

Locating Tragedy in *El ángel de Sodoma*: Inversion and the Unchanged Name

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In medical and literary discourses of the early twentieth century, the chaste “invert” was a pathological subject, rendered perpetually virginal by feelings of shame regarding a perceived incongruence between his or her psychological and anatomical sex. Whether a female soul trapped in a male body and desirous of traditionally gendered males or vice versa, this figure played a crucial role in debates concerning sex reform, homosexuality, and modernity during the 1920s and 1930s.¹ Specifically, the invert was a point of convergence for scientists, jurists, and novelists as they struggled to define modern attitudes towards sexuality. Writers with different professional backgrounds thus contributed elaborate paratexts on the subject of inversion to novels portraying this theme. Most famously, the sexologist Havelock Ellis composed a preface for Radclyffe Hall’s 1928 novel on female inversion, *The Well of Loneliness*.² In Spain, the liberal endocrinologist and sex reformer Gregorio Marañón penned a prologue for Carmen de Burgos’s 1931 novel *Quiero vivir mi vida*, which features a woman who takes on increasingly masculine traits following her marriage (Clúa Ginés 55-59; Larson vii-xii). Other novels and plays by the Spanish and Latin American writers Álvaro Retana, Eduardo Zamacois, José González Castillo, and Ofelia Rodríguez Acosta lack paratextual frames by similarly illustrious commentators; instead, the texts themselves invoke medical thought on inversion and sex reform.³

¹ Foucault famously notes the link between gender inversion and same-sex desire in early medical theories of homosexuality: “We must not forget that the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized—Westphal’s famous article of 1870 on ‘contrary sexual sensations’ can stand as its date of birth—less by a type of sexual relations than by a certain quality of sexual sensibility, a certain way of inverting the masculine and the feminine in oneself” (43). Richard Cleminson and Francisco Vázquez García trace the medicalization of inversion in the Spanish context, noting that it was not until around 1915 that gender inversion was routinely linked to same-sex genital activity in Spain (29-81, 96).

² In Ellis’s view, *The Well of Loneliness* is of “great interest because—apart from its fine qualities as a novel by a writer of accomplished art—it possesses a notable psychological and sociological significance” (6).

³ Retana’s risqué novelettes, published in Spain in the 1920s and early 1930s, feature effeminate, homosexual men who mock the era’s medical thinking on inversion. In *A Sodoma en tren botijo* (1933), one such character distorts Marañón’s ideas to make him into a homophile activist (202-03). Zamacois’s long middle-brow novel *La antorcha apagada* (1935), also published in Spain, upholds Marañón’s liberal ideas on

Within the corpus of texts with invert protagonists, Spanish-Cuban writer Alfonso Hernández-Catá's novel *El ángel de Sodoma* (1928) has attracted special critical attention on the premise that it was among the first works written in Spanish to deal centrally with male homosexuality (Bejel 66; Cleminson 201; Galdo 19).⁴ Also important is the fact that the novel went through a second edition in 1929 with a lengthy prologue by Marañón and an epilogue by the eminent Spanish jurist and politician Luis Jiménez de Asúa. Comprising nearly one fifth of the second edition, these paratexts argue that the novel supports the opinion of liberal sex reformers that chaste inverts deserve to be pitied for being victims of a congenital aberration. As we shall see, in 1929, this thesis was calculated to combat homophobic legislation in Spain and Chile, where different editions of the text were produced concurrently by two separate publishers.⁵

Besides being caught up in social debates of its time, *El ángel de Sodoma* is also interesting today for its literary qualities and, as I will argue, for the way its generic and formal components shape its social implications regarding sexual inversion. Criticism on Hernández-Catá has long noted his fusion of Naturalist and *modernista* traits in polished prose narratives featuring psychologically complex characters (Aragón 45-69). The finely wrought language and careful narrative development of *El ángel de Sodoma* are prime examples of the author's craftsmanship. Nevertheless, these dimensions have garnered less critical attention than the medical and legal discourses of the prologue and epilogue. According to critic Alejandro Mejías-López, scholars have read the novel as an illustration of Marañón and Jiménez de Asúa's ideas and, in so doing, have interpreted it in line with the stances of liberal sex reform. In opposition to this tendency, Mejías-López convincingly shows that the text's literary devices overflow the meanings proposed by the framing

sex reform, clearly alluding to the doctor's work on intersexual states (239). For a discussion of inversion in Latin American literature of the time, including Rodríguez Acosta's novel *La vida manda* (1929) and González Castillo's play *Los invertidos* (1914), see Daniel Balderston.

⁴ Hernández-Catá was born in the Spanish province of Salamanca in 1885 to a Spanish father and Cuban-born mother. He grew up in Cuba but spent most of his adult life in Spain, where he published the majority of his stories and novels (Aragón 19-44, 143-56). Still, he remained involved in Cuban literary circles, publishing articles in the Cuban journals *El Figaro* and *Cuba contemporánea*, as well as the 1929 study *Mitología de Martí* (Bueno 939, 944). Although information about the Cuban reception of *El ángel de Sodoma* is scarce, it is worth noting that the prologuist Marañón gave lectures on sexology in Cuba in 1927 and published an edition of *Los estados intersexuales del hombre y la mujer* in Havana in 1928 (Bejel 69; Sierra Madero 71, 81). Abel Sierra Madero situates Marañón's interventions within ongoing debates on the island about male inverts or "pepillitos," who "were thought to embody a threat to national masculinity and sovereignty, since their effeminate traits were the result of the defeat of national virility by North American values" (80). Hernández-Catá was surely aware of such ideas in both the Cuban and Spanish settings, but there is no evidence for a Cuban edition of the novel in the 1920s. For readings of *El ángel de Sodoma* in the context of Cuban gay literature, see Emilio Bejel (66-77) and Víctor Fowler (50-64).

⁵ I cite from the Spanish edition published in Madrid by Mundo Latino in 1929. The publishing house El Callao produced a Chilean edition in Valparaíso in the same year. The two editions include the same text but are formatted differently. Whereas the cover of the Spanish book does not have an image, the Chilean edition shows a naked woman standing over the nude corpse of a young man. The bodies resemble Greek statues and the voluptuous poses display a Decadent aesthetic. The Chilean cover also includes the advertisement: "Hernández Catá nos brinda en las páginas maravillosas de esta obra un argumento de máxima valía para extraer del campo del VICIO un problema de indiscutible competencia médica." This edition thus markets the novel simultaneously as a racy, erotic text and a useful, scientifically-informed narrative. In addition to the editions from 1929, Maite Zubiaurre completed a contemporary edition for Stockcero in 2011.

paratexts. In particular, he foregrounds the novel's nuanced Biblical allusions in order to suggest that the invert protagonist is a queer angel who falls victim to the homophobic injustices of his hometown, a straight Sodom.⁶

In the following pages, I want to take a different approach to the project of shifting critical focus on the novel from the frame to the central narrative. Namely, I consider at length a claim made only in passing by virtually every critic who has written about this text: the notion that it is a tragedy. It is generally assumed that this idea needs no explanation, for it is considered obvious that the main character's struggle against his own inversion leads inevitably to his final suicide. By rereading the novel in light of its strong allusions to Aristotle's description of tragedy in the *Poetics*, I hope to show that this view accounts for only one of the narrative's two tragic plots, simplifying the causes of the protagonist's death in the final chapter. Consequently, the dominant critical stance, initiated by Marañón and Jiménez de Asúa, overlooks the text's implication that liberal sex reform does not necessarily offer a modern perspective on sexual diversity.

Following World War I, "sex reform" referred to a range of projects in the sciences, law, and pedagogy aimed at transforming attitudes towards sex in the West. The foremost goal of reformers was to transfer hegemony over social norms regarding sex from the religious to the medical establishments. The planks of the World League for Sexual Reform, an organization founded in Copenhagen in 1928 by the homophile sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld, testify to this objective. One of the tenants declares that "[d]isturbances of the sexual impulse" such as inversion should be treated "as more or less pathological phenomena, and not, as in the past, as crimes, vices, or sins" (qtd. in Sinclair 17). In Spain, where Hernández-Catá initially published his novel, reformers clung tenaciously to this plank at the expense of others with less pathologizing implications for sexual variation.⁷ The Spanish chapter of the League, convened under the presidency of Marañón in 1932, felt pressured to classify inversion as an illness rather than a legal infraction or sin in order to oppose a law criminalizing certain homosexual acts that had been passed by the Primo de Rivera regime with the support of right-wing Catholics in 1928. Articles 601 and 616 of that year's Penal Code distinguished between hetero- and homosexual variants of crimes against decency and public scandal, mandating significantly harsher punishments for the same-sex versions. Given the vague definitions of the infractions, the legislation threatened all men who engaged in homosexual behaviors.⁸ In Chile, a similar statute had prohibited

⁶ Several other critics also read *El ángel de Sodoma* counter to the interpretations proposed by the framing paratexts. Uva de Aragón argues briefly that the protagonist is not victim to inversion, but rather to an intolerant society (83-85). Jesús Jambriña believes that the protagonist commits suicide because he does not want to give up living as an invert in Paris to return to his home city (2). Nina R. Menéndez draws on Bakhtin to argue that the novel "is able to neutralize—through dialogic engagement—many of the various negativizing modes of social discourse [i.e., the pathologizing views of Marañón] related to the subject of homosexuality" (139).

⁷ The World League for Sexual Reform also recommended that "[o]nly those sexual acts . . . be considered criminal which infringe the sexual rights of another person. Sexual acts between responsible adults, undertaken by mutual consent, to be regarded as the private concern of those adults" (qtd. in Sinclair 17). This plank was widely rejected by the League's Spanish chapter (Sinclair 73).

⁸ Article 601 of the 1928 Penal Code stated that "[c]uando el abuso deshonesto, concurriendo cualquiera de las circunstancias del artículo 598, tuviera lugar con persona del mismo sexo del culpable, se impondrá la pena de dos a doce años de prisión." Article 616 added: "El que habitualmente o con escándalo cometiere

sodomy since 1875.⁹ In 1927, two years before the Chilean publication of *El ángel de Sodoma*, the rise to power of the dictator Carlos Ibáñez del Campo marked a new wave of homophobic violence, including the establishment in Pisagua of a concentration camp for convicted homosexual men (Contardo 182). Jiménez de Asúa's epilogue condemns the Chilean legislation for operating "de espaldas a la ciencia" (244). In the absence of other connections between Hernández-Catá and Chile in the late 1920s, this passage suggests that the novel's South American edition responded directly to the homophobic politics of its time.¹⁰

In this sense, the novel formed part of a wider project to combat repressive legal measures. Liberal doctors and jurists, for instance, elaborated a doctrine of conditional compassion towards inverts according to which male inverts were to be pitied as victims of a natural flaw on the condition that they remained chaste and tried to enhance their masculinity. As Marañón writes in his treatise *La evolución de la sexualidad y los estados intersexuales* (1930), "[e]l invertido es, pues, tan responsable de su anormalidad como pudiera serlo el diabético de su glucosuria" (608). From this perspective, inverts are to blame for their inversion only if they do not take sufficient measures to regulate their gender and sexuality, much as diabetics regulate their blood sugar. Elsewhere, Marañón reviews means of promoting heterosexual masculinity and concludes that genital surgery is too risky (*Tres ensayos* 189-97). He instead favors exercise, diet, hard work, and a vaguely defined "educación de tipo muy varonil" (195).¹¹ In the event that none of this works, he urges inverts to "conllevar[r] a solas la tragedia de su inclinación torcida, sin suscitar jamás la menor sospecha de nadie" (*La evolución* 626). As will soon become clear, Marañón's tragic vision of inversion haunts *El ángel de Sodoma*.

Published in the homophobic climate of Spain and Chile in the late 1920s, the novel's second edition resonates with the medicalizing impulse of sex reformers. In fact, Jiménez de Asúa's epilogue cites Marañón's comparison of inverts to diabetics in order to argue that the legal criminalization of inverts represents a "torpeza anacrónica" (245) with respect to science's "[i]nterpretación moderna" (242) of inversion as a congenital defect. The protagonist himself rehearses the major theses of sex reform when he asks, "¿Qué culpa tengo yo? ¿Si fuera un vicioso, un vil caído por lujuria en la renegación del sexo, merecería que se me escupiera! ¿Pero, si dentro de mí, me siento blando, femenino!" (117). Prior scholars have often drawn on such statements to argue that the novel advocates for

actos contrarios al pudor con personas del mismo sexo, será castigado con multa de 1.000 a 10.000 pesetas e inhabilitación especial para cargos públicos de seis a doce años" (qtd. in Mira 183).

⁹ Without clearly defining sodomy, Article 365 of the Chilean Penal Code of 1875 stated that "[e]l que se hiciere reo del delito de sodomía sufrirá la pena de presidio menor en su grado medio"—that is, between 541 days and three years of imprisonment (qtd. in Contardo 108). For more on the homophobic measures of the Ibáñez regime, see Óscar Contardo (182-85).

¹⁰ During the Spanish Civil War, Hernández-Catá served briefly as Cuban ambassador to Chile. Additionally, the renowned Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral spoke at his funeral following his sudden death in an airplane crash outside Rio de Janeiro in 1940 (Bueno 947-49). There is little evidence for other important connections between the writer and Chile prior to 1937.

¹¹ As Marañón explains in *Tres ensayos sobre la vida sexual*, he is hesitant to provide a concrete plan for combating inversion because "[l]a austeridad sexual que deriva de la máxima diferenciación sexual no puede imbuirse en los corazones con reglas fijas. . . ; es una semilla que sólo florece cuando se planta con recato y amor en cada individuo . . ." (214).

conditional compassion for chaste inverts.¹² What I want to highlight, in contrast, is that these passages recapitulate liberal perspectives on inversion in the context of two tragic plots that ultimately question whether such viewpoints are modern and whether they reduce or intensify human suffering.

Over the course of ten chapters, the novel recounts the life story of the chaste invert José-María Vélez-Gomara, the first-born son of an aristocratic household whose coat-of-arms is a source of pride for an unidentified port city. The port is likely in Spain because it has a Phoenician quarter, but the setting is generic enough to permit identification on the part of a transatlantic Hispanic readership. Following the death of his parents, the eighteen-year-old protagonist seeks to preserve his family honor by grooming his younger sisters for marriage and covering up his brother Jaime's dissolute life as a sailor. His efforts flounder when he realizes that he is attracted to a male trapeze artist. In a subsequent internal monologue, the character concludes that his name is symbolic of a congenital mismatch between his male body and female psychology. José-María vows to maintain his family's reputation by disowning the feminine component of his name. It is only when he receives a letter from his brother that he desists from fruitless attempts to eliminate his inversion. After learning that Jaime has changed his last name to begin working as a pirate, the protagonist decides that he can go abroad, renounce his family name, and live as a sexually active invert. Upon arriving in Paris, he does not give an alias at his hotel because he is confident that nobody will recognize his name in the crowds of the modern metropolis. Consequently, a letter from his hometown is able to reach him around the same time that he arranges for a meeting with a younger man. In the final pages, the missive's reminder about his familial obligations leads him to throw himself in front of a train minutes before his rendezvous was to have taken place at the same metro station.

In their prologue and epilogue, Marañón and Jiménez de Asúa set the stage for a long tradition of readings of José-María's suicide as an exemplary tragedy. The sex reformers contend that the work is "profundamente educativa" (Jiménez de Asúa 246) and a "limpia lección de moral" (Marañón, "Prólogo" 38) because it conveys the supposedly modern scientific thesis that chaste inverts are deserving of pity as victims of a natural error beyond their control. In the words of Marañón, their "extravío evolutivo" (30) is also a tragic flaw: a "fuerza inexorable" (39) that leads José-María "paso a paso hacia la muerte" (39). From this perspective, the protagonist's tragedy is the result of a clash between his admirable attempts to remedy his defect and the harsh reality that he has little recourse short of suicide. The dilemma, seen by Jiménez de Asúa as "el drama íntimo de un homosexual heroico que se entregó a la muerte sin claudicar," is supposed to reinforce the novel's thesis by making readers feel compassion for José-María (255).

Noting that Hernández-Catá dedicated the second edition of *El ángel de Sodoma* to Marañón, many critics assume that he agreed with the doctor's interpretation. To quote a few examples, the early book reviewer José A. Balseiro wrote in 1929 that the novel "presenta un caso de homosexualismo que culmina en tragedia. . . . [E]l lector de ficciones conocerá un nuevo tiro de conciencia: el del ser predestinado a caer en el peor vicio para

¹² Juan Carlos Galdo, for instance, states that one passage "sirve para recalcar los síntomas de la 'enfermedad incurable' y cómo se manifiestan en la atormentada subjetividad del héroe" (27). He finds that José-María is presented as "un homosexual reprimido y en esa medida digno de conmiseración" (25).

que pudo nacer el hombre y que después de luchar contra sí mismo con dolorosa e inútil violencia opta por la muerte antes de ceder al impulso malsano de su carne” (61). In a more recent study, Fowler agrees that the text “plasma una tragedia con momentos estremecedores: la tragedia del que no quiere caer” (50). Finally, in the introduction to her contemporary edition, Zubiaurre observes that “la novela está dibujada en tonos sombríos, con un aire trágico envolviendo siempre la silueta de José-María. Claramente, la homosexualidad se considera una tragedia . . .” (x).¹³ My qualms regarding such statements (the first written from a homophobic perspective, and the others from an anti-homophobic standpoint) are not that they wrongly identify the novel as a tragic text; clearly, it does have a tragic dimension. Instead, I am concerned that the second edition’s paratexts have exercised a disproportionate influence on judgments regarding the causes of José-María’s final suicide. Although there can be no doubt that José-María often considers his inversion an inborn tragic flaw, the conclusion of the text opens the door for the less homophobic reading that his death is the result of his tragic error of not changing his name in Paris.

The distinction between tragic flaw and error, essential to reinterpreting *El ángel de Sodoma*, recalls a long tradition of commentaries on Aristotle’s *Poetics*, which was familiar to early twentieth-century novelists and, as details of his novel suggest, to Hernández-Catá.¹⁴ For Aristotle, the most effective tragedies center on a character who is “better than we are” and who passes “from fortune to misfortune” due to a “great error,” generally followed by scenes of anagnorisis (recognition) and peripeteia (reversal) (lines 1448a-53a). The purpose of the representation is to purge the audience of “pity and terror” through catharsis (line 1449b). Of the numerous debates surrounding this definition, one of the most intense involves the cause of the hero’s fall into adversity, or what Aristotle calls “error” or hamartia in the original Greek. As Rebecca Bushnell points out, many commentators since the Middle Ages have considered hamartia a tragic flaw, a shortcoming innate to a character (86). According to this interpretation, anagnorisis is an experience through which the tragic hero comes to “inner awareness or inner knowledge” of him or herself (69). More recently, though, scholars have argued that the best English translation for hamartia is actually “missing the mark” or doing something wrong (Drakakis and Conn Liebler 8). Rather than an essential defect in a character, hamartia is an erroneous action and anagnorisis is the sudden realization that a seemingly benign deed was actually a grave mistake involving veiled bonds of “friendship and enmity” (Aristotle, line 1452a).

Debates over the meaning of hamartia have a strong bearing on *El ángel de Sodoma*, for the novel narrates two tragedies brought about successively by a supposed flaw and by an error, by José-María’s inversion and by his failure to change his name in Paris. The opening chapter sets up the text’s tragic framework while explaining how José-María becomes head of the Vélez-Gomara household. The first sentence describes a fall into misfortune and imbues the novel with theatrical resonances from the outset: “La caída de cualquier construcción material o espiritual mantenida en alto varios siglos constituye siempre un

¹³ See also Zubiaurre’s reading of *El ángel de Sodoma* in *Cultures of the Erotic in Spain, 1898-1939* (311-15).

¹⁴ Jeannette King notes that late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century novelists such as George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, and Henry James referred to Aristotle as they sought to merge classical concepts of tragedy with novelistic convention (3, 12, 39).

espectáculo patético" (47). The pathetic spectacle evokes suffering as a vital component of tragic plots (Aristotle, lines 1449b, 1452a). Later on, the narrator continues to recount the story of the Vélez-Gomara family as a classical tragedy, complete with protagonists and chorus. When José-María's father commits suicide out of financial despair, "[t]oda la ciudad participó del drama" (Hernández-Catá 55). Following the funeral, the main character and his sisters, "hasta entonces coro doloroso e inerme a espaldas de los protagonistas," must "avanzar hasta el primer plano" to take control of their estate (57). Later references to their "ventur[a]" and "desventura," as well as to José-María's feelings of "lástima" and "piedad" towards his inversion, replicate the words for *fortune*, *misfortune*, and *pity* in José Goya y Muniain's standard Spanish translation of the *Poetics* (1798).¹⁵ Hernández-Catá's narrator promises that readers too shall feel pity, since José-María's tale will be "lo bastante rico en rasgos dolorosos para sacar de su egolatría o de su indiferencia, durante un par de horas, a algunos lectores sensibles" (48). Apparently, the narrator wants readers to undergo an Aristotelian catharsis, defined by Butcher as a "transport of feeling, which carries a man beyond his individual self" (qtd. in Drakakis and Conn Liebler 4). José-María's life is an adequate vehicle for catharsis because his noble origins make him a "better" character like the tragic heroes identified by Aristotle (line 1448a).

As in Greek tragedy, it is the end of a heroic age that spells doom for the Vélez-Gomara household. The novel's first paragraph establishes a distinction between heroic tradition and banal modernity:

La casa de los Vélez-Gomara era muy antigua y había sido varias veces ilustre por el ímpetu de sus hombres y por la riqueza atesorada bajo su blasón. Pero con el desgaste causado por la lima de los años, los ánimos esforzados debilitáronse y el caudal volvió a pulverizarse en el anónimo, merced a garras de usureros y a manos de mujeres acariciadoras y cautas. La democracia alumbró aquí y allá, sin consagraciones regias, cien cabezas de estirpe, mientras la casa de los Vélez-Gomara languidecía. (47-48)

In the past, divisions between social castes defined by a divinely ordained king placed the Vélez-Gomara family near the pinnacle of a feudal hierarchy. But with the spread of democracy and class differentiation through labor and property, the household lost much of its standing in a bourgeois regime. The Vélez-Gomara clan faces changing economic conditions and evolving sexual behaviors in tandem, so that financial hardship under the pressure of middle-class usurers corresponds to emasculation and sexual excess, possibly with female prostitutes. This correlation of capital, sex, and gender persists as José-María confronts a social milieu in the midst of historical flux. By the time his story begins, his hometown's middle-class society is struggling against further modernization: "Las ventanas con sus cristales rotos trepidaban nerviosas, participando del estremecimiento aventurero de las campanas, de los trenes, de los buques, y hasta de los pobres carros urbanos" (49). At the same time that sailors, "hartos de oceánicas castidades," demand a loosening of bourgeois sexual norms, new modes of transportation promise to revolutionize life in the port (48). Throughout the text's tragic plots, the protagonist must

¹⁵ For the words "ventur[a]," "desventura," "lástima," and "piedad" in the standard Spanish translation of the *Poetics*, see Aristóteles, *El arte poética* (25, 30-33, 36). For the same words in *El ángel de Sodoma*, see Hernández-Catá ("venturoso" [60], "venturosa" [64], "desventura" [108, 140, 159], "lástima" [96, 101], "piedad" [149]).

negotiate a triple allegiance to his aristocratic past, to his provincial city's dominant bourgeois ethic, and to forms of mobility, sexuality, and consumerism that herald a new brand of modernity at odds with the middle class.

The first tragedy, or the one in which José-María understands his inversion as a tragic flaw, begins when life has acquired "un ritmo venturoso" for the character following his father's demise (60). The narrative strengthens the link between the protagonist's attitudes concerning money, work, and sex during this time of good fortune: his meticulous accounting at his job as a banker and his exacting tidiness at home go hand in hand with his desire to protect the virginity of his sisters before marriage. All of this forms part of a middle-class ethic whereby he seeks to integrate his household into the city's bourgeois, patriarchal order. The only threat to José-María's contentment consists of his neighbors' constant reminders that he is actually an aristocrat with obligations to his coat-of-arms, the "timbre óptimo" (49) of the community's "ciudad prócer" (48). As Bejel has observed, the coat-of-arms symbolizes the port's honor code, a source of homophobia that eventually becomes intolerable for José-María (75).

Initially, the character is able to ward off criticism by dedicating himself to restoring his lineage to its former glory through "el orden, la limpieza [y] el ahorro" (Hernández-Catá 116). But he is unable to prolong his strict regime indefinitely. The first signs of his impending fall correspond to the forced relaxation of his bourgeois norms when his brother Jaime returns home from his first stint at sea. Having experienced life outside his birthplace, the sailor disdains José-María's moral rigidity. Jaime's drinking and sexual innuendos upset his brother's routine, even causing his perfect handwriting to falter at the bank. The disturbance reaches a climax when José-María accompanies Jaime to a traveling circus. As Galdo points out, the show is an ephemeral and marginal urban space saturated with transgressive sexualities (27). When a male and a female trapeze artist perform an act with a lion and a tiger, the crowd emits "alaridos de voluptuosa angustia" (Hernández-Catá 87). José-María is not exempt from the excitement. After being introduced to the acrobats and asked if he likes the woman, he realizes that "sólo una figura perduraba en su retina y en sus nervios: la del hombre... ¡La del hombre joven y fornido nada más!" (91).

For José-María, this is a moment of "revelación" or anagnorisis, the sudden recognition of a tragic flaw (75). Upon returning home from the circus, he spends the night thinking about his attraction to the man with great "lástima" (96, 101). In an anguished internal monologue, he decides that "la Naturaleza había ido a equivocarse en él" (100). To paraphrase Alberto Mira, the protagonist ventriloquizes scientific texts when he contemplates the etiology of his supposed defect, as well as possible cures (196). Echoing the ideas of liberal sex reform, he finds that he is not a criminal or sinner, since inversion "[n]o se trata de una cosa que puedes adquirir o dejar, sino de algo que 'eres' porque naciste así, porque te engendraron así" (Hernández-Catá 134). Even so, he believes that he is obliged to deny himself any kind of sexual contact with men. Given "la alternativa del sacrificio y del vicio sin perdón" (128), José-María opts for the former and tries to remedy his condition, which he sees at first as an unquestionable "desventura" (140, 159).

Only much later in the text does the narrator mention that the protagonist once consulted a medical treatise in the municipal library to learn how to undertake his "[c]ura de fuego y hierro" (102). It turns out that scientific advice about how to promote sexual differentiation, like the suggestions in the medical works of Marañón, led José-María to

exercise and sunbathe, smoke and grow a beard, modify his gestures and stride, and attempt relations with women. Since he intends for these fruitless measures to help him honor his family crest, or to “conservar y aun abrillantar, de ser posible, el nombre del padre heroico,” he uses modern science to perpetuate aristocratic tradition (100). In the end, then, science is a source of intense, useless suffering for José-María. The character’s cure gives him migraines and a cough, but it does not eliminate his desire for men. *El ángel de Sodoma* thus presents liberal sex reform not as a modern remedy for inversion, as Marañón and Jiménez de Asúa would have it, but as a source of pain for an invert who uses it to uphold a traditional honor code.

After much anguish, José-María finally realizes that attempts to rectify his inversion are in vain. His attitude changes gradually as he spends time at the margins of his provincial city, where an ethic of individualist consumerism prevails over the values of his family’s aristocratic past and bourgeois present. When the protagonist first deviates from his work routine and witnesses the bawdy songs of drunken sailors by the docks at night, he rushes home to avoid the men’s unfettered sexuality. Later in a café, in contrast, he finds it hard to deny the attraction of a group of boisterous soldiers, free from any obligations to work and family. Whereas José-María concludes that he could never enjoy the soldiers’ freedom due to familial duties—“Jaime, Isabel-Luisa y Amparo llevaban también el nombre paterno”—his increasingly awkward penmanship at the bank reveals that he is no longer able to sacrifice himself entirely to communal needs and to middle-class work (144).

José-María’s epiphany that he can relinquish his family name and leave his city comes when he receives a letter informing him that Jaime has taken the name Nicolás Smith to become a pirate. The protagonist reflects:

Cambiar de nombre: ¡qué cosa tan turbadora y, por lo visto, tan fácil!... Cambiar de nombre, bautizarse a sí mismo, cortar el cordón umbilical del alma y reconocerse solo, único eslabón irresponsable desligado de toda cadena... Dejar a un lado la funda estrecha de los apellidos y ser otro, más verdadero tal vez, sin pasado, sin cargas... ¡Qué maravilla! (175)

The character’s joyous exclamations confirm Mejías-López’s observation that this episode marks a reversal in his situation, this time from misfortune to fortune. Following his decision to change his name, he looks forward to the day in Paris when he will be able to say, “¡Así soy! ¡Fuera falsa virtud, fuera vergüenza de mostrarme según me hicieron!” (Hernández-Catá 178). Although José-María clings to the ostensibly scientific truth that his inversion is a congenital condition, he is now less inclined to see it as a shameful pathology. After reading Jaime’s letter, he continues to call himself “un monstruo,” providing evidence of the deeply ingrained homophobia of his upbringing (208). At the same time, he is also able to imagine embracing his sexual desires and liberating “el José-María verdadero” (199) or “él mismo” (204), the José-María who was attracted to the man at the circus.

As his homophobic scruples grow weaker, the protagonist redefines his previous dedication to work and family as a waste of his youth and sets out to release his savings, both monetary and sexual, through consumerism. During his last days in his hometown, he acquires credit cards and becomes well-known for handing out money to beggars. His spending increases during his train ride to Paris, when he becomes an anonymous individual in a crowd of strangers. Thrilled by the pleasure of being alone, he treats himself to coffee and liquor and dares to stare at a young man in a station. For José-María, the

locomotive is a space for the liberation of same-sex desire and a vehicle into Paris's modern order of consumerist individualism. From station to station, he eagerly abandons his aristocratic distinction as he becomes convinced that time and space make all people equal: "Cien leguas, cien años, y el magnate era polvo y el reverenciado desconocido..." (214). As he arrives in France, however, his failure to follow through on his plan to renounce his family name precipitates his downfall in the novel's second tragic plot.

Like the initial tragedy of inversion, the tragedy of the unchanged name begins in a moment of fortune for José-María. Once in Paris, he feels "el júbilo de estrenar la vida" (220). Here, life refers to a vital experience in which the character can act as a free consumer, a stranger in a crowd of seductive commodities and bodies. The financial and sexual restraint of his bourgeois ethic in his home city cedes to a new emphasis on spending and erotic release in the consumerist culture of the metropolis. During his first day abroad, José-María changes his wardrobe and buys soaps and perfumes to give himself a sumptuous bath. According to Menéndez, a "language of pleasure" imbues his purchases with an unmistakably erotic texture (154). Indeed, the narrator revels in descriptions of fabrics in a boutique: "En la tienda su diestra palpaba con delite [*sic*] los hilos frescos, las sedas tibias y crujientes, las batistas traslúcidas, los crespones de lujosa granulación, el raso elástico de las ligas" (Hernández-Catá 218). Just as José-María chooses from among the fabrics, he also cruises the Parisian streets in search of a lover. He anticipates that "un gesto en cualquier espectáculo, en cualquier bulevar" would allow him to pick up a willing male partner (223). While waiting to find someone suitable, he visits theaters and shops, cafés and terraces, tea houses and dance halls, always attuned to passing bodies in "el río humano" (223). Eventually, his gaze falls upon a younger man with whom he enters a bookstore in order to schedule a rendezvous in a metro station the following day. José-María's happiness peaks as he leaves the shop.

Ironically, a sequence of events beginning at precisely this point in the narrative paves the way for a reversal of the protagonist's fortune. Upon returning to his hotel, the doorman informs him that he missed a visit from two unidentified men. In his state of euphoria, he disregards the message and forgets that he chose not to give a false name at his hotel after witnessing "[l]a indiferencia con que fué escuchado el verdadero" (218). While Mejías-López is right to call the unchanged name a mistake, it is also possible to frame it in stronger terms as a tragic error. Like the Aristotelian hamartia, the slip triggers a series of consequences unforeseen by José-María, but within the realms of what Aristotle would call "probability" and "necessity" in the narrative. For the philosopher, the finest tragic actions "happen contrary to expectation but because of one another." Such events are "more amazing" than "random" or unmotivated incidents (lines 1451a-52a). In *El ángel de Sodoma*, it is coincidental that José-María receives visitors at the very time he is arranging a date with the man at the bookstore, but it is not random. Readers will recall that his brother-in-law awaits his return to Spain to make him a partner at the bank. In the station at home, the brother-in-law had shouted: "Déjate de tonuntas y ve a ver a nuestros corresponsales en seguida. Yo les escribo" (Hernández-Catá 212). Since José-María did not change his name, it is plausible that the bankers were able to locate him.

Likewise, it makes sense that he is able to receive a letter from home. After dressing for his date, he finds the missive in his mailbox at the hotel. Certain that it is not for him, he slips it into his jacket without further investigation and hurries to the metro. As he casually

opens the envelope on the train, “un efluvio de su ciudad, de su vida anterior, escapóse de él y entróle imperativo en el alma” (230). The letter reminds José-María of his brother-in-law’s plans at the bank and concludes by exhorting him not to forget his family name. The full burden of aristocratic tradition falls upon the protagonist in the tragic recognition and reversal set into motion by this message. Unlike the realization of his own identity in the tragedy of inversion, José-María’s recognition of his hometown’s stubborn demands is a case of anagnorisis in the Aristotelian sense, the revelation of an enemy (line 1452a). If he sometimes thought fondly of the port in the past, now he must acknowledge its intractable opposition to his personal aspirations. The protagonist’s discovery transforms his ride on the metro from a joyous prelude to his date to a funereal journey towards death.

Once he steps off the train at the station where he is to meet the man, José-María faces a dilemma of the type described by Lucien Goldmann as a tragic impasse, “a choice among a number of different possibilities which are all mutually incompatible but none of which is wholly satisfying” (57). While he could proceed with his date without worrying about the future, he now believes that if he were to surrender to corruption in Paris, “ya no podría volver jamás a la ciudad fundada por los suyos” (Hernández-Catá 232). On the other hand, José-María cringes at the idea of relinquishing his personal well-being for social impositions: “La idea de regresar al hotel, de recibir la visita del corresponsal de la banca de su cuñado —sin duda el visitante del día anterior— también le horripilaba” (232). Forced to choose, the protagonist finds none of his options satisfactory: neither society nor self, province nor metropolis, tradition nor modernity. He concludes that death is his only way out: “La muerte lo evitaba todo, lo borraba todo...” (233). In order to save his family from the shame of a more obvious suicide, he fakes an accident by falling on the rails in front of a train. Once a vehicle for his entrance into a modern culture of consumerism and same-sex desire, the locomotive crushes José-María and seals the triumph of bourgeois homophobia in his hometown. The train’s metamorphosis is the novel’s final tragic reversal, a result not of the character’s inversion, but of an error that prevents him from breaking with his past and acting on his desire.

Reinterpreting *El ángel de Sodoma* in this way significantly impacts how readers experience the cathartic effects of José-María’s story. Like hamartia, the meaning of catharsis in Aristotle’s *Poetics* has been the subject of intense scholarly debate. In one view, tragedy’s purgation of fear and pity reinforces dominant social norms by exposing spectators to chaos only to safely reintegrate them into the hegemonic order (Drakakis and Conn Liebler 4, 12-13). Certainly, Marañón and Jiménez de Asúa expected that *El ángel de Sodoma* would function in this way, offering agonizing images of inversion as a negative foil for traditional masculinity and heterosexuality. In their opinion, the novel presents inversion as something to be feared and pitied by readers, codified as male, who will end up embracing normative gender and sexual roles. Marañón thus writes at the end of his prologue: “Tengo por cierto que ningún hombre, al volver la última página del breve y apasionante libro, tendrá delante de sus ojos otra imagen que una noble, normal y ferverosa exaltación de la mujer” (41).

From my perspective, however, the concluding tragedy of the unchanged name obstructs catharsis in this conservative sense. José-María comes to accept his inversion as a personal identity that need not be feared or pitied but actively cultivated. In this context, Marañón’s confidence (“[t]engo por cierto”) belies his statement’s prescriptive nature.

Ultimately, he cannot predict how readers will respond to the novel; he can only hope to impose his preferred reading. With the turn of events in the denouement, the door remains open for a different sort of catharsis with less constraining results. As John Drakakis and Naomi Conn Liebler explain, several reinterpretations of the *Poetics* view catharsis as a mechanism for instigating social change. For writers such as Nietzsche, Artaud, and Brecht, the powerful emotions unleashed in catharsis mobilize “radical energies” that are not necessarily reinscribed into prevailing social structures (6). At the end of *El ángel de Sodoma*, José-María’s sacrifice to his familial honor code creates feelings of anger and pain for readers who recognize that he could have avoided this end had he followed through on his plan to change his name in Paris. How individual readers act on these emotions is largely a matter of speculation. Yet it is hard to believe that the anger will inevitably resolve into normative heterosexuality. There is also the chance—one I hope to have accentuated—that it will be channeled into antihomophobic struggle, the fight to create the conditions in which José-María would be able to keep his date with the man in the subway and be respected for doing so.

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