

Poetry, Revolution, Homophobia:
Polemics from the Mexican Revolution



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Los individuos de moralidad dudosa que están detentando puestos oficiales . . . con sus actos afeminados, además de constituir un ejemplo punible, crean una atmósfera de corrupción que llega hasta el extremo de impedir el arraigo de las virtudes viriles en la juventud. . . . Si se combate la presencia del fanático, del reaccionario en las oficinas públicas, también debe combatirse la presencia del hermafrodita, incapaz de identificarse con los trabajadores de la reforma social. (Quoted in Monsiváis, "Salvador Novo" 277)

[Individuals of doubtful morals who are holding official posts . . . with their effeminate acts, besides constituting an example worthy of being condemned, create an atmosphere of corruption that reaches the extreme of preventing the maturing of virile qualities in our youth. . . . If the presence of fanatics and reactionaries is combated in public offices, so also should be the presence of the hermaphrodite, who is incapable of identifying with the workers in the social reforms.]

These fighting words, written by one group of Mexican intellectuals against another in 1934, define the ways in which the cultural nationalism of the Mexican Revolution was marked as masculinist and heterosexist.¹ I will be looking here at the conflicts between a revolutionary nationalism of this kind and expressions of homosexual desire in intellectual and artistic circles in Mexico City from the 1920s onward. For although the link between "nationalisms" and "sexualities" is of widespread interest to schol-

ars of cultural studies and is even the title of a recent collection of essays, there has been little attention to the furious polemics that erupted in Mexico in the years after the revolution, polemics centered largely, but only tacitly, on the presence of homosexual artists and poets in the *Contemporáneos* group. After reviewing these polemics, I will look at some examples of homoerotic poetry by two of the *Contemporáneos*, Xavier Villaurrutia and Salvador Novo, whose jobs in the civil service were at stake in the cultural wars, interesting examples of the literature of gay resistance.²

The first of the polemics erupted in 1924. An article entitled "La influencia de la Revolución en nuestra literatura," signed with the pseudonym of José Corral Rigán (and probably written by Febronio Ortega, Carlos Noriega Hope, and Arqueles Vela), described some avant-garde writers, Tablada, Novo, Taniya, and Villaurrutia, as the "producto literario subconsciente del movimiento literario" [the subconscious literary product of the literary movement] (Schneider, *Ruptura* 161); the word *subconsciente* apparently means "to be derogatory," thanks to its association with psychoanalysis (and hence with sexuality). This article was followed a month later by a more explicit attack: Julio Jiménez Rueda, in an essay entitled "El afeminamiento en la literatura mexicana" [Effeminacy in Mexican literature] states that earlier literary schools, including symbolism and naturalism, possessed

chispazos de genio, pasiones turbulentas, aciertos indudables y frecuentes y ponían en la obra un no sé qué, comprensión de la naturaleza circundante, amor, elegancia, pensamiento original, que la distinguía del modelo que imitaba. . . . Pero hoy . . . hasta el tipo del hombre que piensa ha degenerado. Ya no somos gallardos, altivos, toscos . . . es que ahora suele encontrarse el éxito, más que en los puntos de la pluma, en las complicadas artes del tocador. (Schneider, *Ruptura* 162)

[sparks of talent, turbulent passions, undeniable and frequent successes and put a certain "je ne sais quoi" into the work, understanding of surrounding nature, love, elegance, original feeling, that distinguishes it from the model being imitated. . . . But today . . . even the sort of man who thinks has degenerated. We are no longer striking, proud, rough . . . instead, now it is more frequent to find success not in the points made by the pen, but in the complicated arts of the boudoir.]

The blanket character on this attack, which seems to include anyone and everyone, led to responses such as Francisco Monterde's article "Existe una literatura mexicana viril" [A virile Mexican literature exists] (Schneider, *Ruptura* 163-67), in which he celebrates the work of Mariano Azuela and of certain "poetas de calidad—no afeminados" [poets of quality—not effeminate] (165). A series of other articles on the topic appeared in late 1924 and early 1925, most notably a survey on modern Mexican writing in *El Universal Ilustrado* that appeared at the same time that the newspaper was publishing *Los de abajo* in serial form.

The same concern with avoiding effeminacy marks the second manifesto of the *Estridentistas*, dated 1 January 1923 and signed by Manuel Maples Arce, Germán List Arzubide, and some two hundred others. The last paragraph of the manifesto reads in part: "Ser estridentista es ser hombre. Sólo los eunucos no estarán con nosotros" [To be a stridentist is to be a man. Only eunuchs are not with us] (Schneider, *Estridentismo* 50). The "eunuchs" in question would be those Mexican poets who did not sign; because Ramón López Velarde was already dead, these would include some from the previous generation (Amado Nervo, Enrique González Martínez, and José Juan Tablada, most notably) and such emerging poets as Villaurrutia, Novo, Pellicer, and Torres Bodet.

The *Estridentistas* had such power in the state of Veracruz that its capital, Xalapa, was known as "Estridentópolis." Governor Jara of Veracruz was a loyal supporter of Germán List Arzubide, who said that the governor

comprendió que en nuestra protesta lírica y nuestra actitud combativa contra lo apolillado y lo falaz, había una actitud de violenta repulsa a todo lo inútil, lo ruin, lo parasitario o mendaz, en conjunto, la imagen de un mundo que había engendrado la miseria, el dolor, la angustia, la desilusión y el desencanto que iban infiltrándose en la savia viril de nuestra juventud y nuestro pueblo. (Schneider, *Estridentismo* 24)

[understood that in our poetic protest and our combative attitude against what is moth-eaten and false, there was an attitude of violent rejection against everything useless, bad, parasitic or mendacious, in sum, the image of a world that had been engendered by the misery, suffering, anguish, disillusion and disenchantment that was infiltrating into the virile sap of our youth and our people.]

Thus, a close alliance between a revolutionary governor and the incendiary literary movement was built out of a common opposition to a bogeyman constructed of the *ancien régime* and the homosexual vampire interested in stealing the "virile sap" of the revolutionary allies.

The *Estridentistas*, like the Italian futurists, sought an aggressive masculinist aesthetic based on warfare, technology, the subjugation of women, and the bashing of effeminate males. The gay bashing was part of an aesthetic program and appears over and over again in the writings of the movement. List Arzubide, in his 1927 history of the movement, *El movimiento estridentista*, wrote:

El Estridentismo anclaba el triunfo: ellas se derretían sin cautela en sus frases . . . los verseros consuetudinarios habían sido descubiertos en la Alameda, en juntas con probabilidades femeninas y habían sido obligados por la Inspección General de Policía a declarar su sexo y comprobarlo, acusado de un chantage [*sic*] de virilidades en caída. (Schneider, *Estridentismo* 281)

[Stridentism was anchored in triumph: they melted carelessly in their phrases . . . the confirmed versifiers had been discovered on the Alameda, in the company of presumed feminine persons, and had been forced by the Police Chief to declare what sex they were and to prove it, accused with blackmail on their fallen manhood.]

Note that by now the "enemy" of the *Estridentistas*, who in their turn are "amurallado[s] de masculinidad" [fortified in masculinity], had narrowed. The focus of List Arzubide's wrath is the *Contemporáneos* group, many of whom were gay. Two men in particular would be the targets of repeated attack for the next several decades: Salvador Novo and Xavier Villaurrutia. And there was guilt by association in this witch-hunt: the Cuban critic Jorge Mañach would accuse the painter Agustín Lazo of having published some short stories that were "escritos llenos de molicie" [writings full of softness] (Sheridan, *Contemporáneos* 243) and would assert that this "softness" was an ideological softness.³ Revolutionary nationalism, here as elsewhere, had to be constructed by expelling all traces of sexual dissonance.

The irony of the *Estridentista* position, of course, was that it depended

on a return to the very bourgeois values the group claimed to have broken with. As Guillermo Sheridan has noted: "La militancia vanguardista de Maples Arce no tardó en ser sustituida por la militancia anti-homosexual; enfurecido con los Contemporáneos recurre a la moral de los mismos burgueses que denostaba en sus poemarios juveniles" [The avant-garde militancy of Maples Arce was not long in turning into an anti-homosexual militancy; infuriated by the *Contemporáneos* he turns to the morality of the very bourgeoisie that he had attacked in the poetry of his youth] (*Contemporáneos* 132) Maples Arce's attacks on the poetry of the *Contemporáneos* accuse the poets of being "semiinclinados por los mismos complejos y tendencias" [semi-inclined by the same complexes and tendencies] (133). Novo's poetry, for instance, "resalta por una intención de trivialidad que no disimula los deseos bajo ningún eufemismo sexual, como en sus otros compañeros de tribu" [is notable for its trivial intentions that do not conceal his desire with any sort of sexual euphemism, as in the other members of his tribe] (133), and Villaurrutia's writing "se ofrece por las fatalidades del sexo bajo un arreglo de palabras que apenas encubre los artificios de una falsa elaboración . . . que se sirve de la inversión como método poético" [is offered by the fatalities of sex in an arrangement of words that barely covers the artifices of a false process of elaboration . . . making use of inversion as a poetic method] (133).

The attack on the *Contemporáneos* had by 1925 united a series of rather disparate threads: a suspicion that they were not sufficiently nationalist at a time when the Obregón, and then the Calles, governments were under attack;⁴ a suspicion that their writing was not sufficiently "virile" in a context still marked by the memory of armed struggle (soon to break out again in the Cristero revolt); a suspicion that their aesthetic was not that of the emerging revolutionary party (Sheridan, *Contemporáneos* 181). Of particular interest vis-à-vis this last is the relation of the *Contemporáneos* group to the muralist movement. In the early twenties, Novo wrote an article in defense of Diego Rivera, but by the later twenties, when Villaurrutia had begun to write the articles that would make him Mexico's most eminent art critic, relations with Rivera and company had soured. Villaurrutia's friendship with Agustín Lazo began in 1925, and Lazo's art was decidedly apolitical (Debroise 127-38). Rivera would soon accuse Lazo and his friends of a lack of virility in similar terms to those used earlier by Maples Arce and List Arzubide. As Sheridan has noted, the "nationalists"

accused the *Contemporáneos* of having stayed outside of the "proyecto nacional de cultura" [national project of culture]:

Por si fuera poco, se les comenzará a identificar a partir de la polémica con una militancia vergonzosa: los "afeminados." Curiosa conclusión: mientras el nacionalismo y la voluntad social poseen un sexo definido y orgullosamente erecto, los "otros" titubean en una indefinición ideológica que, por metonimia, lo es también sexual. (259)

[As if this were not enough, they were soon identified in the polemic with a shameful militancy: the "effeminate." Strange conclusion: while nationalism and social power possessed a sexual organ that was well-defined and proudly erect, the "others" vacillated in an ideological lack of definition that was always, by metonymy, sexual in nature.]

The document I quoted part of at the beginning of this essay, a petition from a group of intellectuals (José Rubén Romero, Mauricio Magdaleno, Rafael Muñoz, Francisco L. Urquiza, Ermilo Abreu Gómez, Humberto Tejera, Jesús Silva Herzog, Héctor Pérez Martínez, and Julio Jiménez Rueda), dated 31 October 1934, was addressed to the *Comité de Salud Pública* asking for a purge of government workers, obviously with Novo and Villaurrutia in mind. At about the same period, Rivera caricatured the two in his murals at the *Secretaría de Educación Pública* (Monsiváis, "Salvador Novo" 277). Similarly, the group of realist painters called "30-30" called for the firing of government functionaries for the following reason:

Y estamos contra el homosexualismo, imitado a la burguesía francesa actual; y entre ellos, favorecidos ahora, y nosotros, luchadores incansables, existe el abismo de nuestra honradez que no se vende por un puesto. El gobierno no debe sostener en sus secretarías a los de dudosa condición psicológica. (Monsiváis, "Salvador Novo" 213)

[And we are against homosexuality, an imitation of the present bourgeoisie of France; and among those who are favorites at present and ourselves, indefatigable fighters, there exists the abyss of our honesty, not sold for a job. The government should not employ in its ministries persons of dubious psychological condition.]

The full story of the 1925 polemics is told in Víctor Díaz Arciniega's *Querella por la cultura "revolucionaria,"* which constantly mentions the homophobic and sexual content of the polemics yet oddly never focuses directly on the issues of sexuality itself or considers how the invocation of homophobia relates to the question of the creation of a national, "revolutionary" culture.⁵

And yet Villaurrutia was no doubt one of the inventors of a new national project that—for better or for worse—was to go in a straight—and I suppose I should underline *straight*—line from Samuel Ramos to Octavio Paz. The meditation on death in *El laberinto de la soledad* circles endlessly around Villaurrutia's *Nocturnos*, with their insistent meditation on death in life. And Novo would go on to become the chronicler of decades of Mexican life, near the end even achieving the status of television celebrity, as José Joaquín Blanco has recalled:

Ciertamente, Novo fingió ante el público toda su vida: escribió cosas sobre la patria, las buenas costumbres, la moral familiar, etc., y cobró caro por sus servicios, no sólo en dinero: sus patrones y la sociedad tuvieron que aceptarlo con su facha "maldita" de homosexual evidente, depilado, maquillado, con anillos y pelucas, diciendo en sus crónicas periodísticas cosas a las que nunca otros que carecieran de su vocación de amargura y suicidio emocional se habrían atrevido. Cuando, en el régimen de Díaz Ordaz, Novo doctoraba en televisión sobre virtud patriótica se entablaba entre él y el público una clara confrontación de mentiras *asumiendo la farsa*: el sexagenario maquillado, acicalado, amanerado y con joyas aparentaba educar (¡el Maestro de la Juventud en travesti!) a una sociedad mojigata que, a su vez, fingía—comedia de histriones—dejarse educar por él. (168–69)

[Novo, to be sure, feigned for the public all of his life: he wrote things about the fatherland, good manners, family values, and so forth, and charged a high price for his services, and not only in monetary form: his patrons and society had to accept him in his "damned" aspect of a flaming homosexual, his eyebrows plucked, wearing makeup, rings and wigs, saying things in his journalistic chronicles that others who lacked his vocation for bitterness and emotional suicide would never have dared to say. During the regime of Díaz Ordaz, when Novo pontificated

on television about patriotic virtues, a clear affinity for lies lay between him and his public *making evident the farce*: the sexagenarian, made up, dressed in style, affected and covered with jewels, pretending to educate (the Teacher of the Young in drag!) a hypocritical society that, in turn, pretended—as if in some clown act—to let itself be educated by him.]

That tragicomic finale is another side of the same story of institutionalized revolution: the new revolutionary government of the 1920s sought to protect the “virile sap” of radical youth from contamination by effeminate *extranjerizantes*, and the tottering regime of Díaz Ordaz used the homosexual vampire or bogeyman—and the bullets and helicopters and nightsticks at Tlatelolco—to discipline the wayward youth of 1968.

Despite the attacks—or perhaps because of them—Villaurrutia and Novo published a number of homoerotic texts, not perhaps as bold as the poems that Antônio Botto was publishing in Portugal or Luis Cernuda in Spain, but as bold as anyone was at that point in Latin America. Unlike that of Botto or Cernuda, this is not a homosexual poetry that specifies the gender of the beloved; instead, the gender of the beloved is carefully *not* specified, and the love is associated with danger, silence, and self-censorship. Although these may sound mostly like negative qualities fifty or sixty years later, this is nonetheless a poetry that expresses homosexual passion and is still powerfully sensual. And there is none of the self-hatred that marks Federico García Lorca’s most explicit gay poem, the ode to Walt Whitman in *Poeta en Nueva York*.

The most gay-affirmative of the works of Villaurrutia and Novo (apart from Novo’s posthumous sonnets) are published within a few years of the *Estridentista* attacks: Novo’s *Nuevo amor* and *Seamen Rhymes* in 1933; Villaurrutia’s “Nocturno de los ángeles” in 1936. Gay themes are also present in both poets’ prose writings, as in Novo’s memoir of a trip to the United States, “Return Ticket” (1928), or the 1928 essay by Villaurrutia on the art of his friend Agustín Lazo, which includes such phrases as: “Agustín Lazo es un pintor de niños comestibles, maduros como duraznos maduros. Pintor de niños de más de veinte años, de niños de edad madura” [Agustín Lazo is a painter of delectable boys, mature as ripe peaches, a painter of boys more than twenty years old, of mature boys] (*Obras* 1044). In the same article, which Merlin H. Forster terms Villaurrutia’s most interesting and most unorthodox work of criticism (*Contemporáneos* 90),

the poet says that Lazo was to Rivera as Cocteau was to Mayakovsky (*Obras* 1044), a phrase that knowingly refers to a sexuality as well as to an aesthetic program.

An early example of this poetry is Novo’s “Amor,” a poem later imitated by Villaurrutia in his “Amar conduisse noi ad una morte.” Novo writes:

Amar es este tímido silencio
cerca de ti, sin que lo sepas,
y recordar tu voz cuando te marchas
y sentir el calor de tu saludo.

Amar es aguardarte
como si fueras parte del ocaso,
ni antes ni después, para que estemos solos
entre los juegos y los cuentos
sobre la tierra seca.

Amar es percibir, cuando te ausentas,
tu perfume en el aire que respiro,
y contemplar la estrella en que te alejas
cuando cierro la puerta de la noche.

(*Poesía* 75)

[To love is this timid silence / near you, without your knowing it, / and remembering your voice when you leave / and feeling the warmth of your greeting. // To love is waiting for you / as if you were part of the sunset, / neither before nor after, so that we be alone / amidst the games and stories / on the dry earth. // To love is to perceive, when you are absent, / your smell in the very air I breathe, / and to contemplate the star in which you depart / when I close the door of the night.]

Villaurrutia, sometimes the less bold of the two in expressing same-sex love, when he rewrites this poem comes no closer to specifying the gender of the lovers but bends gender roles nonetheless:

Amar es absorber tu joven savia
y juntar nuestras bocas en un cauce

hasta que de la brisa de tu aliento
se impregnen para siempre mis entrañas.
(*Obras* 77)

[To love is to absorb your young sap / and to join our mouths in a
river-bed / until my innards are impregnated forever / by the wind of
your breath.]

The references to sap, innards, and impregnation clearly connote anal intercourse when written (as here) by a male poet. The poem is explicit in its references, though without specifying the gender of the partners.

Yet most of Villaurrutia and Novo's critics will go to any lengths to deny the homoerotic elements of these poems. For instance, in his discussion of "Nocturno amor," Moretta invents a beloved woman nowhere mentioned in the poem (94). Villaurrutia is careful here and in almost all of his other love poetry not to disclose the gender of the beloved—a difficult feat in Spanish—by referring instead to parts of the body (some with the masculine grammatical gender, some with the feminine), to emotions and actions, in short, to what the beloved does, feels, expresses, but never to the beloved him- or herself. The poem, however, explicitly raises the question of gender, even as it refuses to specify the gender of the object:

Ya sé cuál es el sexo de tu boca
y lo que guarda la avaricia de tu axila
y maldigo el rumor que inunda el laberinto de tu oreja
sobre la almohada de espuma
sobre la dura página de nieve
(50)

[I know what the sex of your mouth is / and what the greed of your
armpit conceals / and I curse the noise that floods the labyrinth of
your ear / on the pillow of foam / on the hard page of snow]

The most explicitly homoerotic of Villaurrutia's poems, "Nocturno de los ángeles" [Nocturne of the angels/Los Angeles nocturne] refers to highly sexed male angels, hanging around the downtown Los Angeles cruising grounds made famous later in John Rechy's *City of Night*. The manuscript

of the poem, which Villaurrutia gave to Carlos Pellicer, has been published in a facsimile edition, with marginal illustrations by the poet showing sailors embracing, kissing, and stroking one another's thighs. The poem is divided into two sections; the first describes the nocturnal fauna of Los Angeles, the second the visit of the angels to that place. The second stanza reads:

Si cada uno dijera en un momento dado,
en sólo una palabra, lo que piensa,
las cinco letras del DESEO formarían una enorme cicatriz luminosa,
una constelación más antigua, más viva aún que las otras.
Y esa constelación sería como un ardiente sexo
en el profundo cuerpo de la noche,
o mejor, como los Gemelos que por vez primera en la vida
se miraran de frente, a los ojos, y se abrazaran ya para
siempre.
(*Obras* 55)

[If every one were to say at a given moment, / in a single word, what
he is thinking, / the six letters of the word DESIRE would form a huge
neon scar, / a constellation older, more alive than any of the others. /
And that constellation would be like a burning sexual organ / in the
deep body of the night, / or better still, like the Twins who for the first
time in their lives / look at one another face to face, eye to eye, and
embrace once and forever.]

In both halves of the poem, three lines appear:

Caminan, se detienen, prosiguen.
Cambian miradas, atreven sonrisas.
Forman imprevistas parejas.
(55-56, 57)

[They walk, stop, continue. / They exchange looks, dare to smile. /
They form unexpected couples.]

In the first half of the poem, this unproblematically refers to the men cruising in the square. In the second half, after the angels have come down

to earth on invisible ladders, it also refers to cruising, though the angels (who assume names such as Dick and John and Marvin and Louis) are curiously passive, letting others touch their bodies feverishly, letting themselves be kissed, the objects of the human trinity of "la carne, la sangre y el deseo" [flesh, blood and desire] (56). The poem ends:

Sonríen maliciosamente al subir en los ascensores de los hoteles
donde aún se practica el vuelo lento y vertical.
En sus cuerpos desnudos hay huellas celestiales;
signos, estrellas y letras azules.
Se dejan caer en la [sic] camas, se hunden en las almohadas
que los hacen pensar todavía un momento en las nubes.
Pero cierran los ojos para entregarse mejor a los goces de su
encarnación misteriosa,
y, cuando duermen, sueñan no con los ángeles sino con los mortales.
(57)

[They smile mischievously when they go up the hotel elevators / where slow vertical flight is still practiced. / On their naked bodies there are celestial tracks; / signs, stars and blue letters. / They let themselves fall into bed, sinking into the pillows / that make them think for a moment of clouds. / But they close their eyes to give themselves up more fully to the pleasures of their mysterious incarnation, / and when they sleep they dream not of angels but of mortals.]

The angels are said to come "del mar, que es el espejo del cielo" [from the sea, that is the mirror of the sky] (56), and the celestial marks on their bodies are of course tattoos: Villaurrutia is writing of the persistent gay fantasy about sailors on shore leave. The gentle inversion of the common instruction to Hispanic children, "sueña con los angelitos" [dream of the little angels], reveals that the angels think more about their mortal companions than Rechy's hustlers would readily admit of themselves.

But there are many other Villaurrutia poems that have fairly obvious gay content, many of them published in his late book *Canto a la primavera* (1948). The first poem of "Décimas de nuestro amor," reads, for instance:

A mí mismo me prohibo
revelar nuestro secreto,
decir tu nombre completo
o escribirlo cuando escribo.
Prisionero de ti, vivo
buscándote en la sombra
caverna de mi agonía.
Y cuando a solas te invoco,
en la oscura piedra toco
tu impasible compañía.
(Obras 79)

[I forbid myself / to reveal our secret, / to utter your full name / or to write it when I write. / Your prisoner, I live / looking for you in the dark / cave of my agony. / And when alone I invoke you, / I touch in the dark stone / your impassive company.]

The subject of the poem is the need for care in guarding a dangerous secret, a secret that seems to be the homosexual nature of the relationship. The same theme is expressed in several other poems in the collection, including "Nuestro amor," "Inventar la verdad," and "Amor conduces no a una muerte." Yet in his reading of these poems, Eugene Moretta invents a wholly imaginary biography to justify this love: the poet, he says, is speaking to a woman whose prisoner he is, a woman both present and absent (182). A few pages later, Moretta, still speaking of the "Décimas," writes that they are occasioned by "la mujer cuya ausencia, según el poeta, intensifica el dolor de su soledad en razón directa a la distancia que la separa de él, a pesar de que la presencia de ella también lo 'hiere'" (194, emphasis added): [the woman whose absence, according to the poet, intensifies the pain of solitude in exact proportion to the distance between them, despite the fact that when she is present she "wounds" him].⁶ It should be noted, however, that Merlin H. Forster, when talking about these same poems, is careful to refer to a "beloved person" whose gender is not specified (*Fire and Ice* 122, 128, and passim).⁷

Novo, meanwhile, published his best homoerotic poems in the collection *Nuevo amor* (1933). One of the finest poems in the book is the fourth:

Junto a tu cuerpo totalmente entregado al mío
 junto a tus hombros tersos de que nacen las rutas de tu abrazo,
 de que nacen tu voz y tus miradas, claras y remotas,
 sentí de pronto el infinito vacío de tu ausencia.
 Si todos estos años que me falta
 como una planta trepadora que se coge del viento
 he sentido que llega o que regresa en cada contacto
 y ávidamente rasgo todos los días un mensaje que nada contiene sino
 una fecha
 y su nombre se agranda y vibra cada vez más profundamente
 porque su voz no era más que para mi oído,
 porque cegó mis ojos cuando apartó los suyos
 y mi alma es como un gran templo deshabitado.
 Pero este cuerpo tuyo es un dios extraño
 forjado en mis recuerdos, reflejo de mí mismo,
 suave de mi tersura, grande por mis deseos,
 máscara
 estatua que he erigido a su memoria.
 (86)

[Beside your body totally surrendered to mine / beside your taut
 shoulders from which are born the routes of your embrace, / from
 which your voice is born and your clear, remote glances, / I suddenly
 felt the infinite emptiness of his absence. / If all of these years he has
 been lacking to me, / like a climbing vine that hangs onto the wind, / I
 have felt that he arrives or returns in each contact / and I avidly tear
 every day at a message that contains nothing but a date / and his name
 grows larger and vibrates ever more deeply / because his voice spoke
 only to my ear, / because he blinded my eyes when he turned his own
 aside / and my soul is like a great uninhabited temple. / But this body
 of yours is a strange god / forged in my memories, a reflection of
 myself, / smooth in my tautness, great from my desires, / a mask / a
 statue I have erected in his memory.]

This poem depends on a strange displacement from the lover's body in the
 bed next to him to a former lover's body: from "tu cuerpo" to "su ausen-

cia." Although neither the present nor the past lover's gender is specified,
 the same adjectives are used to describe the speaker's body and desires
 (taut, large, deep) as the lovers' bodies. In the last line, Novo uses a word
 that Villaurrutia uses famously in a number of his best-known nocturnes,
estatua, which is revealed in this context to be a reference to the eroticized
 memory of a male lover's body.

Another poem published in the same year, "Romance de Angelillo y
 Adela" (1933), is a playful narrative ballad of Novo's encounter in Buenos
 Aires with Federico García Lorca. "Angelillo," an Andalusian bullfighter,
 meets "Adela," a dark Mexican beauty, in a silvery city (the city, that is, on
 the River Plate, Buenos Aires):

Porque la Virgen lo quiso,
 Adela y Angel se encuentran
 en una ciudad de plata
 para sus almas desiertas.
 Porque la Virgen dispuso
 que se juntaran sus penas
 para que de nuevo el mundo
 entre sus bocas naciera,
 palabra de malagueño
 —canción de mujer morena—,
 torso grácil, muslos blancos
 —boca de sangre sedienta.
 (Poesía 105–6)

[Because the Virgin so desired, / Adela and Angel met / in a silvery
 city / for their deserted souls. / Because the Virgin so decreed / that
 they should unite their sorrows / so that once again the world / would
 be born between their mouths, / the word of the man from Málaga, /
 the song of the dark woman, / graceful torso, white thighs / a mouth
 of thirsty blood.]

As José Joaquín Blanco notes (170), Novo provided the clues to the de-
 ciphery of this poem in his travel memoir of Buenos Aires in *Continente
 vacío* (in *Toda la prosa* 301–8). In this narrative of Novo's meeting with

Lorca, Novo is at first apprehensive about meeting the celebrated poet and playwright: "Ante tamaña popularidad yo vacilo en mi deseo de conocerlo. Lo admiro mucho, pero no querría ser simplemente un admirador suyo más, y quizá no habrá medio de ser su amigo" [In face of such celebrity, I waver in my desire to meet him. I admire him greatly, but would not want to be simply one more of his admirers, and perhaps there would be no way of becoming his friend] (301). But a few pages later the reader is treated to a sight of Lorca in bed, wearing white-and-black striped pajamas and surrounded by his admirers (305). After referring to Lorca's ode to Walt Whitman, which Novo finds "virile, brave, beautiful" (307), Lorca treats Novo to a rendition of the Mexican revolutionary song "Adelita" (308), the name recalling, of course, the alias Novo assumes in his campy ballad.⁸

Novo's most explicit gay texts are posthumous, however: his eighteen pornographic sonnets and his memoirs of his—and Villaurrutia's—scandalous youth.⁹ The sonnets have been published in a limited edition of five hundred copies; two fragments from the memoirs appeared in the late 1970s in the ephemeral magazine *Política sexual*, published by the first major gay liberation group in Mexico, the Frente Homosexual de Acción Revolucionaria, and in English in Leyland's *Now the Volcano*, an anthology of gay Latin American literature. It is now up to readers and critics to recover these texts, memoirs that can tell us much about gay life in Mexico City in the first decades of revolutionary Mexico.¹⁰

One of the posthumous sonnets reads:

Si yo tuviera tiempo, escribiría
mis Memorias en libros minuciosos;
retratos de políticos famosos,
gente encumbrada, sabia y de valía.

¡Un Proust que vive en México! Y haría
por sus hojas pasar los deliciosos
y prohibidos idilios silenciosos
de un chofer, de un ladrón, de un policía.

Pero no puede ser, porque juiciosa—
mente pasa la doble vida mía
en su sitio poniendo cada cosa.

Que los sabios disponen de mi día,
y me aguarda en la noche clamorosa
la renovada sed de un policía.
(XVIII sonetos no. 2)

[If I had time, I would write / my Memoirs in detailed books; / portraits of famous politicians, / important people, wise and worthy. // A Proust who lives in Mexico! And I would let / pass through my pages the delicious / and forbidden silent idylls / of a driver, a thief, a policeman. // But it cannot be, because / my double life wisely goes on / putting each thing in its place. / Because the wise take my time during my day, / and in the clamorous night / the renewed thirst of a policeman awaits me.]

These forbidden sonnets, not published until 1986, are scarcely more explicit than "Nocturno de los ángeles," published in 1936. The few published fragments of Novo's memoirs are campy accounts of sexual adventures, apparently still considered too racy for Mexican readers. The continuing suppression of discussion of gay themes in the writing of these two poets and their contemporaries would seem to be due to an "anxiety of (queer) influence," because these writers are the unacknowledged gay fathers of Octavio Paz and of modern Mexican poetry.¹¹

Notes

1. Schneider asserts that the Contemporáneos were "nationalists without the demagoguery or exaggerated rhetoric of their antagonists. They loved their country critically and without flag-waving" ("Introducción" 5).
2. A fine paper that in many ways parallels what I will have to say here, "Outsiders at the Center: The Contemporáneos and the Construction of Culture in Post-Revolutionary Mexico," was presented by Tamra Suslow-Ortiz at the MLA meetings in Chicago in December 1995.
3. Similarly, in 1923 Julio Torri complained to Alfonso Reyes that Pedro Henríquez Ureña had surrounded himself with a group of "muchachos petulantes y ambiguos como Salomón de la Selva" [petulant and ambiguous young men like Salomón de la Selva] (Díaz Arciniega 36), showing the presence of this

homophobic rhetoric even in contexts that have nothing to do with revolutionary nationalism.

- 4 Díaz Arciniega notes repeatedly that the ferocity of the attack increased when Calles came to power in 1925, and after Vasconcelos had left the Ministry of Education (30–38, 123).
- 5 An example of Díaz Arciniega's limited focus: "Lo más sorprendente es que con los dos conceptos ['afeminado' y 'viril'] y tal relación, algunos polemistas pretenden formar las 'categorías' estéticas y el 'esquema' analítico suficientes para ponderar y encauzar a la literatura mexicana" [The most surprising thing is that with the two concepts ("effeminate" and "virile"), some polemicists try to form esthetic "categories" and the analytic "scheme" sufficient to consider and channel Mexican literature itself] (56). He never really considers why these terms in particular are invoked, though he mentions them on 53–62, 66, 86–92, 142, and elsewhere. I am grateful to Robert Irwin for pointing out the Díaz Arciniega book and for his remarks on an earlier version of this essay.
- 6 Suslow-Ortiz refers in terms similar to mine to "the tortured misreadings made by earlier critics, who refused to see (and perhaps refused to discuss) the possibility of a homoerotic interpretation of the poems" (9).
- 7 Earlier, Ramón Xirau had spoken of "the poet himself as an absence in the face of the beloved" (30), using the masculine form *amado*, which in this context could be gender-specific as a male lover or non-gender specific.
- 8 In *Los Contemporáneos en el laberinto de la crítica*, a collection of essays on the group that is otherwise devoid of extended commentary on the sexuality that marked and united most of its members, the out gay Spanish poet Luis Antonio de Villena comments on a late book of Novo's, *Sátira* (1970), noting that Novo assumed a final position of defiance: "Dandi al fin, hombre altivo, deseoso de epatar, se autoproclama viejo bujarrón, se ríe, se acaricia, se exhibe y gime a la par que goza" [A dandy to the last, a proud man, desiring to shock, he proclaims himself an old queer, laughs, strokes and exhibits himself, crying out as he comes] (212). For a recent biography of Novo, see Alderson.
- 9 One example of Novo's *desenfado*, or outrageousness, in his later writing that was published in his lifetime, just two years before his death, is the opening sentence of his book of journalistic chronicles, *Las locas, el sexo, los burdeles en México* [Queens, sex, bordellos in Mexico]: "Hubo siempre locas en México" [There were always queens in Mexico]. This declaration exceeds the import of the first chronicle in the book, "Las locas y la Inquisición" [Queens and the Inquisition], which reports on several Inquisition cases against "sod-

omites," and the placing of this first sentence at the beginning of the book is extraordinarily emphatic, as if to say, "There always were, there are, and there always will be . . ."

- 10 Monsiváis told me (in September 1992) that a fuller edition of the memoirs is to be published in Mexico City.
- 11 For all their noise about procreative sexuality, the *Estridentistas* have no progeny among contemporary Mexican poets.