algo distinto— y que se volvió humillante por sí sola ... Esto de *sus* deseos era un territorio donde Gonzalito entraba con pies de plomo y que se confundía o había ido confundiéndose cada vez más con lo que él mismo llamaba sus efectos. Gonzalito se había sentido desde niño afectivamente insatisfecho, como si entre sus expectativas y sus satisfacciones hubiera, una vez más, una distancia insalvable, a consecuencia de la cual se había sentido siempre muy poco feliz. (MPI 234–235)

Gonzalito's displacement is a consequence of his self-imposed exile in London, dealing with an alien culture and language, and in a setting where for the first time he engages his erotic intentionality towards men, an existential experience that for him has resonance only as a kind of fantastical imagery. Ultimately, as well, his engagement with same-sex eroticism transforms into an alienating experience that does not correspond to the *jouissance* that Gonzalito had imagined the sexual experience might be. Gonzalito's ambivalence issues from the fantasy of expectation versus the reality, and the entire London journey transpires as a kind of illusory experience that leaves him on the brink of his existential abyss: "almost as if between his expectations and his deeds there existed an unfathomable chasm, as a result of which he had always felt miserable." In London, the homosexual praxis that Gonzalito sought out as a kind of existential awakening ultimately becomes the source of his emerging self-destruction and further pushes him into a sense of self-loathing interiority—what Michael Warner, aping Lacan, calls his self-destructive "homo-narcissism."¹⁵³

The protagonist's fruitless venture into self-discovery away from his native shores is a common Pombian theme in the *ciclo de la falta de sustancia*, and one that Pombo uses to great effect in this text as well. Being out of a familiar experiential realm and thrust into another environment forces the individual to come to terms with the vicissitudes of a spatial, cultural, and ultimately experiential disorientation: the subject comes to this experience, following Heidegger, with an inherent and historically determined pre-understanding of their Being-in-the-world (*Dasein*), which is not incidental or in any way optional.¹⁵⁴ Thus Gonzalito, like any

¹⁵³ Warner's piece is a scathing criticism of the Lacanian notion that homosexual inversion is a result of the homosexual's failure to recognize himself in the homosexual relationship because of his deep and abiding sense of loathing towards the Other. See Michael Warner, "Homo-Narcissism; or, Heterosexuality," in *Literary Criticism: Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer (New York: Longman, 1998), p. 632.

¹⁵⁴ Heidegger argues that being creatures who are thrown means that we have always already inherited a way of understanding that is so inextricably part of us that it constitutes our very Being itself. Human beings always have an inherited way of looking at things around them long before they begin to modify that way of looking and understanding. See Heidegger in Brice R. Wachterhauser, ed., *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), pp. 21-23.

creature who is forced to confront the situation of his homoeroticism, or his foreignness in another country, must navigate the phenomenological experience of his sexuality (if indeed sexuality has any meaning for him) and his relation to Others, to whom he is inextricably bound. This interconnection to the Other does not issue from physical relationality (the pure physical act *en-soi*, e.g., the exchange of bodily fluids) but from a significant symbolic exchange. The symbolic exchange can only come about when the significance of the relationship is mutually recognized, which for Gonzalito is decidedly not the case. Charles Taylor describes this as a condition of *mattering* in the self's positioning within the domain of the subjective Other, from whom the self derives significance. Authentic self-consciousness can only occur in a context where the self is able to perceive his/her significance as it affects Others, towards whom the self's actions can be measured as meaningful, tawdry, petulant, or destructive. It is by measuring the affect on Others that the self acquires a sense of the mattering of the interaction.¹⁵⁵

In Pombo's other homotexts, where homosex or homoeroticism is problematized, as it is in *Los delitos insignificantes* (most significantly), or in *El hijo adoptivo* or in *El parecido*, the protagonist's awkwardness with himself issues from the disturbing nature of his erotic intentionality towards members of his own sex. In these texts it is the subject's incipient stirrings of same-sex eroticism that ultimately disrupt his sense of sangfroid. José Carlos Mainer describes the repressed homosexual in Pombo's texts in terms of his dissimulation, his mirroring in respect of his relationship and confrontation with his homoeroticism.¹⁵⁶ For Mainer, the term

¹⁵⁵ See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 49.

¹⁵⁶ Mainer describes the "parecido" in the following terms, and I should note that this is the only part of Mainer's critique that deals with homosexuality in Pombo's writing to any degree: "Álvaro Pombo gusta de usar la palabra 'parecido' en su sentido vulgar: la relación de fidelidad que un retrato mantiene con el original. Y no es casual que, muy a menudo, el término 'parecido' se refiere en la narrativa de Pombo a homosexuales más o menos vergonzantes y a suplantadores más o menos explícitos. Pombo es el escritor español que más ha hecho por dar cara de naturaleza al homosexual en la literatura de su tiempo, pero esto no quiere decir que ignore lo que tal condición significa desde un punto de vista ontológico: desmentir por muy legítimo que sea, un orden inmemorialmente concebido de otro modo. En *Metro* la contradicción se propone en forma de vigoroso análisis lógico, rematado en una expresiva

parecido corresponds to a means of experiencing homoerotic intentionality as a simulacrum, or altered consciousness, in the subject's situatedness within his experiential realm. Mainer's concept corresponds to what I have described previously as "metonymic shadowing," that is, the manner in which the homosexual sublimates (or camouflages) his intense same-sex erotic desire and sense of identity within a heteronormative realm. Thus the homosexual either suppresses his erotic intentionality altogether or else acts in ways that subversively mimic heteronormativity—for example, via drag or extreme displays of effeminacy or masculinity, depending on the subject's biological gender. For Pombo's homosexual protagonists, the tendency to live furtively—that is, metonymically as *el parecido*—is preferable to existing in a heteronormative reality that either scorns or does not acknowledge and validate them.

Through Gonzalito's abdication of the physical, the narrative provides a view into the mind of a purely sexless, atemporal realm: disembodied homosexual consciousness. Eroticism for Gonzalito becomes a spurious undertaking, a recipe for the impossibility of happiness, which the London experience demonstrates unequivocally: "El erotismo se había convertido en un proyecto agotado, en casi una receta de la imposibilidad de disfrutar. Todo el último año en Londres había sido una monótona repetición de esta evidencia" (246). The dialectic of inner versus outer Being that characterizes Gonzalito's relationship with his environment, with his dissonant sexuality and concomitant dislike of physical and social contact, emerges as the key theme of the text:

Una gigantesca impaciencia le ocupaba ahora como una sustancia pegajosa. Impaciencia consigo mismo que había reducido todos sus deseos sexuales a la necesidad de masturbarse. Impaciencia con los demás que aparecían siempre distantes y velados: los desconocidos ya sólo fugazmente contenían un núcleo conocido ... El círculo de la irrealidad se había cerrado y su fruto real era la esperma degradada de sus pañuelos, sus calzoncillos, las sábanas. (MPI 247)

cadena de equivalencias de ser homosexual." See José Carlos Mainer, *Tramas, libros, nombres: Para entender la literatura española, 1944-2000* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2005), p. 275.

Gonzalito's descent into a realm of "irreality," for such is the extent of his estrangement from his existential situatedness, characterizes his relationship with the outside world. The world of human contact and touch and the subjective Other becomes but a phantasmal realm for the increasingly hermetic Gonzalito—"los demás aparecían siempre distantes y velados ... y el círculo de la irre realidad se había cerrado" (MPI 247)—and his only engagement with reality, sexually speaking at least, is evidenced by the cum-soaked sheets and underclothing in his room. There are, in this regard, conspicuous similarities between the attitudes towards sex exhibited by Gonzalito and those of the moribund homosexual friend of the writer Ortega, Hernández, in *Los delitos insignificantes*. Hernández, as I argue in chapter III, is portrayed as a nihilistic, narcissistic homosexual, whose sex life consists in onanistic sexual gratification—to erotic images of young men.

There is in the narrative of the sexual sterility and the morbid fear of the body exhibited by Gonzalito, and in his sexuality for the sake of sexuality with no redemptive intersubjective communion or symbolic exchange, the persistent strain of profound censure that underlies Pombo's writing. Protagonists such as Gonzalito and Hernández, and also Manuel from "Sugar Daddy" in *Relatos sobre la falta de sustancia*, are symbolic of a decadence and a malaise of spirit that in the Pombian narrative betoken a grief-stricken end. The oft-repeated charge (by Pombo's gay critics) that Pombo's narrative deals with many of its homosexual protagonists in a singularly brutal manner is no doubt true. Unhappiness and tragedy seem to follow these characters, but this is the stuff of narrative. In Pombo's multifaceted parables of morality and ethics, there is some kernel of redemption or optimism that manages to find its way into the tale. As I have argued throughout this study, abjection or forlornness is not the exclusive condition of Pombo's homosexual characters. Nevertheless, homosexuality as phenomenological experience of Being is the condition that Pombo finds most suitable to convey (allegorically in this case) the

profound difficulty of living an authentic life, particularly under conditions of acute oppression. There are homosexual protagonists in Pombo's writing—Vélez in this story, for one, and others in *Contra natura*, as I argue in the subsequent chapter—who are exceptionally virtuous and authentic in their behaviour. Alfonso Vélez, in particular, stands as a model of virtue and redemptive selflessness in the unflagging solace he gives to María when she is betrayed by her husband and best friend, and eventually when she is confronted by the tragic loss of her son. The discursivity of interiority is not an inherent characteristic of homosexuality in Pombo's narrative, and this is certainly not the case in *El metro de platino iridiado*, but it emerges poignantly in the case of Gonzalito, owing to his historical situatedness.

The Trope of Avuncular Love

In Pombo's writing, relationships between uncles and nephews have a particularly special place, and the stories that explore this relationship tend to be among Pombo's most poignant. Generally speaking, the avuncular relationship always involves an older man, who is a homosexual, and a nephew, who is not. In Pombo's narrative, avuncular homotextual relationships have two salient characteristics: (1) there is unmistakable homoerotic foreshadowing in the relationship that results in the emotional and psychological detriment of the older man, who is generally in some form of unrequited love. In this sense, the relationship takes on the characteristics of a typical Pombian older man/younger man (puer-senex) relationship wherein there is a psychological and emotional co-dependency, with the exception, however, that the relationship has no sexual dimension. (2) The relationship generally ends quite tragically, or at the very least infelicitously, for at least one of the participants, and the relationship has no apparent redemptive qualities. That is to say, from the perspective of "moral" appropriateness, the older man's obsession with the younger is especially troublesome.

Gonzalito's relationship with his nephew Pelé in *El metro de platino iridiado* is unquestionably one of the most complex and, from a strictly "moral/ethical" point of view, problematic relationships that can be found in Pombo's narrative. The bond between Gonzalito and his nephew Pelé conforms to many of the relationships of the type that I have described in previous chapters where the uncle develops an amorous affection for the nephew. However, in *El metro de platino iridiado*, there is an added dimension in the nephew's attempt to save his forsaken uncle from his self-destructive, solipsistic behaviour, which ties into the theme of redemption. The nephew, by virtue of his sagacity, steadfast virtue, and altruism, serves as a kind of salvific force, and because of this righteous conduct, Pelé pays in the end with his life.

The uncle-nephew love relationship is Pombo's singular contribution to the store of subversive homotextual fictional writing, a contribution for which, due to the exceptionally thorny nature of the subject, Pombo has not generally been recognized. The mere act of writing a homosexual story that involves an uncle's incestuous infatuation with his nephew is remarkably transgressive and a literary undertaking for which there is scant precedent in Western literature. The inscription of avuncular homosexuality fulfils a type of unconventional literariness for which Pombo is becoming increasingly well known. However, it is surprising to note how little acknowledgment of this narrative trope one finds in criticism of Pombo's writing.¹⁵⁷

As I have discussed in chapter II, Pombo's treatment of the uncle-nephew relationship begins with his first narrative, the short story "Tío Eduardo" in *Relatos sobre la falta de sustancia*, where the despondent, authoritarian uncle tragically suffers the unrequited love of his breezy nephew Ignacio and ultimately dies without ever having tasted the love of another man. In *El parecido*, the writer Gonzalo Ferrer harbours a passionate, unreciprocated love for his

¹⁵⁷ Even Alfredo Martínez, who has commented extensively on multiple facets of Pombo's homotextual narrative, avoids this topic. The other primary critics of Pombo's writing, and this work in particular, do not broach the subject of uncle/nephew incest. In fact, José Mainer conceives of the relationship as a sibling rivalry, where one of the rival siblings (in a Cain and Abel type confrontation) does away with the other (2005: 278).

phantasmal nephew Jaime, and he is ultimately murdered during a robbery in a city park, but also because of his known homosexual proclivities. In *El hijo adoptivo*, the writer Pancho García has a (virtually) incestuous relationship with his former ward and secretary, Pedro, who later returns to blackmail him—by means of threatening revelation of his past sexual indiscretions. Pedro ultimately dies from consumption. In *El cielo raso*, Esteban, the adoptive nephew of the maleficent cousin Leopoldo de la Cuesta, becomes the quasi love interest of the homosexual writer Gabriel Arintero (although the relationship is never consummated), and in the recurring pattern of gruesomeness that often befalls characters in asymmetrical power relationships in Pombo's narrative, the tempestuous Esteban brutalizes Arintero and murders his guardian Leopoldo. Thus, a pattern is clearly established; the relationship involving the older man and younger one will come to some type of grisly end, particularly in instances where the relationship has some sort of amorous nature.

Gonzalito's obsession with his nephew derives from the very intimate relationship that he shares with his sister, María, who becomes (is) the supreme symbol of redemption and hope in the decaying La Moraleja household. In many respects, Pelé's coming into the world represents a new beginning for the austere, loveless household into which Gonzalito was born, and his coming—with all its religious connotations of salvation—is greatly celebrated in the dour abode. Gonzalito's close relationship with the nephew comes about as a result of the potency of the matrilineal relationships that reign in the household, and to which Gonzalito is beholden. Gonzalito's bond with his sister is one of the few attachments that he retains in his dealings with the outside world, and in the end, this bond with his sister is replaced by his attachment to the nephew. In an apropos study of historical literary representations of avunculate relationships, particularly between the mother's brother and her son, Thomas J. Garbáty explores the nature of matriliney and its role as a determining factor in the close bond between the uncle and nephew, a

factor that no doubt influences this relationship.¹⁵⁸ In Garbáty's study this relationship was generally cemented by the strong notions of kinship within the frequent blood feuds that erupted between warring factions, and even within families. In *El metro de platino iridiado*, there is a similar blood feud that erupts between Gonzalito and the boy's father, Martín, and Gonzalito seeks the nephew's complicity in his unrelenting scheming against the father.

Gonzalito's "discovery" of his nephew is rather gradual and comes on the heels of his traumatizing exile in and return from London. The uncle's re-acquaintance with the nephew is at first tentative. He had been gone for many years and only remembers the child as a baby, and has not known him as the strapping young man that he has become—Pelé is so called because of his exploits on the soccer field. Pelé represents the antithesis of his uncle, although there are many resemblances between the two from a physical standpoint, and it is the juxtaposition of Gonzalito's sociopathic tendencies with Pelé's earnest selflessness that represents the crux of the moral argument that Pombo is making in this tale. On the one hand, the young Pelé embodies all that is vigorous, virtuous, and life-sustaining, not only because of his superior good looks, supreme athleticism, and gregarious personality, which allow him to exist in perfect harmony with his surroundings, but also because he makes every endeavour to engage wilfully with Others in search of what is good. Pelé's actions are a function of his benevolent will and conform to what Iris Murdoch calls "the public nature of morality" in respect to the actions of the will towards an objective outside.¹⁵⁹ Gonzalito, on the other hand, is oblivious to the suffering or the anxieties of those around him, and his once striking good looks have degenerated to an unkempt slovenliness that reflects the festering decay in his spirit. Pelé, owing to his

¹⁵⁸ See Thomas J. Garbáty, "The Uncle-Nephew Motif: New Light into Its Origins and Development," *Folklore* 88, no. 2 (1977), p. 225.

¹⁵⁹ Says Murdoch: "Morality abhors the private ... Reason and rule represent a sort of impersonal tyranny in relation to which, however, the personal will represents perfect freedom. Morality resides at the point of action. What I am 'objectively' is not under my control; logic and observers decide that. What I am 'subjectively' is a foot-loose, solitary, substanceless will." See Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge Classics, 2001), p. 16.

physical and metaphysical proximity to Gonzalito, represents a redemptive transubstantiation into the good, and an exemplary shift from the self- and other-directed misanthropy of Gonzalito.

Gonzalito's increasing narcissism—self-obsessive and fixated on auto-erotic sexual images—is reflected in his burgeoning obsession with his nephew, in whom he sees a virtual duplicate of his younger self. Whereas at first Gonzalito sees Pelé as a logical extension of his sister and views him affectionately in this light, he soon begins to view Pelé as the consummate, albeit chimerical (utopian), male love figure that Gonzalito had so unsuccessfully sought out in the sterile trysts of his London days: “Por lo demás, ya no era ningún niño. Era un guapo adolescente, consciente, con toda probabilidad de serlo: Gonzalito, en su soledad, asistió perplejo a la reaparición erótica de Londres en su antiguo dormitorio infantil” (MPI 244). Pelé becomes, by virtue of his exterior presence, in contrast with Gonzalito's distraught interiority, a phantom representation of the substantially whole being that Gonzalito can never be, and the only bridge between the confines of the inauthentic unreality (*la irrealidad*) that Gonzalito lives in his psyche and the frightening possibility of authentic existence that is the real world (*la realidad*):

La realidad de la relación impedía, en el momento mismo de aplicar la analogía, reducir lo hipotéticamente conocido del muchacho al aspecto único y exclusivo de la identificación de sus deseos sexuales. Lo conocido de Pelé era un mar que resumía, en sus miles de aspectos, la realidad entera de la vida que Gonzalo había vivido antes de Londres y en especial la realidad de María y de su amor por ella. Gonzalito tenía, por consiguiente, que elegir entre dos evidencias igualmente poderosas (por lo menos, a simple vista): una fascinante, la del parecido, y otra curiosamente desleída, la evidencia de la complejidad de un ser real, la realidad evidente del hijo de su hermana. Pero la perplejidad procedía no tanto del propio Pelé —quien, en todo caso, se habría comportado sólo como un chico curioso y travieso— como del hecho de que, a partir de Londres, Gonzalito se veía impulsado a aplicar a todas sus relaciones con individuos de su mismo sexo la plantilla erótica y ambigua que Londres le había proporcionado. (MPI 244)

Gonzalito's unhappy return from London and his increasing fascination with his nephew reinforce the nature of his dichotomy of Being that, on the one hand, he perceives as illusory and that he associates with a previous existence—his youth, of a time when he felt at least a substantiveness in his existence, notwithstanding his vexing connection to his homoerotic

intentionality—and, on the other hand, a more menacing present “reality” in which he is existentially adrift. Gonzalito experiences his damaged existence through fitful encounters with his sister, María, and Pelé, both of whom observe helplessly Gonzalito’s inexorable descent into dementia. Through the erotic imagery of Pelé, Gonzalito is able to conjure his own erotic consciousness, which he transposes vicariously to all members of his sex.

From the perspective of the homotextual narrative, Gonzalito’s sexual obsession with Pelé hinges on the physical resemblance between uncle and nephew, on the dichotomy between the healthy, vigorous plenitude of the nephew and the increasing degeneration of the uncle, whose anomie and listlessness pervade the household and exacerbate the simmering tensions among the household’s residents. Gonzalito’s unabashed libidinous obsession with his nephew becomes evident in his reveries of forbidden eroticism involving the youth, through which he contemplates his own waning sexuality. The sexual imaginings, couched in an internal monologue, have all the lubriciousness of unrequited sexual lust, but this is a lust that Gonzalito does not contemplate as part of his reality:

a medida que se echaba encima la dulce anochecida y se encendían lucecitas en las fincas cercanas, más se persuadía Gonzalito de que su sobrino y él se desnudaran mutuamente. Esto del desnudarse era, por supuesto, una manera de hablar que contenía, siquiera verbalmente, algo de la ternura del amor, algo de la feliz confusión de la mirada que mira a un semejante. ¿No eran innegables las semejanzas entre ambos? Gonzalo contempló la firme espalda de su sobrino arqueada al inclinarse sobre el juego. La camiseta blanca revelaba la espalda firme. Gonzalito imaginó el olor del cuerpo joven. Todo se consumía en aquel imaginarlo que, a su vez, impregnaba de irrealdad toda la relación. (MPI 290)

Gonzalito makes a meagre attempt to connect with his humanity, albeit vicariously through the erotic imagining of his nephew, who signifies not so much a sexual object-of-desire as he does an object-of-reflection for the irredeemably narcissistic Gonzalito, whose degenerate behaviour is best characterized by his regression into an infantilized stage of the imaginary. Thus, as a consequence of the mirror function of the imaginary, Gonzalito perceives his own image in Pelé and misidentifies Pelé as the spectral Other, his object-of-desire. However, the aspect of

Gonzalito's auto-eroticism that keeps him in a perpetual state of dissonance is his own misrecognition, which manifests as self-loathing: "Gonzalito se había retirado a una profundidad taimada, donde no era posible llegar sólo con el amor. El amor requería una cierta mansedumbre del amado, un dejarse querer y querer ser amado que había desaparecido de la personalidad de Gonzalito" (MPI 251). Gonzalito, who is always referred to in the diminutive throughout the narrative, is perceived as infantilized, submissive alterity (as degeneracy and strangeness); for this reason, he is treated as an object of derision and scorn by his tormentors, Martín and Virginia. As I later argue, persistent emasculation and denigration by Martín and Virginia drive Gonzalito to commit atrocious acts, but the root of Gonzalito's psychosis is his self-loathing.

Gonzalito reveals the essence of his psychosexual traumas to Pelé and exacts the nephew's promise of silence, and the nexus between the two grows ever murkier and more sinister. Gonzalito's unfiltered confidences in Pelé constitute, in effect, a perverse violation of the boy's innocence and a corruption of the bonds of trust that should normally exist in this type of relationship. Moreover, in a further infringement of the boy's innocence, within the context of his machinations of psychological warfare against the boy's father, Gonzalito takes the boy to a section of the garden where Pelé is able to witness, furtively, his father and Virginia in adulterous *flagrante delicto*. Gonzalito's divulging of his confidences, and his enmeshing of the youthful Pelé in a sordid web of adult treachery, immorality, and loss of innocence, epitomize Gonzalito's moral disequilibrium and the extent to which his subsumption in Pelé's persona has obliterated his sense of responsibility and Care:

E hizo que su sobrino metiera la cabeza por un hueco del matorral, entre el matorral y la pileta. Y ahí estaban los amantes. Inconfundiblemente ellos dos, Virginia y Martín, abrazándose y besándose. Tío y sobrino se retiraron silenciosamente. Pelé, al subir hacia la casa, iba delante, mirando al suelo, andando muy deprisa. Y Gonzalito iba detrás, viendo la espalda inclinada de Pelé, andando muy despacio, sorprendido de no sentir ningún sentimiento ni ninguna sensación, como paralizado, como convertido en un autómata, sintiéndose, en todo caso invisible. (MPI 347)

Gonzalito's loss of moral compass is evinced in the deliberate and selfish act of afflicting his nephew (the only person he seems to have any feelings for) with the knowledge of his father's infidelity. Gonzalito's action exhibits a malice motivated by narcissism, cruelty, and a selfish motive of vengeance—the resentfulness that Nietzsche attributes to slave morality—which irreparably shatters the youth and removes the last shred of intersubjective intimacy between them. In the moral schema that the narrative is drawing—through the juxtaposition of Gonzalito with Pelé, and also of Martín and Virginia with María and Vélez—the path to existential authenticity lies, following Merleau-Ponty, in the primal instituting of the self with the Other in a shared world. This primal institution involves experiencing the subjectivity of the Other and immersing oneself in the Other's experiential field.¹⁶⁰ To immerse oneself in the Other's experiential field is to experience the world in a conjoined fashion and to know the same level of pain, or joy, that commonality of experience entails. Gonzalito's unconscionably egocentric behaviour towards the youth is a manifestation of what Charles Taylor refers to as a “subjective expressivism,” as opposed to “altruistic authenticity.”¹⁶¹ Taylor uses subjective expressivism to refer to the process of caring for the self in preference to caring for Others, an inward turn informed only by an intrinsic knowledge of and preoccupation with the self. “Altruistic authenticity” implies just the opposite: the subject can only have knowledge of himself by considering the external actors who directly impinge on his existence and make him aware of it. In Pombo's dialectical ethical scheme, the attainment of the communal good can only be achieved through acts of virtue that are guided by reason, practical sense, and a selfless compassion for the Other—what Aristotle conceived as *phronesis*.¹⁶² Clearly Gonzalito's

¹⁶⁰ See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. John O'Neill (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 139.

¹⁶¹ See Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, p. 480.

¹⁶² *Phronesis* translates as practical or moral wisdom and derives from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. The thrust of *phronesis* is that the subject must live in relation to life's situatedness with prudence, foresight, compassion, and ultimate concern for how one's actions affect Others. Bernard Williams provides an extensive discussion of

behaviour violates the very premise of *phronesis*. Through his insatiable desire for retribution against Martín, he ultimately precipitates the disintegration of the household.

Homophobia as the Root of Narcissism

A key aspect of *El metro de platino iridiado*, largely uncommented upon by most of Pombo's critics, is the narrative discourse of homophobia and the extent to which this homophobia impinges on the actions of Gonzalito.¹⁶³ I posit that *El metro de platino iridiado* is a tale wherein the destructive impact of nihilism and solipsism in the behaviour of its most disturbed protagonist, Gonzalito, has its origins in the manner in which this clearly vulnerable youth is humiliated and devitalized by his brother-in-law, Martín. The moral gist of Martín's behaviour (and there always is a moral gist in Pombo's narrative) is that actions have consequences, and in Pombo's narratives, these consequences, whether intended or unintended, always return to haunt the protagonists in unforeseen ways. In this case, the consequences of Martín's homophobia on Gonzalito's fragile psyche eventually lead Gonzalito to a spiralling and irremediable descent into destructive, sociopathic behaviour that results in the death of Martín's only son and the dissolution of Martín's marriage. In the larger moralistic context, the situation between Gonzalito and Martín is another didactic allegory: it illustrates Pombo's notion of authentic behaviour concerning intersubjective mattering in our relations with Others. In the absence of mattering and recognition, humanity is eminently capable of sliding into unspeakable evil.

The compelling moralistic force of *El metro de platino iridiado* becomes most manifest when protagonists confront the moral vicissitudes of life and, more particularly, their reactions to these circumstances. Gonzalito's failings are rooted in his conception of himself as a victim of

phronesis in the context of moral behaviour. See Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 23.

¹⁶³ Only Alfredo Martínez (in *Escrituras torcidas*: 171) seems to appreciate the fact that this novel is one of Pombo's more trenchant depictions of overt homophobia, although he does not make the connection between the homophobia and the subsequent dereliction of Gonzalito.

his own undesired subjectivity, i.e., his homoerotic intentionality, and his seemingly purposeless Being within his existential realm. Martín's failings reside in his perception of himself as the victim of an unfulfilled life—his childhood poverty and subsequent feelings of inadequacy amidst the upper class surroundings of his wife's family, his failure as a writer or intellectual of any significance, and his inability to express love openly and generously even for his own family, especially for his son. As a result of his existential situatedness, Martín becomes consumed with his own egocentric self-gratification and sublimates his failings in his writing, which becomes as well a kind of simulacrum for his life.

The arguments used by Martín and Virginia, his principal tormentors, to denigrate Gonzalito crop up in long disquisitions concerning human nature and aesthetics: the transcendence of female and male biological difference (to wit, the ascendancy of heteroeroticism); the naturality of heterosexual biological reproduction; and the sterility of homoerotic sexuality. Martín's abhorrence of Gonzalito issues from an abiding perception of the latter as an "insignificant" human being because of his lack of purposive intentionality or substantiality that "real" men possess by their properly directed "phallic" nature. Martín lacks none of the hubris and self-confidence that are so conspicuously absent in Gonzalito, and by all appearances, his life is seemingly harmonious and complete. Nonetheless, in the course of his dealings with his family, including the despised Gonzalito, and as a result of his general existential situatedness, Martín's life—which is autobiographically consistent with the novel that he is writing, including his adulterous affair with his wife's best friend—is exposed as a sham. Moreover, the domain that Martín phallocratically rules as "lord" of the house dissolves into a shambles when it is revealed that he and Virginia are conspiring to destroy Gonzalito, and to deceive María in her own house. Martín's antipathy towards Gonzalito manifests itself in a variety of ways, but it emerges most trenchantly in an exposition on his philosophical certainties

with regard to homosexuality. Martín's long philosophical disquisition, concerning the ontological and metaphysical differences between male and female, gives rise to an ominous mood when the discussion turns to male homosexuality. Martín's premise is that much visual art is unduly influenced by (male) homosexual aesthetics, which accords precedence to sterile male "beauty" (read carnality): "El hombre, en cambio, es mortal: todos los hombres son mortales. Los hombres son, por eso, porque sienten nostalgia de la vida, mucho más proclives a feminizarse que las mujeres a masculinizarse ... toda belleza artística es viril y estéril" (PMI 106); over transcendent female "vitality" (read virtue and stoicism): "Da, por lo tanto, igual decir «mujer» que decir «vida», porque las mujeres son la vida: lo son, la tienen, la transmiten, la ejemplifican y, por último, son su símbolo perfecto" (PMI 105). Martín's epistemological discourse is little more than a pedantic philosophical diatribe against the hapless youth—Gonzalito is no more than a young man at this stage and, in addition to being somewhat infatuated with his brother-in-law, he is in the throes of existential angst concerning his own homosexuality. Martín's sentiments become increasingly hostile as he comes to understand the nature of Gonzalito's "difference," and this is made clear in his harangue against homosexuality, which evolves as a metaphoric displacement onto Gonzalito himself:

He detectado una falacia —de la cual, por cierto, no eres tú responsable porque es algo que se dice en ciertos círculos que ha llegado a ser un tópico dotado de una cierta apariencia de refinamiento paradójico—: esa falacia consiste en oponer radicalmente vitalidad y belleza ... Se trata de una característica inversión: quienes lo dicen son homosexuales: son grandes artistas, grandes críticos, todo lo grande y grandes que tú quieras. Pero son, sobre todo, homosexuales. Eso es lo primero: eso es lo último: eso es todo, es el círculo estéril y maniático de la absoluta identidad. Oponen la vitalidad a la belleza con coherencia suma: son coherentes: ser homosexual es ser coherente: tautológico: ahí está la gracia y ésa es su desgracia: no pueden seguir ni no-seguir: es la inmovilidad de la muerte: de hecho, lo único que oponen a la vitalidad es su contrario: la mortalidad. Lo funerario, lo concedo es bello: durante cinco minutos todos los cadáveres son bellos: su ser y su no ser componen una única figura: genio y figura son los mismos: han acabado y nos complace su acabado. (PMI 109)

Martín's philosophical soliloquy constitutes, I suggest, a homographetic discourse in that it names homosexual identity as a form of "absolute identity." Martín's discourse postulates that homosexual identity per se is a form of "parasitic" and "maniacal" essentialism, that it is "consistent" and "tautological," and redundant to the point of superfluity; it is dispensability. Lee Edelman explicitly defines homographesis as a form of writing that delineates the homosexual as visibly abject and parasitic, particularly in relation to his "intrinsic incongruence" within the "normality" of heterosexuality.¹⁶⁴ Martín's disquisition constitutes a diatribe against homosexual aestheticism which he directly associates with morbidity, evanescence, and the obliteration of art's eternal vitality and "true beauty." Moreover, Martín's harangue, in the form of interior monologue, is consistent with the type of didactic, exhortative narrative that one finds in many novels of Francoist Spain wherein homosexuality is eschewed for its sterility and morbidity, and where it is invariably associated with death—of the homosexual, to be sure.¹⁶⁵

Although *El metro de platino iridiado* constitutes the first Pombian text where homophobia is explored extensively, it is nonetheless a compelling example of Pombo's contrapositionality of homosexuality in its subversive mimicry of the epistemological certainties of heteronormativity. Pombo's literary dissection (via Martín) of the prevailing homophobic doctrines about homosexuality (moribund and sterile) conforms precisely to Dollimore's "transgressive mimesis."¹⁶⁶ In Dollimore's formulation, the homosexual subculture (through a type of inversion) reproduces itself in terms of its abjection or exclusion, and thus it becomes a

¹⁶⁴ According to Edelman: "The 'writing,' in other words, as which homosexuality historically is construed, names, I will argue, the reduction of 'différance'; from the vantage point of dominant culture it names homosexuality as a secondary, sterile, and parasitic form of social representation that stands in the same relation to heterosexual identity that writing, in the phonocentric metaphysics that Derrida traces throughout Western philosophy from Plato to Freud (and beyond), occupies in relation to speech or voice." See Edelman, "Tearooms and Sympathy," p. 573.

¹⁶⁵ I am referring in particular to the novels of Carlavilla (*Sodomitas* 1956), van Meersch (*La máscara de carne* 1958), and Umbral (*Tratado de perversiones* 1977). The novels of Carlavilla and van den Meersch invariably portray homosexuality as a type of metaphysical and physiological disease. Umbral is more or less considered to be a "liberal" (*progre*) and not given generally to heterologocentric discourse; nevertheless, *Tratado de perversiones*, as well as (*El Giocondo* 1970) portray homosexuality as degeneracy and foppish insubstantiality, à la *Boys in the Band*.

¹⁶⁶ See Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*, p. 280.

point of obsession for those who would obliterate it. Martín, of course, merely propagates prevalent nineteenth century theories of homosexual degeneracy as parasitic and congenital, as a recalcitrant deviation from normalcy that tended to perpetuate itself from generation to generation.¹⁶⁷ Nevertheless, Martín is obsessed with homosexuality and its presence in the household over which he rules, and because of this, he vents his spleen against the unsuspecting, hapless Gonzalito. Martín's diatribe constitutes a discourse uttered with scientific and philosophical certainty by someone possessed of obviously superior educational and cultural background, not so much as a homophobic invective, but rather as an axiological certainty—a certitude that is ultimately refuted through the self-contradictions of his own argument, as I explain below. The irony of Martín's bombastic proclamations results from his all-consuming misanthropy and narcissism. No one is spared his unfeeling self-importance and haughty disdain, least of all the exalted, vital women of his diatribe: his wife is deceived in the most ignominious fashion in her own household and Virginia is unceremoniously dumped after things begin to fall apart. Moreover, Martín's sexual and political misalliance with Virginia against Gonzalito, and also to a certain extent against his wife, María, symbolizes his own degeneracy and misogyny, and augur his fall from grace.

In a further fit of homophobic vitriol directed towards Gonzalito, Martín disparages the ostensible “homosexual proclivities” of the artistic movements of the twentieth century, associating the physical orientation of masculine-inspired art with homosexual fixation on physical beauty and hedonistic gratification. Martín's outburst against the defenceless Gonzalito

¹⁶⁷ Regarding prevailing nineteenth century conceptions of same-sex “perversion,” Arnold Davidson contends: “if one takes the natural function of the sexual instinct to be propagation, and if one takes the corresponding natural psychological satisfaction of this instinct to consist in the satisfaction derived from heterosexual, genital intercourse, then it becomes possible to see why [homosexuality, sadism, masochism, fetishism] were classified as perversions. Sadism, masochism, fetishism and homosexuality all exhibit the same kind of perverse expression of the sexual instinct, the same kind of functional deviation, which manifests itself in the fact that psychological satisfaction is obtained primarily through activities disconnected from the natural function of the instinct.” See Arnold Ira Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality: Historical Epistemology and the Formation of Concepts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 76.

derives from years of pent up, and largely concealed, hostility towards a completely caught-off-guard Gonzalito. Until this defining event, Gonzalito had assumed that the relationship between them was on harmonious footing. However, to Gonzalito's tremendous dismay, a seemingly innocuous (and glib) comment he made relating to Martín's disquisition unleashes Martín's deep-seated acrimony towards him. Pombo's narrative frequently provides pivotal turning points where the simplest of events, or words spoken casually or haphazardly, give rise to situations of great tension and crisis in which the protagonist's life situation is thrown into irremediable turmoil—what Masoliver calls confrontations at the liminalities of narration (“enfrentamientos en las fronteras de la narración”¹⁶⁸)—and this is clearly the case for Gonzalito:

Tal vez estás pensando, estoy seguro de que estás pensando que exagero: no hay nada más peligroso ni más grave que entre bromas y veras, almorzando, charlando, decir medias verdades que, claro está, son medias falsedades: no lo has pensado bien: son cosas que se dicen: tú no eres responsable, ya lo sé, de la orientación homosexual del arte de este siglo: no te estoy echando nada en cara: ¿a quién podría ocurrírsele en serio que la vitalidad o la belleza femenina se oponen a la idea de belleza? Sólo a un homosexual. Quien o quienes, por cierto, son o pueden ser con gran facilidad heroicos. Hay un verso de Eliot que nunca nadie, creo, ha comentado, donde se dice lo mismo que yo acabo de decir: *Unnatural vices are fathered by our heroism*. (MPI 110)

Although Martín claims not to be directly reproaching Gonzalito (“echando nada a cara”) about the “lamentable homosexual orientation of art,” it is clear that it is him—that is, in his metaphorical displacement as the incarnation of the homosexual spirit—that he holds responsible, and it is for him that the invective is precisely intended. The Eliot reference is to his poem “Gerontion,” which provides a glimpse into an old man's soul as he muses on the history of mankind from the fifth century BCE to the modern era.¹⁶⁹ Eliot, of course, was not impervious to speculation about his own homosexuality, and Martín's curious allusion to “Gerontion” and to

¹⁶⁸ See Masoliver, *Voces contemporáneas*, p. 269.

¹⁶⁹ The quote in question is taken from the final stanzas of the poem, and concerns the decadence of the human endeavour, particularly as an androcentric enterprise:

Think Neither fear nor courage saves us.
Unnatural vices Are fathered by our heroism.
Virtues Are forced upon us by our impudent crimes.
These tears are shaken from the wrath-bearing tree.

Eliot provide an interesting counterpoint to the premises of Martín's argument. Eliot's poem, as Suzanne Churchill points out in her study on the homosexual allusiveness of Eliot's writing, is deeply immersed in cryptic references to the vices and virtues of male-centred, homosexual art, and the allusion to heroism is, as I understand Eliot's poem, a refutation of phallocentric privilege, of which Martín is, of course, one of the most flagrant abusers.¹⁷⁰

The irony of Martín's tirade lies in the circularity of his argument: men (heterosexuals, presumably, and artists like himself) create through their art a world of ostensible inverisimilitude. In Martín's pretentious conceptualization, men are disposed to imagine that life as art is an internal sanctuary steeped in unflagging notions of grandeur and heroism. Moreover, Martín conceives of life (and presumably art) as informed by a rational mastery and domination of the material self. Martín's tirade constitutes, in effect, a sardonic mockery of the narrative of Enlightenment philosophy and its obsession with rational self-control. Martín's great self-deception is that his art, and behaviour, conform precisely to this type of aesthetics—his writing is all about rational mastery and self-control—and his deep misanthropy bespeaks a thinly veiled misogyny towards María and Virginia, the two women who share his affections and who suffer his cruel deceptions. Furthermore, Martín's homophobia is to all intents and purposes a form of inverted misogyny. As Gonzalito confesses to his sister in a consolatory heart-to-heart following Martín's blistering assault:

Porque, si bien está bien que hables de mí, a ser posible bien con todos, está mal que hables de mí, incluso si hablas bien, con alguien que no me quiere bien: o mejor dicho: que me quiere, al revés mal. Martín me ve al revés. Martín me invierte: no sólo a mí: todo lo que ve lo ve invertido: reflejado: imitado: reproducido, repasado y revuelto y repetido y remoto. Así es Martín y siempre será así porque Martín, eso sí, es un auténtico escritor: odioso, pero auténtico.
(MPI 117)

¹⁷⁰ According to Churchill, Eliot himself was deeply conflicted about his own sexuality and, while being very circumspect to avoid attributing any specific "homosexual inflection" to his writing, she muses about the author's "obsessive interest in sexual corruption and a particular fascination with homosexuality." See Suzanne W. Churchill, "Outing T. S. Eliot," *Criticism* 47, no. 1 (2006), p. 10.

Young Gonzalito sees through Martín's scarcely concealed misanthropy and homophobia, his loathing for humanity, a repugnance that Martín inverts as a spectral image of his own inadequacy and shortcomings. This dialectic enshrouds the Pombian literary aesthetic, and it underscores the unbridgeable chasm that separates the immoral and moral protagonists in this story. There is a fundamental abyss that separates Gonzalito, Martín, and Virginia from María, Vélez, and Pelé. To varying degrees, Gonzalito, Martín, and Virginia are embroiled in their own spurious irreality centred on the contrivances of their illusory worlds of art, introspection, and self-indulgence. On the other hand, María, Vélez and Pelé lead lives of heroic altruism and selfless compassion, and in the end, suffer a less ignominious fate (save Pelé, who perishes) because they exude a type of redemption in their humanity, notwithstanding the tragedy that enshrouds them.

Curiously, for me at least, two of the formidable critiques of this novel (by Masoliver and Mainer)¹⁷¹ allude to the parallelism between Pombo and Martín. They advert to the confluence of metanarrative (the interpolation of the author in his own writings), as well as to the pithy disquisitions on the nature of life, sexuality, substantiality, and truth that inform the texts—both *El metro de platino iridiado* and the novel Martín is writing. They have also suggested that Martín embodies Pombo's detached ironic style, as a writer who puts to paper aspects of his most unsettling (or uplifting) life experiences and then sits back to analyze them in scrupulous philosophical detail.¹⁷² From this they have concluded that Martín constitutes in effect a Pombian alter ego. *El metro de platino iridiado*, like any novel, contains aspects of the author's own phenomenological ego—as Robert Magliola points out, citing Serge Dubrovsky. Literary language merely retrieves the world, and the author's *parole* represent the *matérialisation* of the

¹⁷¹ See Masoliver, "La ironía de Álvaro Pombo," p. 27.

¹⁷² See Mainer, *Tramas, libros, nombres: Para entender la literatura española, 1944-2000*, p. 161.

world in literature.¹⁷³ Thus the text necessarily encompasses the subjectivity of the author, through the intentionality of writing. Nevertheless, the text once transmitted as language assumes its own phenomenological identity, conveying a subjectivity in the intertwining among writer, reader, and text.¹⁷⁴ The dialectical twists and turns in Martín's strongly held and (from his perspective) irrefutable epistemological certainties are a standard Pombian rhetorical device in his exposition of philosophical sophistry, in this case pernicious homophobia. Moreover, Martín's character strongly resembles other Pombian protagonists who hold equally irreproachable positions, and who in the end ravage the lives of others around them.¹⁷⁵

In his analysis of *El metro de platino iridiado*, Wesley Weaver characterizes Martín's trenchant homophobia towards Gonzalito as a mere quibbling concerning the nature of masculinity and aesthetics, and Gonzalo's existential anguish as a mere consequence of his insubstantiality:

No es que la sexualidad de Gonzalo deba ser puesta en tela de juicio como obstáculo al autoconocimiento. Ya se ha visto en el caso de Martín y Virginia que la heterosexualidad tampoco garantiza la meta del autoconocimiento. El mal de Gonzalo radica en que su búsqueda carece de vitalidad, es estéril, fruto de la inacción, de la falta de inacción con los demás.¹⁷⁶

Weaver has perceptively picked up on both Gonzalito's portrayal as solipsistic nihilist and Gonzalito's lack of substantial engagement with the Other as principal causes of his insubstantiality. This is also the case, no less, with Martín and Virginia. What is missing from Weaver's otherwise judicious analysis is an appreciation of the dialectical and ironic juxtaposition of Gonzalito's misanthropic narcissism with the overwhelming sense of loss and self-obliteration that the youth feels at his betrayal by Martín. Weaver's almost casual dismissal

¹⁷³ See Magliola, *Phenomenology and Literature*, p. 86.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 87.

¹⁷⁵ Pombo's other fervidly homophobic characters, Leopoldo de la Cuesta in *El cielo raso* and Juan Campos in *La fortuna de Matilda Turpin*, bear many similarities to Martín in that each suffers from a distorted and overblown self-image built upon delusional notions of their own infallibility; however, each character founders in the end owing to his human failings and misanthropy.

¹⁷⁶ Weaver, *Álvaro Pombo y la narrativa de la sustancia*, p. 113.

of the pervasive and malevolent homophobia of Martín, and the abject self-loathing of Gonzalito with regard to his existential situation, reveals a failure (disinclination, perhaps) on Weaver's part to examine Pombo's depiction of homophobia (internal, or directed towards the subject) as a *causa cardinalis* of homosexual alienation and subsequent solipsism.

Conclusion

El metro de platino iridiado is Pombo's boldest narrative exploration of homoerotic consciousness. It is unquestionably Pombo's most penetrating writing: the narrative allows us to infiltrate the inner realms of the protagonists' psychological and existential turmoil, what Santos Alonso refers to as Pombo's psychological realism.¹⁷⁷ Certainly, Pombo's writing explores the psychology of his protagonists, and there is some "realism" in his writing, however that may be characterized. Nevertheless, Pombo's writing is of a philosophical nature—it reflects on the nature of existence—whereas psychologism refers to an empirical, scientific analysis of the synapses of the brain. More than penetrating the psychological interiority of Pombo's protagonists, the reader explores the phenomenological intentionality of their motives, as well as the consequences of their behaviour. Nevertheless, psychological realism is the category in which Pombo's writing is often (unsuitably) categorized. *El metro de platino iridiado* is the first in a series of Pombo's novels that explore the nature of existential substantiality from the perspective of the protagonists' actions towards and intersubjective engagement with the Other. The other novels in this series include *Telepena de Celia Villalobo* (1995), *Donde las mujeres* (1996), *Cuentos reciclados* (1997), *La cuadratura del círculo* (1999), and *El cielo raso* (2001).

¹⁷⁷ See Santos Alonso, *La novela española en el fin de siglo, 1975-2001* (Madrid: Marenostrum, 2003), pp. 132-135. Alonso's usage of the term is infelicitous, given that psychologism is a term that Pombo would surely find unflattering, and grossly inaccurate. Moreover, Pombo has a deep aversion to the term "realism," as he informs in his discussion of the nature of philosophical writing. See Pombo, "De las narraciones y sus filosofías furtivas," p. 12.

In *El metro de platino iridiado*, Pombo begins to eschew the predominantly heterorelational model of his early novels—a situation wherein homosexuality is only considered within the context of its abject, inverted relation to heteronormativity. Pombo also expounds more fervently on the notion of morals and ethics as they pertain to the phenomenological intentionality of homosexual praxis. By this I mean that, although Pombo does not altogether abandon the notion of homosexual existential dissonance as abjection in relation to denaturalizing heterologocentric epistemologies, he no longer views homosexuality in the context of its status as *vicio*, but rather as *naturaleza* in view of evolving societal mores.¹⁷⁸ I don't mean to suggest that Pombo considers homosexuality to be anything but *naturaleza*, and I have stated as much in my earlier arguments. However, Pombo begins to describe at this stage certain epistemic changes in the perception of homosexuality's dissonant place within the larger heteronormative context. Thus, Gonzalito's estrangement is anomalous not because he is overtly oppressed in expressing his homoerotic intentionality, but rather because he is unable to accept his situation in life. In *El metro de platino iridiado*, the homosexual exists in a society where there is perhaps greater social acceptance of "deviant" sexuality, but where the existential tension and dialectic of hetero/homosexual asymmetry is still irrefutably in force.

It is not surprising that *El metro de platino iridiado* began, by Pombo's own admission, as a text on the contemplative life of Saint Augustine,¹⁷⁹ specifically Augustine's dictum concerning self-contemplation as a path to redemption and communion with God: *noli foras ire, in te ipsum redi; in interiore homine habitat veritas* [do not wish to go outside, return into

¹⁷⁸ The term "naturaleza en vez de vicio" comes from Gil-Albert who is writing very much in the vein of homosexual naturalism. See Gil-Albert, *Heraclés, sobre una manera de ser*, p. 7.

¹⁷⁹ Augustine is one of the major sources whereby classical philosophy in general and Neoplatonism in particular enter into the mainstream of early and subsequent medieval philosophy, and his significant contributions concerning belief and authority, his account of knowledge and illumination, his emphasis upon the importance and centrality of the will, and his focus upon a new way of conceptualizing the phenomena of human history are all meritorious. Pombo seems to be admiring of Augustine's philosophy in some respects, but he diverges significantly from it in terms of his conceptualization of the authentic self and its relation to the exterior world, which specifically calls for the subject to turn outward, and not inward as Augustine had advocated.

yourself; truth dwells in the inner man]. *El metro de platino iridiado* clearly serves as a philosophical admonition, of sorts, on the dangers of introspective pursuit of the will as subjective expressivism. The non-Augustinian notion that only the self matters for phenomenological “expression” is, according to the Pombian scheme of ethics, absolute nihilism.

In *El metro de platino iridiado*, we also begin to see in stark terms the countervailing forces of good and evil as exhibited by the radical and subjective choices the individual makes in relation to the subjection of the will, in other words, an overcoming of the nefarious aspects of the will to power. The “malevolent” characters in this novel (Gonzalito, Martín, and to a lesser extent Virginia) are not so because they have intentionally chosen to be, but rather because they refuse, or are indifferent to, the consequences of their actions in the intersubjective realm. This idea becomes more highly developed in Pombo’s subsequent texts, in particular in *El cielo raso* and *Contra natura*, wherein the nature of good and evil, ethics and morality, and subjective, introspective consciousness is explored in more depth.

Chapter V

Towards a View of Postmodern Love, Morality, and Ethics in *Contra natura*

In previous chapters, I analyzed the emergence of a homotextual discourse in the narrative of Álvaro Pombo from the perspective of homosexuality as a manifestation of phenomenological consciousness, wherein abject feelings of existential dissonance dominate the subject's engagement with his experiential realm. In this chapter I examine Pombo's decidedly different approach to the inscription of homosexuality, that is, his portrayal of homosexuality's emergence into mainstream consciousness as a visible, albeit still perceptibly disquieting, force within heteronormativity. Concomitantly, in this new era of "visibility," persist the scrutiny and judgement with regard to how the homosexual behaves morally and ethically in his engagement with Others and how the homosexual subject immerses himself into the complex web of human discursivity as a more "equal" interlocutor. Pombo's narrative interrogates this topic in scrupulous detail, for in Pombo's estimation, the existential homosexual (as "ontological" Being) remains, notwithstanding remarkable evolutions in social attitudes towards nonconformist sexual practices, a pariah within epistemologically, and by and large religiously, determined heterologocentric discourses concerning the "natural" way to be.

In *Contra natura* (2005), Pombo probes the emergence of a more visible, more self-confident, less self-effacing, and more existentially grounded homosexual subject in the rapidly evolving social, cultural, political, and historical circumstances of the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, Pombo recognizes the contingency of this greater acceptance and visibility on a number of social and cultural factors that are subject to changeable historical circumstances.

Within this historical setting, the pendulum can just as easily swing the other way—Nietzsche’s fateful notion of eternal recurrence in history. From Pombo’s perspective, heterologocentric discourses of homosexual objectification remain largely in force, and in *Contra natura* he approaches the topic of heterologocentrism with some tenacity.¹⁸⁰ The homosexual’s relationship to this increasingly “tolerant” society is inevitably informed by his ontological conceptualization through same-sex desire. Within the cultural, social, and political discourses of heteronormativity, not all of which are homophobic per se, the homosexual remains *contra natura* by virtue of his sexual praxis—that is, in consideration of sexual praxis as a fundamental aspect of Being within the greater experiential realm. Moreover, the homosexual remains at a distance from these mainstream discourses by virtue of his own self-segregation, where he is within the confines of the security and familiarity of his existential dissonance. Thus, Pombo addresses questions that concern how the homosexual leads his life in these circumstances.

In this chapter I consider the way that Pombo’s homotextual narration in *Contra natura* significantly challenges and destabilizes heterologocentric, epistemic certainties of Being as precepts that govern the expression of sexuality. Pombo’s narrative considers how the homosexual and the predominant heteronormative society view erotic intentionality—that is, sexual engagement with another—as a significant determining factor in a subject’s identity formation. In his assessment of the place of the subject in postmodernity, Jonathan Dollimore looks at a number of factors that contribute to displacement within the wobbly edifice of identity that is the conception of the autonomous, rational self—the experiential locus of “liberating,

¹⁸⁰ Once again, I restrict my discussion primarily to what is happening in economically developed, Western countries. The socio-political situation for homosexuals in many countries, dare I say much of the world, remains generally dire and precarious, particularly in regions where conservative, authoritarian, or fundamentalist-religious mores predominate—including in many former socialist or communist countries—and to the extent that these selfsame religious mores prevail in developed countries, there as well.

uncontaminated subjectivity.”¹⁸¹ Dollimore’s conclusion, not surprisingly, is that identity formation is not so simple, owing to the different experiential factors of the subject’s historical situatedness and to the fact that the homosexual subject has yet to emerge fully from his cocoon of invisibility. I argue that Pombo largely agrees with Dollimore, and the textual evidence in *Contra natura* clearly corroborates this notion of indeterminate and differently inflected sexualities and identities. However, I also argue that Pombo unequivocally asserts that the subject’s sense of self is firmly rooted in the concept of a free will that is inherent in his actantiality as moral agent, albeit an actantiality that is determined by his intersubjectivity with Others, as well as the ineluctable historical and cultural situatedness of his Being-in-the-world.

In *Contra natura* Pombo fashions a narrative dialogue, cum dialectical critique, that trenchantly, and at times uncompromisingly, challenges manifestations of what Pombo perceives to be a dissolute, solipsistic postmodern homosexuality often characterized by nihilistic subjectivism, where gratification of the ego and intensification of pleasure assume paramount significance. In my analysis of *Contra natura*, I discuss two salient aspects of Pombo’s writing concerning homosexuality in postmodernity, namely: (1) heterogeneous homosexual identities that inhere in the experiential realm of homoerotic intentionality as a basis for the formation of cultural, political, and social practices, and the manner in which the “postmodern” homosexual conceives of his place within a more accommodating, and less oppressive heteronormativity (in this context, I also examine Pombo’s treatment of ethics and morality—aspects of virtue and selflessness towards the Other—within the subjective engagement of love); and (2) the evolution of epistemological discourses concerning homoerotic intentionality and love (that is, I examine various interpretations of love: passionate vs. compassionate love—*Eros* as opposed to

¹⁸¹ Dollimore is referring to Foucault’s notion of the dispersal of the autonomous self, and Foucault’s subsequent proposition that the autonomous self, as conceived by rational humanism, is actually the source of a repression that constructs and infiltrates consciousness itself. See Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*, p. 81.

Dionysus). Moreover, I explore how Pombo interrogates same-sex eroticism as sexual praxis from the perspective of rigid gender roles and how these are informed by essentializing discourses of heterologocentrism (male phallic and thus dominant top; female receptive and thus submissive bottom).

Contra natura is written as a dialectical interrogation that examines the way sexual identities (both homo and hetero) are informed. By this, I mean the way identities are constructed and negotiated by means of the subject's phenomenological, intentional experiences with his environment, and in accordance with prevailing religious, moral, social, and cultural—to wit, epistemological—conceptions of Being. In *Contra natura* Pombo employs rhetorical dialogical techniques to interrogate these notions of Being, providing discursive asides in which the narrator expounds on a particular philosophical point or moral conundrum and engages as well with the protagonists themselves in second person, interdiagetic stream-of-consciousness dialogues (à la Goytisolo) concerning the moral and ethical consequences of their behaviour.

As Pombo relates in the epilogue, *Contra natura* is essentially a story about two different ways of living the homosexual experience: one, bound up in the hedonistic, anything-goes, anti-patriarchal, antinomian, anti-bourgeois, and so-called Dionysian transgressive modes of Being (à la Genet) and the other, in accordance with prevailing modes of “conventional” (heteronormative) relationships and modes of affective Being, albeit necessarily different by virtue of the dynamics—to wit, the lack of an epistemologically grounded history—of same-sex relationships. Furthermore, Pombo leaves no doubt as to which he considers the more “valid” form of existence, that is, from his conception of existential authenticity, and as evinced in the narrative:

He procurado expresar con vigor y crudeza —quiero decir, con la mínima cantidad posible de sentimentalismo— las relaciones entre homosexuales de distintas generaciones. Así, la tradicional fascinación de los homosexuales masculinos mayores por hombres treinta años más jóvenes aparece aquí con toda

su intensidad pero también con todas sus dificultades y contradicciones. La tradicional atracción del homosexual masculino por la belleza física es presentada aquí en toda la ambigüedad y absurdo que en sí misma contiene. También con todo su encanto. Este encanto incluye una dosis de rijosidad ... En esta novela, en definitiva, se plantean dos modos radicales de vivir la experiencia amorosa homoerótica masculina. Uno de ellos es válido: el otro, inválido. Dejo a la inteligente decisión del lector decidir cuál de los dos modelos es aceptable. (CN 561)

Pombo's epilogue imparts an unambiguous ideological stance with regard to modes of homosexual Being as defined by erotic intentionality. Although the reader does not come to this bit of information until the epilogue, Pombo's attitudes and ideological stance are altogether clear from the narrative of the text.

Contra natura examines how homosexuals are readily recognized (homographetically) in the greater society for the manner in which they "wear" their sexuality on their bodies (ideologically as a matter of cultural recognition) and also how they insinuate themselves metonymically¹⁸² within the overarching mode of heteronormativity. *Contra natura* is also fundamentally preoccupied with the search for truth, that is, for the authentic revelation of the subject's Being by virtue of his engagement with life and in accordance with his moral, ethical, and, I would add, spiritual orientation vis-à-vis the Other. Pombo's quest for truth in *Contra natura* resembles in many respects the writing of Iris Murdoch, in that the subject evolves in a moral and ethical space of interindividuality, and the very nature of one's actions and righteous actions towards the Other become indispensable to the subject's own survival. Pombo concedes that he is deeply inspired by Murdoch, in particular her writings on the subject's ethical and moral engagement with his universe and the responsibility each of us has to seek truth in meaning as a means of orienting ourselves within our inscrutable, and often tragic existence.¹⁸³

¹⁸² "Metonymic shadowing," as I discuss in the introduction, relates to the homosexual's existential dissonance within heteronormativity; this is a disquieting existence that heteronormativity is keenly aware of, for it reminds the dominant society of this oddly contiguous presence that makes it, the dominant society that is, acutely self-conscious of its own difference.

¹⁸³ See Pombo, "Recordando a Iris Murdoch," p. 83.

The Narrative Structure of *Contra natura*

Contra natura takes place in Madrid, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, and concerns four homosexual men whose lives and histories converge in a final dramatic series of events. Javier Salazar is a sixty-something retired editor of an influential magazine that deals with world affairs. Paco Allende, also sixty-something, is a retired professor who was a schoolmate of Salazar's in a Jesuit seminary during the Franco era and now works as a teacher in a secondary school in a working-class neighbourhood. Ramón Durán is a preternaturally handsome twenty-something plebeian from the working class suburbs of Málaga who seemingly has no fixed direction in his life—he lives the life of a bon vivant, working in gay nightclubs and bars as a waiter or busboy and relying mainly on his physical comeliness and charms to elicit attention from older men. Juanjo Garnacho is a thirty-something former physical education teacher from Málaga, also extraordinarily good-looking and exuberantly macho, who is married to a woman and has a young daughter. Durán and Juanjo are former lovers from Durán's high school years, and it is the older Juanjo who had initiated him in the rites of same-sex love.

The first section of the narrative consists of flashbacks into the lives of Salazar and Allende in the Jesuit seminary where both were indoctrinated in the inflexible, dogmatic religiosity of National-Catholic Spain. In these flashbacks, the narrative examines, in starkly polemical fashion, the role of Christianity (generally) in the discursive evolution of morality, and the role played by the Spanish Catholic Church in the denaturalization of the homosexual. The solipsistic world of Salazar is laid bare, and he is depicted as a ruthlessly egotistical individual whose callousness and homophobia cause a young man (Carlos Mansilla) who is deeply infatuated with him to take his own life after being rejected. Allende also eventually falls in love with Salazar in the homosocially charged environment of the seminary; however, Salazar, owing to his abiding sense of homosexual self-loathing and general misanthropy, is unable, or unwilling, to accept homoerotic intentionality as a part of his nature, and thus he refuses to yield

to Allende's advances. Salazar, we come to discover, is an ascetic who eschews prurient gratification (of any form) as a means of human intercourse.

The principal focus of the narrative, however, is the contemporary era and centres on the eventual reunion of Allende and Salazar, through a chance encounter and after a long hiatus. Initially, the senescent, flaccid Salazar is partnered with the vigorous, youthful Durán in a curiously incongruous and mostly emotionless relationship—at least on the part of Salazar. Salazar, like many of Pombo's insubstantial characters, is characterized by a lifeless physical fragility and limpness that limn not only his morbid physical appearance, but also his emotional detachment. Salazar is a cold-hearted misanthrope who preys on the emotions and vulnerabilities of those who attach to him, as he did with Carlos Mansilla in the seminary. Ultimately, Allende meets Durán and is smitten by the young man, although he never makes an attempt to connect sexually with him, even when Durán is at his most vulnerable and turns to Allende for comfort (upon learning of the murder of his mother). During this time, Juanjo moves to Madrid to pursue a course in professional football training, and eventually he reconnects with Durán. In due course, the lives of the four men intertwine during the unfolding of the drama. Although Allende shuns sexual contact with any of the other protagonists, he soon becomes swept up in the maelstrom of their *ménage-à-quatre*. Nevertheless, Allende pines intensely for Durán but maintains a discreet relationship with him, and it is Allende's platonic relationship with Durán that sheds light on the narrative's most incisive philosophical stance concerning the nature of love, the passions, and the "natural" and "rational" human impetus to strive towards a moral and virtuous state of Being.

Love as Eros, Homosexual Identity, and the Ethics of Being

In *Contra natura* subjective nihilism emerges as the focal point of a dialectic concerning the phenomenon of love and sex between men, in particular the complex and byzantine love relationships between older and younger men. Pombo constructs the narrative of this text as an

interrogation of the various forms of love that humans can have for one another, and how these types of love emerge in the authentic engagement with life, which the subject must strive for. The narrative examines love and the expression of homoeroticism from two entirely different perspectives. The first conforms to a concept of so-called Dionysian expressivism,¹⁸⁴ or a liberated sexuality, in the wake of gay liberation, that rejects any notion of “commitment” in the sense of patriarchal “ownership,” which allegedly characterizes heteronormative relations between men and women. This concept of sexuality corresponds generally with Foucault’s notion of *ars erotica*,¹⁸⁵ and speaks of a love that is informed by a licentious expression of love and passion, unfettered by a slavish Christian moralism of chastity and self-restraint with regard to the body and the irrepressible “human spirit.” The other conforms to a type of love based on the Platonic notion of *Eros*, that is, a relationship of intersubjective engagement between individuals who merge authentically in a relationship, not simply a relationship of physical sexuality, but also emotional, intellectual, and spiritual communion. This form of intersubjective engagement binds one to the other, not in the sense of possession, but rather in the sense of mutual mattering, caring, and recognition. It is the latter form of behaviour that corresponds to what I have been describing in this study as Pombo’s notion of authentic Being.

Two of the protagonists in this story (Salazar and Juanjo) embody all that is solipsistic, dissolute, and self-indulgent with regard to sexual and emotional engagement with the Other. Their attitudes towards sex in particular cohere with the Dionysian model, the intemperate one at

¹⁸⁴ The Dionysian aspect of Nietzsche’s philosophy is the subject of tremendous debate among poststructuralists and traditional philosophers. Walter Kaufmann contends that Dionysus in Nietzsche’s first book (*The Birth of Tragedy*) is the symbol of a “drunken frenzy which threatens to destroy all forms and codes; the ceaseless striving which apparently defies all limitation,” but that the later Dionysus is the synthesis of the two forces represented by Dionysus and Apollo in *The Birth of Tragedy*, to wit: “passion controlled, as opposed to the extirpations of the passions, which Nietzsche more and more associated with Christianity.” See Kaufmann (1974: 128-131).

¹⁸⁵ The Foucaultian notion of *Ars erotica*, according to Arnold Davidson, corresponds to unfettered bodily pleasure intensification, while *scientia sexualis* is organized around the axis of subject-desire-truth. Davidson posits furthermore that in the Foucaultian scheme of sexuality, *scientia sexualis* ultimately results in the “imposition of truth discourses on the subject of sexuality and leads to the centrality of a theory of sexual desire, while the discourse of pleasure and the search for its intensification are exterior to a science of sexual desire.” See Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality: Historical Epistemology and the Formation of Concepts*, p. 211.

least.¹⁸⁶ The other two protagonists (Allende and Durán) are ultimately searching for significance through the fulfilment of the authentic self, which they perceive to be inherent in full recognition of and love and compassion for the Other. There is little question that the moralizing discourse in *Contra natura* portrays the so-called Dionysian model of sexuality to be nihilistic in the extreme, and that this type of behaviour contributes little, if anything, to the ultimate “emancipation” of the homosexual, other than the indulgence of licentious urges without consequence. Moreover, the moralizing discourse of *Contra natura* purports to show that liberated sexuality as pleasure intensification reduces the subject to a libidinous, solipsistic apparatus. The so-called Dionysian mode of sexual Being, which professes to subvert heterologocentric discursivity concerning sexuality (the *scientia sexualis*), results, in the end, in the mere objectification of sex itself. For Salazar, in particular, but also for Juanjo, this mode of sexual Being leads to catastrophic consequences and ultimately an annihilation of the self.

In the Spain of the *Transición*, there were few culturally determined (or sanctioned) models for a same-sex erotic relationship. However, within the temporal and spatial setting of *Contra natura*—early twenty-first century Madrid in the gay *barrio* of Chueca—there is a veritable plethora of homosexual “lifestyles” and cultures that advocate for homosexual identity through the expression of eroticism. In a manner, this advocacy for homosexual identity through sexual praxis is done almost homographetically by means of the ascription of homosexuality to the body—the frequently salacious imagery of homoeroticism as a signifier of “identitarian”

¹⁸⁶ This is the version of Dionysian that Foucault cites, in his reading of Nietzsche, as the impelling force for his notion of the pleasure of the body. In his excellent biography of Foucault, James Miller sums up his (Foucault’s) reading of the Dionysian force in the following terms: “‘It is a matter of a multiplication and a burgeoning of bodies,’ producing ‘an exaltation’ of a kind of autonomy of its smallest parts, of the smallest possibilities of a part of the body ... There is a creation of anarchy within the body, where its hierarchies, its localizations and designations, its organicity, if you will, is in the process of disintegrating ... This is something unnameable, useless, outside of all the programs of desire. It is the body made totally plastic by pleasure: something that opens itself, that tightens, that throbs, that beats, that gapes.” See James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), p. 274.

difference. With the growing acceptance of homosexual identity, however, come attempts by heteronormative culture to “normalize” and amalgamate homosexuality as another, albeit exceptionally dissonant aspect of normative society:

Comer, follar y defecar: el matrimonio acabó convirtiéndose en un incesante tránsito intestinal ... Era imposible negar esto. Allende también pensaba algo así cuando, considerada la cuestión homosexual (en general o en sí mismo), llegaba a ese punto, tan de actualidad, en que es preciso afirmar la normalidad de las relaciones homosexuales ... Allende se daba cuenta de que lo que él mismo rechazaba en estas estampas no era tanto el bienestar o la buena comida, sino la inmersión deliberada en la normalización burguesa. ¿Era homosexualidad compatible con esta *vida beata*? (CN 417-418)

In his musings Allende reflects on the rather banal ordinariness that the “homosexual lifestyle” had come to assume in seeking to insinuate itself into bourgeois normalcy (the *beatific lifestyle*). Allende also considers whether in fact normalization of the homosexual in the mainstream is within reach, or even desirable. In the Spanish culture of Allende’s time, where the “normalization” of the homosexual had been steadily evolving since the incipience of gay liberation movements in the late 1960s, homosexuality is still considered, in the larger cultural imagination, to be egregious: male homosexual characters (lesbians are still mostly invisible) are stereotypically lampooned as flamboyantly effeminate, flighty, and inconsequential—the derogatory Spanish term for a homosexual is “pierde aceite,” which translates as “he is leaking oil.” These depictions are readily visible in contemporary (early twenty-first century) Spanish cinema and television. No doubt, from Allende’s perspective, these attempts at normalizing popular gay culture are amusing, and even laudable, in their attempts to mitigate open fear and hostility towards homosexuals and break down—or further promote, as the case may be—popular stereotypes.

Nevertheless, despite the rapid evolution in societal mores and levels of acceptance, and a relative openness to different expressions of sexuality, the singular identifying characteristic for homosexuals—and what signifies their difference within heteronormative society—is with

whom they express their erotic intentionality. It is in the context of the expression of this choice of object-of-desire that homosexuals merge into the consciousness of the mainstream as visible, and in some cases palpably threatening. *Contra natura* deals extensively with the erotic, amorous entanglements of the various protagonists within the context of this relatively unrestricted environment as concerns choice of object-of-desire, within a society where homosexuals no longer have to scurry furtively among the bushes in public parks or steal away to the squalid raunchiness of public washrooms for anonymous trysts—unless they do so by cultural choice, that is. Of course this new freedom also entails negotiating the dynamics of love, among men in the case of *Contra natura*, and the dynamics of such relationships have their own complications and involve moral choices. Thus, it is in the framework of this new cultural and social setting where the protagonists of this narrative begin their engagements with one another, and where the ultimate confrontation between the clashing ideologies of homosexual Being unfolds.

Unlike the meeting between Ortega and Quirós in *Los delitos insignificantes*, charged as it is with the headiness of homoerotic banter and coquetry, the casual first encounter between Salazar and Durán in *Contra natura* is anti-climactic and matter-of-fact. The relationship surfaces in circumstances where same-sex courting is just another type of sexual socialization that a “liberated,” Western society accepts with some measure of forbearance. In one of the early episodes of the novel, the wizened and cynical Salazar meets the arresting young Durán whom he comes to seduce, but not in the manner of postmodern, liberated homosexualisms:

Esta escena inicial, en la memoria de Salazar, no contiene apenas nada. En todo caso, un cierto aire anticuado, una seducción démodé, más característica de los años oscuros de la juventud de Salazar que de los años posmodernos de homosexualidades liberadas del nuevo siglo. (CN 11)

Homosexual courtship in the age of postmodern dissolution and clamorous identity politics is no longer a subterfuge of perverse anonymity where the homosexual skulks and lurks like a stealthy

beast on the prowl for unsuspecting prey. In the new era, the homosexual brand is visible and, for the typically scornful Salazar, somewhat risible. Yet, there is something distinctly anomalous about the first encounter between Salazar and Durán because the latter is not of the mould of the liberated gay; rather, he is ingenuous and desirous of a more “traditional” type of relationship where courtship and coy flirtatiousness come into play. Durán’s ingenuousness, in particular, and the misplaced love that he feels initially for Salazar, for which he is ultimately rewarded with contemptuous indifference, and then for Allende, who treats him with magnanimous compassion, illustrate a parable of behaviour that in Pombo’s narrative does betray at times a certain quasi religiosity. Durán represents, in some respects, metaphorically the young waif who is rescued by the Samaritan in the Gospel of Luke. His rescuer, as it turns out, is no less than Allende, the erstwhile seminarian who has rejected his religious upbringing and Catholicism altogether.

Durán is at first bedazzled by the garish, dissolute ambience of nightclubs, bars, and backrooms, as well as by the fixation on male physical beauty that he discovers in Madrid’s gay district of Chueca. For the young naïf from Málaga, Chueca is distinctly otherworldly, but Durán is determined to find love and fulfilment at all costs. Durán eventually settles in with the love-challenged Salazar; however, he subsequently encounters and is once again smitten by the sight of his first love Juanjo, also from Málaga, who has come to Madrid to escape the “drudgery” of his heterosexual conjugal life there with his wife and young daughter. While at first averse to the display of tawdry “homoness” that he finds so prevalent in Chueca, Durán is nevertheless besotted by the sight of his strapping one-time lover:

Durán está incluso a punto de decir que detesta este lenguaje de musculocas, y sin embargo, al contemplar ahora a Juanjo tan cuarzón, con su camisa tan ceñida, atractivo de pronto, le parece adecuada esta imagen de los musculocas, este baratillo de gimnasios, gays de drugstore, y cabinas de bronceado rápido. (CN 119)

Durán's initiation into the world of muscle queens (*musculocas*), drugstore gays, and rapid tanning salons (*bronceado rápido*) is one of bewilderment, but his disorientation serves as a dramatic turning point in the narrative for the wide-eyed country bumpkin who is thrust into the world of rampant narcissism and licentiousness that characterizes aspects of Chueca's "scene." The gay district of Chueca is depicted metaphorically, in a style similar to the asphyxiating enclosures that characterize Pombo's other works—the capacious houses in *El cielo raso*, *El héroe de las mansardas de Mansard*, and *El metro de platino iridiado*. To wit, Chueca becomes a Sartrean *No Exit* (*Huis Clos*) for Durán owing to his existential entrapment in its all-consuming homoness; as does the claustrophobic hotel for Sartre's characters, Chueca too eventually becomes a kind of stifling hell for Durán. The world of *musculocas* and *bronceado rápido* is, the narrative's sardonic commentary informs, the nadir of the postmodern homosexual experience in that it represents a retrenchment into a spurious existence of dissimulation and alteration, a means of covering up what was once homographetically visible—the "flamboyant" effeminacy associated with "queerness"—with bulging biceps and permanent tans. In a paradoxical way, the narrative intimates that the homosexual ghetto, aside from providing a safe refuge from the relentless vilification and degradation occasioned by homophobia, also insulates the subject who lives there from engagement with the world at large, and removes him from the only means by which authentic existence can be asserted: radical disputation with the sources of his oppression. This dialectic is most clearly evinced in the musings of Allende as he contemplates the nature of homosexual existential dissonance, and the fact that alienation from society is what the homosexual "craves," in spite of it all:

Sin embargo, con la naturaleza misma del impulso homosexual que, tanto en aquellos tiempos como después o incluso hoy día en el siglo XXI, tiene un componente de transgresión y de desafío al común de la sociedad: por integrado que el homosexual esté o llega a estar, por mucho que felizmente se case y viva en paz con su pareja, no acaba de ser verosímil una integración plena. No se trata

tanto de que la sociedad le rechace como del rechazo que el propio homosexual, emparejado o sin emparejar, hace de su sociedad. (CN 254)

Allende and Salazar, of course, represent Pombo's generation with its vastly different cultural and historical perspectives and experiences, one that was firmly anchored in the culture and society that suppressed outward manifestations of homoerotic intentionality, if not consciousness of it. Durán and, to a much lesser degree, Juanjo are the standard-bearers of a new generation that seemingly seeks its identity and self-anchoring through a solipsistic inward turn in the form of a self-imposed ideological segregation, as well as the rudiments of an identity consisting in difference related to desiring of the same. Consequently, the homosexual ghetto in a way paradoxically reinforces the dynamics of compulsory difference, much as Diana Fuss tells us heteronormativity asserts its own compulsory standards and practices by excluding what it is not.¹⁸⁷ The Chueca ghetto, then, represents the interiority of space and a separation of the protagonists from the world at large. The interactions between Salazar and Allende and Juanjo and Durán occur in the metaphorical fishbowl of Chueca, and manifest in forms of behaviour that highlight the vast existential differences in their respective homoerotic subjectivities. Salazar's encounter and subsequent relationship with Durán, and the insertion of Juanjo into the foray, sets the stage for the kind of existential turmoil that Pombo so adeptly uses to juxtapose dialectically the vastly different moral and ethical postures that infuse his narrative.

Salazar is a prototypical character in the succession of insubstantial Pombian characters who, owing to their all-consuming solipsism, never fully engage with, or "recognize" existentially, the subjective Other: they are cold, apathetic, calculating, and misanthropic. Salazar,

¹⁸⁷ Fuss says: "For heterosexuality to achieve the status of the 'compulsory' it must present itself as a practice governed by some internal necessity. The language and law that regulates the establishment of heterosexuality as both an identity and an institution, both a practice and a system, is the language and law of defence and protection: heterosexuality protecting itself from what it sees as the continual predatory encroachments of its contaminated other, homosexuality. Of course, any sexual identity, based on the complicated dynamics of object choice, works through a similar defensive procedure." See Fuss, *Inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, p. 2.

notwithstanding his self-proclaimed Dionysian dissoluteness, represents in many respects the antithesis of a “liberated homosexual,” and in fact the narrative reveals that his inclination has always been towards asceticism, or at the very least, a type of relationship with the Other that involves a chaste aloofness rather than sexual hedonism:

A sus veintitantos años, Javier Salazar se consideraba heterosexual a sí mismo. Pensaba que los remotos episodios de iniciación erótica de su primera juventud, allá en el pueblo, así como todo el episodio de Carlos Mansilla, sólo confirmaban la exquisita naturaleza de sus inclinaciones sexuales, su natural ascetismo, su aprecio por la castidad, su aborrecimiento de toda relación carnal vulgar, como Salazar lo llamaba. (CN 273)

Moreover, Salazar’s interactions with Others has been as spectator; he has never been one to join the foray, as it were, or to sully his hands with messy human relationships. In reality, Salazar is the type of homosexual for whom the trappings of homosexuality, as lifestyle, as identity, as political or social consciousness, are anathema:

Igual no eres gay —comentó el muchacho—. A mí me da igual lo que tú seas. No te preocupes. Sí soy. Claro que soy gay. Sólo que estoy viejo y eres muy guapo y te deseo tanto que me atrevo a tocarlo. Estas frases parecieron a Javier Salazar, de pronto, líquidas, no suyas, ajenas a su carácter, metidas y sacadas de la boca como una barrita de vaselina recto adentro: tenían su deliciosa repugnancia, su sentimentalidad intestinal propia, una baba o saliva dulce, inauténtica, circunstancial, de la cual se arrepintió nada más sentirla, pronunciarla, paladearla. (CN 12)

Salazar readily accepts the intentionality of his conscious homoeroticism—his desire to fornicate with the voluptuous young Durán—but he also acknowledges the spuriousness of his existential “insertion” into the vortex of homoerotic intentionality, as reflected facetiously by this metaphorical locution of the vaseline slathered applicator shoved into his rectum (“recto adentro”). Pombo’s narration, ever given to satirical imagery, equates Salazar’s discomfiture regarding the disclosure of his homosexuality with the embarrassment experienced around anal probes; an apt metaphor, in any event, for Salazar’s parsimonious emotivity, not to mention his anal retentiveness.

The enunciation, as it were, of Salazar's homoness induces a certain nausea for him related to the inauthenticity of its utterance. Salazar's earliest recollection of homoerotic intentionality, which has remained seared in his consciousness since his youth, is the image of two mechanics fornicating lustily in the countryside. It is also this indelible image, recounted in lusty detail, that informs the spectatorial relationships that he has with the men in his life: "¿Volverían a hacerlo esta vez? El más joven se puso a cuatro patas de pronto, y el mayor le quitó el mono y le lamió la raja del culo y se masturbó un poco y le metió la polla por el culo y los dos jadeaban: le pareció al joven Salazar una escena bellísima" (CN 189). Salazar is obsessed with this image of sex between men as anthropological, as brutal phallogentric domination through penetration of the objective Other, and this is the imagery that comes to represent homoerotic intentionality in his consciousness. The scene in question unfolds on his father's property in the Castilian countryside, in the midst of the darkest years of Francoist oppression, during which the apprehension for such an act would have resulted in the mechanics' internment in prison or a concentration camp. Ironically, in the waning stages of Salazar's fateful and abusively degrading relationship with Juanjo, this is the image that he conjures up and it is the means by which he invokes the "naturalness" of his own homosexual proclivities: "Naturalmente esto no fue así con los mecánicos: los mecánicos le arrastraron a un placer increíblemente intenso que, ahora, ha vuelto: con Juanjo la memoria de aquel intenso placer ha reaparecido" (CN 472).

Salazar's connection to his homoerotic intentionality, to the extent that it exists at all, is one of disaffected physical erotogenicity. From Salazar's perspective, there is no in-between stage in the development of erotic/affective relationships—vital or emotional nexus to the Other, aside from what the Other can offer through his erotic appendages. The narrative uses Salazar's engagement with his erotic intentionality to interrogate sexual relationships between men as the

basis for intersubjective intercourse—in all its connotations—and in so doing, Pombo exposes the basic ontological problem of a homosexual identity that is centred solely on sexual gratification. Pombo uses *Contra natura* as a means of examining homosex from the phenomenological perspective of praxis: following Merleau-Ponty, our meaning as individuals (in an intersubjective world) becomes significant only when validated against the subjective reality of a “reciprocation of significance.”¹⁸⁸ Merleau-Ponty’s reciprocity of significance is situated in a context of mutually exchanged signified meanings that refute the tendency to objectify the Other as outside our realm of mattering. For homosexuals who already feel marginalized in a homophobic world, and for whom one’s own existential significance is called into question, the conferring of significance on the Other dissipates in a pervasive feeling of inauthenticity as regards one’s own existence. Thus, Allende has to acknowledge that his impassioned erotic feelings for Durán consist in something infinitely more substantial than prurience, in which his lust as desire for objectification must itself be negated:

Allende sabe que tiene que pensar contra sí mismo y sentir contra sí mismo en todo esto. De lo contrario su homosexualidad se volverá clueca, chueca, babosa, empollapollas ... Sus enternecimientos con Durán tienen que ser mortificados y negados si han de valer algo al final. Si los homosexuales —se dice— no somos capaces de aceptar en todo su poder la seriedad de lo negativo, más vale que sigamos cluecos, chuecos, como llevamos más de dos mil años en el Occidente. (CN 420)

Historically, the Other, as same-sex object-of-desire, is not a part of an individual’s subjectivity, and thus remains perennially objectified. Allende concludes that an objectified, abstract (amorphous) Other is devoid of significance and exists merely for purposes of prurient gratification, and that ultimately there can be no significant symbolic exchange in a meaningless sexual relationship.

The juxtaposition of Salazar with Allende, then, establishes the dialectical tension concerning Dionysian love versus the love of Eros, and explores the ramifications of pleasure

¹⁸⁸ See Merleau-Ponty in Silverman, *Inscriptions: Between Phenomenology and Structuralism*, p. 82.

intensification as the sole basis for a relationship. In the narrative, Salazar's depiction embodies the antithesis of the "good homosexual," and his misanthropy towards humanity—the desire to inflict pain and humiliation on others—drives his interactions with the Other. From Salazar's perspective, love generally, and particularly love between men, is transitory, fleeting, and insignificant, and certainly overdetermined as the basis of one's sexual identity: "¿Qué poca cosa es este amor!, se dijo Salazar mentalmente. Este amor de ligue, estos amores de un día para otro, ni siquiera del todo satisfactorios o agradables, más menos que nada" (CN 19). In the flashbacks to the days of the seminary, the younger, idealistic, and cerebral Allende and Salazar continually debate, in Jesuitical tradition, the relative virtues of subjection to a rational, hegemonic sense of duty in terms of one's engagement with the (subjective) Other. In his earlier days, that is, after deciding that he will fully embrace the existentially homosexual mode of Being, Allende is given to a life of hedonism and subjectivism that is founded on the principle, following Nietzsche, that rational hegemony and control fundamentally stifle, desiccate, and repress the subject, and on the principle that rational self-mastery leads to self-domination or enslavement:¹⁸⁹

Entendía Allende que en el texto de Nietzsche vivir una gran pasión y representarla eran posibilidades opuestas ... Lo más parecido a una gran pasión era su pasión homosexual ... Ni siquiera soy un gran artista capaz de representar la gran pasión [nietzscheana], ni siquiera soy un gran apasionado capaz de vivir la gran pasión: soy sólo el hombre medio sensual, goloso, vulgar, que desea, mientras puede disfrutar del inmensamente deleitable erotismo homosexual. (CN 252)

The great Nietzschean passion that Allende purports to want to live would give him "power to create harmonious beauty and to shape his own nature through the life-giving force of his passions"¹⁹⁰—that is, to reach his full potential authentically. Although from the perspective of

¹⁸⁹ According to Charles Taylor, the anti-rational basis for moral considerations in sexuality—largely advocated by the poststructuralists, following Nietzsche (erroneously, or so Taylor contends)—stems from a fervent reaction to the Kantian notion of the primacy of the rational agent as an arbiter in our efforts to live according to the moral law. See Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, p. 116.

¹⁹⁰ Walter Kaufmann provides a scrupulous account of the Nietzschean philosophy in this regard, which largely contradicts the meaning taken away by the likes of Foucault and Deleuze, among others, concerning Nietzsche's

true Nietzschean doctrine (concerning the overman and the will to power), this would entail sublimating his impulses, dominating his animal instincts, controlling the chaos of his passions, and giving style to his character, all of which obviates, and in fact contradicts, the younger Allende's obsession with licentious pleasure gratification.¹⁹¹ In the end, however, the older, more sagacious Allende comes to reject his obsession with sexual gratification as the only means of experiencing his existential homosexual sense of Being, and this is the focus of the narrative concerning his relationship with Durán. Salazar, for his part, is unswerving in his fascination with the antinomian tenets of the Dionysian doctrine, and his outlook in this regard compels him to cling to the transitory nature of sexuality with the primary purpose of concupiscent gratification, or intensification of pleasure—*la sexualité pour la sexualité*, as it were. Salazar's physical relationship—or lack thereof—with Durán, in fact, bears this out:

Y el hecho, casi fantasmal, de que físicamente le agradara el chico —una especie de esquematismo afectivo homoerótico, más que un real deseo— le permitió retenerle consigo aquella tarde y acostarse con él por la noche y las otras noches.
(CN 71)

For Salazar, this type of engagement allows him to live in his emotional cocoon, far removed from any type of intersubjective relationship that has a consequent social responsibility. Salazar is equally contemptuous and dismissive of Juanjo's heterosexual relationship with his wife, Sonia, with whom Salazar trifles maliciously when she comes to Madrid, bedraggled and with child in arms, in desperate search of her wayward husband. Salazar sardonically mocks her sense of bourgeois propriety and the fact that she does not know her husband at all; despite all epistemological certainty of Juanjo's heterosexuality, he is living the life of a "faggot": "¡Esto es una mariconada! —exclama Sonia. ¡Ésta no es la habitación de mi marido! Salazar se echa a reír. Pero sí que lo es Sonia. Éste es un lado de su marido que usted ha ignorado siempre" (CN 398).

purported conviction that indulging grand passions was the highest form of Being. See Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, pp. 234-235.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., pp. 211-227.

The dialectic of sexuality in *Contra natura* examines erotic intentionality towards another (same-sex or opposite sex) as the focal point within heteronormative culture's socially constructed norms of propriety and moral conduct. That is, the manner in which two individuals interrelate sexually and emotionally is determined by the boundaries of acceptable behaviour as determined by the prevailing mores of the dominant society. Salazar, for his part, despite his apparent breeziness and *outré* mannerisms, is conspicuously uncomfortable with same-sex affection as a means of intersubjective relating, even for the purposes of sexual gratification:

Decirse uno a otro «te quiero», e incluso besarse en la boca, era impensable: incluso cuando por iniciativa de Durán se besaban en la boca, seguía siendo impensable: podía hacerse, con la misma naturalidad y deleite con que se hacían mamadas el uno al otro o se masturbaban, pero no podía reconocerse: no podían reconocer explícitamente ninguno de los dos, ni para sí mismos ni ante el otro, que, al besarse en los labios, eran conscientes de que se besaban los labios. ¿Por qué? Porque besarse así era de «mariconas», y ellos dos no eran mariconas ni maricones. (CN 77)

The act of kissing, as heterosexuals do without even being conscious of it, forces the older Salazar and even the younger Durán to have sudden pangs of foreboding, of feeling that somehow their expression of open affection for each other would come across as maudlin and inauthentic, as falling within the domain of a spurious heteronormative relationality. The manifestation of brazen homoerotic intentionality embodies within it a certain measure of “queerness”; however for Salazar, it also represents a sterility and artificiality that he cannot quite reconcile with his repudiation of bourgeois “normalcy.” Salazar's repugnance for this behaviour conforms to what Leo Bersani calls the homographetic reflex to anti-relationality in same-sex relationships.¹⁹² Nevertheless, in the case of Salazar, one detects as well a certain

¹⁹² By this Bersani suggests (in his analysis of Genet's narrative) that the homosexual is portrayed as rejecting the homogenizing nature of the outward trappings of heterorelationality, that is, public displays of affection, cooing, and other demonstrative gestures. Bersani suggests, following Genet's dialectic, that these are antithetical to the pursuit of pleasure. Bersani attributes this particular aspect of homotextual narrative in Jean Genet, that is, Genet's visceral excoriation of bourgeois French morality concerning sexuality, to his irrepressible desire to *épater les bourgeois*. Says Bersani: “For Genet homosexuality is enlisted as the prototype of relations that break with humanity; that elevate infecundity, waste and sameness to requirements for the production of pleasure.” See Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 172.

undercurrent of fear, a fear of simulating a type of relationality in the act of kissing another man that would homographically mark him as a “queer.”

Owing to the dissonant nature of the relationship among the three (Salazar, Juanjo, and Durán) and Salazar’s phobia for intersubjectivity, their affective lives are depicted in almost clinical terms. This is a deliberate ploy, I contend, that underscores the nihilism that characterizes the disaffected relationships of Salazar and Juanjo. For someone as emotionally impoverished as Salazar, sex is a spectacle that lacks basic emotions and feelings, and that becomes in the end a banal *jouissance*. The objective Other, from Salazar’s perspective, serves as a metaphorical receptacle for his erotic impulses and indulgences: a sperm depository, as it were. Salazar appears to be interested in the sexual escapades of his love interests as a means of stimulating (through onanism) his own flaccid eroticism. No more is this in evidence than in the following description of Salazar’s bemused spectatorship to the nightly trysts between Juanjo and Durán that have become in effect a degrading surrogate for Salazar’s inauthentic sexuality:

Es insaciable en esto: quiere saber quién se agachó primero, si se dieron mutuamente por el culo o sólo uno y quién, y cuánto duró la penetración y si sacó la polla excrementada, o no, del culo de Durán: ¡es fascinante —piensa Juanjo, fascinado— lo muy interesado que está Salazar en saber si la dura polla de Juanjo, al entrarle recto arriba a Durán, se le llenó de dulce mierda maloliente, y si al sacarla luego se la chupó con mierda y todo Durán o si sólo Juanjo se la lavó en la ducha. Un cielo excremental de tiza rosa y mariposas y lombrices blancas resplandece en lacas de paneles y biombos chinos. (CN 330)

The imagery of the anal penetration between Juanjo and Durán (replete with excremental lubrication) is recounted with bawdy humour and superfluous scatological detail. The exultant Eros that should erupt in an act of sexual intimacy between the preternaturally handsome Durán and Juanjo is transformed in effect into a performance of anthropological scatology, and the sexual scene becomes one of almost humdrum pornography for its breezy, spectatorial detachment. However, in the midst of the scene of perfunctory anal coitus between Salazar’s love slaves, the narrative turns sardonically poetic as evinced by the evocation of a mellifluous,

excrement-slathered sky of pink chalk and white worms and butterflies glistening on lacquered Chinese folding screens (“un cielo excremental de tiza rosa y mariposas y lombrices blancas ...”). The juxtaposition of the poetic narrative with the tepid pornography unfolding before Salazar’s eyes betrays a tone of mocking derision in its portrayal of the withering, decrepit Salazar—represented by white worms—who experiences sex vicariously in his (morally) putrefying abode—represented by an excrement-smeared firmament.

In stark contrast to Salazar, Allende embodies the radically reflective human being who is intensely stirred by his affective relationships, and more crucially by the consequences of his relationships as reciprocally intersubjective. Allende’s path to illumination is also strewn with the corpses of jilted lovers and unabashed indulgence in sexual promiscuity, as the reader discovers was the case with his former lover Alberto, whose only offence it was to love Allende too much, as a result of which he became an “unbearable weight” for Allende:

A Alberto le gustaba que le diera Allende por el culo. Eso le divirtió a Allende unas semanas. A raíz, sin embargo, de esta última práctica, Alberto se puso pelma, mimoso, empalagoso, celoso, lloroso: una pesadez insoportable. Ni siquiera esperó Allende a terminar el curso: le dejó de un día para otro y ligó con otro chaval en el bar de la facultad. (CN 246)

Reflecting on his licentious, hedonistic past, Allende ultimately has to determine the type of love that he wants to experience with the vulnerable Durán, who has just learned of the murder of his mother, Chipri, with whom he was very close, at the hands of unknown assailants in Marbella. The issue for Allende is whether to give in to his lascivious feelings for the young man by accompanying him in his time of acute grief, in expectation that perhaps some sort of sexual gratification will ensue:

Es cierto que el chico le gusta, pero la acción correcta debe ejecutarse con independencia de que le guste o no. Una inteligencia éticamente refinada como la de Allende siempre titubea a la hora de hacer algo que debe hacer pero que además le gusta hacer. Kant llamaba *patológico* a ese extra de agrado que la acción éticamente correcta puede en algunos casos comportar. Si Allende ahora—obsesionado por el formalismo kantiano, que es una tentación que todas las

inteligencias éticamente responsables sienten— dejara de auxiliar a Durán cometería una falta, un pecado moral imprescriptible. (CN 350)

The centrality of this moral paradox for Allende pervades the entire dialectical framework of this text. Allende is intensely smitten with the beauty of the young ephebe, and he knows that the consequences of his actions will greatly impinge on the life of Durán. The Pombian dialectic concerning different types of love (passionate and compassionate) centres on the rational roles of “duty” and reason in the effecting of morality. The narrative’s discussion of love as virtue mirrors to a great extent the Kantian prescription against “passions” for the irrational influence they exert on the subject’s ability to distinguish right and wrong—an old philosophical conundrum, in any event, that predates by many centuries Kant.¹⁹³ The Kantian conception divides rational, noumenal motives from emotional, phenomenal motives and stresses that dutiful action is something of which man is immediately capable.¹⁹⁴ Kantian notions of rational agency in moral deliberation fly in the face of poststructuralist notions of the decentred self which question even the possibility of morality, as encapsulated in the Nietzschean myth of the eternal return, which posits that there will be no resolution, no rising higher, no compensation for suffering, no ultimate reconciliation, no way out; it postulates that morality (as conceived by Christianity) misrepresents humans as we truly are and negates our natural Being.¹⁹⁵ It is clear that Pombo’s philosophical position, as evinced in the dialectical discourse of the narrative, straddles a number of different ideologies, but where morality is concerned, Pombo’s position on authentic moral action is reflected unequivocally in Allende’s behaviour, and thus leans to the

¹⁹³ Kant’s conception of rational duty derives from the Categorical Imperatives where his preliminary formulation states: “I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law.” This is the principle that motivates a good will, and that Kant holds to be the fundamental principle of all morality. See Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 402.

¹⁹⁴ Charles Taylor describes the Kantian notion of morality as inhering in reason: what the moral person wants above all is to conform his action to the moral law, and this is the subject’s ultimate purpose. The law of morality then “is dictated by the very nature of reason itself,” and “to be a rational agent is to act for reasons that are, by their very nature, of general application.” See Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, p. 363.

¹⁹⁵ See Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, pp. 307-314.

Kantian approach. That is, the phenomenological conscious self is rationally guided in its moral actions.

The parallels between Allende and Durán, on the one hand, and Irish Murdoch's similarly age-discordant protagonists Bradley Pearson and Julian Baffin in *The Black Prince*, on the other, are noteworthy—the former character in Murdoch's book is an unsuccessful fifty-eight year old writer, and the latter a university student of nineteen. In Murdoch's text the older, more established writer must confront his all-consuming passion for the ephebe in order to know himself as authentically engaged and to view his external world with keener, “more enlightened and compassionate” insight. In Murdoch's tale, Bradley Pearson ultimately does gain insight and a profound sense of the significance of his life through the virtuous and compassionate love (Eros) that he experiences for his young love interest. Allende is haunted by experiences that date back to his days in the seminary with Salazar, and he views Salazar's impassive, sterile relationship with Durán as precisely the type of behaviour that he abhors and, moreover, has come to reject. Allende sees in Salazar a product of the barren, even sociopathic, ethos of his environment: to wit, the world of meaningless, anonymous sex and frivolous, self-indulgent behaviour. Much like Murdoch's character Pearson in *The Black Prince*, Allende finds himself beseeched by a beautiful youth. Durán, in gratitude for his comforting presence during the anguished moments of his mourning, attempts to seduce Allende: “Allende sabe que cualquier intento de satisfacerse ahora mismo con Durán volvería chusca la relación entre los dos. Toda dignidad se empaparía de genitalidad apresurada” (CN 373). Allende sees sexuality qua Dionysian prurient gratification as an impediment to a deeper moral understanding of himself. In Pombo's previous texts dealing with sexuality as solipsistic gratification, there is also an overriding sense of insubstantiality that results from the abandonment of oneself to wanton eroticism. I am referring in particular to Gonzalito's anonymous nocturnal trysts in the parks and

alleyways of London's grimier cruising spots in *El metro de platino iridiado*, and to Manuel's experiences in "Sugar Daddy" in *Relatos sobre la falta de sustancia*. Allende further makes clear to the now genuinely earnest (and interested) Durán that he is not able to sleep with him because he has not dominated his passions for lust and thus is not yet able to love him in a manner befitting Eros:

Si nos acostamos esta noche, no habrá diferencia ninguna entre Salazar y yo, entre Juanjo y yo. Reproduciremos en esta casa, y entre tú y yo, las primitivas prácticas de seducción y abajamiento que tantísimo placer nos dan a todos. Ceder es maravilloso, entregarse es maravilloso, follar es maravilloso. Es un antiquísimo deseo ... (CN 408)

Ultimately, for Allende the love that he feels for Durán is enacted as a liberating and transforming experience of his own subjective ego; he assumes responsibility for the care of the traumatized (and vulnerable) Durán, not as a consequence of the sexual sway that Durán has over him, but because he truly cares about his well-being, as well as his moral and spiritual betterment: "Esto es, de alguna manera, una consecuencia benéfica, liberadora, de la voluntad pedagógica de Paco Allende o, si se prefiere, de su arriesgado modo de entender el amor como liberación y no como devoración del objeto amado" (CN 482). Allende, in an act of genuine altruism, perceives his intersubjective relationship with the hapless Durán as an act of liberating love rather than as an act of rapacious objectification.

Allende's altruistic decision to refrain from a physical relationship has to be considered in the framework of the subject's engagement with the complex, heterogeneous contingencies of moral agency; that is, the subject's need to sublimate uncontrolled libidinous passion to the execution of the good. This is the crux of the moral question that Pombo's narrative probes in respect of any relationship but particularly in respect to homosexual relationships where the actors, because of their historical exclusion from discourses of sexual morality, purport to exist as if outside the discursive bounds of sexual moralism. Absent are the constraints of a moderating (heteronomously imposed) code of morality founded in traditional patriarchal

discourse of sexual subjugation and possession (traditionally of the female)—or so the poststructuralist rhetoric goes, the deterritorialization of the “desiring machines” in Deleuze’s parlance.¹⁹⁶ Through his dialectical examination of behaviour as regards the moral and ethical consequences of concupiscence and love, Pombo implicitly refutes as nihilistic Deleuze’s notion of deterritorialization which speaks to the deconstruction of metaphysics in order to promote a world that is free of hierarchy and dialectical opposition, particularly as regards the human impulse for Eros. Allende is confronted with the choice of acting out unconstrained his homoerotic urges or of conforming to a kind of amorous or affective relationship that is informed by passion, caring and a sense of indissoluble affinity with the Other:

Ni tampoco dudó nunca, a la hora de tratar la homosexualidad, del amor homosexual como una variante legítima del amor humano. Allende aprendió con Emilia el lema spinoziano: *bene agere ac laetari*. Allende siente un agradecimiento poético, religioso, humano, tal vez demasiado humano, pero tranquilo y firme por la existencia: *Nicht wie die Welt ist, sondern das sie ist, das ist das Mystische* ... El amor —recuerda Allende una de las célebres definiciones de los afectos que propone Spinoza— *es una alegría acompañada por la idea de una causa exterior*. (CN 430)

Allende’s internal turmoil, his radical reflexivity with regard to the moral posture that he will adopt vis-à-vis his beloved Durán, surfaces in the narration as a type of Spinozan dialectic of rational interrogation concerning the manner in which humans pursue happiness (*eudaimonia*). Pombo’s narrative subtly turns here to discuss love in a quasi religious manner, as befitting the noble and virtuous behaviour of Allende towards Durán, and in startling contrast to the manner in which he unceremoniously and pitilessly tossed aside his former lover, Alberto.

Allende’s demeanour and disposition are informed by the religious indoctrination of his youth, and although he has rejected the ecclesiastical admonitions that characterized his sexually repressed Catholic upbringing, he nevertheless recognizes that his sexual intentionality involves a subjective Other who is inextricably involved in his love act (as recipient, as companion, as

¹⁹⁶ See Deleuze and Guattari, *Capitalisme et schizophrénie 1: L'Anti-Oedipe*, pp. 205-207.

accomplice). Salazar, on the other hand, proffers a rather jaded interpretation of the station of the homosexual in society—a life of perpetual marginalization that corroborates the existential dissonance to which the homosexual is condemned. For Salazar, the homosexual is tainted and thus lives with the sense of marginality and morbid insignificance that mark his relation to heteronormativity:

Verás ... te interesará saber quizá, mi viejo Allende, que en mi conciencia, como en la de Jean Genet o en la de Sartre, la homosexualidad, su teoría y sobre todo su práctica, conecta ontológicamente con la marginación y con la soledad y con la muerte y con las cárceles. Ontológicamente significa *ab ovo*: significa antes y después de toda aceptación jurídica o política o social. Nadie nos librará de nuestra esencial conexión con la marginación, con el fracaso y con la muerte. La mayor parte de la gracia que aún tenemos los maricas, antes que la trivialidad y la normalidad nos conviertan en simples consumidores pancistas españoles, mariquitas per cápita que contribuyen con normalidad e incluso con un muy buen balance anual a los gastos de la hacienda pública, antes y después de toda esa babosa voluntad de normalización e identidad con los comemierdas que siempre hemos envidiado y odiado, nuestra conexión más pura es con el fracaso, con la marginación, y con la muerte. (CN 531)

Salazar's inclination is to live an ethereal (insubstantial) type of homosexuality, in a way merely refractory, and countervailing of all established codes of moral engagement. Ironically, Salazar's belief that the homosexual is condemned to a life of perpetual marginalization does not differ too radically, in theory at least, from Pombo's oft-stated postulation that homosexual existential dissonance is inescapable. The crucial difference lies in the manner in which one inserts oneself, subjectively, into the discursivities of existence that this marginalization brings in its wake, and fights inexorably against the prevailing doctrines, whether they be socially, culturally, historically, or epistemologically constructed, that give rise to marginalization in the first place. This is Pombo's basic philosophical position with regard to authenticity, in stark contrast to Salazar's nihilistic cynicism. Salazar's juxtaposition of himself with Sartre and Genet must be considered *mutatis mutandis*, and his depiction throughout the narrative as feckless and apathetic is used to deprecating effect: Salazar is a classical fence-sitter who observes life

dispassionately and disdainfully with no redeeming decisionism in his engagement with anyone or anything.

In the end, Salazar, notwithstanding his rigorous efforts to avoid the affective domain of his experiential realm, succumbs piteously to his human emotions, as he becomes fatally enamoured of Juanjo. Salazar's relationship with Juanjo ultimately assumes the characteristic of all Salazar's previous relations with other men: Salazar's misanthropy towards his other lovers is reciprocated in the most pitiless fashion, as Juanjo, who is even more unfeeling in his sexual relations with other men (or women for that matter), ultimately brutalizes the smitten Salazar. Because of his unrequited love, Salazar is given to bouts of reckless drinking, drug-taking, and performing of the most degrading sexual acts, even draining his personal wealth in order to mollify Juanjo, who extorts him with threats of violence and the withholding of sexual favours:

Salazar se arrodilla delante de su amado Garnacho. Es una escena bella y hostil. Como una cogida de torero. Como un navajazo que parte el corazón. Bella muerte ... en un difuso atrás de su alma, en un trastero olvidado de su conciencia: en un ayer largamente preterido, se acuerda Salazar de *la dialéctica del amo y el esclavo* e incluso de Losey: *The Servant*. (CN 474)

The intertextual allusion to Losey's masterpiece with its intricate psychological plots of intrigue, class warfare, and servitude, is apt for its parallels to the storyline of *Contra natura*. Salazar now assumes the posture of the degraded Other and becomes victim of Juanjo's malicious misrecognition of his subjectivity. His denigrated status as sexual slave conforms precisely to what Alexandre Kojève, in his analysis of Hegel's *Lordship and Bondage*, describes as the nihilation of his subjective Being.¹⁹⁷ Juanjo has no desire for the flaccid Salazar as sex object; he merely craves Salazar's humiliation and prostration. Nevertheless, the degraded, abused Salazar,

¹⁹⁷ Alexandre Kojève's analysis of the Hegelian dialectic of *Lordship and Bondage* posits that it is the struggle for "recognition" that is the driving force behind Hegel's entire philosophy of history. Kojève further characterizes Hegel's dialectic as a reflection of Hegel's position that man is a "desiring being" who seeks the "nihilation of Being" and is thus motivated by a desire that transcends simple physical satisfaction. See Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), pp. 22-26.

even in his most abject moment of humiliation, experiences as a searing reminder of his existence the exhilarating ecstasy of love:

Los tres grandes filósofos alemanes, además de Hölderlin, se servían de una fórmula latina: *est Deus in nobis* ... En los enamoramientos, y también en los encoñamientos, funciona a toda máquina, a todos los niveles de nuestro sistema de ocurrencias, el seréis como dioses. Y Javier Salazar, al enamorarse de Juanjo Garnacho, a saltos, a tramos, ha visto acceder a su conciencia este sentimiento de presencia divina de potencialidad dilatante, de energía centrípeta y centrífuga a la vez, que llamamos amor. (CN 511)

The juxtaposition of Salazar with Juanjo in this tableau underpins the dialectic that Pombo uses in his narrative to construe physical and emotional love as centrifugal and centripetal forces in the phenomenological experience of sexuality, and to explore how these forces govern our ethical and moral responses to the exigencies of the Other. Engaging in physical and emotional love with someone entails an act of conscious and physical immersion in subjectivity that corresponds to the very notion of what Merleau-Ponty calls an intercalation in the Other, from which the subject, however cynical and detached, is unable to dissociate himself. The intensity of the physical or emotional experience that a human being can have with another in a love relationship, as revealed in Salazar's affliction, has few parallels in human emotivity.

In her study of phenomenology in the queer context, Sara Ahmed speaks of the importance of the lived experience, the intentionality of consciousness towards an object that becomes inextricably involved in our perceptions and understanding of our own experiential realm and existential orientation. Ahmed says: "Phenomenology, after all, is full of queer moments, moments of disorientation, which involve not only the intellectual experience of disorder, but the vital experience of giddiness and nausea, which is the awareness of our own contingency and the horror with which it fills us."¹⁹⁸ Salazar's experience with Juanjo is one of complete existential disorientation in his acquiescence to an overpowering subjective Other who

¹⁹⁸ See Sara Ahmed, "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 4 (2006), p. 3.

holds him in master-slave objectivity. For Salazar, this newfound situation is a God-like or epiphanic experience that robs him of his gravity, of his sense of grounding, and that pushes him to the extreme of life-ending, inauthentic behaviour: “Éste es el primer amor de Salazar. Al tragar el semen, sabe Salazar que ama a Juanjo ... despavorido, enfebrecido, desatinado. Es el semen de su primer amor, el principio del fin” (CN 466). In drinking Juanjo’s sperm, in surrendering entirely to his mastery, Salazar becomes in effect his slave. The final act of submission—the drinking of Juanjo’s sperm, which in Pombo’s sardonic religious allegory is a type of Eucharistic transubstantiation—signifies Salazar’s symbolic subsumption in Juanjo’s dominance, and ultimately Salazar’s subjective annihilation.

Salazar eventually kills himself, as did Gonzalo Ortega in *Los delitos insignificantes*, by throwing himself off the balcony onto the street. In *Contra natura*, as in *Los delitos insignificantes*, the ultimate outcome of the dialectic of bondage/submission is death. Salazar’s (and Ortega’s) death can be viewed metaphorically as a kind of killing off of insubstantial Being. There is no question that both Ortega and Salazar represent the nadir of human existence in the Pombian taxonomy of substantiality and authentic behaviour. However, their insubstantiality issues not from any intrinsic aspect of their homoerotic intentionality—although, to be sure, it is a source of tremendous guilt and self-loathing on the part of Ortega—but rather from their inability to move beyond their solipsistic nihilism and to engage purposively within the greater discursive framework of humanity of which they are part. As a result, both Ortega and Salazar perish from the paralysis and fear that results from their resentfulness and their inability to “overcome” (in the Nietzschean sense) their own degradation and humiliation.

The Indeterminacy of Gender Roles in Homoeroticism

In this final section, I turn to a topic that resonates throughout the entire Pombian homotextual narrative, and certainly in *Contra natura*: homoerotic intentionality as it occurs between men,

and between men of different generations. I am referring to gender role-playing in homosex as a discursive construct of heterologocentric discourse. In the Pombian scheme of sexual discourse—and also as it relates to Western notions of the propriety of sex, going all the way back to the Greeks¹⁹⁹—sex between two men appears to be a topic that defies appropriate epistemological grounding within heteronormativity, and one that goes to the heart of “difference” in terms of the societal roles of gender and patriarchy in same-sex male relationships. These roles relate to instances of dominance/submission, sexually active versus sexually passive—phallic active versus anal receptive, as it were—and the respective sociological mimesis (or simulacrum) of male/female gender difference as a critical aspect of compulsory heteronormativity. Pombo’s narrative evokes these motifs, not so much as a means of debunking gender as a visible means of reading sexuality, but rather as a means of understanding why sexuality between men may devolve into a subliminal reconfiguration of the symbolic domain of gender difference, that is, where one of the partners is, metaphorically at least, transmogrified into a woman.²⁰⁰ This distinction is particularly evident in the following description of the sexual inclinations of the hypermacho Juanjo:

Juanjo Garnacho se tenía además en aquel entonces por heterosexual, y lo ocurrido a lo largo de aquellos dos cursos con Ramón Durán eran, en su opinión, debilidades propias de una picha brava que se había complacido sólo en lo que Durán tenía de femenino. Una de las reflexiones más satisfactorias de aquel tiempo era que Durán tenía esa necesidad obsesiva por la ternura y las caricias propia de las mujeres. Así que darle por el culo o las mamadas y las

¹⁹⁹ According to David Halperin, sexual privilege in ancient Greece was regulated by the social position of the participants (nobility vs. slave class, for example), and also the gender of the participants. Thus, sex between men was not remotely anomalous, but it was rigidly guided by a hierarchical system of positionality within the social structure. Says Halperin: “The sexual system of classical Athens, which defined the scope of sexual object-choice for adult men in terms of gender was therefore logically inseparable from the gender system of classical Athens, which distributed to men and to women different kinds of desires, constructing male desire as wide-ranging, acquisitive, and object-directed, while constructing female desire (in opposition to it) as objectless, passive, and entirely determined by the female’s body for regular phallic irrigation.” See David M. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 36.

²⁰⁰ Symbolic to the extent that Lacan identifies desire and identity with castration or a lack, and in this sense with the sublimation or non-exposure of the penis in the form of same-sex intercourse. Juanjo can penetrate Durán and have intercourse with him only to the extent that Durán does not attempt to elevate his reciprocal desire to an equivalent symbolic level; he (Durán) must remain always subordinate.

masturbaciones de los dos, quedaban reducidas, en la mentalidad de Juanjo, a desahogos propios de la edad, nada serio o digno de tenerse en cuenta. (CN 105)

Juanjo, it seems, can only conceive of his relationship with Durán in terms of transforming the latter into the metaphorical female-identified Other (Durán's seemingly feminine allure, and his constant "need for affection and cuddling so characteristic of women"). This transformation also bolsters Juanjo's standing as a heterosexual, which is how he conceives himself—his *heterograpthesis*, as it were—and how he is perceived by those unaware of his voracious homosexual indulgences. Despite his penchant for aggressive machismo and all the trappings of inveterate heterosexuality, in *Contra natura*, Juanjo's "sexual orientation" is constantly being called into question. He has, after all, existed as a "normal" heterosexual, having frequent sex with Sonia, producing a child, and living in a conjugal setting with her in accordance with prevailing heteronormative social mores and custom. Nevertheless, in all his social interactions, Juanjo has to constantly remind himself and others that he in fact identifies as heterosexual, notwithstanding his insatiable affinity for sex with men. According to Jonathan Katz, to openly name heterosexuality and to speak explicitly and at length about it removes it from the realm of the taken-for-granted, subjecting it to the dangers of analysis, and the possibility of critique.²⁰¹ Following Monique Wittig, within the social domain of compulsory heterosexuality, gender and sexuality are derived from one another inasmuch as the symbolic domain of sexuality posits that the hierarchical structuration of sex evolves from an asymmetrical opposition between "feminine" and "masculine," with the former being essentially "different" and inferior in this conceptualization. This difference, according to Wittig, manifests itself in a regime that regulates the way gender is perceived as a means of domination.²⁰² Wittig's proposition comes across as ideologically inflexible and conceives of sex as invariably hierarchical and operating strictly in the realm of domination and subjugation. Nevertheless, it helps to illustrate the ideological

²⁰¹ See Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, p. 67.

²⁰² See Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), pp. 1-8.

positioning of Pombo's narrative in this case, which is decidedly less dogmatic than Wittig's. Pombo's narrative frequently has recourse to paradigms of subjugation/domination involving the social conceptualizations of sex between men which follows from the need of his existentially dissonant homosexual protagonists to anchor themselves in heterorelationality. In order to possess Durán, Juanjo must first feminize him, and all that follows in their trysts— notwithstanding their shared gender—conforms to the “traditional” pattern of male/female coupling; that is, at least, as Juanjo perceives it.

In Pombo's narrative, the fluidity and reciprocity of a male-to-male symbolic exchange become particularly distorted as the relationship between the inferior, subjugated subaltern (the slave) and the corresponding dominator (master) becomes increasingly desperate and exploitative. The dialectical framework of slavery and bondage (or executioner/victim) is particularly germane for understanding how the subaltern—that is, the homosexual generally within the realm of heteronormativity—sexually subjugates the Other of his kind in an environment of objectified denaturalization. In *Contra natura*, homosex is no less susceptible to these paradigmatic discourses of gender roles as determinants of sexual “positioning.” This is clearly in evidence in the narrative depiction of homosex involving the act of anal penetration as the medium of sexual, social, and symbolic exchange. Given the sometimes sadomasochistic, power-driven portrayals of homosex, it would be superficial to conclude—as no doubt some of Pombo's most acerbic gay critics would²⁰³—that these depictions in Pombo's narrative, in which one of the participants assumes a passive sexual role, seemingly conform to a hierarchical and patriarchal notion of symbolic phallic ascendancy. However, upon closer reading, it becomes clear in the Pombian narrative that the marginalized homosexual is not perforce represented as

²⁰³ There are to date no critical reviews of *Contra natura*, which is surprising given the subject matter of the book, and the trenchancy with which Pombo discusses the “situation” of homosexuals, not to mention homosex, in the contemporary era. I allude here to other critical reviews of Pombo's narrative, particularly *Los delitos insignificantes* as discussed in chapter III, in which this topic comes up.

marginal because he is a passive partner in anal sex, or because he assumes a feminized “bottom” posture in his relations with a more masculinized (or heterosexualized) “top,” but rather, because from the perspective of an external cultural (that is, epistemological) gaze, sexual exchange is typically conceptualized in frameworks of dominance/subjugation, top/bottom, and thus invariably man (top)/woman (bottom):

Al fin y al cabo Juanjo era un tipo «normal,» que vivía con Sonia, que follaba con Sonia. Lo de Ramón era una «debilidad»: la idea de que aquel amor fuera sólo una debilidad para Juanjo torturó a Ramón Durán, incluso mucho tiempo después de haber interrumpido la relación ... y Juanjo dijo: esa pregunta, Sonia, viniendo de ti no es de recibo. ¿A mí me ves marica, Sonia, tú? No sé lo que Salazar te habrá contado. Que, por cierto, ¿qué crees que pasó, entre Durán y yo? Durán sí que es maricón, es medio tía, y estaba por mí, ésa es la verdad, ya en el colegio. (CN 423)

From Juanjo’s perspective, the flagrancy (weakness, or *debilidad*) of his affair with Durán is vitiated by Durán’s innate womanliness, which stems not from his (Durán’s) effeminate comportment—of which the narrative provides no inkling—but rather from his willingness to submit to Juanjo’s domineering, aggressive, masculine sexuality. Moreover, Juanjo perceives his situation as “normal”—he has sex with his wife in a conjugal setting that conforms with all the epistemological prescriptions of heteronormativity—and in diametrical opposition to the situation of feminine “submissiveness” to which Durán subjects himself by allowing himself to be possessed, dominated, and phallically penetrated in contravention of “normal” masculine behaviour.

The discourse of anal intercourse in *Contra natura* calls into question the epistemological grounding of masculinized top and feminized bottom inherent in heteronormative gender roles, and its ineluctable imposition on same sex relationships. Durán, in his blithe ingenuousness, does not conceive of himself as a subaltern. Moreover, he does not conceive of himself as a metaphorical woman in his submissive sexual posture to Juanjo. Thus, when we read of Durán’s rapturous cooing at the thought of taking Juanjo’s phallic hardness into his rectum, the narrator

informs that his enrapturement is merely the result of his “education,” and the inevitable consequence of it:

La pedagogía deportiva de la Grecia clásica que Juanjo enseñó a Durán a denominar la *paideia*—. Aún ahora, cuando Juanjo, los días en que están solos en el piso compartido, le da por el culo, Ramón Durán siente el derretimiento mantecoso, la flojera de sus glúteos y sus piernas como un enterneamiento carnal —parte de la *paideia* olímpica—. De esa pasividad, tan deliciosa cuando amaba y creía ser amado, extrae ahora una resignación fuerte, una decisión poderosa que es compasión pura. (CN 94)

The Greek concept of *paideia* refers to the education of young men, usually by older men. The older, experienced man (*erastes*) imparts knowledge (at times including sexual knowledge) to his receptive (that is, at times anally penetrated) younger man (*eromenos*), resulting in his (the younger man's) sexual and pedagogical edification. Pombo, I believe, is playing ironically in his narrative with the idea of *paideia* to convey a sense that emotional and physical eroticism (as Eros) between two men (or two women), particularly in a society that is inveterately homophobic, constitutes in itself a resistance to the force of heterologocentrism by virtue of its very enactment. Sexual acts between men—or more specifically between men and boys—while historically problematic perhaps, were/are not uncommon, and in fact were (and still are) tolerated in some societies. However, the notion of emotional love between men that is embodied and culminates in a sexual act is to this day evocative of an uncanny fear and dread. David Halperin, in his assessment of Greek mores towards homosex, alludes to men who depart from the cultural norm of manliness insofar as they actively desire to be penetrated by other men, and derive pleasure from it—i.e., they adopt a feminine role in sexual intercourse—as *Molles* (*malthakoi*).²⁰⁴ Halperin refers only to men, of course, and not to boys, for once a free Greek

²⁰⁴ Coelius Aurelianus, according to Halperin, considers these men, and also the feminine version of them (*tribades*), to be afflicted with a mental disease. Halperin says: “The example of Coelius Aurelianus makes plain that ancient sex and typologies generally derived their criteria for categorizing people not from sex but from gender: they tended to construe sexual desire as normative or deviant according to whether it impelled social actors to conform to or to violate their conventionally defined sexual roles.” See Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, pp. 19-22.

man reached a certain age, it was considered absolute anathema for him to be the passive recipient (bottom) in a sexual liaison.

Based on the narrative's description of the blissful Durán, however, one surmises that he experiences no sense of emasculation or degradation in his anal receptivity to his beloved Juanjo; the gist of the narrative, in fact, is that Durán is elevated to a more noble sense of self, even altruism, as a result of his intercourse with Juanjo. More to the point, Durán's bliss is emblematic of someone who is rapturous at the thought of his sexual embrace of the vigorous, manly Juanjo, the thought of which infuses him with a sense of well-being and compassion towards the subjective Other, and from whom he draws vital sustenance in their sexual liaison. Pombo's narrative formulation regarding anal sex, and *paideia* in particular, is exhibited in Durán's initiation into his authentic homoerotic intentionality at the hands of an older, more experienced man, who was his first sexual partner, in whom he trusts completely, and for whom he feels the utmost love.

Pombo's elevation of the anus to literary subject in *Contra natura* is clearly an act of deliberate, albeit playful, literary subversiveness that challenges, paradoxically at least, heterologocentric notions of appropriate literary material. Pombo's narrative of homosex and the particular place that the anus has in this literary composition constitutes a type of counter-narrative of the nature of the body (the *physis*), and of intentionality in sexuality, that is, the manner in which the body—in this case the anus—becomes a site of sexuality. Guy Hocquenghem, in his role as enfant terrible, strove for a privileging of the anus as a radical and revolutionary antithesis to phallic authority which typically denigrates the anus as an anti-erogenous zone—Hocquenghem called it, tongue-in-cheek, a *trou-du-cul* (literally and figuratively an asshole).²⁰⁵ Pombo's writing about anal intercourse between men, while not

²⁰⁵ Hocquenghem conceives of homosexuality, in particular anal sex between men, as being simultaneously phantasmatic and obstreperously present within the overall domain of heteronormativity for the way in which it

nearly so ambitiously subversive as Hocquenghem's, nevertheless is a literary act that interrogates different significations of the language relating to same-sex concupiscence as intersubjectivity. This is the crux of literary phenomenology and symbolizes the function of the text as construing the imaginary world of sexuality. It is the language of the literary text, Merleau-Ponty informs, that makes palpable and discernible to us the phenomena that make up our experiential realm and that we use to gauge our Being in ourselves.²⁰⁶ For Pombo, it is the literary articulation of these sexual experiences of the men in this text that imparts a certain life and vitality to the complex and often byzantine relationships between men who love men.

Conclusion

In *Contra natura* the reader is once again confronted with the topic of the “homosexual condition” and, in particular, its various manifestations in the context of postmodernity. In this text, Pombo weaves a dialectical narrative of expressive vigour to describe the multifarious worlds of homosexual identity in a Spanish society that is perceptibly different from previous eras in terms of its tolerance for—at least in terms of its perception of—homosexuality, and in which the homosexual, as something besides abject Other, seeks some type of authentic significance in his existence. The thrust of Pombo's philosophical writing centres on the manner in which the subject leads his life in the historical situation into which (following Heidegger) he is thrown and in which ultimately he has the responsibility to live authentically in scrupulous engagement with his fellow human beings. Although homophobia disappears as a central theme in *Contra natura*, this text situates same-sex sexuality as a contrapuntal breakwater before the “grounding” narratives of heterologocentric discourses and interrogates the manner in which the

unsettles the heterosexual prerogative by its very presence as an anti-masculine, anti-phallic dissonance. Hocquenghem says further that homosexualisms serve as a foil to the repressive institutions of bourgeois, heterologocentric society, and he repudiates the valorization of masculinity as a sign of superiority inherent to a civilization that is founded on the rudiments of physical force and dominance. See Guy Hocquenghem, *La dérive homosexuelle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), p. 14.

²⁰⁶ See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *La prose du monde* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1969), pp. 66-68.

homosexual comports himself morally, ethically, and even religiously, one might say, in the historical circumstances of a rapidly evolving and, superficially at least, more accepting society. In *Contra natura*, Pombo also explores the nature of same-sex physical and emotional love relationships as a disturbing metonymic presence in juxtaposition with hegemonic discourses concerning the “naturalness” of sexuality found in heterologocentrism. Pombo’s interrogation of homoeroticism goes to the heart of what constitutes love relationships between men and how men relate to one another—that is, how they assume these physical and emotional relationships as a natural aspect of their Being—in the context of a discursivity that denaturalizes them.

Pombo never actually states how he expects the homosexual existential condition as experienced through homoerotic intentionality to evolve, or whether it will be necessary in the decades to come to speak of homosexual identities as rooted in the maelstrom of sexual identity politics. Nevertheless, from Pombo’s perspective, those for whom homoerotic intentionality is the primary means of experiencing their sexual Being will be in the minority, and these individuals will be under the sway of a majority that perceives their homoerotic intentionality as extrinsic and unnatural. To this end, Pombo argues that the “liberated,” postmodern homosexual subject will have to find ways to integrate and merge into society as a courageous, fearless seeker of truth and justice against forces of oppression and tyranny of any sort, irrespective of his own repressed, unjust circumstances. This deliberation is perhaps best summed up in the following excerpt from *El cielo raso* (2001)—a text that preceded *Contra natura* and that began Pombo’s earnest interrogation of the condition of the “postmodern” homosexual—in which the young Gabriel Arintero reflects on his efforts to help the massively suffering Salvadoran people who are in the throes of a murderous civil war, and on his clandestine relationship with his beloved Osvaldo:

Arintero, ahora en Madrid, se encuentra maltratado por la insignificancia que aceptó como punto de partida y como virtud: quiso ser uno más: como Osvaldo,

como la madre de Osvaldo, como los amigos de Osvaldo, como los propios jesuitas que —no obstante su relieve intelectual o personal— aspiraban sólo a ser útiles al pueblo ... De todo aquello le ha quedado sólo un deseo de servicio a quienes desde el punto de vista del sufrimiento puede considerar infinitamente más sufrientes y maltratados que él mismo como homosexual. (ECR 164-165)

For Arintero there is no question but that his own suffering and sense of aggrievement and oppression must be subordinated in order to offer solace to those “more abused and oppressed than he is as a homosexual,” some of whom would no doubt consider his homosexuality an offence *contra natura*, and would treat him with equal, perhaps greater disdain. In the ultimate scheme of things, the fate of these downtrodden masses is no less precarious than his—the agents of oppression that act against them are not much different from those who would also destroy him.

In *Contra natura*, Pombo’s narrative envisions radically different ways of existing as an openly identified Other. The narrative portrays solipsistic hedonism as one salient aspect of this existence; this is a form of Being that issues from the ghettoization and commodification of homosexual culture in postmodernity—liberation from abjection may give way to behaviour that allows free rein to any kind of self-indulgent, solipsistic behaviour, which leads ultimately to subjective nihilism. Pombo concedes that his narrative concerning the different homosexualisms that exist within the domain of homoerotic intentionality represents but one particular authorial expression on this subject. The paucity of criticism of *Contra natura* suggests that perhaps contemporary critics have not quite figured out how to approach this text, either as literature or as social critique. At the very least, there is no doubt the novel will elicit some response. Nevertheless, *Contra natura* must be understood in the context of its philosophical dimension, as an exposition of modes of Being. As I have shown in my discussion of some critical approaches to Pombo’s writing, this is the dimension that is most often given short shrift.

Conclusions

A Different Kind of Homotextuality

In the introduction of this study, I proposed that I would be answering the following questions: What is transgressive about Pombo's inscription of homosexuality in Spanish letters; what is distinctive about Pombo's narrative technique in this regard? In what ways is Pombo's writing phenomenological; what does Pombo's phenomenological homotextual writing say about epistemological schemes of "homonormativity"? How does Pombo's narrative construe homosexuality as existentially dissonant? What does Pombo mean by "overcoming" the degradation and abnegation that give rise to existential dissonance; how is existential dissonance a means of ideological or subversive resistance to heterologocentrism? What are the ethical and moral dimensions of Pombo's depiction of authentic Being; how does authenticity in Being relate to homosexual existential dissonance? How is it possible for authentic homosexual existence to subsume itself within the greater heteronormative paradigm, however subversively or harmoniously as the case may be? Responses to these questions are never clear-cut or unambiguous, and to the extent that I have addressed these questions in my analysis, I have only provided my own subjective critical perspective. Pombo never explicitly presumes to tell anyone how to live his or her life. Literature provides a vast ideological terrain for dialectical confrontation, negotiation, and engagement. Pombo's perspectives on homosexuality are obviously reflected in lived experiences in a world that is still evolving considerably in terms of how it deals with the homosexual question.

As I have shown throughout this study, homosexuality is the conspicuous leitmotif that has remained constant in Pombo's writing since the appearance of his first work of fiction, *Relatos sobre la falta de sustancia*, in 1977. To be sure, Pombo is not the first author to write about homosexuality in Spain; he had numerous predecessors, particularly in the early twentieth century, who wrote about homosexuality as a discursive construct. In *De Sodoma a Chueca* (2004), Alberto Mira provides a compendious account of the various manifestations of homosexually themed writing that occurred in Spain in the twentieth century. The ultimate conclusion that Mira comes to is that by and large literature about homosexuals in Spain, even when not intentionally malicious, has been about the homosexual's strangeness and intrinsic perverseness. Mira provides the following rather glum assessment of the depiction of the homosexual in mainstream Spanish literature, from roughly the beginning of the twentieth century until the time of the *Transición*:

Se convierte en una de las amenazas al orden burgués que proliferan en estas nuevas Sodomas. Amenaza a la procreación, amenaza a la propia unidad familiar, amenaza a la religión. El homosexual aparece en la literatura como ejemplo de lacra que hay que extirpar. Además se convierte en representante de unos valores que atacan la mentalidad burguesa y su estilo de vida. Las virtudes burguesas: frente al trabajo, el homosexual piensa sólo en el placer; frente al compromiso y la estabilidad, el homosexual es promiscuo y volátil. (56)

Although in his consideration Mira does not distinguish between homosexual and non-homosexual writers, he mostly refers to mainstream writers who were writing the homosexual as a dangerously parasitic and perverse creature who "threatens" and attempts in every conceivable way to subvert the "natural" bourgeois way of life. While Mira accurately depicts the foremost doctrines of heterologocentric discourses concerning homosexual "unnaturalness," not all writing about homosexuals in Spanish literature of the twentieth century, which is really the only century one can speak about in terms of any substantial literature about homosexuals, conforms to this model. There was some literature, particularly by gay writers of the late modern and

avant-garde periods (García Lorca, Cernuda, Retana, d’Halmar, Zamacois, et al.),²⁰⁷ consisting in subversive homosexually themed narratives, drama, and poetry. Nevertheless, my aim in this study has been to show that when Pombo began his homotextual undertaking—during the Franco dictatorship, and while he was in exile—he was doing so in a void of significant writing about homosexuality or homoeroticism in Spanish letters. Moreover, in the 1960s, when Pombo first began writing about homosexuality, where homosexually themed literature of any sort was in evidence in Spain—particularly among Pombo’s contemporaries—much of this writing did not deviate significantly from prevailing heterologocentric discursivity. After Spain’s transition to democracy, a more *outré*, personal, and ideologically grounded literature aimed at shocking or disquieting the bourgeois reader—as in the case of the writings of Juan Goytisolo, or Terenci Moix, for instance—began to emerge. It is in this contemporary, post-Transition era, then, that Pombo’s writing, vastly more ethereal and contemplative than other writing on the topic of homosexuality, began to gain the attention of critics.

The Misinterpreted Nature of Pombo’s Homotextuality

Pombo’s philosophical approach to literature, depicting homosexual existential dissonance through abjection and alienation, set him in no great stead with his contemporary gay critics or readers, many of whom were disapproving, or at least skeptical, of the Pombian homotextual enterprise. The newly arrived Pombo had always had a somewhat tenuous relationship with his gay contemporaries in transitional Spain, and Pombo’s early writing never received the sort of recognition as substantial fiction about homosexual topics that other gay writers of his generation were afforded. In the latter part of the twentieth century, and in the twenty-first

²⁰⁷ Writers such as d’Halmar, Catá, Retana, de Hoyos y Vinent, Nin Frías, Zamacois were writing their homoerotically themed literature in the 1920s and early 1930s—until the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. The type of literature they produced conformed, more or less, to the tradition of camp, as was the case with Retana certainly in his rollicking *locaza* tales of drag queens and foppish behaviour, or else to the Gidean model of “naturalistic” homosexuality.

century, this relationship (and lack of recognition) has changed considerably, particularly in light of Pombo's elevation to the pantheon of Spanish letters with his admission to the Real Academia Española in 2004. Nevertheless, as I have argued throughout my analysis, Pombo's homotextual enterprise has been fundamentally misinterpreted by most of his gay critics (Aliaga, Guasch, Ingenschay, et al.), Alfredo Martínez being the prominent exception. Among mainstream critics, Pombo's homotextuality has been all but ignored—the notable exceptions being Juan Antonio Masoliver and José Carlos Mainer, who in recent years have incorporated, albeit to a very limited extent, homotextual analysis into their discussion of Pombo. I have argued that this discordance, or misapprehension of the substantiality of Pombo's heterodox, subversive writing, stems from the critics' failure, for a variety of reasons, to situate Pombo's writing about homosexuality within the context of a philosophically grounded, dialectical discursiveness. I claim that most of Pombo's critics have failed to appreciate the manner in which Pombo's narrative challenges, in a paradoxically inverted, refractory fashion, the very premises of the discourses that had come, since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in any event, to define writing about homosexuals or homoeroticism.

Contributing to the misapprehensions about Pombo's homotextual narrative, particularly among his gay critics, has been the tendency to perceive Pombo's complex and not entirely conventional writing as an inscription of homosexuality as grounded in the metaphoric essentialism of abjection. To be sure, abjection figures prominently in Pombo's writing; however, Pombo does not write about homosexuality per se as some ontological form of Being related solely to physiological impulses of same-sex sexual desire, and thus biological essentialism. Rather, Pombo writes about different kinds of homosexualisms as phenomenological apperceptions and experiences (some of them profoundly unsettling) that are situated in the

broader spectrum of human consciousness and subjectivity—that is, the way the subject comes into contact with his experiential realm.

As I have shown in chapter II, in Pombo's early writings (*Relatos sobre la falta de sustancia*, *El héroe de las mansardas de Mansard*, *El parecido*, and to a lesser extent *El hijo adoptivo*) there are recurring themes of self-loathing, self-repression, guilt, and hyper self-consciousness that are related to the subject's "homosexual condition" and that inform the very premise of Pombo's allegorical narrative. In these early texts, Pombo's narrative directly links the subject's existential alienation to his homoerotic intentionality and his situatedness within the larger context of heteronormativity. Moreover, this condition of alienation prevents the subject from revealing himself truthfully, without fear and trepidation, and minus the seething resentfulness that Nietzsche tells us emanates from the particularly vicious selfishness and self-loathing inherent in a slave morality.²⁰⁸ It is at this stage of Pombo's writing that one of the fundamental theses of Pombo's dialectic of authentic phenomenological engagement begins to emerge: to wit, existence as Being with the Other.

Although I have examined a variety of critical approaches to literature in my analysis of Pombo's homotextual writing, principal among them being queer theory, I maintain that Pombo's homotextual writing is not an attempt on his part—rooted in the anti-subject/identity polemics of poststructuralist queer theory—to dismantle, subvert, or contravene the entire value system of the predominant heteronormative paradigm. Rather, guided by Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer, Heidegger, et al., I have read Pombo's homotextual endeavour as a conspicuous attempt to reposition the homosexual within an ongoing dialectic that concerns the very nature of

²⁰⁸ Nietzsche's reference is to the subject of "self-overcoming, overcoming of a morality that is the mimicry of an impotent hatred; a hatred of the self and Others and that manifests itself in a kind of selfishness and nihilism that places *ressentiment* at the core of our morals." See Nietzsche in Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, p. 113.

intersubjective existence. Thus, in my consideration of Pombo's attempt to refocus the dialectical discussion of homoerotic intentionality or praxis within the greater realm of human behaviour, I have examined Pombo's narrative as an exploration of consciousness and how consciousness, as our primary means of grasping our experiential realm, informs the premise of our Being-in-the-world and our understanding of the Other. Looking at Pombo's narrative from this perspective has led me to take a decidedly philosophical approach in the literary analysis of his writing. Pombo's writing about homosexuality and homosexuals is steeped in a philosophical dialectic that probes the dissonant states of homosexual existence as cultural and sociological phenomena in Spanish culture and society. As a philosopher, Pombo concerns himself with writing about the experiences of homosexuality as a lived intersubjective existence—as part of the subject's world of lived experience, following Merleau-Ponty, or as the *Dasein* of “thrownness” into existence, which Heidegger describes as the subject's immersion in his universe—that inevitably entails a fateful confrontation with the existence of the Other. The homosexual, according to Pombo, is a subject who, because of the way he experiences his sexuality (phenomenologically), is historically at odds with his environment, that is, the historical environment in which he finds himself.²⁰⁹ As a result of this thrownness into a historical situation where homophobia is seemingly ubiquitous and unrelenting, the subject suffers immeasurably from a sense of moral, ethical, and existential estrangement and *may* act in ways that are not only detrimental to his own Being but to those around him as well. This is the crux, as I have explained in chapters III and IV, of Pombo's notion of existential dissonance. The essence of Pombo's homotextual narrative is that morality does not necessarily inhere in the modality of one's sexual intentionality but rather in how one engages with other human beings in

²⁰⁹ Following Wachterhauser's reading of Heidegger, we are “thrown into a historically mediated culture in terms of which we come to understand not only ourselves but nature itself, and because we come to understand nature only through a historical matrix, history is, in a sense, more primordial than nature.” See Wachterhauser, ed., *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*, p. 21.

intersubjective relationships that “recognize” the substance, virtue, integrity, and dignity of the Other. Pombo dedicates an entire book to exploring this issue, *Contra natura*, which is the main subject of chapter V.

In Pombo’s narrative, it is not the subject’s consciousness of his homoerotic intentionality that vitiates him, but rather his solipsistic and nihilistic tendencies that threaten to fold him in upon himself. In his writing, Pombo does not reject altogether the notion of a homosexual phenomenological consciousness as identity. The homosexual experience as homoerotic intentionality situates him in an ideological setting, society, and culture that largely determine his concept of himself by virtue of their ideological and ontological categories of gender and “sexual orientation” as signifiers for Being-in-the-world. This is a concept that I discuss at length in chapter V where I explore various aspects of homosexual identity and sexual engagement in the context of the subject’s situatedness in a postmodern era of somewhat greater social acceptance of homosexuality. As Diana Fuss has aptly noted in her discussion of “minority” identities, the poststructuralist, decentred deconstruction of subaltern (specifically black) binaries is at times a fanciful theoretical notion. Fuss writes that attempts to deconstruct sexual or racial binaries have at times served to deny, in some sense, the existence of these identities altogether.²¹⁰ The (mainly phallo- and Eurocentric) poststructuralist critique of identity, Fuss argues, has less attraction for marginalized subalterns, simply because they already speak from a position of disempowerment.²¹¹ In a similar vein, Leo Bersani argues that the persistent attempts to deconstruct homosexual identity via the objectification of the epistemic and political regimes that have come to “construct” gays results, to all intents and purposes, in a form of erasure, which in effect leaves intact the heterologocentric regimes that these deconstructionist

²¹⁰ See Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature & Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 95-96.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

discourses claim to subvert.²¹² Homosexuals, much like African-Americans, colonized aboriginals (or any other disparaged, marginalized minority), begin from a position of fragmentation and dispersal; historically they have been denied access to the ego and the cogito by virtue of their invisibility, and thus they fall outside the postmodern concept of “de-realization” of identity.²¹³ Furthermore, as Terry Eagleton argues, the postmodern subject (to wit, the principal focus of queer theory) is in a paradoxical sense “free” and “determined,” but at a far more profound level he risks becoming overdetermined in view of the culturalist bias of postmodernism which verges ever so precariously towards linguistic and cultural determinism.²¹⁴ For this very reason, despite my frequent allusions to the deconstructionist, homographetic model of Edelman and other queer theorists in my analysis of Pombo’s writing, I maintain that Pombo’s homotextual writing does not limit itself to disrupting, or otherwise circumventing, notions of “homosexual identity,” against which the prevalent strains of queer theory vigorously disclaim. Rather, Pombo proffers new methods of considering homosexual identities as modes of consciousness and praxis that are fundamentally rooted in the intersubjective experiences that comprise the greater realm of human sexuality. In this vein, Pombo’s homotextual narrative argues explicitly against heterologocentrism as a discursive means of repressing authentically different modes of experiencing Being.

Pombo the Writer

Álvaro Pombo is a writer whose style and authorial intentionality adhere in many respects to different expressions of “realism,” and deformations or embellishments of this genre, that have

²¹² See Bersani, *Homos*, p. 76.

²¹³ According to Hugh Silverman, Lyotard’s concept of de-realization describes the culmination of a process of Being that fails to distinguish between the natural and the artificial in experience. Thus, there can be no real concept of identity because “the self can never affix itself within a realm of indeterminate and constantly in flux modes of Being.” See Hugh J. Silverman, *Lyotard: Philosophy, Politics, and the Sublime* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 15.

²¹⁴ See Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford, UK, Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), p. 132.

characterized the writing of previous generations of Spanish writers. Pombo is often compared to other celebrated Spanish authors such as Miguel de Unamuno, Pio Baroja, and even Valle-Inclán. However, there are numerous other comparisons that could be made—to writers such as Juan Benet, for example, owing to the allegorical (“irrealist”) and symbolic narrative techniques that Benet employs. Comparisons to Unamuno stem from the philosophical, self-reflective, and humanistic nature of Pombo’s narrative.²¹⁵ In this study, I argue that one of the great contributions that Pombo makes to contemporary Spanish letters is his inscription of homosexuality as a transgressive form of literary discourse. As I argue in the introduction, I am not suggesting that Pombo’s homotextual writing is a uniquely transformative depiction of homosexuality within Spanish letters or that it represents a radical departure from “realist” depictions of social phenomena. Pombo’s writing is not overtly subversive, or politically contentious, or even so much stylistically transgressive, in its content or its presentation, in the way that Genet’s or Goytisolo’s writing, for example, could be considered. Nevertheless, Pombo’s engagement with homosexuality in his narrative constitutes a poetic hermeneutic (in the Heideggerian mode of *poiesis*) that considers homosexuality as a manifestation of human existence and expressiveness that has long been kept under wraps and that has subsisted in an existential void—a parallel, degraded metonymic existence of sorts. Pombo’s inscription of the homosexual in his narrative is transgressive by virtue of its presence, of its bursting forth in the consciousness of the reader of his narrative, who comes to know the deep-seated anguish, fear, and self-loathing that consumed the lives of many homosexuals living in Spain in the era of Franco, and even in the present era in Spain and elsewhere. The reader of the Pombian homotextual narrative confronts the situatedness of homosexuality as a dissonant, albeit

²¹⁵ Juan Antonio Masoliver says the following concerning Pombo’s similarity to Unamuno: “Unamuno, como Pombo, no pertenecía a ninguna tradición española de novela, y a Pombo, como a Unamuno, hay que leerlo en tres claves inseparables: la puramente narrativa, la reflexiva o filosófica como búsqueda de una identidad o de una conciencia, y la irónica que nos revelará la realidad como una escritura y la interpretación final del texto como una poética.” See Masoliver, *Voces contemporáneas*, p. 293.

precarious, form of Being, as conveyed by the narrative's painfully probing interrogation of this existential situation in Spanish life. Pombo asserts, by virtue of a meticulous philosophical reasoning, that those who do not confront the denaturalizing epistemology of heterologocentrism may become in effect its victims. To this end, Pombo's narrative gives rise to a disconcerting prose (harsh, jarring, discordant) that lurches from the mellifluously lyrical to the crassly vulgar, from the most absurdly fantastical to the most sordidly real, in order to show the various states of despair and self-crushing nihilism that issue from inauthentic existence. It is in this vein that I have shown that Pombo's homotextuality is an original undertaking owing to its exceptional philosophical scrutiny and narrative complexity, and its search for a different way of existing in alterity.

Pombo writes very differently about homosexuality than most of his contemporaries do. In this study I have attempted to show that Pombo's philosophical and literary interrogation of different states of homosexual consciousness affords a glimpse into the myriad manifestations of homosexualisms, something that most great world literatures have not explored to any great extent—or at least not in a way that viewed homosexuality as anything other than freakishly perverse and unnatural. Writing about homosexuality entails engagement with a subject that has been for the most part taboo, or at the very least relegated to the most sordid confines of literature. Pombo, for his part, has attempted to establish new paths of philosophically textured literary discourse that consider homosexual consciousness, and its concomitant phenomenological praxis, as an indubitably and radically different, but nonetheless intrinsic part of the complex fabric of humanity.

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