

*Between modernity and degeneration: Oscar Wilde
and Mário de Andrade in the Brazilian periodical press /*
Entre modernidade e degeneração: Oscar Wilde
e Mário de Andrade na imprensa periódica brasileira

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ABSTRACT

This article examines a selection of materials concerning Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) and Mário de Andrade (1893-1945) published in the Brazilian press of the early 20th century, showing how the culture of this period articulated conflicting views of both writers—at times presenting them as figures emblematic of new conceptions of modernity, at others construing them as symptoms of a process of cultural and moral degeneration supposedly inherent in this same modernity. More specifically, this study explores how Mário de Andrade, one of the leading figures of the First Phase of Brazilian Modernism (1922-30), reread Oscar Wilde—both his public persona and his works—through a dual creative strategy: partly oriented towards giving form to his own sexuality, partly towards shaping a literary project more consistent with the transformations of a new republic. Finally, this article argues that, although Brazil underwent an intense modernisation process in the early 20th century, this was not accompanied by a corresponding process of cultural modernisation—a disjunction made visible in the ways the periodical press of the time repeatedly mobilised these writers—particularly on account of their sexual orientations—as discursive and ideological weapons, often subjecting them to a range of symbolic violences.

KEYWORDS: Oscar Wilde; Mário de Andrade; Modernism; Degeneration; Homosexuality.

RESUMO

Este artigo examina uma seleção de materiais a respeito de Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) e Mário de Andrade (1893-1945) publicados na imprensa periódica brasileira do início do século XX para mostrar como a cultura da época manifestava opiniões conflitantes a seu respeito—ora tomando-os como referências a novas concepções de modernidade, ora tomando-os como sintomas de um processo de degeneração cultural e moral supostamente intrínseco a essa

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modernidade. Esta investigação esclarece, mais especificamente, como Mário de Andrade, um dos principais nomes da Primeira Fase do Modernismo Brasileiro (1922-30), releu Oscar Wilde—sua pessoa e suas obras—segundo uma dupla estratégia criativa—em parte voltada a dar forma à sua sexualidade, em parte voltada a dar forma a uma literatura mais consistente com as transformações de uma nova república. Por fim, este artigo revela como, embora o Brasil tenha passado por um intenso processo de modernização no início do século XX, a ele não se seguiu um processo de modernização cultural, descompasso perceptível no fato de que a imprensa do período com frequência tomava esses escritores—em particular por conta de suas orientações sexuais—como armas discursivas e ideológicas e com frequência os sujeitava a uma série de violências simbólicas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Oscar Wilde; Mário de Andrade; Modernismo; Degeneração; Homossexualidade.

1 Introduction

Between July 1926 and January 1927, the newspaper *Folha da Manhã* (now *Folha de São Paulo*) ran a column titled *Chronica Extrangeira* (*Foreign Chronicle*), aimed at gathering perspectives from foreign correspondents on Brazilian culture. On August 15, 1926, the column featured the article “Oscar Wilde: A Fictitious Reputation,” which discussed two short stories by Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) published the day before in the newspaper *Estado de São Paulo* (now *Estadão*).

The first story, “The Actress,” tells the tragedy of a woman who leaves the theater for the love of a man, only to realize years later that her affection is unreciprocated, a bitter situation she resolves by going back to the stage as a veteran performer. The second story, “Simon of Cyrene,” centers on a dialogue between Simon of Cyrene and his wife, who reproaches him for helping Jesus carry his cross instead of attending a selection process for temple guards in the city.

These stories, along with “Jezebel” and “The Poet,” with which they form a sort of collection, are rarely included in Wilde’s works due to their controversial origins.

All four stories were first published between January and October 1912 in *The Mask: A Quarterly Journal of the Art of the Theatre*, edited by the British theater practitioner Edward Gordon Craig (1872-1966) in Florence from 1908 to 1921. Although the magazine credited Wilde as the author, the stories were reportedly written by Aimée Lowther (1874-1944), a friend of his, who claimed he had narrated them to her when she was a child. The stories then resurfaced in 1948 in the pages of *Echoes*, a rare pamphlet first compiled in 1890 by British playwright Gabrielle Enthoven (1868-1950), who later donated it to the British Library that same year. Once again, despite Wilde being listed as the author, the stories were in practice written from memory by Enthoven herself, another close friend of his, who also claimed he had recounted the tales to her in the past

(Fitzsimons, 2016, p. 174). Wilde, a masterful conversationalist, may well have narrated the exact same stories to both Lowther and Enthoven, which they later used as the basis for their own versions, but it is impossible to determine who first recorded them. In *The Mask*, Lowther claims credit for bringing these narratives to the public, but, while she makes no mention of Enthoven or her *Echoes*, she does acknowledge that her versions were indeed not the first written accounts of the material (Lowther, 1912, p. 17). Lowther's claim is supported by the fact that she, a friend of Enthoven, owned a copy of the rare pamphlet, which she later passed on to Vyvyan Holland (1886-1967) (Fitzsimons, 2016, p. 174-175).

In any case, the publication of "The Actress" and "Simon of Cyrene" in *Estado de São Paulo* stirred a strong sense of outrage in *Folha da Manhã's* correspondent—identified only as E.B.W.—who argued that Wilde's name should never be cited as an example to uphold the excellence of English literature.

First, his name should be avoided because it evokes an individual whose "decadent pose" served only to magically captivate the bourgeoisie of his time, leading them to perceive qualities in his character and literature that in truth did not exist. Second, his name should be avoided because it reinforces the misguided validity of the "art for art's sake" philosophy, as if it were possible to produce meaningful literature, or to explore religious themes with integrity, without a sincere relationship with the world. Third, his name should be avoided by "Latin minds" because, unlike the English minds, they were particularly vulnerable to his false genius and the deceptive brilliance of his works, a fact demonstrated by his growing obscurity in England at the time (E.B.W., 1926, p. 12).

E.B.W. never denies Wilde's wit, skills, or eloquence—on the contrary, he praises these qualities—, but, in his view, Wilde's affectation and commitment to valuing form over content result in works whose elegant structures ultimately conceal their real lack of substance (E.B.W., 1926, p. 12).

E.B.W. concludes their article with the following remarks:

Samuel Butler is but one of Wilde's unknown contemporaries whose work was genuine and durable and whose work is now recognised to be as superior to Wilde as that of a builder of a majestic cathedral is to a decorator who uses an exceptional talent in plaster redundant decoration on walls which do not need them (E.B.W., 1926, p. 12).

For E.B.W., however, Wilde did produce some genuine literature of quality towards the end of his life, works marked by truth and sincerity, such as *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898), the poem he wrote after witnessing an execution in prison. This work, according to E.B.W., holds particular significance because it captures how Wilde's confrontation with harsh reality revealed to him "the nakedness and hopelessness of a life of cleverness, pretence, and charms," a disillusionment clearly reflected in the raw honesty of his verses. E.B.W.'s perception of the objectivity in Wilde's later works, contrasted with the artificiality of his earlier ones, is undoubtedly accurate, but it wavers between oversimplification and harshness: on one hand, the aesthetes' renewed emphasis on form was part of a broader project to resist the rising moralism of Victorian culture—a project largely encapsulated by the precept of "art for art's sake" (Ross, 2013, p. 2-3); on the other hand, Wilde's engagement with reality in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* is clearly a gesture of respect for both the suffering of others and his own suffering—imposed on him as a consequence of that very moralism (Wilde, 2000, p. 733-734).

E.B.W. is also correct in highlighting the national and international sanctions imposed on Wilde's literature between the late 19th and early 20th centuries due to his infamy, but this silencing would not endure (Donohue, 1997, p. 119-120). In Brazil, specifically, his work remained alive primarily through his plays, such as *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), staged by Lucília Simões (1879-1962) in 1922, *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1893), produced by José Loureiro (1880-1949) in 1923, and *Salomé* (1905), conducted by Richard Strauss (1864-1949) in Rio de Janeiro in 1920 and 1923 (Artes, 1921, p. 4; Palacio, 1923, p. 5; Artes, 1910, p. 5).

Throughout the 1920s, however, this renewed interest in Oscar Wilde became part of a broader cultural reconfiguration within Brazilian society: the First Phase, or Heroic Phase, of Brazilian Modernism (1922-1930).

2 Brazilian Modernism

The First Phase of Brazilian Modernism was inaugurated by the *Semana de Arte Moderna* (*Modern Art Week*) at the Theatro Municipal de São Paulo (São Paulo Municipal Theater) in

February 1922. This period marked a bold attempt to challenge the aesthetic conventions of the time and to craft a new distinctly Brazilian cultural identity. Led by key figures such as Mário de Andrade (1893-1945), Oswald de Andrade (1890-1954), Tarsila do Amaral (1886-1973), Anita Malfatti (1889-1964), and Menotti del Picchia (1892-1988), the movement sought not to reject foreign cultural influences, but to absorb and transform them (Chaves, 1970, p. 9-38; Schüler, 1970, p. 39-74). The project of these modernists was not, therefore, to reject the influence of other cultures, but rather, in the manner of the Tupinambá natives, to cannibalise them in order to create modern aesthetics that were at once expressive of the country's own culture.

In literature, this cultural renewal can be seen in efforts to move beyond the strict formalism of Parnassianism through experiments with the Tupi language and colloquial speech, aiming for a style closer to the everyday simplicity of the Brazilian people (Cabral, 1970, p. 105-148). One example is Mário de Andrade's *Pauliceia Desvairada* (1922), a collection of poems centered on São Paulo—the country's new cosmopolitan capital—and built around themes that reflect this reality, such as the frenzy of an industrial society shaped by migration and misery (Andrade, 1987, p. 59-82). In painting, this renewal is evident in attempts to break with the conventions of Academicism through experiments with primitive art and subversive aesthetics that express Brazil's cultural roots (Jackson, 2021, p. 1-25). A prime example is Tarsila do Amaral's *Abaporu* (1928), a painting that depicts a grotesque human figure in a dreamlike landscape—a cannibalization of Cubism and Surrealism—reflecting on the relationships between humans and nature—a cannibalization of Auguste Rodin's *Le Penseur* (1880) (Jackson, 2021, p. 7-8).

Oswald de Andrade, in his *Manifesto Antropófago (Anthropophagous Manifest)* (1928), clearly formulates the concept of *cultural cannibalism* as a radical response to European influences:

Only Anthropophagy unites us.
Socially. Economically. Philosophically.
The world's only law. A masked expression of all individualisms, of all collectivism. Of all religions. Of all peace treaties.
Tupi, or not tupi, that is the question.
Against all catechisms. And against the mother of the Gracchi.
I'm only interested in what is not mine.
The law of man. The law of the cannibal.
(Andrade, 1976a, p.3; my translation)¹

¹ Só a Antropofagia nos une. Socialmente. Economicamente. Filosoficamente.

Kenneth Jackson, in his *Cannibal Angels* (2021), in turn writes the following about the research undertaken by Brazilian modernists in order to develop their project:

In the period from the first decade of the twentieth century until the end of the 1920s, artists, writers, musicians, and architects from both sides of the Atlantic interacted to create a modern style for Brazil by mixing European and Brazilian materials and designs. This dynamic continued the interplay between Brazil and Europe that had defined the study and description of Brazilian civil and political society, nature, and indigeneity throughout the colonial period and nineteenth-century empire. The difference is that Brazilian modernists openly challenge dominant European influences through artistic proficiency and talent, perfected in studies with European artists; and they integrate regional, folkloric, Afro-Brazilian, and indigenous materials in their creations. Their works are important for their aesthetic independence or singularity, for being part of an international avant-garde, and because they shape national expression and self-definition for the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Jackson, 2021, p. 1)

The cultural renewal strategies proposed by these modernists undoubtedly became foundational for reshaping Brazilian culture—*Abaporu* is today one of Brazil's most important national symbols—, but, at the time, their ideas were not always well received.

As Jorge Vergara (2015; 2025) observes, one example of resistance to these renewal efforts was the series of conservative campaigns launched by the São Paulo media at the time, often portraying Modernism as both a cultural decline and a form of psychopathology. For many conservative critics, *cosmopolitanism*, the coexistence of people of diverse natures and from diverse backgrounds, posed a threat to cultural integrity, as it was believed to pollute a society inspired by European ideals with elements from so-called primitive or uncivilized peoples. Moreover, radical formal experiments, such as the use of indigenous and colloquial terms, or the incorporation of psychoanalytic and mass psychology structures, were seen as contributing to the coarsening of the population. Some critics even feared that these artistic innovations could lead to a process of both individual and collective madness, further destabilizing Brazilian society (Vergara, 2015, p. 98-126; Vergara, 2025, p. 1-19).

Única lei do mundo. Expressão mascarada de todos os individualismos, de todos os coletivismos. De todas as religiões. De todos os tratados de paz.

Tupi, or not tupi that is the question.

Contra todas as catequeseas. E contra a mãe dos Gracos.

Só me interessa o que não é meu. Lei do homem. Lei do antropófago.

For these and other reasons, conservative critics began to frame Parnassianism, with its classical and European references, as a *civilized* style, while Modernism, with its focus on renewal and naturalistic curiosity, was seen as an *uncivilized* movement.

Many newspapers took part in this campaign, but *A Gazeta*, then one of the most widely circulated periodicals in São Paulo, was undoubtedly one of its chief proponents.

Plínio Salgado (1895-1975), a columnist for *A Gazeta*, elaborated on this view in his article “Parnasianismo e Decadência” (“Parnassianism and Decadence”), explaining that Parnassianism was not a literary dogma meant to unite writers under a shared belief, but rather a kind of etiquette guide for anyone wishing to contribute to the cultural sphere. “Parnassianism represents mental balance, grammar dressed in a clean shirt with combed hair, a sense of proportion, which is itself the essence of Beauty. Parnassianism, ultimately, is the ‘Manual of Good Taste’ for well-mannered artists (Salgado, 1921a, p. 9; my translation)². Similarly, Salgado argued that Modernism was not a liberating artistic exercise in exploring new ways of feeling and expressing, but rather a symptom of physical and mental degeneration, characteristic of those afflicted with a sort of sociocultural cretinism. “The freedom to feel and think cannot go so far as to consider delirious ideas, nonsensical phrases, and incomprehensible symbols as expressions of beauty, for these only attest to atrophy and degeneration.”, he writes about the movement. “Nor does freedom of style justify watered-down forms, childish or trivial language, rhythms perceived only by their authors, or a disregard for the demands of euphony and syntax.” (Salgado, 1921a, p. 9; my Translation).³ For Salgado, then, this conflict between Parnassianism and Modernism—framed as a conflict between Parnassianism and Decadence—was clearly a symptom of a broader sociocultural clash between *civilization* and *incivility*: to him, *civilization* was embodied by sensitive and rational individuals, while *incivility* represented the hyperesthetic and disturbed minds that he believed Modernism both attracted and promoted.

In his article, however, Salgado also frames this cultural conflict from a psychopathological perspective: “Parnassianism, which among us cannot be an absolute impassivity nor the

² O parnasianismo será o equilíbrio mental, a gramática de camisa limpa e cabelos penteados, o sentido das proporções que é o próprio sentido da Beleza. O parnasianismo, afinal, é o ‘Manual de Bom Tom’ dos artistas bem educados.

³ A liberdade de sentir e pensar não pode ir ao ponto de considerarmos expressões de beleza as ideias delirantes, as frases sem sentido, os símbolos indefiníveis e incompreensíveis que só atestam a atrofia e a degenerescência. Também a liberdade de estilo não justifica as formas aguadas, os dizeres infantis ou corriqueiros, as metrificações de ritmos só percebidas pelos autores, o desprezo pelas exigências da eufonia e da sintaxe.

almofadinha refinement of form, but rather the formula of balance between thought and expression, has not disappeared and will not disappear anytime soon.” (Salgado, 1921a, p. 9).⁴ In Brazilian Portuguese, *almofadinha*—which can be loosely translated as “pillowy”—is a pejorative term used to describe effeminate men, often with the implication of homosexuality. (Almofadinha, 2026) For Salgado, this term highlights how the tension between Parnassianism and Modernism can also be understood as a sociocultural conflict between heterosexuality/virility and homosexuality/femininity: whereas the former, intrinsic to Parnassianism, are characteristics of a vigorous society inclined to prosper, the latter, intrinsic to Modernism, are characteristics of a vulnerable society prone to ruin. In other words, whereas Parnassianism—the style of an elite that saw itself as white and masculine—was therefore the ideal style for the progress of society, Modernism—the style of an increasingly variegated mass—was, for that very reason, to become the fateful style that would bring about its destruction.

In the same article, Salgado also criticizes the artistic production of the time for being seduced by what he calls the “Juquery of new aesthetics,” adding that its adherents are “the most relentless enemies of the artists of the past.” (Salgado, 1921a, p. 9).⁵ The term “Juquery” refers to the Hospital Psiquiátrico de Juqueri (Juqueri Psychiatric Hospital) in São Paulo, one of the country’s largest mental institutions at the time, notorious for its overcrowding and poor conditions (Hospital, 2021). For Salgado, Modernism was condemnable not only for its aesthetic proposals, which he saw as confused, ignoble, and counter-evolutionary, but, more critically, because he viewed those proposals as symptoms of an underlying psychological disorder in its proponents. To resist Modernism, therefore, was not merely a matter of good taste, erudition, or civility, but a genuine question of social sanity and sanitation, deemed necessary for the progress of a society that was whole and manly.

Salgado further develops this sanitizing perspective in his article “S. Paulo e o Regionalismo” (“S. Paulo and Regionalism”), published in *A Gazeta* just a few weeks earlier, where he examines the influence of World War I (1914-1918) on the emergence of new themes and styles in Brazilian literature. According to Salgado, the war led many Brazilian writers to realize that

⁴ O parnasianismo, que não pode ser entre nós uma impassibilidade absoluta nem o requinte ‘almofadinha’ da forma, porém a fórmula do equilíbrio entre o pensamento e a expressão, não passou, não passará tão cedo.

⁵ “Juquery das novas estéticas, cujos sectários, aliás, são os mais implacáveis inimigos dos artistas de antanho.”

national cultural vigor could not be restored by “cultivating the madrigal,”⁶ that is, by continuing to produce a sort of girlish sentimental literature; instead, it required a rejection of foreign literary imitations in favor of exploring “the customs, the ethnological traits of the sub-races that populate the country, their civilization, their society, their tendencies and aptitudes.” (Salgado, 1921b, p. 1).⁷ This resistance to foreign literatures specifically targeted the prose of Paul Bourget (1852-1935) and Anatole France (1844-1924), the exaltation of Gabriele D’Annunzio (1863-1938), the skepticism of Vicente Blasco Ibáñez (1867-1928), the flamboyance of Vargas Vila (1860-1933), and the paradoxes of Oscar Wilde. For Salgado, it was essential to reject the influence of these so-called “enlightened ones”—a term he uses ironically—because their works lacked a distinctive “physiognomy”—a cultural face or identity—and amounted to “disparate products of contradictory influences.” (Salgado, 1921b, p. 1), characteristics inconvenient to a culture in need of masculine might.⁸ Beyond their aesthetic influence, however, Salgado also saw these writers as dangerous to Brazil’s youth for political, religious, moral, sexual, and cultural reasons. He believed their works transmitted a form of femininity that threatened to transform Brazilians into a passive people, akin to the Eloi from H.G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* (1895)—a docile race doomed to be preyed upon—or to Ganymede—the beautiful shepherd abducted by Zeus to serve as his cupbearer on Olympus. (Salgado, 1921b, p. 1).

The Brazilian media of the time generally referred to Wilde as a synonym for genius, but it is also possible to find a competing narrative in many periodicals where his name was used as a metonym for immorality and a host of imagined psychopathologies.

In a review of *Lady Windermere’s Fan* published in *A Gazeta*, Wilde is described as an artist who “never sacrificed rebellious ideas for the sake of literary ornamentation,” which quickly led him to provoke the “refined hypocrisy of his contemporary society.” (Coelho, 1923, p. 3).⁹ In contrast, a review of *Salomé* in *Correio da Manhã* portrays Wilde as a writer with a “sick brain,” evidenced by his “psychic perversion” in transforming the passive biblical Salomé into a figure of “extraordinary active power.” (Temporada, 1920, p. 3).¹⁰ Brito Broca (1903-1961), one of the

⁶ “cultivando o madrigal”

⁷ “os costumes, os traços etnológicos das sub-raças que o povoam, sua civilização, sua sociedade, suas tendências e aptidões.”

⁸ “iluminados”; “fisionomia”; “produtos disparatados de influências contraditórias”.

⁹ “nunca sacrificou ao brilho das roupagens literárias a ideia mais rebelde”; “moral requintadamente hipócrita de sua sociedade contemporânea.”

¹⁰ “cérebro doentio”; “perversão psíquica”; “potência ativa extraordinária.”

leading essayists of the period, writes that Wilde, “the messiah of art,” “dared to rise too high, but the bourgeois held him back,” noting that Wilde failed to see that “before the sun comes the thick mass of clouds.” (Broca, 1924, p. 2).¹¹ In a special report on the Asilo Praia da Saudade (Praia da Saudade Asylum), *O Imparcial* journalists recount how a “caboclo epebe” approached them, a young boy who, despite “having nothing of Oscar Wilde,” nonetheless “practiced poetry and exalted sodomism [sic].” (Dia, 1927, p. 1, p. 11).¹² Shortly after, these same journalists report seeing a “negress Salomé” passing by, “preoccupied with stylizing choreographic steps;” described as a “precocious madwoman,” she “still wanders languid and dreamy, searching for the head of John the Baptist.” ((Dia, 1927, p. 1, p. 11).¹³ This blend of admiration and moralism is further reflected in Julio Dantas (1876-1962), who first translated *Lady Windermere’s Fan* into Portuguese. Dantas suggests that Wilde did not succumb to homosexuality due to an “*ab ovo* psychic androgyny”—that is to say, due to a natural characteristic—but rather because of a chronic syphilis that affected his brain. (Dantas, 1920, p. 2).¹⁴

In the Brazilian press of the period, references of the second kind to Wilde’s name can, in turn, frequently be found in connection with the name of Mário de Andrade, a writer whose sexuality did, in fact, become a recurring subject of scorn and hostility on the part of critics.

3 Mário de Andrade

Born in São Paulo, Mário de Andrade was arguably the most influential modernist in early 20th-century Brazilian culture, beginning his career at the Conservatório Dramático e Musical (Dramatic and Musical Conservatory) and soon expanding his activities to literature and criticism. While Oswald de Andrade acted as a coordinator for the movement, charting its ideological course, Mário de Andrade emerged as its true creative leader, suggesting the cultural references that would shape the conception of a new national identity (Jackson, 2021, p. 89-111). Mário’s leadership, combined with his reserved and thoughtful demeanor, stirred feelings of envy in Oswald, who was

¹¹ “o messias da arte”; “atreveu-se a subir muito alto mas burgueses o impediram”; “antes do sol se antepõe o bloco maciço das nuvens.”

¹² “efebo caboclo que, sem ter nada de Oscar Wilde, todavia pratica a poesia e exalta o sodomismo [sic].”

¹³ “uma Salomé preta passou perto, preocupada na estilização de passos coreográficos”; “demente precoce”; “anda ainda, langorosa e sonhadora, à procura da cabeça de São João Batista.”

¹⁴ “androgenismo psíquico *ab ovo*”.

in turn known for his combative and expansive personality, a tension that would quickly evolve into a series of public and private disputes between them. In the second issue of the *Revista de Antropofagia* (*Anthropophagy Magazine*) (1929), edited by Oswald, a short text refers to Mário as a “Miss São Paulo in male translation” and accuses him of having started a “war against originality.” (Andrade, 1976b, p. 8).¹⁵ The second comment can certainly be interpreted as a critique of Mário’s gradualist approach, which clashed with the magazine’s radicalism; but the first remark was clearly a personal attack, specifically targeting his sexuality. Though Mário never made a definitive statement about his sexual orientation, his correspondence, along with certain aspects of his literature, suggests that he was, in fact, homosexual—or, at the very least, someone whose erotic interests did not conform to the societal norms of his time (Braga-Pinto, 2022, p. 157-83).

Mário’s clearest engagement with Oscar Wilde appears in his poem “Paisagem N. 3” (“Landscape N.3”), from the collection *Pauliceia Desvairada*.

As previously noted, *Pauliceia Desvairada* is a hymn to the city of São Paulo, which, between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, became Brazil’s leading industrial center due to the rapid expansion of the coffee economy. This economic boom drew a large number of migrants to the city, both from other regions of Brazil, particularly the North and Northeast, and from abroad, with immigrants arriving from countries such as Italy, Spain, Germany, Lebanon, and Japan. This industrialization, combined with the city’s growing migrant population, transformed São Paulo into a bustling metropolis—cosmopolitan in every sense: wealthy and impoverished, popular and elitist, diverse and racist, progressive and conservative, secular and religious etc. (Prado Júnior, 1976, p. 207-286; Furtado, 2007, p. 180-253).

The title *Pauliceia Desvairada* therefore encapsulates the concept of São Paulo as a new Brazilian urban organism: the word *Pauliceia*, which can be adapted into English as *Paulicey* or *Paulissey*, suggests that the book is a kind of *odyssey* through the city of São Paulo; meanwhile, *Desvairada*, which can be translated as *crazy* or *insane*, clarifies that this city is a chaotic center, shaped by the individual and collective madness of those who inhabit it. Thus, *Pauliceia Desvairada* could be translated into English as *Crazy Paulicey* or *Insane Paulissey*, both titles indicating that the poems in the collection form a mosaic of explorations into the chaotic multiplicity of realities that now constitute the city. (Schüler, 1970, p. 64-71; Jackson, 2021, p. 62-66) Among these poems,

¹⁵ “Miss São Paulo traduzido no masculino”; “guerra contra a originalidade”.

however, a specific set—the “Paisagem” or “Landscape” poems numbered 1 through 4—stands out for conducting these studies of São Paulo’s new urban reality through distinctly Victorian influences.

Landscape N.1

My London of fine mists...
High summer. The ten thousand million Paulistan roses.
There is perfume snow in the air.
It’s cold, very cold...
[...]
And I go on. And I feel as I do it,
Under the restless joy of winterness,
Like a taste of tears in my mouth...
(Andrade, 1987, p.87)¹⁶

In “Paisagem N. 1”, the introductory poem of the series, we see the poet embark on a contemplative walk through the streets of modern São Paulo, much like a *flâneur* wandering the streets of Victorian London. This walk leads to the creation of a psychogeography, a poetic mapping of the impressions and thoughts evoked by his encounter with the material reality of the city. São Paulo, with its gray and overcast atmosphere, mirrors the British capital in its somber mood, yet remains unique in the exuberance of its natural surroundings. Immersed in these contemplations, sensations, and emotions, the poet engages in a personal introspection, drawing connections between his urban experiences and the literary elements that shaped his literary formation.

In “Paisagem N. 3”, specifically, Mário establishes the following connections:

Landscape N.3

Is it raining?
A gray-colored sleet smiles,
Very sad, like a sadly long...
Casa Kosmos has no waterproof jackets on sale...
But in this Largo do Arouche
I can open my paradoxical umbrella

¹⁶ Minha Londres das neblinas finas!
Pleno verão. Os dez mil milhões de rosas paulistanas.
Há neve de perfumes no ar.
Faz frio, muito frio...
[...]
E sigo. E vou sentindo,
à inquieta alacridade da invernã,
como um gosto de lágrimas na boca.

This lyric sycamore of laces sea...

A further ahead... - Mário, put on the mask!
- You're right, my Madness, you're right.
The king of Thule cast his cup into the sea...

Men pass by soaked...
The reflections of short shadows
Stain the petit-pavé...
The Normal pigeons
Fly through the fingers of the sleets...
(What if one put one of Crisfal's verses
in De Profundis?...)
Suddenly
A half-wild sunray
Cuts the sleets in half.
(Andrade, 1987, p. 99)¹⁷

In “Paisagem N. 3”, the poet, walking through the Largo do Arouche in downtown São Paulo, finds himself caught in an unexpected drizzle—São Paulo is known as the “land of drizzle”—that suddenly triggers in him a stream of consciousness: he recalls that Casa Kosmos, a well-known men’s clothing store, currently has no raincoats on sale; he notices people walking around, soaked, their shadows projected onto the city’s distinctive Portuguese-tiled sidewalks; and he observes the pigeons at the Escola Normal, an old teacher training school, suddenly taking flight in

¹⁷ Chove?

Sorri uma garoa de cinza,
Muito triste, como um tristemente longo...
A Casa Kosmos não tem impermeáveis em liquidação...
Mas neste Largo do Arouche
Posso abrir o meu guarda-chuva paradoxal,
Este lírico plátano de rendas mar...

Ali em frente... - Mário, põe a máscara!
-Tens razão, minha Loucura, tens razão.
O rei de Tule jogou a taça ao mar...

Os homens passam encharcados...
Os reflexos dos vultos curtos
Mancham o petit-pavé...
As rolas da Normal
Esvoaçam entre os dedos da garoa...
(E si pusesse um verso de Crisfal
No De Profundis?...)
De repente
Um raio de Sol arisco
Risca o chuveiro ao meio.

the rain. However, this walk through the city center also stirs in him a series of more speculative reflections. In a moment of metaconsciousness, the poet chastises himself for observing his external reality without properly delving into his inner self—unlike Goethe’s King of Thule, who, at the end of his life, cast his most precious object into the sea, preserving only the memory of the woman who had given it to him. (Goethe, 2016, p. 287-291) In a moment of imaginative curiosity, the poet then wonders what effect it would have to insert a verse from *Crisfal* (1543-1546) by Cristóvão Falcão (1512-1575) (Falcão, 1915, p. 105-140) into Wilde’s *De Profundis* (1897)—that is, to include a verse about love between a man and a woman in a letter about love between a man and a boy. The poet’s emotional and intellectual journey is abruptly interrupted when the sun breaks through the clouds, bringing to an end his psychogeographic explorations of the metropolis.

Mário’s conjecture about a possible intersection between *Crisfal* and *De Profundis* is rooted in the tension between their respective tragedies and rhetorical strategies.

Although *Crisfal* tells the story of Crisfal and Crisalda, shepherds kept apart by physical distance, it subtly reflects Falcão’s own love for Maria Brandão, a noblewoman whose family prevented her from marrying him due to his lower social status. Falcão, however, faces no legal or moral restriction in expressing his feelings, as his love, though disapproved of by Brandão’s family, is not considered a crime under the laws of 16th-century Portuguese society (Oliveira e Silva, 1993, p. 115-127). In contrast, *De Profundis* is Wilde’s introspective reflection on his personal experiences and the moral constraints of his society, centered on his relationship with Alfred Douglas (1870-1945). This relationship, however, was untenable in late Victorian England, where sodomy was not only morally condemned but also violently criminalized (Foldy, 1997, pp.31-47). Unlike Falcão, therefore, Wilde finds himself significantly constrained in his expression, as his love is not merely disapproved of but objectively deemed illegal by his society. Despite already having been convicted of gross indecency, Wilde remains cautious in exploring the naturalness of his desires, aware that delving too deeply into his condition could indeed worsen his situation.

Thus, if we take Mário’s conjecture literally, we arrive at the likely conclusion that the incorporation of certain verses from *Crisfal* in *De Profundis* would make this letter even more scandalous, as it would frame sodomy as a natural desire and practice before the eyes of a society historically cultivated and legally encouraged to condemn it.

However, it is also possible to interpret Mário's reflection figuratively, as a broader metaphor for homosexuality itself.

In this reading, his question becomes far more complex and can be reformulated as: what if homosexuality were regarded as something natural?

There is, of course, no simple answer to this question, but, for Mário de Andrade, the cross-pollination of the many fundamental elements of Brazilian society – races, creeds, genders, and ways of thinking – is vital to the synthesis of a robust culture capable of propelling that society towards a new condition of modern civilization (Andrade, 1987, p. 59-82). In his address as patron to the students of the São Paulo Conservatory of Dramatic and Musical Arts (1923), for example, he compares this form of cultural nationalism to the subtle role played by Italian artists of the past – Dante, Giotto, Tiepolo – in the Italian Unification (1848–71). According to him, just as these artists were instrumental in establishing an Italian language and in consolidating aesthetics of varied origins, the new Brazilian artists would likewise be essential in establishing an entire Brazilian culture out of diverse matrices (Andrade, 1923, p. 3). Mário de Andrade does not specify whether multiple sexual orientations might come to be integrated into this new society, but it would be paradoxical for his project of modernization, in all its cosmopolitan ambition, to resist such inclusion.

As indicated, his own literature seems to suggest this perspective.

Macunaíma, the embodiment of his modernist project, displays an almost unrestrained sexuality, engaging with women of all kinds – especially prostitutes – and even going so far as to cross-dress as a woman in order to seduce Piaimã – a man – in an attempt to recover his lucky amulet (Andrade, 2017, p. 41-47; Moraes, 2005, p. 75-79). Cabo Machado, for the poet a national symbol, is characterized by his rose-apple complexion and gentle manners, by his fondness for face powder and his refined upbringing – traits of a homosexuality that he regarded as essential to a more sensitive and therefore less violent society (Andrade, 2022, p. 168–169). The short story “Frederico Paciência”, finally, centers on the friendship between two gentle young men who, finding themselves caught in an erotic tension, resort to violence in order to prevent their peers from making it public (Andrade, 2022, p. 178-179). In the poem “Paisagem N.3”, moreover, the sudden shaft of sunlight that interrupts the poet's reflection seems to suggest how the world might become more radiant if people were more receptive to their multiple natures.

However, not all members of the Brazilian Modernist movement were as open to the inclusion of diverse sexual orientations in their vision of a new society.

Oswald de Andrade, a partner of Mário de Andrade in Brazilian Modernism, even drafted in his *Dicionário de Bolso* (*Pocket Dictionary*) (1930-40) an entry on the movement suggesting that Mário de Andrade was “very similar from behind to Oscar Wilde” (Vergara, 2015, p. 100)¹⁸. This remark, extremely offensive to the sexuality of both writers, was ultimately not published, but it came to add to a series of tensions that would eventually wear down the relationship between the two modernists. The magazine *Dom Casmurro*, in turn, published in 1939 a response to Mário de Andrade in which it referred to him as a “sub-Wilde mestizo”, an expression that, while ostensibly aimed at criticizing his aesthetic positions, also sought to attack his ethnicity and sexuality (Solidão, 1939, p. 2). This dispute between the magazine and the writer was grounded in a conflict of perspectives regarding the function of criticism in Brazilian modernity: whereas Mário de Andrade, like Wilde, understood the critic’s role to be the examination of how a work’s form enhances its content, *Dom Casmurro* held that the critic’s function was to assess how the content of a work might offer consistent remedies for certain social ills (Solidão, 1939, p. 2). In a manner akin to Matthew Arnold (1822–88), *Dom Casmurro* acknowledged that formal experimentation might be appropriate in times of social stability – what Arnold termed “epochs of expansion” – but made clear that this was not the case for a Brazil as unstable as that of the period – a country, therefore, passing through an “epoch of concentration” (Arnold, 1865, p. 1-41).

We can read in the magazine:

If we were to classify literary movements and books by gender, we would have to say that Modernism was a ‘feminine’ movement, concerned only with appearances, whereas, for example, the postmodernist movement of essays and novels was a ‘masculine’ one, focused on content. The critic, in a way, falls into ‘art for art’s sake,’ which is, in fact, what lies behind Mário de Andrade’s aestheticism. This aestheticism—this love of form at the expense of content—which has captivated so many people, is, in the end, merely a reaction against the social in art. It is the ‘modernist’ prejudice against the ‘primitives’ who followed [the social in art], those unconcerned with formal problems and focused instead on the problem of content (Solidão, 1939, p. 2).¹⁹

¹⁸ “muito parecido pelas costas com Oscar Wilde.”

¹⁹ Se fôssemos classificar os movimentos literários e os livros em função do sexo, teríamos que o modernismo foi um movimento “feminino”, se preocupando apenas com a roupa, enquanto, por exemplo, o movimento de ensaios e

However, one of the most aggressive texts directed against Mário de Andrade is the article “The Crime of Oscar Wilde: São Paulo and its Men of Letters”, published by the poet Francisco Pati (1898–1970) in *Folha da Noite* on 27 April 1923.

Although Pati never explicitly mentions Mário de Andrade by name, he makes it clear that his critique is directed at a certain modernist “music professor from a conservatory” (Pati, 1923, p. 2)²⁰, an unmistakable reference to Mário’s position at the Conservatório Dramático e Musical. The text survives in poor condition in the archives of *Folha de São Paulo*, making the exact content of its opening paragraphs unclear, but it is generally understood that Pati places much of the blame for the perceived excesses of Brazilian Modernism on Wilde’s remaining influence. Pati, in fact, expresses solidarity with the British who once smashed the windows of bookshops displaying Wilde’s works, though he distances himself from the severity of Wilde’s prison sentence. (Pati, 1923, p. 2). Although he never provides any evidence, he specifically blames Wilde – particularly *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) – for inspiring São Paulo’s modernists to explore paradoxical forms to critique the city’s conservative elites. Pati condemns these modernists for embracing Wilde’s premise that “the value of an idea is independent of the sincerity of the person expressing it” (Pati, 1923, p. 2)²¹, a principle that, for him, gave modernists license to create complicated aesthetic forms devoid of profound meaning. For Pati, Mário de Andrade displays this false competence by extending his studies from the field of music—practical by nature—into that of aesthetics, a branch of philosophy requiring a far more complex conceptual knowledge (Pati, 1923, p. 2). One of the reasons why Wilde was invited to America in 1882 was his supposed expertise in the “science of the beautiful”, which, it was believed, would enable people to recognise traces of beauty even in the most ugly and sordid elements of society. Upon his arrival in New York, indeed, a reporter is said to have asked him to indicate where the beauty lay in a hideous grain elevator across the river—a request he was, however, unable to fulfil owing to his supposed short-sightedness (Hofer and Scharnhorst, 2010, pp. 15–16). According to Pati, Mário de Andrade adhered to a similar

romances pós-modernistas foi um movimento “macho”, preocupado com o conteúdo. Cai o crítico de certa maneira na “arte pela arte”, que é, realmente, o que se encontra por trás do esteticismo de Mário de Andrade. Esse esteticismo, esse amor pela forma, em detrimento do conteúdo, que anda a apaixonar tanta gente, é apenas, em última análise, uma reação contra o social na obra de arte. É o preconceito “modernista” contra os “primários” que vieram após eles, desligados dos problemas da forma e preocupados com o problema do conteúdo.

²⁰ “professor de música de conservatório”.

²¹ “o valor de uma ideia depende da sinceridade de quem a exprime”.

aesthetic philosophy, ridiculing the “most beautiful conceptions of the human mind” in favor of portraying prosaic realities such as the “cry of the potato sellers” and the “inarticulate shouting of football supporters” (Pati, 1923, p. 2). Mário de Andrade would thus be a harmful influence on the culture of the time, for, from his lay perspective as a musician, he proposed a new aesthetic orientation centered on diminishing the sophistication of past traditions in favor of exalting the mundane. For Pati, in short, by adopting Wilde’s theories on the primacy of form as the basis of their manifesto, modernists such as Mário de Andrade would come to resemble a kind of Dorian Gray, producing works whose formal complexities ultimately conceal the danger of their moral contradictions (Pati, 1923, p. 2). Such readings, indeed, could only be misguided interpretations produced by these modernists – these “eunuchs of São Paulo letters” (Pati, 1923, p. 2)²², another expression intended to feminize them – who extracted from Wilde’s theory precisely what it contained that was most indecent.

Conclusion

Although new studies on the influence of Oscar Wilde in Latin American cultures have come to light in recent years, this remains a field of research that is clearly marginal within Wilde Studies (cf. Navas and Bouzaglo, 2019, p. 321-328). This is particularly the case with Brazilian literature, in which his presence is often too subtle and diffuse to be readily apprehended, requiring scholars to engage with other domains and elements of the country’s culture.

This article, specifically, proposes an examination of the ways in which Mário de Andrade reads Wilde, connecting his writings to media materials relating both to himself and to the Irish writer, often permeated by prejudices concerning their sexual orientations. For this study, texts published in *Folha da Manhã*, *O Estado de São Paulo*, *A Gazeta*, and *Dom Casmurro* were selected; however, these periodicals are far from exhausting the many references to Wilde’s name for a variety of reasons across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In the National Library’s digital newspaper archive alone, for the period between 1890 and 1929 – covering the years of Wilde’s imprisonment and the early years of Brazilian Modernism – the term “Oscar Wilde” appears 256 times in São Paulo periodicals and 1.646 times in those of Rio

²² “eunucos das letras paulistas”.

de Janeiro. In practice, however, even this limited number of references is likely to be higher, since the library's search tools do not always successfully identify his name in printed pages, and since his works were often referred to metonymically. Nevertheless, these figures reveal that, although there are relatively few studies on Wilde's influence on Brazilian literature, his name and works were indeed highly present in Brazilian intellectual production.

In Brazil, between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the principal medium of expression for intellectuals – including art and literary critics – was the periodical press, such as the journals and newspapers examined in this study. This means that a consistent way of understanding how literature evolved in the country during this period is to trace the discourses of these critics in such publications – that is, to follow their perspectives on contemporary literature and the language they publicly employed to articulate them.

The texts analyzed in this study thus reveal how Oscar Wilde and his work came to function, within Brazilian literature and media of the time, as cultural instruments – moral, aesthetic, pathological, and so forth – for the construction of conflicting perspectives on the direction of society. Whereas Mário de Andrade drew upon them to formulate new critical and aesthetic principles for the emergence of a more modern culture, critics such as Plínio Salgado and Francisco Pati used them as examples of degeneration to be avoided in the name of a pure culture. Indeed, if Mário de Andrade, in his "Paisagem N.3", invokes Wilde to suggest a cosmopolitanism receptive to diverse forms of sexuality, Salgado and Pati, in their articles, invoke his name precisely as evidence for resisting such a proposal of social pluralization. At the same time, Oswald de Andrade, Mário de Andrade's partner in the modernist movement, generally aligned himself with this project of refining Brazilian culture, yet his use of Wilde's name as a sexual insult reveals that he too was not free from prejudice.

This investigation, therefore, seeks to contribute to current Wilde Studies by offering a new perspective on his reception in Brazilian culture: at times, as in the case of Mário de Andrade, this reception may be constructive and inclusive, participating in the formulation of more modern premises regarding culture and social inclusion; at other times, as in the cases of E.B.W., Plínio Salgado, and Francisco Pati, it may be destructive and exclusionary, participating in the formation of more conservative premises concerning culture and social inclusion. In any case, this reception of Wilde

demonstrates how he enjoyed a striking afterlife in Latin America, including Brazil, where his persona and thought served both to substantiate cultural reforms and to prevent their realization.

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