

Review. *De ahí venía el miedo.* Jorge Marchant Lazcano. Tajamar Editores, 2020, 311 páginas.

Eros, a great leveler: love surpassing class & caste with D’Halmar, Forster, Carpenter & Merrill

This appealing and innovative choral novel, narrated in four voices, proceeds from an intriguing geo-historical premise. The year is 1907, a decade after the trials and imprisonment of Oscar Wilde, and a decade before World War I and the Great Depression drew the curtains on the British Empire, formerly the largest in human history. We are in rural Derbyshire, near Sheffield, deep in the Midlands, not far from where Robin Hood and his merry men formerly romped through Sherwood Forest, stealing from the rich to give to the poor. The imaginary but plausible premise of Marchant’s novel involves a chance meeting of more modern outlaws: three pioneers of early 20th-century literature by and about gay men.

Marchant’s impressive skills with dialogue and characterization proceed in a fast-moving plot that interweaves both English and Spanish-language queer literary traditions. Among the principal characters whose voices his novel features are three early 20th century writers who defend love between men when it is illegal. In order of appearance, the first (and youngest) is Augusto D’Halmar (1882-1950). He would have been 25 years old when Marchant had him descending from the ship that had carried him from Valparaíso to Liverpool en route to Calcutta, where he had accepted a Chilean consular post. In this fiction and in real life, when D’Halmar left for India, he had published but one novel, the costumbrista *Juana Lucero* (1902). He has shown fleeing the shame of what he feels to be two colossal failures:

- 1) his unsuccessful attempts in founding an all-male Tolstoyan Colony in Southern Chile, and
- 2) his horror when his beloved Tolstoyan comrade, Fernando Santiván, marries Augusto’s half-sister.

Set in 1907, this novel humanizes D’Halmar by sending him first to Liverpool and then to the English Midlands, where the Spanish-speaking visitor from distant Chile is forced to rely on his considerable wits. He sheds the aristocratizing tendencies that annoyed friends such as Santiván along with acquaintances such as Gabriela Mistral, who lamented them in a letter to Eugenio Labarca: “El mismo talento de Augusto Thomson se malgasta en asuntos orientales o pseudo-orientales que no dicen nada al artista chileno y que al europeo también han de dejarlo frío” (Mistral).

D’Halmar clearly sought recognition as a leader and tastemaker. Bringing him to Liverpool, then to Milthorpe, enables Marchant to reveal him, the writer whom Pedro Prado called “el hermano errante”, as an example of what David William Foster praised in another of Marchant’s novels, *El amante sin rostro* (2009): “a recurring 20th century type: the innocent and aspiring young writer, be it the Latin American in Paris, London or New York, even Buenos Aires” (p. 202).

D’Halmar was a character, and knew it. Born Auguste Goemine Thomson in either Valparaíso or Santiago (the record is not clear), he was keenly aware of the precarious social status that he traced to his French father, a mariner who had deserted Augusto’s mother, who then died when the boy was just ten years old. He and his two stepsisters were raised by their maternal grandmother, from whose ancestors the young writer claimed the name of a distant Swedish “Baron D’Halmar”. *De ahí viene el miedo* shows an Augusto who has yet to imagine or plan, much less write what is now regarded as D’Halmar’s most significant novel: *La Muerte y Pasión del Cura Deusto* (1924), the first in the Spanish language with a theme that turns on sexual attraction between men.

Sylvia Molloy notes that “el archivo europeo, al ser evocado desde hispanoamerica, constituye ya otra lectura” (p. 16). This is the archive from which Marchant’s novel draws, but it’s specifically a queer one, seen from Latin America, as is evident in the novel’s second major character: the English novelist E.M. Forster. Just three years older than D’Halmar, as of 1907, Forster had published his first

two novels: *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905) and *The Longest Journey* (1907). Both bring acclaim for his spare, dry, sparking style. But neither novel touches on the unresolved drama in the life of young Forster, who is addressed as “Morgan” by his friends and throughout this novel.

E.M. Forster is both a central character and the primary source for *De ahí viene el miedo*, whose title and premise pay homage to his *Maurice* (1970), the posthumously published novel that delivers what his biographer, Wendy Moffat, calls “a revolutionary new genre: a gay love story that ended happily” (p. 7). *De ahí viene el miedo* develops from the premise underlying that earlier novel’s final pages, which is that alliances – Whitmanian comradeship -- between gay men are crucial. Only by crossing the boundaries of caste, generations, and social class can men live free and meaningful lives.

As D’Halmar and Forster were both teenagers in the late Victorian era, they doubtless observed the world-wide publicity surrounding the trials, condemnation and imprisonment of Oscar Wilde. Victorianism also led both Forster, D’Halmar and many others towards the so-called “Orient”, that is, the lands and peoples from North Africa (in the west) to the Indian subcontinent (in the east). Peoples and lands from whence Britain accrued the vast wealth to maintain correspondingly intricate social divisions and exclusions. But wealth did not protect Forster who grew up as the lonely, only child of a fanatically overprotective mother, widowed at age 32, with whom he lived, in her house, until she died in 1945, at age 90. She was likely aware of her son’s sexual orientation, but never acknowledged it. Despite his being painfully shy, “Morgan” traveled quite a bit. As he wrote in a note, he was 38 when he finally “parted with” his “R” – for “Respectability” -- on an Egyptian beach with an anonymous wounded soldier, according to Moffatt (p. 148).

Once he discovered sex, Forster, the pre-eminent English novelist of his generation, sought to make up for lost time. His novelistic production correspondingly dwindled. In the end, his fame might well rest on *Maurice*, which he periodically revised and circulated among friends such as Lytton Strachey, who recognized himself in its pages, and D.H. Lawrence, who closely read and admired the manuscript. When Forster completed the last set of revisions of *Maurice* in 1960, he wrote and left this note on the cover page of his unpublished manuscript: “Publishable, but worth it?” (Moffatt, p. 319). Such a publication could not be retracted, as is clear from the example of D.H. Lawrence, who, among others, lost both time and money battling the courts.

How *Maurice* was finally published following Forster’s death in 1970 is a story worth telling for the contrast with the aftermath of D’Halmar’s death, which occurred two decades earlier. The Chilean writer’s friend and colleague, the critic Alone, waited thirteen years after D’Halmar’s death before outing him: “el uranismo de D’Halmar, que no explica todo, pero sin lo cual nada se entiende” (Alone, p. 19). D’Halmar’s sexual orientation was clearly “un secreto a voces”, a category whose multiple valences Molloy, Fiol-Matta, Cano and others have usefully illuminated. Surely Alone, a man without an independent income, knew that this observation would help his book’s sales. The situation was clearer to the two friends of Morgan -- Christopher Isherwood and John Lehmann, both openly gay British expats in Southern California, who oversaw the administration of Forster’s extensive archive. Their decision to publish *Maurice* within a year of the author’s death effectively uncloseted him, with a particularly interesting result: the immediate critical reception of the posthumously published novel was ... underwhelming, not because of the perceived social progress of the revisions to Britain’s Indecency Laws (in 1967). Rather, it is the novel’s ending. Reviews of the subsequent film adaptation, (directed by James Ivory in 1987) bear this out. Mainstream reviewer Roger Ebert complained, for example, that it was not realistic for a man to leave everything for passion. Ebert praises the film but disputes *Maurice*’s stunningly radical conclusion that after years of attempted “cures” and a pathetically chaste friendship within his social class, the good-looking stockbroker Maurice Hall ditches everything -- career, dull-as-dishwater sisters and long-time friends -- to share his life and passion with Alec Scudder, a gamekeeper. Maurice casts his lot with the working classes into which he vanishes with his lover.

In fact, *Maurice* has two endings: the one in the novel itself, where Alec and Maurice find happiness in one another’s arms after many twists and turns on the motif of the chase. That is followed

by Forster's afterword, which alludes to the bucolic weekend in the countryside, in the company of like-minded male friends, where he had the revelation that gave him the courage to write (if not publish) *Maurice*. The very weekend and revelation that likewise form the core of *De ahí viene el miedo*, whose title is a direct quote from Forster's novel. But because of the diverse characters and voices, Marchant's novel outdoes its predecessor in mapping out the fears that their protagonists courageously face down. For Forster, the great danger is loneliness. In Marchant's novel, the fear is more complex, most often involving exposure, and of the many ways and forms that the fear that a stupid and hateful neighbor deploys, which leads to a well-founded fear of the law, as seen in the escalating harassment unleashed by the novel's farcical and despicable antagonist, a homophobic and incompetent police inspector.

There are two moral centers to Marchant's novel, two characters in whom the author has invested right action and right thought. Both are historical figures. The first is Edward Carpenter, age 63, the visionary Utopian Socialist writer. A man rightly revered as the gay godfather of the British Left. This Cambridge-educated scholar, born in 1844, became a LGBTQ and free-love advocate, anti-vivisectionist and vegetarian. In the afterword to *Maurice*, Forster calls Carpenter a "savior" whose prestige "cannot be understood today.... a socialist who ignored industrialism and a simple-lifer with an independent income and a Whitmannic poet whose nobility exceeded his strength and finally, he was a believer in the Love of Comrades, whom he sometimes called Uranians. It was this last aspect which attracted me in my loneliness" (Forster, 1960, p. 235).

Born into a large and stiflingly conventional upper-class family, Carpenter discovered Whitman's poetry shortly after he had graduated from Cambridge. Carpenter later credited his spiritual and sexual awakening to reading Whitman, "largely the poems which celebrate comradeship" (Carpenter, 1916). Like Whitman, "one of the roughs, a kosmos," Carpenter preferred working-class men. Upon graduation, he declined a post as chaplain and tutor to Britain's two young princes, the first and second in the line of succession to the throne. Instead, Carpenter entered the new University Extension movement, lecturing throughout northern England. After corresponding with Whitman, Carpenter twice traveled to visit the bard in the USA (1877, 1884). His other correspondents include Mahatma Gandhi, the theosophist Annie Besant, the sexologist Havelock Ellis, the writers J.A. Symonds and Olive Schreiner. How fearless was Carpenter? The first of his 35 books, *Homogenic Love and its Place in Free Society* (1894), was published (privately) right before the Oscar Wilde trials. The next, *Love's Coming of Age* (1896). Both appear in *The Intermediate Sex* (1908), with newer writings.

Among Carpenter's broad and deep interests, he was also a student of oriental religion who spent a full year in India and Ceylon. Shortly after returning from those travels in 1890, Carpenter was on a train when he met George Merrill, the handsome working-class man, twenty-two years his junior, who forms the second moral center of Marchant's novel. Born and raised in the slums of Sheffield, George Merrill's lack of education doesn't prevent him from sharing bed and board with Carpenter over the next three decades (but not exclusively – they both occasionally have other lovers). Casual onlookers regard the two men as master and servant. Carpenter writes. Merrill handles the cooking, cleaning, decorating and setting flowers in each room. Privately, in this novel, Carpenter is wont to address Merrill as "Georgette." They cultivate a market garden and manufacture hand-made artisanal sandals which they sell locally. (Carpenter adopted this deeply un-English footwear from his travels in Ceylon and India.)

Merrill and Carpenter serve as co-hosts of an unplanned weekend house party at Milthorpe, where they have lived for 17 years. Unplanned, because each of them, separately and without informing the other, invites a guest. Without consulting Carpenter, Merrill invites D'Halmar, whom he had just met by chance in a Liverpool bookstore where he had noticed the young Chilean writer. Carpenter invites Forster, a known entity.

D'Halmar had been browsing the shelves when he had spied and picked up a photo of Oscar Wilde in his glory days. That is when the curious Merrill sidles up to him, seeming out of nowhere, precisely when D'Halmar decides to purchase a photo of the man whose ghost haunts this novel and the situation of "uranos" everywhere. The world-renowned 40-year-old poet, essayist and playwright

whose brilliance, fall and memory haunt England, whose courts and press tried, condemned and sentenced him. A man destroyed by the testimony of several good-looking young working-class men whom his enemies assembled to describe, in public testimony, the extravagant gifts with which he had paid them. Scandalously, Wilde denied none of it and responded to questions with insouciance. Behavior that brought him two years in prison.

Augusto D'Halmar is confused by this man, George Merrill, who seems to be a peasant, a working man. How could that be? In a bookstore? In Liverpool? Noting the Indian and Egyptian travel books that D'Halmar was considering, George Merrill says that Edward Carpenter, whom he lives with, has written a book about his travels in India.

D'Halmar is right to wonder. Merrill, not much of a reader, was cruising, looking for fun when he spotted and struck up a conversation with D'Halmar, whose arrival in Milthorpe means that Carpenter and Merrill have an unexpectedly full house. Merrill leads the young men past the lovingly tended gardens, out to the stream that runs through the property. Fully hidden from the road, it is perfect for bathing. The novel treats us to their frolicking in the pool. The scene clearly draws from the benevolent perspective of the invisible onlooker in Whitman's "29 Bathers" scene (*Song of Myself*, chant 11), which ends thus:

The beards of the young men glisten'd with wet, it ran from their long hair,
Little streams pass'd over their bodies.

An unseen hand also pass'd over their bodies,
It descended trembling from their temples and ribs.

The young men float on their backs, their white bellies bulge to the sun, they do not ask who seizes fast to them,
They do not know who puffs and declines with the pendant and bending arch,
They do not think whom they souse with spray (whitmanarchive.org)

From this stream, the novel relives the revelation that Forster, in his afterword to *Maurice*, describes as having immediately inspired him to write that book:

It must have been on my second or third visit to the shrine that the spark was kindled and he [Carpenter] and his comrade George Merrill combined to make a profound impression on me and to touch a creative spring. George Merrill also touched my backside – gently and just above the buttocks. I believe he touched most people's. The sensation was unusual, and I still remember it, as I remember the position of a long-vanished tooth. It was as much psychological as physical. It seemed to go straight through the small of my back into my ideas, without involving my thoughts. If it really did this, it would have acted in strict accordance with Carpenter's yogified mysticism, and would prove that at that precise moment I had conceived (p. 235).

The choral use of poetry along with scraps of letters are a strength of Marchant's writing, evident here and in his play *Gabriela* (1981). Marchant's use of these techniques goes far beyond sampling in that his novel answers, absorbs and alters the queer archive. Where the conventional narrative style of *Maurice* represents the protagonist's inner thoughts as reported by 3rd person omniscient narrator, Marchant's innovative narrative incorporates a far range of voices, altering the canon by bringing the English gay literary canon into the Spanish one and vice-versa.

And it is here, precisely, in this voyeuristic moment that Carpenter and George Merrill necessarily join forces to protect their two young guests from an outside menace: the police, whose

negative example showcases the quick-thinking and careful coordination of the two hosts. Police Inspector Wilfred Harris is the very model of the proudly incompetent policeman. He is new to Milthorpe, recently demoted from London to Sheffield following a long career dedicated to the ridiculously zealous, panic-driven persecution of sexual dissidents in the City's theater district. Insecure in his masculinity, Harris especially singles out transvestites and cross-dressers. Protected by a uniform, this smug, bumbling, self-righteous tyrant proceeds to harass the men at Milthorpe, whose freedom, beauty, intelligence he regards as a personal insult. The more that Harris sees, the blinder his fury at the evident transgression of class, caste and gender. That fury is triggered by the gruesome death of a character, the transvestite Miss Violet, who recalls *La Manuelita* in José Donoso's *El lugar sin límites*. Provoked to panic by what he has seen in Miss Violet's rented room, the farcically homophobic inspector Harris turns the charge to investigate that homicide into a flagrant abuse of power. Arriving at Milthorpe with two uneasy subordinates, Harris proceeds to illegally search and interrogate the two men and their two guests. After Carpenter repeatedly rebuffs him, Harris singles out and attempts to extort D'Halmar, the most vulnerable, but fails, thanks to the solidarity of all the men, including Harris' subordinates, who call him out for bullying.

In a straight version of another genre, the police procedural or detective story would satisfactorily identify and punish the culprit.

So, who killed Miss Violet? Unless Marchant tells us, we will never know.

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