Introduction

In some sense, Georges Bataille is surely right that “all eroticism has a sacramental character.” Bataille’s point, of course, is that just as sacraments bridge the chasm between divine transcendence and creaturely immanence, so erotic desire substitutes the “isolated discontinuity” of individual existence for the “profound continuity” of sexual union. For theological purposes, however, one might think that the wisdom in Bataille’s claim could also bear the inversion of its terms: all sacramentality has an erotic character. Catholicism, for example, has long construed marriage as “the sacrament of the covenant of Christ and the Church” and sexual intimacy within marriage as a form of communion both physical and spiritual. Something similar goes for the other sacraments, most notably the Eucharist, which Aquinas calls the “sacrament of love” because through it we are “made perfect in union with Christ.” And yet if sacramentality and eroticism share a common quest for wholeness and communion, it is precisely as quest rather than satisfaction that they belong together. As Socrates tells Agathon in the Symposium, everyone who desires “desires what is not at hand and what is not present, and what he does...
not have, and what he himself is not, and what he lacks.” Socrates’ lapidary account of eros as lack or privation will require significant nuancing, but even this initial formulation casts into sharp relief the erotic character of sacramentality. Sacraments, after all, function as sacraments only to the extent that the divine presence to which they point remains imperfectly realized. In fact, even in those traditions that emphasize sacramental efficacy and “real presence,” the Eucharist itself is nonetheless also a sacrament of absence: one celebrates Holy Communion because Christ has not yet come again and because the kingdom of God has not yet been fully realized. Every Eucharist is therefore “erotic” in Socrates’ sense: a longing for what is absent, a yearning for what is not yet fully at hand.

In a moving and sophisticated poem called “The City without Laura” (1938), the Argentine poet Francisco Luis Bernárdez (1900–78) brings together these two themes—the erotic character of sacramentality and the sacramental character of eros—in a complex theological and poetic vision for which I shall have to justify the phrase a poetics of sacramental desire. Although Bernárdez is relatively unknown outside Argentina, his place among an influential group of twentieth-century Catholic poets, together with his theological and poetic sophistication, ought to make him an important point of reference for contemporary Catholic thought. Perhaps most crucially for the purposes of this essay, Bernárdez is equal parts sacramental poet and love poet. A student of Aquinas and Bonaventure, he was also influenced by the courtly love tradition and, more directly still, by Petrarch, a connection reinforced by the happy historical accident that his own wife, like Petrarch’s beloved, was named Laura. What I wish to argue is that, in “The City without Laura,” these two otherwise divergent streams, the romantic and the sacramental, flow together in such a way that Bernárdez’s understanding of eucharistic sacramentality comes to supply the implicit model for his experience of romantic desire. More interesting still, if romantic eros finds its model in the Eucharist, then for Bernárdez both depend upon a version of eros even more basic: the intrinsically erotic character of
language. By linking the erotic, the sacramental, and the linguistic-poetic in this fashion, Bernárdez offers, so I want to suggest, not merely an account of sacramental desire, but a poetics of sacramental desire: a vision of eros that sees the process of linguistic meaning-making as itself erotic and hence as deeply implicated in our understanding of desire.

I make this argument in three parts, beginning with an overview of the erotic character of sacramentality (part 1) and then turning to a detailed reading of “The City without Laura” (part 2). In the third part, I argue that Bernárdez’s vision of the erotic character of both language and sacramentality opens upon a series of theoretical questions about the nature of desire and its role in the sacramentalism that sits at the heart of a Catholic vision of the world.

Eros and Eucharist

In a short prose poem entitled “Aesthetics of the Cup of Water” (1963), Bernárdez imagines himself seated in his study early in the morning, desperate for inspiration. Suddenly, as if from the corner of his eye, he glimpses a cup of water on the desk in front of him. No sooner does the poet observe its “clarity” and “simplicity” than his inspiration returns, and what first appeared a banal essay on water transforms into a theological meditation on God’s sacramental presence in the world. Almost immediately, water ceases to be merely water and becomes instead a metaphor of divine presence: “that omnipresent being that makes up the greater part of all other beings.” In the wake of this recognition, the rest of creation is slowly drawn into water’s sacramental play: In “the grandiloquence of the waterfall” the poet detects traces of “the divine will”; in “the drops mixed with the Eucharistic wine” he perceives “the figure of humanity”; and in “the flow of the fountain” he discerns “heaven’s sacramental key.” The closing lines reveal more clearly still the poem’s theological import as the poet’s search for inspiration turns out finally to have been a search for something far more cosmic—namely, “the
thirst for beauty,” which, the poet adds, “is, in a certain sense, true thirst for God.”

The sacramental vision that animates these lines suffuses much of Bernárdez’s poetry, and here as elsewhere it assumes a predictable form: a bit of created reality (e.g., water) serves not merely as a conduit of divine presence but also as the occasion of the poet’s desire or “thirst” for that presence. In “Poem of the Eucharistic Bread,” for example, first published in the Argentine daily La Nación in 1946, an otherwise unassuming meditation on the Eucharist gives way to a breathless tour of salvation history that brings the poet to the cusp of the kingdom of heaven itself. Likewise, in El buque [The Vessel] (1935), one of Bernárdez’s most ambitious poems, the sound of a mysterious “music” stirs the poet from his house and initiates a long and increasingly desperate search for the song’s invisible, transcendent source.

In each of these cases, as also in “Aesthetics of the Cup of Water,” the sacramental potency of the material world has two interrelated and equally significant components. On the one hand, Bernárdez makes it clear that the various bits of material reality (water, bread, and music) that occasion his poetic reflections do not merely recall or suggest divine presence, but somehow contain or transmit that presence. On the other hand, it is equally clear that that presence, however real and palpable, is nonetheless defective and inadequate. The clearest signal of this tension is that each of the poems ends not in a moment of mystical ecstasy but of heightened desire, as if the sacramental transmission of divine presence serves rather to intensify the poet’s “thirst” than satisfy it.

In a certain sense, this is precisely what we should expect from a sacramental poem. In his account of the Eucharist near the end of the Summa theologiae, Aquinas distinguishes what he calls “threefold significance” of the sacrament. In one sense, he says, the Eucharist refers to the past as a commemoration of Christ’s passion and death. In another sense, it refers to the present and signifies the unitas or communion of the pilgrim Church. In yet a third sense, it refers to the future insofar as it foreshadows or prefigures (praefigurativum) the fruitio Dei:
the full revelation of Christ’s presence in the eschaton. The key point to notice here is that on Aquinas’s view the Eucharist is at once a sacrament of presence and a sacrament of absence. In one sense, Christ is “really present” in the bread—and this because Aquinas accepts as an article of faith that, upon consecration, the material elements of the Eucharist do not merely signify Christ’s body and blood but really become that body and blood. And yet if Christ is indeed really present in this sense, his presence is nonetheless interpenetrated by a “real absence.” In fact, as Aquinas’s distinction makes clear, Christ’s presence in the Host is also a prefiguring presence, one that points beyond itself to a still fuller presence that awaits the faithful in the kingdom of God. Even on the Catholic view, as Denys Turner has noted, the communication of Christ’s presence in the Mass necessarily “fails of ultimacy” simply because the “Eucharist is not yet the kingdom of the future as it will be in the future” but instead “points to it as absent.” Turner’s point is that however present Christ may be in the Eucharist, the Eucharist itself nonetheless remains a sign of the kingdom and not the actual kingdom. As a sign, it always promises a fullness of future presence that it never fully delivers. And this, in turn, is just to say that the Eucharist has an irrevocably eschatological orientation: as the signlike bearer of Christ’s sacramental presence, it stretches out toward, but does not coincide with, the full realization of that presence in the eschaton.

One way of understanding this point would be to say, as Aquinas in fact does, that sacraments occupy a kind of intermediary position, an eschatological medius between the present, in which we see “through a glass darkly,” and the future, in which “all truth will be openly and perfectly revealed.” In fact, as I shall try to explain, it is precisely this sense of “intermediarity” that both marks the Eucharist as erotic and invites a conception of eros more nuanced than Socrates’ initial account in the Symposium allows. At least provisionally, as Mario Costa notes, Socrates presents erotic desire as pure privation: whatever desire lacks it desires, and it does not desire if it does not lack. Later in the dialogue, this strongly dualistic vision
finds its corrective in Diotima’s considerably subtler account. For Diotima, as the myth of Penia and Poros makes clear, eros is neither “rich nor at a loss” but instead occupies a middle position between the two. Thus situated, it both mediates between the human and the divine and facilitates the ascent from the one to the other.\(^{17}\)

In a general sense, Diotima’s “metaxic” account of eros (from her repeated use of *metaxu*—“in between”) certainly accords better with our ordinary experience than Socrates’ alternative. Objects of desire, after all, are never purely or simply absent. However vaguely and inchoately, they must at least be present to the mind to be desirable at all. Another way of putting this point would be to say that Diotima sees, while Socrates misses, that erotic desire derives its power from the interplay of concealment and disclosure, hiddenness and revelation. Without this interplay, moreover, the ostensibly erotic risks devolving in simple vulgarity. This is why pornography, for example, is not only revolting but boring: by revealing exactly everything, it short-circuits the interval between hiddenness and anticipated disclosure and so seals off the space in which eros could move.

It is in precisely the sense, moreover, that Diotima’s metaxic account of desire underscores the erotic character of eucharistic sacramentality. For just as Christ is neither simply present nor simply absent in the Eucharist, so our experience of that presence is likewise never one of simple plenitude or simple privation. It is instead “metaxic” in Diotima’s sense, positioned in the interval between the veiling of Christ’s body under the species of the bread and the future unveiling to which that veiling obliquely points. Perhaps more importantly still, the two poles of this interplay—what is revealed and what is concealed—conspire to provoke a desire that is simultaneously sensual and spiritual. The Eucharist, after all, is fundamentally a meal, and as a meal it stirs the same sorts of desires we associate with eating and drinking more generally: the desire to taste and touch and smell and see. Add to this the liturgical setting—with its art, music, incense, and chanted prayers—and even at a purely material level, the celebration of the Eucharist is, and is designed to be, sensually
attractive.\textsuperscript{18} The Eucharist, of course, is not purely material, nor is its attractiveness purely sensual; but, as Aquinas well knew, the sensual attractiveness of the Eucharist is important because it prepares the communicant to desire the “spiritual sweetness” present sacramentally in the eucharistic elements.\textsuperscript{19} Crucially, then, the Eucharist works not simply to stir desire but to transform it. By joining the sensual desire to consume bread and wine to the spiritual desire to receive Christ’s sacramental body, it trains us to see that our desire for and delight in creation’s materiality is really, finally, a desire to delight in the transcendent source of that materiality.

In the final stanza of his famous eucharistic poem, \textit{Adoro te devote}, Aquinas spells out clearly this progression from immanent desire to transcendent desire:

\begin{quote}
Jesus, whom I now see \textit{aspicio} hidden \textit{velatum},
I ask you to fulfill what I so desire \textit{sitio}
That perceiving \textit{cernens} your face unveiled \textit{revelata},
I may have the happiness of beholding \textit{visu} your glory.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

As in the Mass, Aquinas’s poetic Christ is at once absent and present, at once hidden and revealed: sufficiently revealed to allow the poet to discern Christ’s presence under the figures of bread and wine, and yet sufficiently hidden to prompt him to long for a fuller “unveiling” of that presence in the future. In fact, as Aquinas’s artful placement of \textit{sitio} between \textit{velatum} and \textit{revelata} suggests, desire subsists in the interval between concealment and disclosure; and indeed it is precisely because the sacrament also inhabits this liminal space that it provokes the poet’s desire. The lexical progression from \textit{aspicio} to \textit{cernens} to \textit{visu} underscores the point. The first verb, \textit{aspicio}, with its etymological link to \textit{species}, suggests a simple visual perception of an outward form or appearance. \textit{Cernens} is stronger, suggesting not merely “seeing” but also “perceiving” or “discerning.” The final term, \textit{visu}, evoking as it does the \textit{visio beata}, subtly links the poet’s visual perception of the eucharistic Christ to his future, “intellectual” vision of the divine
essence. For Aquinas, then, to see (aspicio) the Eucharist is already to see beyond the Eucharist to the visio beata to which it points. Or, rather more precisely, to see the Eucharist is already to desire the sort of vision that sacraments can promise but never fully deliver. The Eucharist is thus not merely a sign of Christ’s presence in the kingdom, but also a vehicle designed to incite desire for presence.

Love, Language, and Laura

Given its close link with desire, it is perhaps unsurprising that sacramentality should have been put to erotic use, not only in theoretical accounts like Bataille’s, but also in the poetic tradition to which Bernárdez was heir. The modernistas, for example, a highly influential group of late-nineteenth-century Latin American poets, regularly employed eucharistic imagery in erotic contexts. To give just one example, in his 1896 poem “Ite, missa est,” the father of modernismo, Rubén Darío (1867–1916), described his beloved’s “spirit” as the “host of my erotic mass.”21 For his part, Bernárdez at once belongs to and diverges from this tradition.22 For the modernistas, on the one hand, religious imagery served a broadly secular, even antireligious, purpose. Their goal, as Richard Cardwell has pointed out, was to appropriate the symbols of the Catholic Church to establish a subversive “religion of art” in which the poet would act as both God and priest.23 Bernárdez’s Catholic traditionalism ruled out this sort of move, and as we shall see, his interest in eucharistic imagery has less to do with subverting or transgressing than with synthesizing the Catholic tradition to which he was devoted and the Petrarchan tradition to which he was indebted.

One initial indicator of the “traditionalism” of Bernárdez’s approach is that, unlike Dario, who celebrates eroticism in the abstract, often with multiple and anonymous female objects, Bernárdez’s love poetry is dedicated exclusively to his wife.24 Bernárdez met Laura González Palau in 1931 in Córdoba, Argentina, a provincial capital 400 miles northwest of Buenos Aires in the foot-
hills of the Sierras Chicas. The couple married seven years later, but not before Bernárdez wrote what is arguably his most popular work, “The City without Laura” (1938), a love poem composed in long, 22-syllable lines and inspired by Petrarch’s *Canzoniere*. The Petrarchan influence is apparent both in the epigraph (“ove l’aura si sente,” from *Canzoniere* 129) and in the poem’s main theme. As Giuseppe Mazzotta points out, Laura functions in Petrarch’s work less as a concrete historical personage than as a stylized figure of absence and elusiveness. “In a real sense,” Mazzotta writes, she “appears” by “being invisible,” and it is precisely this “invisible appearing” that fires the poet’s desire.\(^{25}\) The analogy with Bernárdez is far from perfect—unlike the Argentine poet, Petrarch had almost no personal interaction with his Laura, whose very identity remains a matter of dispute—but the Petrarchan motifs of “present absence” or “invisible appearing” are nonetheless central to any account of “The City without Laura.” It is just this dialectic in fact that lends the text its eucharistic overtones. Many of the poem’s central motifs are already present in the opening lines:

In the city, silent and lonely, my voice awakens a deep resonance.  
As the night grows, I utter a name and this name accompanies me.  
The solitude is powerful but it succumbs to my loving voice.  
There can be nothing as strong as a voice when it is the voice of the soul.  
In the sound with which it sounds I sense the sound of a distant music.  
And in the energy that moves it [the voice] I feel the warmth of a remote flame.  

\(^{1–6}\)\(^{26}\)

The drama begins as the poet’s “voice” pierces the quiet solitude of the city. The urban setting is important not only because such spaces had already become emblems of isolation and anonymity in 1930s Argentina, but also because the opening line’s sharp contrast between the city’s lonely silence and the “deep resonance” of the poet’s voice sets
the stage for a series of interlocking and deeply consequential binary oppositions. The reference to “night” in line 2, for instance, finds its natural opposite in line 6’s reference the “remote flame.” The flame, in turn, because it supplies the “energy” that “moves” the poet’s voice, links line 6 to lines 1 and 5, where a “distant music” furnishes the “sound” with which the poet’s voice “sounds.” (The emphatic repetition of s-sounds is equally pronounced in the Spanish.) Finally, line 3 picks up the opening line’s reference to “voice” and deploys it to oppose the solitude of the city to the communion of love.

In a rather obvious sense, these oppositions have the effect of creating an atmosphere in which various sorts of presence subtly inflect various sorts of absence: light and darkness, sound and silence, communion and solitude. At this point, however, the most important of such oppositions remains largely implicit. In line 2, the poet “utters a name” and this name “accompanies” him. We will soon learn, of course, that the “name” is “Laura,” but here it remains a naked signifier with only an implied referent. This delayed identification further heightens the mood of present absence that characterizes the opening stanza. In fact, if language itself is already once removed from the reality to which it refers, the second line’s reference to “a name” adds yet a further layer of distance: “name” is a linguistic sign that refers to another linguistic sign (“Laura”) which refers, finally, to a concrete historical personage. Laura herself is thus doubly absent from the poem’s textual economy; she appears neither in persona nor in signo.

If Laura is absent, however, she is also manifestly present. In fact it is precisely her absence that renders her presence more conspicuous. Note, first, that with a single exception, the poet does not name Laura directly, preferring instead to refer to her in guarded periphrasis (“this woman’s name”) or grammatical negation (“without Laura”). And yet the poem is so clearly about Laura that the poet’s reluctance to name her directly has the effect, not of excising her from the text, but of suggesting that she so thoroughly pervades its economy that she cannot be located at any particular point within it. The strategy
is somewhat analogous to the apophatic practice of writing God “under erasure” (e.g., “God”), the effect of which is not to deny God’s presence but to affirm that that presence exceeds the fragile limits of human language and thought.28

Already at this point, moreover, Bernárdez’s apophatic approach lends the poem a sacramental, even a eucharistic, character. Notice, in the first place, that the text as a whole takes the form of a memorialization: Laura was once present, but is now absent. In the meantime the poet writes. The product of that writing, the poem itself, comes to serve as a kind of linguistic supplement, an attempt to render present as sign what is absent as thing. In itself, of course, this fact does not make the poem sacramental or eucharistic. All poetry—indeed all language use—is in some sense an attempt to make present what is absent. But Bernárdez’s poem is different. Perhaps we can get a handle on that difference by attending carefully to line 5, where the poet hears in the articulation of Laura’s name “the sound of a distant music.” This “distant music”—which, two lines later, becomes an “uncaused music”—is clearly an allusion to God, and the connection is unsurprising. In addition to its centrality in Bernárdez’s corpus, music has also played an important role in the Christian tradition.29 In De institutione musica, for example, Boethius famously distinguished three types of music: musica instrumentalis (music produced by instruments), musica humana (the fit proportion, or temperatio, of the parts of the body and of the body and the soul), and musica mundana (the movement of the heavenly bodies and the harmony of the elements).30 Boethius’s readers later added a fourth category, musica divina, which pre-exists in God and serves as the ratio or exemplum by which God creates and sustains musica mundana.31

I know of no direct evidence that Bernárdez read Boethius (though he probably did), but he certainly read Fray Luis de León (1527–91), a sixteenth-century Spanish poet and theologian whose famous ode to the organist and music theorist Francisco de Salinas (1513–90) not only inspired some of Bernárdez’s more explicitly
musical poems, but also betrays a deeply Boethian influence. There Fray Luis casts music as a conduit of divine presence that reminds the soul of its “original and exalted origin.” The idea that music both transmits divine presence and reminds us of our own divine origin is a pervasive Bernardian motif, and in “The City without Laura” the poet links it directly to the invocation of the beloved. The music that Bernárdez hears in the “sound” of Laura’s name is thus not simply the presence of the beloved but also the presence of God.

This reading, if convincing, already suggests a deep connection between sacramentality and eros. Simply put, by doing what, according to Bataille, eros always seeks to do (i.e., overcome the “isolated discontinuity” of individual existence), Laura’s name also does what sacraments are supposed to do (i.e., mediate divine presence). Both sides of the equation—the erotic and the sacramental—are equally crucial, and each inflects the other. The poet’s desire for Laura, for instance, is not merely sexual. Certainly it is also sexual, but the emphasis on the beloved’s name as a conduit of divine presence seems to rule out any reduction to, let us say, pure carnality. But neither, on the other hand, is the poet’s desire for Laura merely an allegory of his desire for God. Rather, both sorts of eros are present, and each informs the other: the poet’s desire for Laura qua human beloved inflects his desire for Laura qua mediatrix of divine presence, and his desire for Laura qua mediatrix of divine presence inflects his desire for Laura qua human beloved. And this, in turn, suggests that the beloved’s name is sacramental in the richest sense. Just as the Eucharist is neither merely a sign nor merely Christ himself but both simultaneously, so Laura is likewise neither merely a human beloved nor merely an allegory of the presence of God but both simultaneously. Precisely because her name, like a sacrament, both contains and transmits the presence of God, the two sorts of desire are fully mutually implicative: the poet desires God by desiring Laura and desires Laura by desiring God.

But if the poet’s invocation of “Laura” is sacramental in this sense, it is also sacramental in another sense. Sacraments, after all, are not
merely signs but *efficacious* signs—signs that somehow effect or bring about the reality they signify. And, in the second stanza, Laura’s name takes on this function as well. The poet writes:

> Things are intelligible because this woman’s name illuminates them. Because this name wrests them from the darkness in which they were submerged. One by one they recover their spiritual brightness and revive. One by one they rise with the radiance and beauty they once had. . . .
> Because of this name of names, even wordless death has life.

(11–14, 16)

The first stanza’s focus on sound here shifts to an emphasis on light. Line 11, for instance, is clearly an allusion to something like Augustinian divine illumination, one that in fact bears a strong resemblance to a passage from the first book of the *Soliloquia*: “those things . . . which everyone understands [*intellegit*] to be most true . . . cannot be understood [*intellegi*] unless they are illuminated [*illustrentur*] by something else as by their own sun.”34 For Augustine, of course, that “something else” is God, and so the appearance of this motif in Bernárdez’s text further underscores Laura’s divine-like status.35 The following three lines are more provocative still. *Tinieblas* (“darkness”), in line 12, is a relatively archaic term that appears in standard Spanish versions of Genesis 1 as a translation of the Hebrew *choshek* (Latin: *tenebrae*). And just as in the Genesis story, God’s speech floods the *choshek* with *aur* (light), so here the invocation of Laura’s name wrests the world from formless darkness and grants it intelligible shape and structure. But, just as clearly, whatever “efficacy” the poet attributes to the beloved is linked not to her presence but to her absence. If Laura in some sense participates in this erotico-poetic reenactment of the creation of the universe, hers is a manifestly *sacramental* participation: one based not on the beloved herself, who remains absent here and throughout, but on the divine presence contained in and transmitted by the sound of her name.
Lines 13–16 extend this motif, linking it, as in Bernárdez’s eucharistic poem, to the theme of resurrection. The appearance of “revive” in line 13 supplies the first hint, while the majestic Hebrew superlative (“this name of names”) of line 14, itself a patently Christological reference (“a name above every name”—Phil 2.9), sets the stage for line 16’s climactic finale: “even wordless death has life.” The description of death as “wordless” is significant in the first instance because by grafting the life-death distinction onto the word-wordless distinction, the poet further reinforces Laura as an image or type of Christ. In his De incarnatione, for instance, Athanasius describes corrupt, perishing, pre-Incarnation humanity as alogōthētōn (without-logos). On this view, the point of the Incarnation itself is to overcome death by restoring not only the divine image, but also and at the same time the divine logos. For Athanasius, then, as for Bernárdez, Christ’s redemptive work is at least in part a passage from the absence of the logos to its presence, from “wordless” death to “word-full” life. The difference, of course, is that for Athanasius redemption is mediated by the presence of the Incarnate Word, whereas for Bernárdez it is, as it were, doubly mediated: not only by the sacramental presence of the incarnate Logos, but also in and through the sound of Laura’s name.

In the poem’s final third, this double mediation comes to play an increasingly important role in the poet’s representation of his beloved as precisely a sacramental reality, one that inhabits the liminal, metaxic space between presence and absence. Near the end of the second stanza, for instance, the poet remarks:

My whole life endures because this name that I remember does not forget me.
Because this name sustains me with feeling from its tender distance.

A stanza later he asks:

What would have been of my life without this name that I utter in the desert?
What would have been of my life without this name that accompanies me from afar?

(29–30)

Here, as elsewhere, the poet’s joyous, almost rapturous, expressions of the beloved’s presence are laced with equally conspicuous intimations of absence: Laura “sustains” the poet, but only from a “tender distance”; her name “accompanies” him, but only “from afar.” Even the poet’s confident assertion that his “life endures” in and through the beloved’s memory is framed as grammatical negation (“does not forget me”). The following lines develop the motif further still:

Distant is the sweet cause of the heart, of the head, of the hand.
But its absence is that of river, which lives tethered to the source that weeps it.
Never as now have I felt the nearness of the woman I am singing.
When love is present nothing can be distant or hidden.

(32–35)

The emphatic “Distant” at the head of line 32 underscores the poet’s separation from his beloved, but this sense of separation is subtly undermined by the rest of the line, which casts Laura as the quasi-divine source or “cause” of the poet’s life. The beloved is thus distant but active, absent but creative. The striking metaphor in line 33 spells out the relationship more clearly. The reference to “river” evokes the prose poem mentioned earlier, “Aesthetics of the Cup of Water,” and its account of the sacramental valences of water, while the second half of the line adds a note of somber melancholy: the “river” that links poet to his beloved is in fact a river of tears. Yet even this fleeting sense of melancholy is swiftly dispatched in lines 34–35, where the poet again reaffirms Laura’s “presence” and “nearness.”

The closing lines dramatize most clearly of all the tension between presence and absence that characterizes the poem as a whole:

Though the leagues stand between us, no longer can they separate us.
Because a love that conquers time can only be safe from space as well.
Yesterday’s difference between happiness [la dicha] and my existence is being erased.

The being that I name is one that, by being, gives me a life without pain or fright.

(37–40)

The opening line repeats the paradox of “distant presence” (the “leagues” that “stand between us” nonetheless cannot “separate us”), while the final line circles back to the poem’s opening and to the central motifs of language and naming: if the beloved grants the poet “life,” she does so only and precisely as “name,” a metaxic presence that points to, but does not fully coincide with, full bodily presence. In fact, just as the poem begins with the enunciation of Laura’s name (“I utter a name”), so there it ends as well—with a naked signifier which, like all signifiers, simultaneously evokes the object it signifies and underscores its absence. For Bernárdez, then, Laura remains absent precisely to the extent that she remains a sign, a “name” inscribed in the interval between “being” and “naming” (“the being I name”) and hence in the interval between presence and absence. The poem as a whole is thus structured not only according to the absence inherent in the preposition “without,” but also according to the absence that characterizes language as such.

As we have seen, however, Bernárdez does not make this absence an occasion for sorrow or sustained melancholy. Throughout the poem, in fact, the poet remains hopeful and optimistic, and this, more than anything else, sets him apart from the broadly Petrarchan tradition to which he is otherwise so richly indebted. For Petrarch, we will recall, desire persists to the extent that its object remains unattainable. There is, of course, a certain pleasure in frustrated love, one underwritten by the not unreasonable assumption that objects of desire excite more in the desiring than in the possessing. Lord Byron captures this point in a famous couplet from Don Juan:

Think you, if Laura had been Petrarch’s wife,
He would have written sonnets all his life?
But Bernárdez’s poem evinces none of this: neither despair in the face of an unattainable beloved, nor the paradoxical pleasure of unattainability itself. (Laura, after all, was his wife, and he did write sonnets all his life.) The difference is crucial and goes to the heart of the eucharistic character of Bernárdez’s poem. On the one hand, as I noted earlier, Petrarch’s Laura is less a concrete historical personage than a rhetorical figura of elusiveness. Her physical absence as a concrete historical personage is thus virtually constitutive of her presence as a poetic trope. Bernárdez’s Laura, on the other hand, is of course also a poetic creation, but she is much more besides. Specifically, as the poet’s wife and lover, she holds forth the promises of an extrapoetic communion from which Petrarch’s Laura, as pure rhetorical figura, is constitutionally excluded. And this means that while Laura is now absent, her absence is nonetheless inscribed within a horizon of hopeful expectation. And this, in turn, is just to say that Bernárdez’s poem has an eschatological structure, one that depends as much on the reality of a present absence as on the hope of a future presence. The penultimate line makes the point clearly: “Yesterday’s difference between happiness [la dicha] and my existence is being erased” (15). The key image is “being erased,” which suggests that the poet’s reunion with the beloved is neither complete nor incomplete but instead situated in the eschatological interval between the fact of present separation and the promise of future communion.

As may be apparent by now, the eschatological temporality of “The City without Laura” mirrors the eschatological temporality of the Eucharist itself. For just as the Eucharist inhabits the metaxic interval between sacramental presence and kingdom-presence, so Laura’s name likewise inhabits the metaxic interval between present separation and future communion. Nor is this parallel purely formal: that is, it is not based simply on the fact that Laura and the Eucharist embody present absences that promise future presence. This is no doubt part of the story, but there is more besides. In fact, though I have already noted various ways in which Laura’s name functions sacramentally, even eucharistically, the connection is actually more
explicit than I have so far suggested. To see how will require us to look closely at Bernárdez’s language. On two occasions—one near the beginning, once near the end—Bernárdez remarks that Laura’s name “accompanies me” (me acompaña). At first glance, the comment appears, if not exactly trivial, then not especially consequential either. But, for reasons that should become clear in a moment, it merits further scrutiny. So what does it mean to say that Laura’s name “accompanies me”? In a basic sense, of course, it means that Laura “goes along with” or “exists in association with” the poet. It means, in other words, that she is his “companion.” But what does it mean to be a “companion”? Here things get interesting. The English “companion,” like the Spanish compañero, comes from the Latin words cum, meaning “with,” and panis, meaning “bread.” A companion is therefore literally a bread-fellow, one who breaks bread with another. To say, then, as Bernárdez does, that Laura’s name “accompanies me” is not merely to say that it “goes along with” him, but that it goes along with him in a special way: namely, as one with whom the poet shares bread at a common table. In light of the rest of the poem, however, the poet’s description of Laura as “companion” suggests that she is not merely a bread-fellow, but also the bread itself, the source of the poet’s sustenance. It is she, after all, who “sustains” him (20), she who gives him “life” (40). The Christological overtones of this line of thought are unmistakable (cf. John 6:35), and in view of the poem’s sacramental character, the eucharistic implications are likewise difficult to resist. If bread is the physical sign of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist, and if Laura is herself figured as bread, then the poet’s desire for his beloved is mediated by his desire for the Eucharist. In a rather straightforward sense, erotic desire takes its coordinates from the Eucharist.39

What is still more interesting, however, is that the poet casts his “eucharistic” longing for the beloved in explicitly linguistic terms. Seeing how will require another brief excursus. The Spanish term translated “happiness” in the phrase “between happiness and my existence” is dicha. Dicha means, of course, “happiness,” but it derives
etymologically from the Latin dicta ("the things said") in the sense of things determined or "decreed" by the gods. To say that someone is a persona de dicha or a persona dichosa is thus to say that she enjoys happiness or good fortune because the gods have so decreed it. And this, minus the pagan overtones, is more or less what Bernárdez means. In a somewhat more literal sense, however, the "difference between la dicha and my existence" is not only the difference between happiness and my existence, but also the difference between "the things said" and my existence: that is, the difference between language and world, between "poetry about Laura" and "life with Laura." The interval of desire—the "difference" that separates poet from beloved—thus corresponds exactly to the interval between language ("dicha") and world ("existence"), and desire itself assumes a linguistic shape. The poet writes about his longing for the beloved, and the structure of his language—situated, as language always is, in the metaxic space between presence and absence—gives the shape and measure of that longing.

Here the various threads of the argument come together most clearly. If Laura’s name is a figure of the Eucharist, then Bernárdez’s desire for his beloved is not merely carnal but also sacramental: by desiring Laura, in other words, the poet also desires Christ’s presence in the eucharistic bread. In both cases, moreover, the interval of desire—the distance between the lover and the object of his love—receives its shape and measure from the linguistic interval between sign and referent: Bernárdez writes about desire, but it is the writing itself (that is, the very structure of the poet’s language) that is the gauge and measure of his longing. And it is in this sense that Bernárdez offers not simply poetry about sacramental desire, but a poetics of sacramental desire, one that sees desire as both a linguistic and a sacramental phenomenon and hence that construes both language and sacramentality as themselves deeply implicated in the nature of human longing.
And yet precisely here another question emerges, one that is less exegetical than theoretical. Why is it, after all, that Bernárdez should frame the question of desire in just these terms? Why should his account of romantic desire take its coordinates from the sign-like structure of Eucharist and hence structure of the linguistic sign itself? And, more importantly, what does this suggest about his understanding of language, desire, and sacramentality more generally? From one angle, of course, the answer may seem perfectly obvious: Bernárdez is both a lover and poet, and one of the things that lover-poets do is write poems about their beloveds, especially when those beloveds happen to be absent. Add to this that Bernárdez is a Catholic of an evidently sacramental disposition, and it is perhaps unsurprising that his poetic vocation, his eucharistic devotion, and his romantic attraction should converge in something like the way I have described.

It seems to me, however, that this broadly biographical explanation, though probably correct as far as it goes, may nonetheless obscure a set of deeper issues. Perhaps we can get some traction on those issues by making explicit a point that has been implicit throughout this essay. In his 1993 book, *The Double Flame*, the Mexican poet and Nobel Laureate Octavio Paz remarks that “eroticism is first and foremost a thirst for otherness. And the supernatural is the supreme otherness.” Both halves of Paz’s comment are crucial, and I would like to consider them in turn. The first half—eroticism as thirst for otherness—has two converging slopes. The first is that eros is born as a recognition of the self’s lack of sufficiency, an awareness that, in itself, the subject is somehow defective, deficient, or incomplete. This awareness of insufficiency in turn generates the subject’s “thirst” for completion in the otherness of the object of its longing.

Though Paz is speaking here of desire in general, his comments open up a space to reflect on the inherently erotic character of language. Notice, in the first place, that because signs function by ren-
dering present to the mind something other than themselves, the very act of signification is, so to speak, oriented to alterity. And, precisely because it is so oriented, language always reveals a kind of structural lack of self-sufficiency. In some cases, language’s erotic or “other-seeking” character is obvious. A phrase like “I want a glass of water,” for instance, is an expression of both subjective insufficiency (I lack the water to sate my thirst) and linguistic insufficiency (the phrase “a glass of water” cannot itself sate my thirst). It is also, by the same token, a literal “thirst for otherness”: a recognition that something “other” (namely, the glass of water) will have to do for us what neither I nor my language can do for ourselves. The point, however, is not merely that language can express desire. Obviously it can. The point, rather, is that the process of signification is itself erotic because the interval between sign and referent is an erotic space. It is as if, at the risk of undue personification, signs were seeking completion or wholeness in the otherness of the referent to which they point.

This may appear an odd way of speaking, but it seems to make sense of Bernárdez’s peculiar way of framing his desire for Laura. By casting the distance between lover and beloved as, precisely, the distance between “language” and “world”—between “la dicha and my existence”—Bernárdez suggests not only that desire takes its coordinates from the linguistic interval between sign and referent, but also that the satisfaction of desire would correspond to the closure of that interval. He suggests, in other words, that the satiation of eros corresponds to that moment at which the sign ceases merely to point to its referent and instead renders it really and bodily present.

It is precisely this fact, moreover, that explains the centrality of the Eucharist in Bernárdez’s account of desire. If, as I have insisted throughout, the Eucharist has the structure of a sign, it is a very peculiar sort of sign. Under ordinary circumstances, the “something” to which signs refer is necessarily other than the sign itself. In the Eucharist, by paradoxical contrast, just the opposite occurs. The bread and wine do not merely signify Christ’s body and blood. They are Christ’s body and blood. Sign and meaning coincide. In one sense,
of course, this is exactly what we should expect: the miracle of the Eucharist lies in the manner in which it renders Christ’s body “really present” under the sacramental species. In another sense, however, the coincidence of sign and meaning in the host marks the Eucharist as the point at which signification reaches an extreme of plenitude, where the materiality of the sign (the bread) is so transfigured by signification, so “full of meaning,” that the object it signifies takes on bodily presence. The Eucharist, then, appears as something like the limit of signification: it is where language performs most perfectly its function of rendering present what is absent and hence the boundary toward which language, insofar as it attempts to be meaningful, always tends. In this sense, to the extent that language attempts to signify at all, it attempts to become Eucharistic.

Now, if this is so, it has important implications for Bernárdez’s understanding of desire. For to the extent that desire has a signlike structure, and to the extent the Eucharist is where signs perform most perfectly their function of rendering present what is absent, then the Eucharist is also something like the emblem of desire’s perfect consummation: the closure of the interval between sign and referent and hence the satisfaction of the longing of which that interval is the measure. But this is only part of the story. For if Christ is indeed “really present” in the Eucharist, that presence remains, as we say, a “sacramental presence.” Admittedly, it is difficult to know what we mean by “sacramental presence,” but however we construe it, the very notion of sacramental presence is an inescapably two-sided or double-edged phenomenon, one in which, to paraphrase Denys Turner, Christ’s real presence is interpenetrated at every point by an equally palpable sense of real absence. And this is simply because if the Eucharist is indeed the “limit of signification” in the sense that it makes Christ “really present,” that presence nonetheless points beyond itself to a fuller form of presence in the kingdom. At first glance, of course, this way of stating the matter is bound to appear hopelessly paradoxical. How could it be, after all, that the Eucharist simultaneously marks the limit of signification by making
Christ “really present” and yet nonetheless points beyond itself to a fuller, future presence? Surely it has to be one or the other: Either the Eucharist makes Christ “really present” here and now, in which case it doesn’t make sense to say that it also points beyond itself to a future, fuller presence; or else the Eucharist points beyond itself to Christ’s future presence, in which case it doesn’t make sense to say that it renders Christ “really present” here and now. The paradox disappears, however, when we recall that the Eucharist is an inherently eschatological reality, one that exists in the metaxic interval between Christ’s resurrection and our own future resurrection. To say, then, that the Eucharist makes Christ “really present” here and now is just to say that it makes Christ present in such a way and to such an extent as a resurrected, glorified body can be made present to nonresurrected, fallen bodies. Likewise, to say that the Eucharist also stretches out beyond itself to a future, fuller presence is just to say that it points ahead to the way in which a resurrected, glorified body can be made present to similarly glorified, resurrected bodies.43

It turns out, then, that the Eucharist is the limit of signification in two different but related senses: in one sense because it makes Christ really, bodily present in the Host, and in another sense because it points across the infinite interval between God and creation to the moment at which what we now see “in a mirror dimly” will be seen “face to face” (1 Cor 13:12). Or, put another way, if the Eucharist makes Christ present at the limit of what is possible for fallen, pre-resurrection bodies, it also points ahead to something like the absolute limit of what is possible for resurrected, glorified bodies—when, in what Aquinas calls the “state of glory,” death and corruption will have been at last overcome and God will be “all in all” (1 Cor 15:28). Precisely this distinction, moreover, invites a parallel revision of the idea that by closing the interval between sign and referent, the Eucharist likewise marks the completion or consummation of desire. In one sense this is certainly true. By making Christ really, bodily present, the Eucharist fulfills our desire to the extent that such a desire can be satisfied here and now—that is, to the extent that a resurrected
body can be made present to nonresurrected bodies. At the same time, however, because the Eucharist points to the full manifestation of Christ’s presence in the eschaton, whatever desire it satisfies here and now also opens upon an infinite desire, one that awaits its eschatological fulfillment at our own resurrection. From this angle, moreover, the satisfaction of our desire for Christ’s real presence in the sacrament is as much an incipit as it is a terminus: by satisfying our longing it generates yet more longing. It is, as Dante says in the *Purgatorio*, “food / which, in satisfying us, stirs our hunger.” Nor, in the end, could it be otherwise. As Aquinas’s *Adoro te devote* makes clear, the desire for Christ’s sacramental presence is finally a desire to glimpse the visio beata to which that presence points. In this sense, eucharistic desire is infinite not only because its object, the divine essence, is properly infinite, but also because the effect of the satiation of our desire for the Eucharist always yields infinitely more desire. We might even say, in fact, that it is precisely because the Eucharist provokes infinite desire in this manner that it serves as something like the Church’s practice of reminding itself that if desire is “first and foremost a thirst for otherness,” that thirst is finally satiable only to the extent that it seeks its satisfaction in the “supreme otherness” of the Triune God. On this view, all desire is ultimately desire for God, and the Eucharist serves as our permanent reminder that our longings are finally oriented to the divine as to their limit, the upper threshold of their thirst for completion in another.

If this analysis is correct, moreover, Bernárdez’s own account of desire as at once sacramental and poetic comes into yet sharper focus. Notice, in the first place, that the poet’s decision to frame his desire for Laura as a desire for the Eucharist is not merely a rhetorical device, but a recognition that romantic desire is constituted by his eucharistic desire. And this, in turn, is simply because desire itself is always eucharistic. For what the Eucharist trains us to desire is the only thing that is really, truly, finally desirable at all: the full manifestation of the divine glory now concealed under the species of bread and wine. This is not to say, of course, that our desire for food, love,
knowledge, companionship, and so forth are second-rate substitutes, though certainly they can be when wrongly pursued. It is simply to say that these desires acquire their full weight and measure only to the extent that they are subordinated to, and illuminated by, our desire for the infinite divine reality made sacramentally present in the eucharistic host.

And yet if the Eucharist indeed serves as a reminder that our longings are always oriented to the divine as to their limit, then language has precisely the same effect for precisely the same reason. In fact, if language is always in some sense trying to become eucharistic, then every instance of language use is, by its very nature, a kind of “stretching out” toward the divine reality that the Eucharist both makes present here and now and points to in the eschaton. Nor, in the end, should we find this fact particularly surprising. For Christian thought, after all, reality at the deepest level is constituted by a linguistic act: first by the Father’s eternal articulation of the Logos in the perichoretic life of the Trinity, and second by the act of creation itself, the utterly gracious donation of being to beings in and through the serene majesty of divine speech—“Let there be.” From this angle, speech itself is always a doubly theological act: a kind of limited and imperfect participation not only in the eternal motion of trinitarian perichoresis that constitutes God’s life, but also in the act of divine poiēsis that constitutes our own. By the same token, Bernárdez’s sense that Laura’s name transmits Christ’s sacramental presence is simply an intensification or focalization of what is true of language-use in general. For if the poet’s invocation of Laura is an expression of desire for the beloved that is also an expression of desire for God, this is simply because every instance of poetic speech—indeed, every instance of human speech more generally—is both a reminder of the transcendent source of our existence and, implicitly, a desire that our own words might find union with, and completion in, the divine Word from which all things come and toward which all things tend.
Notes

2. Ibid., 15.
4. St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa theologiae, 3a. q. 73 a. 3 ad 3 (hereafter ST). For translations of the Summa, I have usually followed the Blackfriars’ version: Thomas Aquinas, Summa theologicae (Cambridge: Blackfriars, 1964–1981). Aquinas’s phrase here, of course, is sacramentum caritatis, not sacramentum amoris; but, as we shall see in a moment, his understanding of Eucharist retains certain “erotic” elements in the sense in which I shall be using the term.
8. In addition to Petrarch and Laura, Dante and Beatrice provide another important (literary) model for Bernárdez’s relationship with Laura.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 14.
12. “Poem of the Eucharistic Bread” was republished in Francisco Luis Bernárdez, Las estrellas (Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada, 1947). El buque was published together with another text in Francisco Luis Bernárdez, La ciudad sin Laura; El Buque (Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada, 1941).
13. See Aquinas, ST, 3a, q. 75, a. 1.
15. ST, 3a, q. 61, a. 4, ad 1.
17. Ibid., 40.
18. For more on this point, see John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, Truth in Aquinas (London: Routledge, 2001), 86–89.
19. *ST*, 3a, q. 81, a. 1, ad 3.


22. For more on Bernárdez’s relationship with the modernistas, see Rodríguez Francia, *Perspectivas religiosas en la poesía argentina*, chap. 2.


24. Or so it appears at least. It is, of course, impossible to know precisely what—or about whom—the poet is thinking as he writes.


26. The original text of the poem is available in Francisco Luis Bernárdez, *La ciudad sin Laura; El Baque* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada, 1941). I cite parenthetically by line number.


29. For more on the role of music in Bernárdez’s work, see José María Alonso Gamo, *Tres poetas argentinos: Marechal, Molinari, Bernárdez* (Madrid: Cultura Hispánica, 1951), 111ff.

30. Boethius, *De institutione musica*, bk. 1, chap. 2.


33. This is also the central theme of *El buque* [The Vessel] (1935), one of Bernárdez’s most ambitious poems.


35. There may also be an allusion to Dante here. At *Purgatorio* VI, 45, Virgil describes Beatrice as she “che lume fia tra ’l vero e lo ’ntelletto” (“[she] who will be the light between truth and mind”).


43. For more on this point, see ibid., 153–54.