

Too Wilde for Comfort

Desire and Ideology in Fin-de-Siècle Latin America

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THIS PIECE IS PART OF A LARGER reflection on turn-of-the-century Latin American cultures, most especially on the paranoid construction of a gender and sexual norms, and of gender and sexual difference.¹ It will assume that the definition of norm does not precede but is arrived at, and indeed derives from, the gender and sexual differences that purportedly deviate from it, in the same way that the definition of "health," in psycholegal studies of the period, follows that of disease, and decadence gives birth retrospectively to notions of maturity and fullness. This assumption measures the anxiety informing those constructions and those definitions. By focusing my reflection on Latin America at the turn of the century, that is, at the moment of its complex entrance into modernity, I must take into account two related issues: first, the ideological implications of these constructions in debates on national identity and national, even continental, health; second, the double pressure of continued cultural dependence

vis-à-vis Europe and of United States political expansionism, a pressure informing these debates on national identity as, indeed, all forms of Latin American cultural production of the period.

I would like to focus on a particularly revealing cultural encounter in turn-of-the-century Latin America and on the gender unease resulting from it. On the evening of January 7, 1882, the Cuban writer José Martí attended a lecture in New York City. In spite of rival attractions, there was a very large crowd at Chickering Hall, Martí reports in *La Nación* of Buenos Aires, one that struck him both for its size and its elegance. The title of the lecture Martí heard was "The English Renaissance of Art" and the lecturer, of course, was Oscar Wilde. This occasion, which I have chosen to make emblematic for the purpose of my argument, is culturally significant. Martí, arguably the most important Latin American intellectual figure of his time, encounters this other, influential innovator, come to the United States, as prophet of a "new imagination," to reveal to his public that "the secret of life is in art."² Encounter is too generous a word, of course, since the two men never met and since Wilde was totally unaware of Martí's existence. What interests me here, to begin, is precisely that imbalance which affords Martí a particularly interesting vantage point. Lost in a New York crowd, Martí, the foreign correspondent, gazes upon, better still, spies on Wilde, carefully taking in the man and his words, the better to report his experience to the Spanish American readers of *La Nación*. I quote from his description of the moment he lays eyes on Wilde:

Look at Oscar Wilde! He does not dress as we all do but in a singular manner.... His hair falls over his neck and shoulders, like that of an Elizabethan courtier; it is abundant, carefully parted down the middle. He wears tails, a white silk waistcoat, ample knee breeches, black silk hose and buckled shoes. The shirt collar is cut low, like Byron's, held together by an ample white silk cravat knotted with abandon. A diamond stud shines on the dazzling shirtfront; an ornate watch-chain hangs from the fob. Beauty in dress is imperative; of this, he is the perfect example. But art demands of all its works temporal unity, and it hurts the eye to see a handsome man wearing a waistcoat from this period, breeches from another, hair like Cromwell's, and a foppish turn-of-the-century watch-chain.³

This first, detailed description subtly hints at a dichotomy that will become increasingly evident in Martí's piece. On the one hand, he sees in Wilde a kindred soul, one who would teach others (in this case the materialistic North American other despised by Martí) love of beauty and devotion to art. Yet, on

the other hand, Martí is clearly disturbed by the *extravagance* he has before his eyes. This costume, this affectation, work against Martí's appreciation, literally becoming an obstacle. Far from dispatching Wilde's unusual appearance after the first description, a fascinated Martí keeps harking back to it in wonder, attempting to excuse it for his readers, for himself. Wilde does not dress, writes Martí, the way *we* all dress. But who is this *we*? The usual first-person plural, so frequent in Martí as a means to separate the Latin American *we* from an antagonistic North American *they*, gives place here to an atypical, panicked *we*—that of all "normally dressed" men, whatever their national origin—before the "strange," the "childish," the "extravagant."⁴ With his long hair, velvet knee-breeches and black silk hose, Wilde "hurts the eye," his costume "adds little to the nobility or slenderness of the human form, and is but an inefficient rejection of vulgar habits of dress" (367). Admiring Wilde's artistic zeal, Martí enthuses: "What praise does this gallant young man not deserve, *in spite of his long hair and his knee breeches*, for trying to turn the dullish red gleam hanging over the melancholy English into the sun's vibrant rays...!" (367; my emphasis).

Martí, it is true, is not the only one bothered by Wilde's appearance nor, more generally, by his attitude. The Cincinnati *Commercial*, finding Wilde too delicate, dared him to soil his hands: "If Mr. Wilde will leave the lilies and daffodils and come west to Cincinnati, we will undertake to show him how to deprive thirty hogs of their intestines in one minute."⁵ The choice of words betrays a transparently anxious *machismo*: Wilde's difference is not only mocked, it is perceived as a menace. To his credit, Martí does not ridicule Wilde nor does he show his anxiety in such uncompromisingly anal terms. He is willing to hear him out, even applauds his message; yet Wilde's physical person is another message offered up for decoding, a corporeal inscription of fin-de-siècle aestheticism with an obviously homoerotic subtext which, as such, puzzles Martí.

The notion of temporal unity, which Martí, rather surprisingly, uses against Wilde ("but art demands temporal unity in all its works"), deserves some commentary here. For within Martí's system, lack of temporal unity is usually a positive, if violent, creative force: witness his defense of anachronism and heterogeneity as constitutive of the new American man in "*Nuestra América*."⁶ It is not really heterogeneity, then, that is at stake in Martí's critique of Wilde's costume. Martí evaluates the mixture of disparate elements positively when he, Martí, as a founding voice, can give that mixture a name—the new American man—and thus provide ideological unity for the fragments. Instead, the mixture that is Wilde defies Martí's nomenclature: Wilde is the unspeakable, with no

place within Martí's founding fiction. Martí then needs to fall back on classic criteria of temporal harmony, at odds with his habitual ideology of art, in order to critique Wilde's unresolvable, unsettling difference.

Eighteen years later, on December 8, 1900, another Latin American, Rubén Darío, writes about Oscar Wilde. I must go into the particulars of this piece since they allow me to measure significant changes in what, rather loosely, might be termed a Latin American perception of Wilde. Darío writes his piece in Paris, eight days after Wilde's death. Entitled "The Purifications of Pity," it begins in the following manner:

Tolstoi tells a story about a dead dog, found lying in the street. Passers-by stop and each comments on the remains of the poor animal. One says that it had the mange, and so it was fitting that it die;⁷ another supposes that it may have been rabid, and therefore it was just and useful to club it to death; another says that it is disgusting and smells; another, that it reeks; yet another that this thing is hideous and foul and should be taken soon to the dump. Before the swollen, rank carcass, a voice suddenly cried: "Its teeth are whiter than the finest pearls." People thought: "This must be Jesus of Nazareth and no other, since only he could find something to praise in that fetid carcass." Indeed, that was the voice of supreme Pity.⁸

That is the first paragraph of Darío's piece. The one immediately following it begins:

A man has just died, a great and true poet, who in the last years of his life, suddenly cut short, suffered pain and affront, and who, faced with misery, decided to leave this world. (468)

These two paragraphs, containing Darío's strategy in its entirety, set the sanctimonious tone of the piece. One does not have to look very deep into the pseudo-parable to read an ultimately judgmental subtext, barely masked by bleeding-heart sentimentality. Wilde, like the dead dog, is confined to the role of a particularly disgusting victim, foul to the senses and hazardous to health. Men are repulsed by him and only Christ in his "supreme pity"—a pity that, in its very perfection, is implicitly inaccessible to most mortals—is capable of redeeming him. If Darío's piece invites the reader to heed Christ's words, it also, in an ambiguous maneuver that informs the whole of this article, indicates that the goal may well be unattainable given the superhuman effort it presupposes.

Throughout the piece, Darío stigmatizes Wilde in the name of "the purification of pity." Not only is the choice of adjectives eloquent—*unfortunate*,

infamous, *wretched*, *ill-fated*—but the summary of Wilde's life reveals a very anxious agenda. Wilde's life is a cautionary tale: "the confusion between the nobility of art and capricious display, in spite of his immense talent, in spite of all the advantages of his good fortune, brought him down very low, to shame, to prison, to poverty, even to death" (470). If Darío, in principle, endorses Wilde's break with bourgeois convention—this was, after all, one of the tenets of the *modernista* movement he contributed to found—it is the particular modality of this break, and the way in which it is publicized, that Darío finds fault with. Yes, Wilde is a victim of society; but first and foremost, Darío tells us, he is a victim of himself. He is (note the order of the terms) "a victim of his own eccentricity and of honorable England" (471). Once again, it is Wilde's *visibility*, a thousand times greater now than when Martí wrote his piece, that is at stake. It is this "capricious parade" that Darío frowns upon, chiding Wilde for not understanding that: "times change, that ancient Greece is not modern day Britain, that psychopathies are treated in clinics, that deformities and monstrous things must flee from light, must hide from the sun" (471).

If Darío's corrective reading of Wilde's life dooms him to the clinic or the closet, Darío's reading of Wilde's death is even more telling. For when he describes Wilde as "a man...who decided to leave this world," he means this quite literally. Surprisingly misinformed (he writes, after all, in Paris, barely a week after Wilde's death), he states:

The perfumed cigarette he held in his lips on lecture nights foreshadowed the strychnine in his mouth as, in the last desperation, this *arbiter elegantiarum* died like a dog. Like a dog he died. Like a dead dog his wretched body lay in his lonely room. In truth, his poems and his stories are worth the finest pearls. (471–472)

This recreation is, needless to say, apocryphal: Wilde did not commit suicide nor was he alone when he died. But the sleazy suicide of the pathetic queer is a fiction of homophobic discourse that Darío must resort to in order to settle accounts with Wilde's only too visible body. The *arbiter elegantiarum*, he with the long hair, the velvet, the green carnation, the perfumed cigarette, is now a dead dog, his intolerable physical presence no longer an obstacle or a threat. Only with that body gone—that body literally incarnating perversity, that site of "deformities and monstrous things"—can Wilde's writing be appreciated, can the disembodied "pearls" of his art live on.

Wilde, writes Darío, "played at being a ghost and ended up being one" (471).

Bearing in mind that Spanish has but one word for ghost and phantasm—*fantasma*—one may submit the phrase to an additional twist and say that Wilde ended up being the disturbing phantasmatic construct of many, certainly haunting Martí and Darío. Yet I will go one step further and propose that this anxiety may be, and indeed should be, contextualized in a larger cultural framework. In other words, I want to argue that Darío and Martí are voicing a collective anxiety, one with which their Latin American readers will identify, the ideological import of which I shall now try to clarify.

There is the commonly held belief that late nineteenth-century Latin American literature imported fin-de-siècle decadence wholesale and, in so doing, naturalized it into a typically Hispanic expression. While not denying the process of translation and *bricolage* that is at the base of all Latin American literature, indeed at the base of all postcolonial cultural configurations, I want to call attention to the paradoxical nature of that translation as put into practice at the turn of the century in Latin America. Why would new countries make decadence—a term implying enervation, aboulia, and, above all, in accordance with pseudomedical diagnoses of the time, disease—the starting point for a new aesthetics, for *modernismo*, which one could argue is the first self-consciously literary reflection in Latin America?

Octavio Paz claims that what turn-of-the-century Latin American writers found in European decadence was less the ominous “dusk of nations” prophesied by Max Nordau in *Degeneration* than a rhetoric that allowed Latin America to attain modernity: “*modernistas* did not want to be French, they wanted to be modern.... For Rubén Darío and his friends, modernity and cosmopolitanism were synonymous.”⁹ Paradoxically then, the appropriation of European decadence by Latin America was less a sign of degeneration than an occasion for regeneration: not the end of a period but an entrance into modernity, the formulation of a strong culture and of a new historical subject. Yet the process of translation of decadence is, one can’t but help notice, patchy and uneven. I would like to reflect on this unevenness, ask what it is that Latin American cultures *can* borrow for self-constitutive purposes, what it is that they cannot, and why this may be so. In other words, my reading will attempt to identify some of the gaps, overreadings, and deviations from the text of European decadence (or from what Latin America perceives as being the text of European decadence) in order to grasp the ideological significance of those critical differ-

ences. Latin America read European literature voraciously, cannibalistically: to quote Paz once more, “its mythology was that of Gustave Moreau; its secret paradises, those of Huysmans’ *A rebours*, its infernos, those of Poe and Baudelaire” (20). But at the same time Latin America read and incorporated, with equal voracity, texts that signified another form of modernity, texts belonging to a scientific or pseudo-scientific corpus that, while providing a base for incipient psychiatric research, denounced the very decadence *modernismo* emulated in literature. Thus, due mainly to the influence of Nordau and Lombroso, the emergence of what one might term the double discourse of *modernismo*, one in which decadence appears *at the same time* as progressive and regressive, as regenerating and degenerating, as good and as insalubrious. Nowhere of course is that doubleness made so apparent as in discourse relating to the body sexual.

If Latin American *modernismo* espouses decadence’s celebration of the body as locus of desire and pleasure on the one hand, and, on the other, recognizes it as site of the perverse, the latter recognition is more nominal than real—and then strictly observant of heterosexual mores. If sensuality, sexual role-playing, erotic voyeurism abound in these texts, there is hardly a true adhesion to the transgressive nature of the works of high decadence, to the reflection on morals resulting from that transgression, or to the reformulation of sexualities that such a reflection would propose. Texts are read more for their titillating effects than for their subversive import: Latin Americans admire Huysmans; they do not, or cannot, rewrite him. Moreover, they tend to distance themselves from transgression when they perceive it, even denounce it in the very terms used by decadence’s staunchest critics, anxious not to be caught deviating from a tacit code of decorum. Rubén Darío, while admiring Rachilde’s *Monsieur Venus*, calls its author “a red flower of sexual aberrations,” adding that this is “a book that only priests, doctors and psychologists should read.”¹⁰ The same doubleness, the same attraction mixed with prudishness (the soft-porn effects of which are obvious) is to be noted when Darío speaks of Lautréamont: “It would not be prudent for young minds to converse at any length with this spectral man, not even for the sake of literary curiosity or the pleasure of trying new nourishment. There is a judicious saying in the Kabbala: ‘One must not play at being a ghost for one ends up being one.’ If there is a dangerous writer in this respect it is the count of Lautréamont.... If I were to take my muse near the place where this madman is caged, howling at the wind, I would cover her ears.”¹¹ The reader will have recognized, in passing, the transgressive ghost-playing attributed to Wilde.

It may be argued that these essays by Darío (and, to a lesser extent, those by Martí) were above all circumstantial pieces, the product of hasty journalism and not of critical reflection; that Darío, especially, may have been trying to court a public of middle-class readers not exactly initiated in, much less approving of, some of the attitudes towards the physical and, more precisely, the sexual, that the authors he discusses rendered explicit. I concede that this is so, and the fact, in a way, adds to my argument. For it matters little what these authors “really” thought on the matter, it matters more to note that this doubleness that had them introducing decadence to a Latin American public even as, to save themselves, they criticized it, was a necessary attitude given the context in which this literature was read.

Let me give some idea of that context by focussing on a little-known text, *Buenos Aires, La ribera y los prostíbulos en 1880* [*Buenos Aires, the River Bank and the Bordellos in 1880*], written in the early 1900s by an Argentine assistant chief of police, Adolfo Batiz.¹² The book, significantly subtitled “A Contribution to Social Studies,” reflects the same doubleness I have pointed out in literature, that is, on the one hand, attraction for and tolerance of “natural” sexuality, on the other, rejection of the perverse. Batiz begins his purportedly “scientific” study, with a dream he has in Italy—in Rome to be precise; the choice of geography is not inconsequential—a dream which takes him to Dante’s tomb. Dante comes to life, greets him, and they have a little chat. “I mentioned to him that, as in the past, there was lust all around us, and now, lust and pederasty.... I shall write on this, I told him. Sharing my opinions, he [Dante] encouraged me to do so.... After a loving farewell, I started to walk away dejectedly when, from the door, I heard Dante, raising his voice so that I might hear him, say to me very earnestly: ‘Take courage....’”¹³

What follows in Batiz’s book, after a first chapter proposing the medical and legal surveillance of prostitution, is not a sociological study at all but a curious *flânerie* around Buenos Aires that is not without charm. Actually, bordellos are described rather benignly. It is another section of the city, the *Paseo de Julio*, that meets with Batiz’s condemnation for “it was the refuge of passive pederasts who gathered round the statue of Mazzini, the revolutionary hero of Italian freedom” (25). Batiz describes heterosexual prostitution with a tolerant eye, even resorts to the sensuous *modernista* vocabulary of the time to describe women. The main scourge, Batiz claims, is the “*granujería cosmopolita*,” the cosmopolitan scum that exploits prostitution and takes it to extremes. Amongst those extremes, of course, we find the substance of his

dream conversation with Dante, lust and pederasty:

Prostitution has taken on alarming proportions, it has grown beyond what is normal and logical, we are on the verge of Roman decadence. This is not an exaggeration after hearing about the scandals in Germany concerning Prince Eulenburg, after hearing about the trial of the two generals. For it is publicly known that there exists in Rome, Corso Umberto I, an agency in charge of finding models for passive pederasts, there is a shameless international traffic in these models, the same as with women’s flesh, there is no romance. (79)¹⁴

This house on Corso Umberto I so fires the imagination of the good chief of police that he will come back to it again and again, as Martí went back to Wilde’s costume:

We must insist on this house in Rome, the one supplying passive pederasts with models, about which much has been written in the press.... This proves that homosexual degeneration, as well as the practice of prostitution in women, and degeneration in general, have achieved truly exceptional proportions, only comparable to those of the decadent Roman empire. (86)

When prostitution and pederasty are set side by side, the excesses of the former pale in comparison with the latter, and are excused in the name of heterosexual nature and needs. “Every man has the right to hide his weaknesses from the world (except pederasts) and I don’t know to what extent one should call weaknesses certain whims [*caprichos*] imposed by nature” (100). The police, adds Batiz, can do little to punish “the new scandalmongers in Argentine society,” those who (once again!) “come to Rome looking for models, like the prince of the German scandals came to the house on Corso Umberto I” (83). It should be remembered that these scandals in the Kaiser’s entourage erupted precisely at the time when Argentina was restructuring its army according to the Prussian model, a fact that surely contributed to the anxiety of the good chief of police.

I am interested here not only in the anxiety awakened by genital homosexuality—not the least merit of Batiz’s book is to document the existence of a thriving gay community in Buenos Aires¹⁵—but by the notorious slippage of the term *pederast*, the ease with which it is either metaphorized or fused with other threatening types. Pederasts (always, in Batiz’s book, “passive pederasts”) become synonymous with rather “active” unsavory characters: pimps, burglars, informers. Most importantly, pederasts (and by extension, pimps, informers,

etc.) are invariably linked to the non-national. Homosexuality exists in Argentina, Batiz tells us, but in reality, *le mal vient de plus loin*, from Italy, from that house on Corso Umberto I exporting decadent Roman models to Buenos Aires.

The use of the word *model* is of course of capital interest here, since it inscribes this sexual transaction in a colonial context even as it critiques it. Who are, after all these models, *what exactly do they do?* Taking the term literally, one could assume that these are models on which the “passive pederasts” fashion themselves, European “originals” for Latin American “copies.” Yet this is surely not quite so, given that the subject of Batiz’s book is the denunciation of prostitution grown “beyond what is normal and logical.” Suggesting a commerce more intimate than mere emulation, *model* means rather a sexual provider, “imported” to Argentina for the satisfaction of “passive pederasts,” by the same “cosmopolitan scum” trafficking in female prostitutes. This being the case, the term becomes much more “active” (and more threatening) than it at first would seem. But why, precisely, use *model*? Could the term refer to the popular nineteenth-century “model artists,” posing in *tableaux vivants* of doubtless erotic charge¹⁶ or would it be a euphemism? Although the meaning of the term is obscure, what matters is the way it functions within its sociocultural context and the eerie effect produced by such a contextualization. For let us not forget that *model* is a key notion in the poetics of imitation adopted by turn-of-the-century Latin America with the purpose of creating new cultural forms; or, as Darío would have it, “*Qui pourrais-je imiter pour être original?*” So that Batiz’s reprehensible scenario—the “passive pederast” seeking the Roman “model” for sexual and/or aesthetic gratification—parodies a pattern of dependency and incorporation that is not censurable but on the contrary acceptable, even desirable, when applied to texts and not bodies. In Batiz’s use of the term *model*, which felicitously brings together for the reader the dominant literary attitude of the day with its perverted bodily counterpart, could one not then read *something else*, something that *cannot be told* within the hegemonic discourses of the period, that is, that new constructions of literature also imply new constructions of sexuality and gender, new remappings of bodies?

For Batiz, however, such a conflation of *models* would have been unthinkable: good came from abroad, to be imitated, in the form of “high” literary models; evil too came from abroad, to contaminate, in the form of despicable models bringing bad “low” habits. The latter perception was, of course, not new and, in countries like Argentina, where the make-up of the population was rapidly

changing due to an overwhelmingly male immigration, it became an urgent issue. Darío and Martí’s preoccupation with Wilde finds its parallel in the technical discourses of the budding nation states, discourses wielded throughout Latin America at the turn of the century by psychiatrists, sociologists, legal scholars and, yes, police inspectors attempting to define, classify, analyze “foreign” sexual deviance as one of the diseases brought on by immigration.¹⁷ The paranoid taxonomy resulting from these discourses made rejection, if not persecution, natural and therefore inevitable, like the rejection of Oscar Wilde’s dog-like carcass by ordinary men. Doomed to the closet of non-nationality, the alien was then constructed as a diseased, perverse, and ultimately threatening other. As the discourse of the Spanish conquest had feminized the native American other,¹⁸ as the discourse of metropolitan Spain had feminized its Creole subjects,¹⁹ so the hegemonic discourse of nineteenth-century nationalism perverts, and in particular eviscerates, the male immigrant. He is assigned a sort of performative effeminacy that, according to the danger he is felt to pose, can go from the simply grotesque to the socially and morally threatening.²⁰

Neither Darío nor Martí, nor for that matter other writers of the period, openly mention homosexuality (or, to use the more term of the day, pederasty) in their chronicles. If they allude to it, they do so obliquely and, above all, defensively. Martí, writing on Whitman, denounces “those imbeciles who, in the love of a friend for a friend, celebrated in ‘Calamus’ with the most ardent images of which the human language is capable, believe they find, like dirty-minded schoolboys, the vile desire of Vergil for Cebes, of Horace for Gyges and Lyciscus.” He then hastens to correct (as, one should not forget, did Whitman himself)²¹ such intimations: the Whitman *he* proposes, “trembles, contracts, swells, disseminates, goes mad with pride and satisfied virility.”²² Martí’s defensive bonding with Whitman, achieved in the name of hypervirility, brings with it the necessary devaluation of the feminine. Thus Whitman, in Martí’s priapic rendering, is “like a ravenous hero smacking his bloodthirsty lips as he describes the various parts of the female body” (137). With comparable scorn, Darío dismisses references to Verlaine’s homosexuality as “a nebulous legend that has provided fodder for cads,”²³ and, when reviewing Lepelletier’s pious biography of the French poet, states that “the famous Rimbaud question” is proven beyond all doubt to be false: whatever allusions to it that may be found in Verlaine’s poetry are “mere aspects of simulation.”²⁴

Now what calls attention in both Martí and Darío is not that the issue of homosexuality is avoided but, precisely, that it *is* brought up; that it appears, indeed, unavoidable. Furthermore, once it is out, it must be energetically denied, attributed to calumny. With regards to its cultural mentors, Latin American *modernismo* not only subjects texts to a creative process of cultural translation, it also translates lives (at least some lives) into an acceptable cultural script, feels it must erase marks of a deviance by which not only the mentors but they themselves fear to be judged. Possibly the most strikingly homosocial movement in Latin American literature (although the so-called boom of the 1960s comes in a close second) this tightly bonded literary *brotherhood*, to use the Pre-Raphaelite term so dear to Rubén Darío himself, is most anxious not to be found guilty by association and most anxious to be “read well.” Even years later, this anxiety will be visited upon *modernismo*’s critics. Twice, in comparing Darío to Verlaine, Octavio Paz feels the need to tell us that Darío’s poetry was virile, while Carlos Fuentes, when speaking of Rodó’s *Ariel*, praises it for its “huskier moments.”²⁵

The slippage between homophobia and xenophobia, the systematic perversion of a frightening “outside” carried out with a zeal that only indicates, as is obvious, how “inside” that “outside” really is, consolidates, by contrast, the notion of national, even continental, heterosexual health; a notion elaborated, discussed and perfected in, foreseeably, all-male atheneums, often (although not always) grouped around a senior mentor. I shall venture one step further, by contextualizing this notion of health not just in terms of a body social but of a body politic, and shall briefly consider one of the prophylactic projects to preserve national health designed by precisely one of those mentors, the Uruguayan José Enrique Rodó.

A pedagogue (I use the word advisedly) who might be best described as a cross between Arnold and Renan, Rodó drew early attention to himself as a *maître à penser* with an 1899 article on the poetry of Rubén Darío. The piece functioned both as a diagnosis and as a cautionary tale, beginning, memorably, with a statement that totally disempowered the by then famously acclaimed Nicaraguan poet: “Undoubtedly, Rubén Darío is not the poet of America.”²⁶ Without going into the detail of the piece, wrought as minutely as any fin-de-siècle bibelot, I want to chart the principal points of Rodó’s exemplary critique, for I see in this piece signs of that very doubleness I mentioned earlier. On the one hand, this is a cautiously sympathetic reading, in which Rodó literally takes on Darío’s voice, in an act of poetic ventriloquism; as he writes, he carefully recreates Darío’s poems, re-producing Darío’s sensuality (and often adding to it) in the

sole interest, as he rather improbably claims, of serious literary criticism. Yet, on the other hand, there is a permanent curbing of Rodó’s passionate ventriloquism, a disquiet that filters into Rodó’s appreciation of Darío, a sense that in this poetry there is something wrong and, more precisely, that there is something wrong for Latin America. There is something sickly, artificial, morbid, and excessively soft in Darío’s poetry, Rodó tells us even as he delights in the very softness he denounces. There is no heroic passion, no strong tragic gestures, no sincerity in this poetry of *pose* but, in their stead, “morbid and indolent obliqueness, idealized serenity, pensive languor, all that allows this actor’s tunic to drape his sinuous body in the most graceful folds” (172). And Rodó goes on to add:

When, in our austere language, has voluptuousness fashioned, from poetry, darts such as these for its quiver? For voluptuousness is at the very soul of these verses: they stretch out, they purr, like sensuous cats they sink into voluptuous softness. Inviting verses, tempting and delicate verses, verses capable of making a Spartan legion swoon.... If there were an imminent war, I would forbid them... (179)

Although the orthodoxy of Darío’s sexuality does not come under suspicion here, that of his poetry definitely does. It should be remembered that Martí, in his programmatic introduction to Pérez Bonalde’s “*Poema del Niágara*,” had already passed a similar judgment on “unmanly” poetry in general, with identical intimations of homoeroticism:

Men would resemble females, weak females, if, crowned with garlands of roses, in the embrace of Alexander or Cebes, they chose to drink the honeyed Falernian that seasoned Horace’s banquets. Pagan lyrical poetry is out of style because of its sensuality.²⁷

Although Martí’s statement antedates Darío’s *Prosas profanas* it could be applied to him retroactively since, just like Rodó’s piece, it resorts to classical homophobic markers to indicate weakness. The swooning Spartan legion, Alexander’s embrace, the wine and the roses bring up the “wrong” kind of Hellenism, the one that should be proscribed—the one we should censor within ourselves.

Rodó performs a voyeuristic reading of Darío not unlike the one that Martí had performed of Wilde; not unlike the one Batiz had performed of the “Sodom of the River Plate”; not unlike, finally, the one Darío himself had performed of Wilde’s death. Rodó, the teacher of Latin American civic virtue—of whom one

disciple wondered why he locked himself up in his bedroom to read Plato's dialogues²⁸—Rodó is as fascinated by the languor of Darío's poetry as Martí was fascinated by Wilde's hair and Batiz by the mythic Roman agency providing passive pederasts with their models. But Rodó inscribes his attraction for and fear of the morbid, his preoccupation with virility and eviration, in a political context. Through Darío, he reads the threat not merely as coming from without (from Victorian England, from the Roman agency, from the boatfuls of Southern European immigrants) but as a possibility within, immensely more dangerous. For it is in Darío and not in a foreigner, in a Latin American himself, that Rodó senses (and is both seduced and frightened by) the languor, the softness, the unhealthiness, the lack of heroic fibre, the feminization, the possible homoeroticism. At a time of continental panic, when Latin America fears loss of its precarious identity through penetration by the United States—an alien impossible to pathologize or evirate, however softly he may speak: he carries, as we all know, a Big Stick—at a time, indeed, of “imminent war,” both physical and ideological, sensuous Darío cannot, shouldn't be, according to Rodó, “*el poeta de América*.” Thus the need for Rodó's *Ariel*, the influential essay he dedicated one year later to “the youth of America,” and, for generations, the most popular proposal for a Latin American identity. A holistic program for a healthy continent, it seductively posited self-improvement through renewed contact with Latin America's “strong” European forebears, Greece and early Christianity. A blend of evangelical *caritas* and Renanian Hellenism, whose sentimentalized virility (and attendant panic) would successfully glue together a community of male intellectuals for years to come, *Ariel* was the pedagogue's lesson. It proposed a “cure” for the *mollitia* of European decadence, it provided a safeguard from the muscular utilitarianism of the United States. In a word, it instructed the intelligentsia in ways of being good (male) Latin Americans together.

It is not surprising that Darío, after Rodó's critique of his poetry and the didactic *Ariel* that followed, took a deliberately new approach, posited himself as a poet of “human energy” and to a point rejected, in *Cantos de vida y esperanza*, his previous aesthetics. Nor is it surprising that a formulation of moral and political correctness as compelling as that of *Ariel*, where homosexual panic was gratifyingly replaced (in reality, compounded) by male bonding *pro patria*, was to mark not only latter-day *modernismo* but the literature that followed it. Nor is it surprising, finally, that José Ingenieros, one of the founders of forensic psychiatry in Argentina, found it necessary to invent a category, that of *simulators*, to distinguish “real” perversions from simulated perversions (the latter, a cate-

gory into which he placed all Latin American writers who might seem suspect), in an attempt to provide Latin American culture with a clean bill of health.²⁹ One of the results of turn-of-the-century homosexual panic has been the near-total suppression of the male body from Latin American literature: the sentimentalized virility preached by Rodó is above all a *cosa mentale*, an abstraction never accompanied (as were similar national movements elsewhere)³⁰ by the rediscovery and aesthetization of the body. And, as the body is hidden, so have all sexual and erotic manifestations deviating from “healthy,” patriarchal, heterosexual norms successfully remained in the closet of literary representation and, especially, in the closet of literary criticism. One of the tasks that awaits the critic is to look, with the same intensity with which Martí scrutinized Wilde, the same curiosity with which Batiz looked at Buenos Aires, the same sympathy with which Rodó recognized Darío, and hopefully without the anxiety present in all three, at the textual production of Latin America since the turn of the century in order to figure out the forms taken by silence, the oblique figurations to which it has resorted to speak the unspeakable.

NOTES

1. Although I use the term “Latin America,” my remarks refer principally to Hispanic countries and should not be expanded to the literature and culture of Brazil. This restriction is due chiefly to the fact that the construction of gender and sexual difference in Brazil develops along distinct lines and deserves to be considered separately. For an introduction to the latter, see João S. Trevisan, *Perverts in Paradise*, trans. Martin Foremen (London: GMP Publications, 1986).
2. H. Montgomery Hyde, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975), 54.
3. José Martí, “Oscar Wilde,” in *Obras completas*, XV (Havana: Editorial nacional de Cuba, 1964), 362. Further quotations will refer to this text. All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.
4. I use the term *panic* as understood by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) and *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley-Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990). I take this opportunity to state the extent of my debt to her work.
5. Hyde, 55.
6. “We were [*somos*] military epaulettes and magistrates' robes, in countries that came into being with sandals on their feet and headbands on their foreheads. The true genius would have been to combine, with the love of the heart and the boldness of

- founders, the headband and the robe.” (José Martí, *Nuestra América* [Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1977], 30). Martí’s fetishization of dress (we are our clothing) is remarkable throughout his work and deserves further study. For a perceptive analysis of Martí’s political articulation of the heterogeneous, see Julio Ramos, *Desencuentros de la modernidad en América Latina: Literatura y política en el siglo XIX* (Mexico: Fondo de cultura económica, 1989), 229–243, especially 232–3.
7. The Spanish uses the colloquial *reventar*, literally “to burst,” metaphorically “to croak.” Darío proves to be uncannily accurate. Wilde’s body, minutes after his death, did indeed burst: “He had scarcely breathed his last breath when the body exploded with fluids from the ear, nose, mouth, and other orifices. The debris was appalling.” (Richard Ellman, *Oscar Wilde* [New York: Knopf, 1988], 584).
 8. Rubén Darío, “Purificaciones de la piedad,” in *Obras completas III* (Madrid: Afrodísio Aguado, 1950), 468. Further references to this article appear directly in the text.
 9. Octavio Paz, “El caracol y la sirena,” in *Cuadrivio* (Mexico: Joaquín Mortiz, 1965), 19.
 10. Rubén Darío, “Rachilde,” *Obras completas II*, 367.
 11. Rubén Darío, “El conde de Lautréamont,” *Obras completas II*, 436.
 12. I owe the discovery of this text to Jorge Salessi, whose work on the construction of homosexuality in turn-of-the-century Argentina has inspired much of my thinking in these pages.
 13. Adolfo Batiz (subcomisario), *Buenos Aires, la ribera y los prostibulos en 1880. Contribución a los estudios sociales (libro rojo)* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Aga-Taura, n.d.), 13.
 14. The reference to Phillip Eulenberg and to the homosexual scandals that were uncovered in Wilhelm II’s entourage (some of them implicating the Kaiser himself) allows us to date Batiz’s book precisely. The Krupp scandal broke in 1902, the Eulenberg scandal in 1906, so Batiz’s book was written after that. These dates reveal an interesting aspect of Batiz’s strategy: since his book purportedly deals with the Buenos Aires in 1880, it is clear that he is projecting these scandals—and the house on Corso Umberto I—onto the past. For information on the scandals themselves, see Isabel V. Hull, *The Entourage of Kaiser Wilhelm II, 1888-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 57–145.
 15. Batiz does not speak of lesbians and little documentation is available on the subject. An article such as Víctor Mercante’s “Fetiquismo y uranismo femenino en los internados educativos” [“Fetishism and Female Uranism in Boarding-Schools”], in *Archivos de Criminología y Ciencias Afines* (1903), 22–30, calling educators’ attention to this “morbid state” in the schools of Buenos Aires shows that it was at least a subject of concern for the medicolegal establishment.
 16. See Michael Moon, *Disseminating Whitman* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1991), 70.
 17. Jorge Salessi, “Medics, Crooks and Tango Queens” (forthcoming).
 18. Margarita Zamora, “Abreast of Columbus: Gender and Discovery,” in *Cultural Critique*, 17 (1990–91): 127–151.
 19. José Piedra, “The New World Made Me Do It,” (forthcoming).
 20. This weakening through homosexualization is particularly virulent in cases when the alien occupies, or is perceived as occupying, an “unnatural” position of power. Witness the following description of Jewish money lenders, “notably averse to women,” by a leading Argentine psychiatrist of the time:

Their habit of keeping an eye on their debtors, of hovering around the building to which they hold mortgages, of cunningly following men they perceive to be most in need, asking after the state of their souls, gives them the air of mysterious lovers.... Their seduction techniques finally betray their true moral nature, enrolling them in the ageless depravity of inversion. (José María Ramos Mejía, *Los simuladores de talento* [1904; rpt. Buenos Aires: Tor, 1955], 166–167).
- The same Ramos Mejía, when discussing the bad taste of relatively harmless Italian immigrants (*guarangos*), mocks them by calling them “cultural inverts”:
- [T]hey resemble sexual inverts in that they manifest their dubious energy in a capricious manifestation of appetites. They [Italian *guarangos*] need very bright colors and very shrill music, as erotomaniacs need intense bodily odors; they like things combined in bizarre and tasteless ways, as inverts like twisted attitudes and scabrous procedures to satisfy the special idiosyncrasies [*sic*] of their sensibility. (José María Ramos Mejía, *Las multitudes argentinas* [1899; rpt. Buenos Aires: Talleres Gráficos Argentinos L.J. Rosso, 1934], 257).
21. Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 203.
 22. José Martí, “El poeta Walt Whitman,” in *En los Estados Unidos, Obras completas, V*, 13 (Havana: Editorial Nacional de Cuba, 1964), 137.
 23. Rubén Darío, “Verlaine,” in *Los raros, Obras completas II*, 298.
 24. “La vida de Verlaine,” in *Obras completas II*, 718.
 25. Octavio Paz, 31 and 39. Carlos Fuentes, Prologue to José Enrique Rodó, *Ariel*. Trans. by Margaret Sayers Peden. Foreword by James W. Symington. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988), 17.
 26. José Enrique Rodó, *Rubén Darío. Su personalidad literaria. Su última obra*, in *Obras completas* (Madrid: Aguilar, 1967) 169–192.
 27. José Martí, “El poema del Niágara,” in *Nuestra América*, 303.
 28. Víctor Pérez Petit, *Rodó. Su vida, su obra* (Montevideo: Imprenta Latina, 1918), 45.
 29. “D’Annunzio (an Italian who has suffered psychological contamination from the French) has simulated approval of incest and homosexuality. It is fitting to consider such ‘refinements’ of the sexual instinct as simulations. It is clear... that he did not copulate with his sisters or with other men.... In truth, Nordau has seriously erred when interpreting as signs of degeneration mere simulated acts, simple products of imposture mixed with aestheticism.

“Among Latin Americans, we know of some subtle minds, attracted to similar intellectual delusions. It would be indiscreet to name them in these pages.” (José Ingenieros, “Psicología de los simuladores,” *Archivos de Psiquiatría, Criminología y Ciencias Afines*, II (1903): 477).

In Ingenieros' classification, Latin American writers are always *simulators*, never "really" degenerate: "[A] young decadent [Argentine] writer, influenced by French humbugs, felt obliged to simulate the refinements and vices the latter themselves simulated, thinking them authentic. He pretended to be a passive pederast [later versions say *maricón*, that is, faggot—so much for Ingenieros' scientific pretense], pretended to be addicted to hashish, to morfine, to alcohol.... This was all a product of his childish imagination, the result of the impostures of those aesthetes and supermen whose works he read avidly to shape his life, trying to adjust his actions and his ideas to the 'manual of the perfect decadent' " (486).

How the young writer pretended to be a "passive pederast" is left to our imagination in Ingenieros' text. What is clear, instead, is the role of the diagnostician who, in declaring homosexuality a writer's fiction effectively robs it not only of its threat but of its physical and cultural reality.

30. See George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality. Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe* (1985; rpt. Madison and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), especially chapter 3.