

“Pero vos ya conocés bien mis delirios místicos”: The Search for Sublime Union in
the Fiction of Pablo Pérez

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“PERO VOS YA CONOCES BIEN MIS DELIRIOS MÍSTICOS”: THE SEARCH FOR SUBLIME UNION IN THE FICTION OF PABLO PÉREZ

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Introduction

Pablo Pérez (born in 1966) is one of a group of young Argentine writers whose work explores the wide variety of homoerotic experience and identity among the post-dictatorship generation in Argentina.¹ Pérez's small and rather idiosyncratic corpus of fiction has just begun to attract the deserving attention of critics and scholars. Giordano, for example, places Pérez into an “inter-century” generation which, like the Modernist writers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, is a group characterized by an “egotismo desenfrenado” that puts their lives as artists directly at the center of their literary works. Giordano indicates, however, that the autobiographical journals, letters, and confessions of this contemporary group of writers (which includes such authors as Raúl Escari, Daniel Link, and Elvio Gandolfo), following several generations since the advent of pop art, do not hold themselves up as exemplars of exceptional or superior living, surrounded by the dreariness and crass commercialization of bourgeois values as their Modernist counterparts did; instead they emphasize the “banalidades extremas” of their daily lives, demonstrating that “la exhibición de algunas vulgaridades íntimas puede servir muy bien a la empresa de convertir en obra la propia vida” (*Giro* 14). The two novels of Pablo Pérez, *Un año sin amor: Diario del Sida* (1998, henceforth abbreviated as *Año*) and *El mendigo chupapijas* (2005, henceforth abbreviated as *Mendigo*), do indeed masterly blur the line between autobiography and fiction through a sophisticated interplay of artistically altered lived experience and erotic fantasy.

In a manner similar to Giordano, Ingenschay focuses on the autobiographical or “homographical” nature of Pérez’s first novel (using Ellis’ concept of how homoerotic writers have modified autobiographical discourse), and he connects it to the important tradition of fiction writing that explores the consequences of HIV/AIDS in the varied Latin American cultures. Employing Angvik’s term of “tanatografía” as contrast, Ingenschay analyzes how Pérez has produced

¹ I would like to thank the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) for the generous grant that permitted me to travel to Buenos Aires in July of 2011 to meet with the author of the novels. I would also like to thank Pablo Pérez for his great personal kindness and professional consideration in granting me an interview that allowed me greater insight into the production of his fiction.

quite a different type of AIDS narrative, one in which a very active sex life and the hopefulness of living with the condition, due to the development of newly-developed anti-viral drugs, is an unexpected and powerful variation on the typical texts which focus on the agonizing ending of life.

From a different perspective, Laddaga explores the inescapable legacy of Borges on the newest generation of Argentine writers, and mentions Pérez's *Un año sin amor* as "uno de los textos que considero más inquietantes y atractivos de los últimos años" (209). The critic views Pérez's novel as exemplary for its employment of a Borgesian notion of the act of writing as an activity which may enable "la superviviencia personal en condiciones de urgencia" (210), which may be used as a way to connect the writer to other human beings, and which, ultimately, may sketch the "rostro secreto" (213) of the author which is imperceptible except by means of the artistic creation.

While Laddaga's brief examination, it seems to me, more closely approaches the inner workings of Pérez's fictional world, he does not explore what I consider a central motif in the writing of Pablo Pérez: the *search*. Marguch, on the other hand, does mention the narrator's search in *El mendigo chupapijas*, but only to illustrate his point that the "espacio anómalo" of the city in this and other texts permits characters with non-normative sexualities to explore the queer possibilities and variations of other bodies outside of a set of fixed sexual identities. It is my view, however, that in Pérez's fiction, the perpetual, obsessive act of searching becomes a primary motivating impulse that unifies and energizes the action of the narrative itself, and is realized fundamentally through the postmodern search for mystic connections between humans and an occult world of significance, the quest for meaning in the individual lives of people who suffer from illness and loneliness, and the desire for the re-union with their Platonic "lost other half" (Bersani, "Genital" 354) in the physical and spiritual connection of same-sex partners. These "compelling searches" have as their aim the discovery of a "healing symbol, a self looked for in the body of the other" (Miller 393).

In the conclusion to his 2005 study, Giordano explores the act of searching in Pérez's first novel as a response to the absence of love and the overpowering loneliness of the protagonist, and classifies the love between men as "a mystery" which is exacerbated by the "inquietante separación entre el mundo de los encuentros sexuales y el de los vínculos sentimentales que caracteriza, no sé si para mi estupor o para mi admiración, el universo gay" ("Consigna" 48). I take Giordano's reaction to the "troubling separation" between homoerotic sex and affective meaning as a point of departure for the present analysis which proposes a psychological purpose and even a mystical value for the protagonists' search—both in terms of "sexual encounters" and "emotional bonds"—in Pérez's two novels. In this way, beyond the bold confessional itinerary of multiple sexual encounters narrated in these two novels, the author enriches the works with an illuminating spiritual content. The desperate, even heroic, search for knowledge takes on qualities of a Borgesian mystical quest which may permit the characters to experience the momentary satisfaction of understanding the purpose of their lives and which may give them a key to discovering the meaning of the physical illness and suffering inside the limits of their bodies, their loneliness, and their seeming insignificance in the world. As in Borgesian fictions, where characters seek obscured meaning in such powerfully archetypal symbols as magic spaces (e.g., alephs and labyrinths), imagined structures that order chaos and convert it to cosmos (e.g., games, lotteries, and secret organizations), or the mystic union of opposite identities (e.g., Jesus/Judas and the hero/traitor), Pérez's characters also search for meaning in similarly esoteric, but certainly more popular, sources of hidden knowledge.

In dramatic contrast to Borges' narratives, however, Pérez's novels define the most powerful and transformative symbol as the act of sexual union between two men. This union has a multiplicity of purposes that involves not just the physical satisfaction of orgasm, but also a kind of satisfaction in psychological and spiritual terms. One of the reasons that the coinciding of male bodies has such a powerful attraction for the protagonists in the novels may be that in that particular connection, the characters experience a transcendental uniting of opposing forces that allows them a momentary glimpse of a sublime *wholeness* from which physical, psychological and spiritual satisfaction may be fleetingly perceived. In effect, for the protagonists in Pérez's two novels, both named Pablo, HIV positive, and active in the Buenos Aires homoerotic consensual S/M scene, the liminal space where the conjunction and interaction of opposing forces occurs is a potent and sometimes explosive source of energy that provides them a short-lived sensation of the sublime, the divine, the absolute.

It seems to me, as a consequence, that one of the more fruitful and illuminating ways to view Pérez's fiction is through a lens of queered psychological theories which, I contend, will illustrate that in Pérez's novels, what has traditionally been viewed as diametrically opposed and discontinuous opposites (e.g., pain and pleasure, masculine and feminine, control and submission, desire and fulfillment, punishment and reward) coincide, combine, and conjoin in the uniting of two (or more) male bodies, and the dynamic union of *sameness* takes the protagonists to a place where captivity within a diseased body and the threat of (potential) immanent death are temporarily alleviated. In these novels, the sexual climax with a complementary same-sex partner is converted into a transcendental "life orgasm" that recharges the spirit and psyche of the characters as they attempt to find the safety and protection of a force they grandly call *el Amor Universal*. By privileging the site of transformation as the homoerotic bond between same-sexed individuals, Pérez masterly queers the traditional Western view that only through *heterosexual* intercourse—the dynamic union of *difference*—can human beings achieve a life-affirming, but temporary, experience with divine wholeness. As a result, Pérez's work combats the traditional moralizing charge against queer men and women that their so-called promiscuity and anonymous sex acts erode and debase the human spirit. And following Bersani's concept examined in *Homos*, where he calls into question the common mode of thinking that actually fetishizes difference itself, placing it in a superior position over sameness, and what might happen if we "rethink economies of human relations on the basis of homo-ness, of sameness" (41), I wish to show how Pérez's fiction subversively exposes the false hierarchy that heterosexual union is superior to other forms of human interconnect-edness as it elevates what have traditionally been considered perverse sexual acts to an experience with the absolute.

Mystic Connections and the Search for Knowledge

The basis of the narrative content of Pérez's two novels, *Un año sin amor* and *El mendigo chupapijas*, is the combination of the autobiographical life experiences and fantasies of the author,

fictionalized through the first-person narration of a character named Pablo as he explores two different periods of his life.² As a result, there is considerable similarity in situations, preoccupations, and mood in both works. But while the first novel, in the form of a diary, focuses primarily on the protagonist's physical illness, surviving with HIV by means of the search for love and the production of a work of narrative, the second is more conspicuously novelistic insofar as it incorporates a variety of different discourse features (mix of first- and third-person narration, the use of dialogue, greater reliance on condensation and ellipsis, etc.).³ The two texts, however, are connected directly by the protagonist's deeply-rooted fascination for mystical, spiritual, and transcendental mechanisms that might endow his life with a longed-for meaning in a world where loneliness, isolation, and illness had become emblematic of existence at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries.

Due to this lack of perceptible meaning or, as Borges put it, a "justification" for his difficult life, Pablo finds himself compelled to seek out experiences that might confirm his hope in some universal organizing principle or compassionate harmonizing force that transcends the chaos of the postmodern world. For example, there are various situations in which Pablo consults horoscopes and astrological charts (*Año* 95; *Mendigo* 26, 53), he reads classic esoteric texts in both the Eastern (e.g., tantric Buddhist; *Año* 74) and Western traditions (e.g., the Jewish Kabbalah; *Año* 82); he believes in meaningful synchronistic coincidences and views certain events as omens (*Año* 73; 27; *Mendigo* 61, 65-66), and in the case of Pablo in *Un año sin amor*, the character has a long series of "premonitions" (40, 41, 45, 64, 89, 94, 95, 118, 119, 144) about his own death. The two novels emphasize Pablo's belief in a mystic spiritual energy which runs through him (*Año* 75; *Mendigo* 54, 55, 77) and he links it to a fervently desired "universal love" (*Año* 38; *Mendigo* 55) that hints precisely at the kind of spiritual force that might offer him solace and serenity, and more importantly, *protection*. In both novels, Pablo senses the presence of guardian angels watching over him (*Año* 38; *Mendigo* 77) who offer a dramatic feeling of comfort and serenity in the midst of the frightening vulnerability of his precarious existence.

In addition to these intuitions, the protagonist also feels mystic connections between himself and masculine spiritual guides. For example, in *Un año sin amor*, Pablo speaks of his connectedness to creative predecessors, such as Ginsberg and Rimbaud, by means of "las redes que tejemos los vivos y los muertos en la música y la poesía" (*Año* 127). The links between Pablo and the great homoerotic artists of past generations illustrate his desire for a connection between creative men that may give value and purpose to same-sex desire, and may provide grounding for the physical act of sexual union that forms so much of the narrative. As the examples from the novels indicate, the protagonists, like their Borgesian predecessors, arduously struggle against the concept that the universe is random, chaotic, and devoid of occult meaning. The alternative to such a dismal view of life is to seek out answers wherever they may be hidden, as a way to satisfy the most basic instinctual human need—survival—in a seemingly incomprehensible, unpredictable and, consequently, threatening world. In the novels, the search for meaning in the interconnectedness of phenomena in the universe—an impulse that Jung, in fact, theorized as a central feature of the human

² Anastasía González explores the complex relationships between the texts' real-life author, and his fictional creations in the form of the narrators, protagonists and objects of the narration.

³ While Pérez's two novels stand alone as distinct pieces of fiction, but linked by a common fictionalized autobiographical protagonist, they were actually blended together for the 2005 film, *Un año sin amor*, directed by Anahí Berneri and co-written by Pablo Pérez and the director. For insightful analyses of the film, see Aguilar and Aguirre.

psyche (Samuels 89)—inspires a certain hopefulness in the protagonists, leading them to believe that there may indeed be some purpose and meaning to the apparently random events of the world, and particularly to their myriad sexual adventures.

In both novels, however, it becomes clear that the search for knowledge and satisfaction by means of such things as astrology and mystic belief systems is only a superficial practice that hints at a deeper and more enriching *quest*. This quest is realized most explicitly and insistently by the protagonists' search for a fantasized male partner through whom the numinous revelation of what he wishes to know may manifest itself. Consequently, Pablo cruises public bathrooms (*Año* 47, 129), pornographic movie theaters (*Año* 30, 42, 84-85, 100, 101, 131, 134; *Mendigo* 9, 28, 48), neighborhoods known for easy pick ups (*Mendigo* 15-16, 17-18, 21-22), and personal ads in homoerotic publications (*Año* 48, 50-51, 55-57, 65, 98, 99, 111-112, 140-41; *Mendigo* 27, 39) in search of an *other* with whom he may form a sexual and emotional bond and, in that way, gain insight into his existence. The character, in other words, is involved in a search for sexual experiences that might ultimately fulfill desires of both the flesh and, hopefully, the spirit. Unlike characters who might seek purely physical sexual sensation through chance encounters with others, the protagonist in Pérez's novels longs for and pursues a *meaningful* connection with his sex partners, optimistically hoping that at some moment, a fortuitous meeting may connect him with the one person in whom he might recognize his true complement, his soul mate, the worthy object of his love.⁴

In essence, what keeps the protagonist involved in this endless pursuit is the desire for a very particular *knowledge* that has seemingly been kept from him, a knowledge that inexplicably remains obscure and reveals itself only partially, imperfectly, and sporadically during occasional acts of same-sex union. Pursuing this human "will to know" (i.e., Freud's "instinct for knowledge") the protagonists in Pérez's fiction make the particularly significant connection between the desire for knowledge and the desire for men. But rather than following the impulse, defined by Freud as primarily the seeking of a revelation of the secret of what sexuality is and how it works (*Three Essays* 60-63), the protagonist in Pérez's novels searches for the underlying *meaning* of same-sex desire, and how such a desire and its fulfillment might temporarily satisfy the needs of his psyche. And here it is important to emphasize that in Pérez's novels sexual "object choice" is not incidental or inconsequential: in stark contrast to the long-standing Western convention, passed down insistently by the cultural discourses of art and literature, that reiterates that only the physical union of *differently* sexed individuals may confer significance, value, and transcendence on human beings, the characters in Pérez's novels seek to discover these values in the conjoining of two male bodies, in the physical union that occurs between *sames*.

Sameness and Difference

⁴ Aguilar takes a contrasting view of Pablo's search. According to him, the protagonist of the film version of *Un año sin amor* has completely renounced love in favor of merely satisfying his physical desires (323, 325), and hence, the title is something akin to a performative act: by enunciating the phrase, Pablo rejects love for one year in order to "autodiluirse," to lose his conscious identity in a "marejada que lo arrastra sin dirección determinada" (327). In contrast, it is my view that the title should be understood as a kind of lament or expression of frustration on the part of the protagonist with regard to the short-lived experience of completion when sameness and difference unite only momentarily.

In Pérez's novels, the protagonists' search for meaning culminates in the spiritually significant repetition of sexual and emotional union between men. In contrast to Aguirre's view, it appears that Pérez is assigning a value and a significance in the acts of same-sex erotics for the protagonists that go beyond the momentary satisfaction of instinct or desire: they provide the characters a glimpse of wholeness and completeness, or what Bersani calls a "re-union" of "inaccurate replications" of the self ("Genital" 365), that cannot be experienced except through the interconnection between *same*-sexed individuals, an act that, paradoxically, works to transcend difference.

The search for the value of same-sex union in Pérez's novels calls into question the essential modern distinction that, in spite of research published in the past thirty years, still haunts our notions of human sexuality: desire for so-called *sameness* versus desire for *difference*. Freud codified this dynamic by theorizing that psychologically healthy, mature human sexuality is the sexuality that develops into a desire for *difference* (*heterosexuality*), rather than *sameness* (*homosexuality*). Freud's rejection of sameness becomes a pervasive and fixed feature of psychoanalysis, primarily through his complex and often contradictory theory of erotic "object choice." As a result, it is fair to say that for Freud, there are four primary, interconnected determinants that characterize the desired object: on one axis is the distinction between *self* (subject) and *other* (object), and on the other axis, the polarities of *same* and *different*, where sameness and difference are defined in terms of biological sex. Freud reinforces the cultural tradition that defines the choice of *other* + *different* as the norm, the culturally desirable outcome, that is, *heterosexuality*; while *other* + *same* is a perversion or "inversion," an immature form of sexuality, characterized by a lack of *difference*, or, in other words, *homosexuality*. For Freud, this specific inversion is an outgrowth of an earlier, even more primitive choice, one that he metaphorically illustrates by means of the myth of Narcissus, or the choice of *self* + *same* (see "On Narcissism"). Missing, however, is the fourth term, *self* + *different*, which is nowhere explored by Freud. It is my view that, in a remarkably unexpected move, Pérez's novels actually make use of this missing possibility as a culminating moment in the protagonists' development in the final pages of each of the novels.

Throughout both *Un año sin amor* and *El mendigo chupapijas*, Pablo is drawn to men (*sames*) who are, in his view, also *opposite* (*different*) from him, and the desired interplay, interaction and conjunction of sameness and difference serves to motivate him physically, psychically and sexually. At this point, though, I must clarify that Pablo's complex desire for a simultaneity of sameness and difference in terms of sexual and gender identity does not imply his belief in a set of fixed or essential identity characteristics, a belief that male and female, masculine and feminine are opposite and absolute. As Reeser examines in his study on masculinity, the unstable, contradictory, and contingent aspects of gender illustrate that the culturally defined binary opposites related specifically to gender are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are "supplements" that co-exist in varying degrees, regardless of the biological sex of the subject (35-40). It is my view, then, that Pablo purposefully seeks exaggeratedly dichotomous manifestations of gender and sexual roles in order to experience the pleasures of how they produce psychological and physical ecstasy through synthesis. As a result, when referring to opposites in the work of Pérez, I wish to show how the protagonists experience the human tendency to draw sharp borders around difference, culturally and psychologically, in terms of binary opposites, and that the desire to bring them together into harmonious confluence, to dissolve the boundaries, is psychologically powerful and

emotionally energizing for Pérez's characters.⁵ In other words, Pablo seeks out his imagined or desired opposite as a way to provide him with the psychological stimulation, the deeply emotional and spiritual experience that can lead to individual transformation and transcendence.

In order for the right same-sexed supplement to be found, it must be defined in opposition to the identity of the desiring subject. In both novels, the protagonists begin with a fairly consistent self description (age, height, weight, and so forth) that can be published in personal ads: "30, 1,73, 60, tipo latino, buen cuerpo, tendencia *slave*, a veces muy obediente. Busco *master* o amigo varonil, activo, protector, bien dotado, para relación estable con sexo seguro" (*Año* 55). Pablo's self-description makes explicit the qualities of a partner whom he believes will best complement him, thereby satisfying his longing for the perfect conjoining of sameness and difference. One descriptor, however, stands out and will become a constant in both novels: *protector*. As noted earlier with reference to the guardian angels that the protagonists sense around them, what Pablo longs for and desires most is a partner who can protect him from the uncontrolled and unpredictable dangers of this world: "mi cuerpo es tuyo a cambio de protección y cariño" (*Año* 111); someone who can fuse or harmonize two seemingly opposing forces: "creo que no hay nada más excitante que estar con alguien que puede llegar a ser peligroso y a la vez protector" (*Mendigo* 52). The perfect companion for Pablo is a man he fantasizes about and describes as

... un hombre en moto, vestido de cuero, que me hace subir y me lleva abrazado a él por una ruta desértica hasta que llegamos a una casa abandonada. Me hace un *piercing* en la tetilla. Usa mi cuerpo como objeto de placer y a su vez me cuida como a un pequeño tesoro. (*Año* 112)

Certainly, the protagonists' quest for fulfillment in specifically consensual *sadomasochistic* sex, it must be noted, actually serves to reinforce my view that his search specifically involves the blurry intersection of a special kind of sameness within difference, and difference within sameness. Consensual homoerotic S/M practices take the coincidence and reciprocity of sameness and difference to their extremes within the context of same-sex coupling by means of highly ritualized and explicitly negotiated roles that maintain dynamic tension through a fluidity of opposing forces, specifically those related to power. In the homoerotic context, the hyper-masculine, aggressive, and active "master" works in concert, harmony, and equilibrium with the "slave" who consents to receive pleasure through the body sensations initiated by the "top," but who also, paradoxically, maintains power over the process by setting limits on how far the master may go (e.g., the use of a "safe word"). Both roles in the configuration combine exaggerated opposing forces in a dynamic balance that allows maleness and masculinity to be simultaneously violent and nurturing, active and receptive, dangerous and protective, frenzied and controlled.⁶

⁵ Sabsay, in her 2011 study on how space (specifically Buenos Aires) is divided for socio-cultural and political effects, provides a fascinating view of how humans actively draw borders around socially constructed or *fantasized* binary opposites as a way to manage the totality of space (e.g., "inside/us" vs. "outside/them").

⁶ The ethical issues surrounding sadomasochistic practices, both hetero- and homosexual, are extraordinarily complex. Bersani, for example, delves into questions surrounding gay S/M, the "consensual brutalization of bodies" and the "relation between pleasure and the exercise of power" in his chapter, "The Gay Daddy," in *Homos* (77-112), while Martínez Pulet explores the queer

Beckmann, in fact, finds that transcendental experiences form a compelling “part of the sensations searched for in consensual ‘SM’.” Her research demonstrates that the concept of “consensual ‘SM’ as [a] spiritual exercise” and the “transformation through ritual ordeal and/or sexual ecstasy has an ancient tradition in many cultures and some have striking parallels in the ‘bodily practices’ of consensual ‘SM’” (100). Beckmann goes on to add that “[i]t appears as if the ‘bottom’ space provides more of a basis for the experience of ‘transcendental’ phenomena as the degree of detachment from habitual contents that individuals achieve within the ritualised context of a ‘scene’ is necessarily more completely achievable for the one who inhabits the ‘bottom’-space” (111). The fact that the Pablo character in Pérez’s novels defines his own role as that of a “bottom” (“tendencia *slave*”) seems to coincide perfectly with Beckmann’s analysis, and lends credence to the notion that part of Pablo’s search for his sexual and emotional complement is driven by his desire to experience transformation through the sublime union of what he perceives as complementary or opposing forces.

In the novels, then, the protagonist seeks an elusive partner who will match exactly the contours of his very particular desire for complementarity and balance. Predictably, many men fail because the combination of opposites does not match the very specific needs of the protagonist. For example, a highly appealing man is too similar because he, too, is a “bottom” rather than a “top” (*Año* 42); a man, “tamaño osito” is not aggressive enough and his nurturing side is too strong (*Año* 43); a bisexual man attempts to “feminize” Pablo by putting a fake leather skirt and pair of panties on him during sex and Pablo finds the experience profoundly disturbing (*Año* 101).⁷ Finally, another man who seems extremely masculine on the outside turns out to be too feminine for Pablo because it turns out that he designs costumes for drag queens (*Mendigo* 25). As is clear from the preceding descriptions, the common element with nearly all of Pablo’s unsuccessful sexual experiences revolves around issues and behaviors having to do with what Western culture has labeled “the feminine.” At this stage in his development, the protagonist appears to be working through a very specific desire for a hyper-inflated, overpowering masculinity that must exclude any hint of the feminine. Exclusion and unidimensionality will hinder Pablo’s process of development, and, as will be explored later, both novels conclude with a compensatory conjuring up of that missing, but complementary counter-gendered self.

In the meantime, amid frequent disappointment and frustration, there are actually moments in which the protagonist, by means of the various “bodily practices” of consensual SM, succeeds in experiencing a spiritual, mystic union of opposites which is so satisfying that it allows him to come into contact —although only very briefly— with a transformative sensation of wholeness and harmony. The momentary satisfaction that comes from the “re-union” of difference within sameness is described repeatedly in Pérez’s novels in various forms. In *Un año sin amor*, Pablo has a sporadic relationship with Luis, a relationship that which has such a powerfully spiritual effect that Pablo views it as “miraculous” (*Año* 72). In fact, for Pablo, the sexual union with Luis

dimensions of S/M in the Hispanic context. Certainly, Langdrige and Barker’s collection of essays on the topic offers a varied and constructive array of analyses that examine S/M practices in non-pathological ways.

⁷ In a fascinating reversal of Sedgwick’s “homosexual panic” (see chapter 4 of *Epistemology*) this scene leads Pablo to a “heterosexual panic” when the man he is with suggests that next time they meet, he bring a girlfriend. The mere image of a female body involved in their sexual encounter, Pablo says, “me daba un poco de asco; me sentía en el medio de una asquerosa película porno española” (*Año* 102).

even has a curative effect that momentarily releases him from the constant suffering caused by his HIV-related illnesses: “La visita de Luis llegó como un rayo de energía. Mientras estaba con él sentía que cada segundo era precioso, que cada caricia era un remedio para mi pena. [...] Él podría ser mi única medicina” (*Año* 71-72). But naturally, the sensation of relief and release is fleeting; the intensity of the union cannot be sustained without danger to each of the partners because the individual subjects literally cannot survive a permanent connection to its complement (Jung, *Aion* 24). As a result, the relationship between Pablo and Luis dissipates, with Pablo waiting in vain for Luis to call and, while he waits, going out in search of other men who might again approximate the experience of wholeness that he had experienced with Luis.

One such man, significantly named “Pablo” as well, meets the protagonist in a pornographic movie theater, and when he takes him home for sex, the “new” Pablo undergoes an amazing transformation. After their experience in the theater bathroom, where he acted like the kind of powerful, dominating, and aggressive leather master that would satisfy the protagonist's needs, he unexpectedly becomes gentle and caring. The protagonist states: “me sorprendió con su ternura, buscaba mi abrazo, el calor de mi cuerpo. La cara de hijo de puta que tenía en el cine mientras me obligaba a chuparle la pija a cualquiera, en su cama se volvía un rostro fuera de lo común, era un bebé, era un monstruo, era un dios...” (*Año* 84-85). The unexpected and dramatic change in his partner—the fact that he becomes a startling combination of incongruous creatures—a baby, a monster, and a god—powerfully suggests that the protagonist has come into contact with a projected image that Jung calls the “Divine Child,” an image that “anticipates ‘the synthesis of conscious and unconscious elements in the personality. It is a symbol which unites the opposites; a mediator, a bringer of healing, that is, one who makes whole’” (qtd. in Roscoe 120). As will be shown, the experience with the second Pablo (same, but different) becomes pivotal for its role in preparing the protagonist for his own unexpected transformation at the end of the novel.

Likewise, in *El mendigo chupapijas*, Pérez expands on the compensatory coincidence and interplay of binaries when Pablo unites with his complement, Martín, in a brief, but transfiguring relationship. Martín appears to be precisely the type of dangerous and sheltering force that Pablo describes earlier as his perfect complement. Pablo’s “leather daddy” disciplines him to the precise limit of tolerance, and then lavishes affection on him in the form of tender kisses. The encounter for Pablo is explicitly spiritual: “... yo disfrutaba del estado que los besos me provocaban y que unía nuestras almas y aceleraba nuestros latidos, una embriaguez extasiante. Mientras él me besaba sentía que un dios había bajado del cielo a darme ese momento único, bello, la energía de un amor desbordante, ilimitado” (63). And while the traditionally-viewed “opposite” qualities of pleasure and pain, domination and obedience, and aggression and tenderness converge in the sexual experience, the first-person narrator emphasizes another formidable union of opposites that characterize Martín’s kisses: he notes that “estos besos en exceso pueden ser un veneno muy potente” (63). Consequently, Pablo feels antithetical, paradoxical reactions, “[a]drenalínico y extasiante por un lado, por el otro lacrimógeno y torturador,” and tells Martín in an e-mail message that “[l]a presencia de mi Señor sería el único antídoto” (67). The danger of a deadly poison and the safety of its curative antidote coincide simultaneously when Pablo and Martín unite.

The sublime experience of union between Pablo and Martín reaches its spiritual and emotional peak when Pablo, inspired after reading Flaubert’s *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*, fantasizes about a new existence, an isolated life far removed from the difficulties of the modern world. In a “santuario” located in the Misiones province of Argentina near a place significantly named “Salto del Ángel,” Pablo evokes the spirit of Martín,

que aparece en la esfera de luz central. Llega radiante, mis ojos se acostumbran pronto a la refulgente luz que emana de su cuerpo. Es bello como un príncipe del Cielo, en sus ojos veo una fuente inagotable de amor. Martín ...me dice ‘Te amo’ y me da uno de sus embriagantes besos, más dulce que el fruto más sabroso de este paraíso. [...] A la hora de despedirnos me dijo nuevamente ‘Te amo’ y se desintegró en la esfera de luz. (71)

Again, as in *Un año sin amor*, Pablo's idealized partner undergoes what the protagonist perceives as a divine, god-like inflation that results from the powerful psychic energy released when opposites collide and interact. But the ecstatic sensation cannot last: although Pablo's consciousness has come into contact with powerful unconscious contents that momentarily give him the sensation of a sublime union, such a spectacular conjoining must undergo a deflation in the light of daily reality. After the extraordinarily emotional experience with Martín, rational calm once again takes hold, and when he and Martín go out to dinner one night, Pablo becomes aware of the all-too-human qualities of the object of his desire. When Martín shows himself to be stingy by making Pablo pay for his half of the meal, when Martín suffers “un ataque de eructos,” and when he confesses his existential aimlessness by stating that he simply does not know what he wants to do with life, Pablo's disappointment is sharp: “...esa noche M. bajó del cielo para no volver a subir nunca, perdió su encanto. [...] Tal vez sea un histérico” (74). But although they never see each other again, Pablo is not unchanged by the experience. Having experienced such powerful moments of psychological intensity that come from the mystical experience that, as Beckmann confirms, frequently accompanies the bodily practices of consensual SM activities, the protagonist has been readied for a final transformation which brings Pérez's novels to their conclusion.

Transformation

Pérez ends both novels with a similar alteration in the main character, a change that might seem unexpected or even inexplicable, given the exclusivity of the hyper-masculine world in which Pablo moves, but which in reality is remarkably consistent with the trajectory of the motif of the search that works as an organizing principle in the novels. In the final pages of each novel, the narration concludes with suggestions that Pablo has been radically transformed by his transitory contact with a sense of totality, an experience that has helped him incorporate and transcend what he perceives as difference through the union of opposites. In each novel, the protagonist demonstrates that he finally feels comfortable, even liberated, by exploring an aspect of himself that had always been marginalized, an aspect whose absence left him both incomplete and unbalanced, that is, a manifestation of *femininity* that suddenly has made its way into his conscious sense of self. In effect, the transcendental union of opposites has resulted in the unleashing of an interior counter-gender image (what Jung has called an essential “symbol of transformation”), a feminine version of Pablo's own self. And because the Western fetishizing of difference (and disparagement of sameness) is represented most fundamentally through *gender*, the protagonist experiences his most dramatic transformation through contrasexual aspects of his own being. Both of Pérez's novels, then, conclude with the protagonist bringing into his conscious reality those unconscious contents that take the symbolic form of his own femininity, suggesting that he has begun to incorporate a cross-gender identity that has always been a part of him. A deeper connection to the totality of his own interior opposites seems to be a necessary step in the protagonist's search for meaning and purpose through same-sex erotic desire.

For example, in *Un año sin amor*, the end of 1996 and the end of the diary bring a number of changes to Pablo, including the embracing of what may serve to balance his over-identification with an exclusive conscious masculinity: “El plan para esta noche es cenar, tirar fuegos artificiales a la medianoche y comenzado el año próximo travestirnos” (144). He notes that when he first suggested that he and his friends celebrate the New Year *in drag*, to exteriorize a gender difference that is also a part of their inner selves, he had only thought about how amusing it would be. But he then has a powerful realization that there is something much more profound about the act of manifesting his own difference and performing an internal gender difference that he had always suppressed.⁸ Pablo’s transformative experience with the union of sameness and difference by means of a same-sex *coniunctio oppositorum*, has opened up his sensitivity to and need for a difference that alters the protagonists sense of identity, a difference symbolized by his sibling, Paula, who had committed suicide at the start of the year. He explains, “Siento que tenía resuelta mi feminidad mientras Paula vivía. Su nombre, el femenino del mío, lo elegí yo... [...] Ahora siento que hacer algo vestido de mujer me ayuda, sin que esto vaya más allá de nada, no dejará de ser una diversión para la fiesta de año nuevo” (144). What he thought had been resolved in his psyche while his externally feminine “twin sister” of himself was alive, has now become internalized into his consciousness and offers him assistance in his spiritual search for meaning in the modern world.

While Pablo in *Un año sin amor* ends the novel on a note of optimism as the protagonist finds a measure of emotional balance and a positive transformation in his physical health, the prospects for Pablo in *El mendigo chupapijas* are somewhat more ambivalent and conflicted. After his aunt reads his private diary (the journal that makes up the text of *Un año sin amor*, one might assume) and tells the family about his “degenerate” sexual life, Pablo’s father evicts him from the house that he shares with the aunt, and the protagonist finds himself suddenly destitute and living on the streets of Buenos Aires. He comes upon a group of homeless men in an abandoned house, and one of them, “el más joven, de melena densa y tupida barba negra” takes him under his wing to *protect* him from the others. As they share a cheap box of wine, the homeless man tells Pablo, “Tenés un culito muy lindo, mamita. Vení sentate acá conmigo que papi te va cuidar de ese degenerado. ¿Y nombre de mujer no tenés?” Surprisingly, Pablo declares that at first he is afraid, but then he suddenly trusts the man, as he experiences “una paz fuera de lo común” in his caresses (77). As he accepts the feminine variation of his name, “Paulita,” Pablo finds a profound calm in the protection offered by the “grandote achinado” and at that moment, he has the sensation of “vibrant, luminous energy” that travels through his spinal cord and out from the top of his head, accompanied simultaneously by a vision of angels (*Mendigo* 77). On the one hand, Pablo has been rejected by his family, cast out of his former life, and finds himself now in a precarious and vulnerable living situation. But on the other hand, he has discovered a deep sense of serenity, harmony, and balance as he accepts a newly enriched identity that incorporates and integrates difference within his own identity.

⁸ The performative qualities of gender and the implications that can be derived from its performance on the construction of identity is compellingly —though still controversially— explored in great depth by Judith Butler and others. For Butler, drag is particularly revealing of how the performance of a different gender belies the notion of a fixed, stable, or natural gender identity for the performer (“Imitation” 313). The psychological perspective on this, illustrated suggestively by Pérez’s novel, implies that since the unconscious portion of the psyche is multi-gendered, the modern queer performativity of gender may be the outward expression of a human being’s deepest sense of possessing a fluidity of internal gender identities.

Pérez's two novels tell the stories of two men whose desire for sameness within difference has spiritual and psychological value, meaning, and purpose. In contrast to the thinking of Freud and his followers, homoerotic desire, as illustrated in these novels, cannot be considered regressive, infantile, or even perverse. Pérez's characters offer a view that the path towards psychic evolution is equally possible through same-sex union as it is through different-sex union. In these novels, the main character convincingly illustrates that the traditional heterosexist definition of the psychoanalytic goal of psycho-sexual development—the embracing of (sexual) difference and the repudiating of (sexual) sameness—has no claim to validity. By experiencing wholeness through the union of opposites in the form of same-sex erotics, Pérez's protagonist confirms that by means of one's "homo-ness," it is possible to pursue and experience psychological growth, it is possible to embrace the repressed portions of oneself, and it is possible to incorporate, include and integrate the variability, continuity and fluidity of sameness and difference within.

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