The Unfinished Art of Theater

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Brazil
Chapter 4

Parsifal on the Periphery of Capitalism

The city of São Paulo is noisy, chaotic, and larger than life, but few would describe it as elegant. Still, it seems oddly apropos that one of the most recognizable landmarks in this megalopolis of soaring skyscrapers and favelas is an opera house known simply as the Theatro Municipal. Postcards disseminate images of its façade, a jumble of neobaroque and art nouveau styles with nubile sylphs, delicate stained glass, and hoary atlases who shoulder columns crowned by the words \textit{Música} and \textit{Drama}. Tourists wander down the stepped terrace along the building’s edge, stopping to gaze up at the mustachioed visage of Carlos Gomes, the Brazilian composer whose opera about the love of a noble savage and a Portuguese colonizer’s daughter was once the toast of Milan. Only a handful of the metro area’s 21 million inhabitants will ever enter the door, let alone see the stage, yet the small plaza where it stands is a popular spot for political protests to begin or end, a site where the destitute often congregate in the middle of the night like an ironic comment on the beauty wrought by the bourgeoisie.

Although the stage of the Theatro Municipal has seen its share of opera stars, one of the principal reasons for its renown is its status as the birthplace of the Brazilian avant-garde. The tale has been told many times: over the course of a week in the middle of February 1922, a group of artists and writers came together in São Paulo’s premier performance venue to overthrow the \textit{passadistas} of the old imitative order. Emiliano di Cavalcanti and Anita Malfatti set up easels in the foyer, turning crystal chandeliers and gold filigree into a backdrop for canvases awash in rude colors and unconventional lines. Victor Brecheret’s bust of Christ with his hair in braids sent the classicists scurrying away in disgust. Meanwhile, in the sumptuous auditorium where Enrico Caruso had wowed the crowds just five years earlier in \textit{Carmen} and \textit{Tosca}, all semblance of decorum disappeared amid a cacophony of whistles, hoots, and catcalls.\footnote{Graça Aranha, a man far too old to plead youthful folly as an excuse (he was pushing fifty-four), scandalized his colleagues in the Brazilian Academy of Letters when he walked onstage to give the opening speech. The next day Menotti del Picchia upped the ante in a rousing defense of the new art, illustrated with readings of poetry and prose by a lineup}
that included Sérgio Milliet and Oswald and Mário Andrade as well as a
dance by one Yvonne Daumerie. At some point the composer Heitor Villa-
Lobos showed up with a shoe on one foot and a slipper on the other: he
later chalked it up to gout, but critics were so appalled by his attire that they
nearly forgot to comment on the “African” and “indigenous” elements in his
dances for piano. The only part of the program on which the upstarts and
their naysayers could agree was Guiomar Novaes—the essence of pianistic
perfection as always, even if she did obstinately insist on playing a few num-
bers by Debussy, that old Romantic.

Some who tell the tale of the Week of Modern Art miss the irony entirely,
but for scholars of theater it sticks in the craw: Brazilian modernismo was
“born” in a theater, yet it engendered no new theater of its own. Sábato
Magaldi and Maria Thereza Vargas attribute the absence of teatro modernis-
ta to the fact that, “being a synthesis of artistic elements, it presupposes the
prior renewal of the arts that compose it.” By this logic, avant-garde theater
can only ever be belated. Even so, the lack might be felt less keenly if the
Theatro Municipal didn’t loom so large in narratives of modernismo, if the
participants and later critics didn’t continually return to the primal scene,
and if the stage at its center hadn’t been built for an art so irrevocably tied to
the Belle Époque. The artists later known as modernistas chose to make their
break from within the carapace of the established order, but perhaps theater
would have spoiled the tenuous illusion of a rupture between the old and the
new; maybe something about the sight of bodies trying to enact experimental
forms on an operatic stage would have confirmed a nagging doubt among
the artists and their heirs as to whether Brazilian modernismo was really as
modern as it claimed.

Indeed, the truly orphic moment, the scene history is most apt to recall,
took place just beyond the designated space of performance, on the sweep-
ing staircase leading up from the lobby to the auditorium doors. It was here
that Mário de Andrade stood before a crowd and said ... what did he say?
There is no hard evidence, and an aura of ambiguity surrounds the speaker
and his words. Some later critics say he read parts of the preface to Paulicéia
desvairada, the lyrical panegyric to the city he would publish later that same
year. It is amusing to imagine him—tall and gangly, every bit the bespectacled
professor—framed between the graceful feminine statues on either side of
the stairs, declaiming in his coy, self-ironizing fashion: “I am a passadista,
I confess. No one can liberate himself all at once from the grandmother-
theories [teorias-avós] he has imbibed.” Most, however, insist he read from
an early draft of A escrava que não é Isaura, a whimsical critique of futurism
in which he defines modernist poetry as The Slave Who Is Not Isaura—not
the nearly white protagonist who is born into bondage in Bernardo Gui-
marães’s Romantic classic A escrava Isaura (1875), but a slave who can
only be named in the negative, by evoking the colonial legacy and shame of
servitude one might expect the avant-garde to disavow. In fact, eyewitness
accounts indicate this is *not* what he read, yet if the claim persists perhaps it is because it seems a fitting performance for an intellectual who was not quite white and not openly gay, but by all accounts queer—a man described as “peculiar,” “elusive,” and an “enigma,” as if he were the half-hidden secret of modernismo. Over time Mário’s speech has come to be regarded as one of the movement’s defining manifestos, though it is a manifesto of a curious sort because its performative power hinges on the refusal to give itself to be seen.

The very idea of the avant-garde posits the possibility of a rupture with the immediate past and privileges art as an agent of change. In this chapter, however, I draw out a divergent logic (partially) hidden at the heart of this future-oriented impulse by turning to an avant-garde that flaunts its dependence on pseudo-secrets and an art often said to be dead. Unlike the Mexican *vanguardias*, which arose in the wake of a decade-long revolution, Brazilian modernismo emerged at a more ambiguous moment of transition and in a place where the transformations associated with modernity owed an obvious debt to the continuity of social and economic practices typically conceived as backward and behind. Despite this, canonical accounts of the Week of Modern Art depict it as a watershed in the quest for cultural autonomy, a performative break that ushered in the “heroic” decade of modernismo and presaged the (top-down) Revolution of 1930. But situating the event on an operatic stage troubles this tale. After the dawn of the twentieth century, writes Mladen Dolar, opera becomes “a huge relic, an enormous anachronism, a persistent revival of a lost past, a reflection of the lost aura.”

Rendered irrelevant by the rise of mass culture, its corpus ever more moribund as the same old classics are rehashed time and again, this holdover from an earlier era is said to epitomize the conventionalism and hollow pomp that the vanguard set out to destroy. Even in Europe this narrative is riddled with contradictions, but it runs into particular problems in Brazil, where in 1922 most opera performances were imported from Europe. To borrow a phrase from Roberto Schwarz, opera was very conspicuously “out of place.” Then again, so was Mário de Andrade when he said whatever it was he said on the stairs of the Theatro Municipal.

This chapter demonstrates how an avant-garde on the semiperiphery of capitalism emerged out of a “peculiar” temporal lag manifesting in the guise of operatic drag. As a point of departure, I turn again to Marx’s discussion of the “secret” of “so-called primitive accumulation”—a secret he argues is exposed when the language of liberal political economy ventures out of its “natural” habitat in Europe and into regions of the world where its artificiality becomes transparent. A similar dynamic is at work in Schwarz’s well-known description of liberalism in late nineteenth-century Brazil as an “idea out of place.” Drawing out the feelings of backwardness and shame that Schwarz sees as formative of Brazilian identity, I show how this “peculiar” mode of ideology rooted in the experience of incongruity also created an odd aura around intellectuals tainted with the “sins” of racial mixture and
nonreproductive sexuality. The heart of the chapter traces these associations in the actions and words seen or heard on- and offstage in the lead-up to and during the Week of Modern Art. By foregrounding the role of the Theatro Municipal in the staging of the event and in the debates it provoked, I argue that the contradictions Schwarz pinpoints converged around the “anachronistic” art of opera and the characterization of Mário de Andrade as the modernistas’ own Parsifal: a vaguely queer, visibly mixed-race version of the chaste knight who wanders the primeval forest in Richard Wagner’s opera of the same name. The chapter draws to a close with early efforts to memorialize the Week of Modern Art, including a “profane oratorio” by Mário in which he textually restages the event as an operatic song contest between competing choirs with some 550,000 singers.

A saintly air has long clung to Mário (he was dubbed the “pope of modernismo” by his peers), and until recently it has been something of a taboo to speak of such subjects. Of course, people do talk. From the time he appeared on São Paulo’s literary scene there were vague allusions; his friend and fellow modernista Oswald de Andrade, ever eager to push the envelope, was known to make indiscreet jokes and eventually brought their friendship to its bitter end with his off-color innuendos about Mário’s sexuality and race. Memoirs and testimonials by fellow intellectuals, written long after Mário’s untimely death, speak of his repressed desires and speculate on the causes, often as if in hushed tones. My reconstruction of the Semana de Arte Moderna sheds light on how Mário de Andrade’s queer mode of publicity emerged, and how his status as a figure who is vaguely “out of place” came to acquire a kind of symbolic power—though symbolic in an odd sort of way because it operates as an open secret, a shared knowledge of something that can never be entirely seen or said.

### Primitive Accumulation and So-Called Secrets

In the first volume of *Capital*, Marx saves his discussion of “so-called primitive accumulation” for the very end, as if he wanted readers to work their way through abstract considerations of value and an excess of empirical details about wages and machinery only to discover that the secret is all too simple. What is it? If the answer remains opaque (as his frequent use of scare quotes implies), it is in part because our words do not always mean what they seem to say. A “free” workforce ostensibly refers to wage earners who are at liberty to sell their own labor power; yet in a more profound sense these workers have been set free for capital by being stripped of their own means of production and left with no option other than to work under conditions determined by their despoilers. Unevenness, in other words, is integral to capitalist development: freedom from serfdom goes hand in hand with dependence on capital, and the creation of wealth is always also an act of dispossession.
Europe, where capitalist relations have already penetrated most sectors of society, those who use the language of liberal political economy can ignore its strange slippages in meaning, but when they attempt to transport it beyond these safe shores, its contradictions come to light and the “beautiful illusion is torn aside.” In the Americas, the separation of the producer from the means of production has to be “artificially” achieved through physical force, enslavement, coercive laws, the outright theft of land—acts of “primitive” barbarism that are speciously cast back onto the people who suffer them as if their impoverishment were divine punishment for some “original sin” (873). Yet for Marx, the obvious artifice of capitalism in the colonies simply reveals its innermost logic. This, the very last sentence of the book proclaims, is the “secret discovered in the New World by the political economy of the Old World”: not some font of originary value to be extracted from capitalism’s ever-receding periphery, but the logic of savagery and expropriation that remain hidden in Europe, in the belly of the beast (940).

This initial installment of *Capital* appeared in 1867, and the Civil War and abolition of slavery in the United States hover in the background of Marx’s reflections, repeatedly referenced if never explicitly addressed as a subject in their own right. But the emergence of this former colony as an industrial power, clearly anticipated in the book, would only further accentuate the “primitive” elements of countries entering into what is commonly referred to as Latin America’s “Export Age.” In an essay originally published in 1973, Roberto Schwarz drew attention to the peculiar status of liberalism in late nineteenth-century Brazil, where ideals such as liberty, equality, and economic rationalization sat uneasily alongside the “impolitical” fact of a slave system that would endure for two and a half decades after it ended in the United States. While slavery was the fundamental relation of production, the ideological nexus around which the society of “free” individuals converged was access to patronage, or *favor*—a practice directly at odds with individual autonomy, “disinterested” culture, and the universality of law. And yet liberal ideology could hardly fail to hold sway, given its dominance in the sphere of international trade, in which Brazil’s own slave economy played an integral (though structurally dependent) role. Bourgeois culture and ideas possessed ornamental value as markers of modernity and hence prestige, often serving to legitimize the “backward” systems of patronage and latifundism they derided as obsolete. Of course, liberal ideology was also a false description of European realities, as Schwarz (like Marx) is quick to concede; and yet in Brazil, where industrial capitalism couldn’t even be said to exist, this incongruous complicity between liberalism and its ostensible object of critique meant that “thought lost its footing” and ideas qua ideas were perceived as “out of place” (155). Patently lacking any claim to generality, grafted onto a system grounded in the *exception* to the rule rather than the principle of representation, liberal ideas in Brazil were plagued by an air of inauthenticity, anachronicity, and lack.
Schwarz’s essay assembles a striking repertoire of terms to describe the psychic toll this situation exacts on those who claim “Brazilian ideas” as their domain. Time and again he highlights the intense shame the Brazilian intellectual expresses when faced with the “impropriety of our thought” (152); citing literary and historical sources, he remarks on the bitterness, irony, and sense of inadequacy the local literati betray when describing their own apparent irrelevance and the egregious disparity between the imported luxuries of the elite and the squalid quarters of their slaves (160). His point, however, is not to simply add another voice to the chorus of woe, but rather to show how this experience of incongruity and the negative affect it entailed came to form the crux of a distinctive ideological dynamic. If theory was unable to reconcile these incongruities, the arts could more easily transform what was and would continue to be regarded as a “national shame” into a “national originality” (160). If Brazil had no choice but to reckon with “modern” styles, literature and its like could “adore, cite, ape, plunder, adapt or devour all those manners and styles, so that they reflected, in their flaw, a kind of cultural torsion [torcicolo cultural] in which we recognize ourselves” (159). In short, Brazilian culture is founded on this “flaw”; the contradiction becomes content and acquires symbolic value as self-affirmation and negation become inextricably bound. As Schwarz briefly notes, both modernismo and the Tropicália counterculture movement under way at the time he was writing achieved resonance for the very reason that they register and put into play these dislocations and disharmonies “for which there was nevertheless no name, because the improper use of names was its nature” (159).

Although slavery is his point of departure, Schwarz is strangely silent on the question of race and how it relates to this symbolic recuperation of dependency and degradation after 1888–1889, when the “abominable institution” came to an end and Brazil swapped the title of empire for the trappings of a republic. He remarks on the hollow nature of a liberal constitution enacted by regional slave-owning elites, but he never explains how the last country in the Americas to declare abolition could give rise to the myth of “racial democracy” in only a few decades’ time. He cites retrospective accounts of slavery still suffused by shame and inferiority, yet he never explicitly states how the idea of liberty hangs together once its linchpin, the condition against which it is defined, no longer has an institutional existence. Following emancipation came four decades of mass immigration from the peripheries of Europe (primarily Italy), subsidized by states such as São Paulo in order to drive down wages while also “whitening” the population. Blacks were disproportionately displaced from the realm of “free” wage labor or relegated to its margins in service jobs and the armed forces, even as the need for raw materials to fuel industrialization drove capital deeper into the Amazon and drew its inhabitants into the export economy in the guise of “primitive” labor. Schwarz provides one of the most incisive critiques of this push-and-pull, yet there is something he either doesn’t see or declines to say; something that might make
his own quasi-theoretical language seem out of place, because it has to do with the “impolitical,” “moral” fact that several of the intellectuals he refers to were slightly brown.

Such was the case of Machado de Assis, the first president of the Brazilian Academy of Letters (founded in 1897) and the writer whose ironic take on the fin de siècle inspires many of Schwarz’s own reflections. In his essay, Schwarz never mentions that Machado was regarded as mulatto—but then again he has no need to, because his intended readers already know. Nor does he allude to the ambiguous racial identity of Mário de Andrade, whose “harlequin” method of poetic composition he cites as another example of the national penchant for dissonance and decontextualization. Only by extrapolating from his insights about the affective idiosyncrasies of cultural discourse in Brazil will one ask whether the canonical status of these and other “mulatto” writers in the decades following abolition might have something to do with the historical process by which the “exception” came to (imperfectly) incarnate the law and the stigma began to double as an emblem of national pride.

Both Machado and Mário played instrumental roles in founding cultural institutions with national claims. Both on occasion held bureaucratic posts, a coincidence explained in part by the fact that unlike their peers from the landed elite they had to earn a living—no small feat for an intellectual in a country where only a small fraction of the population could read. Both were highly visible public figures, yet Machado stuttered and was notoriously shy, while Mário was said to have abandoned hopes of a career as a concert pianist because his hands uncontrollably trembled whenever he walked onstage. Machado refused to take a public stance on slavery, just as Mário betrayed discomfort when faced with political issues related to class or race. Neither had children, though accounts often emphasized how devoted Machado was to his wife. Yet if Mário’s sexuality was a frequent subject of speculation it should not come as a surprise, because the dynamic Schwarz describes bears some striking similarities to a mode of (dis)identification often defined as queer.

Schwarz, to be sure, never draws this connection, and he is a frequent critic of the deconstructionist trends out of which queer theory in the United States has grown. Even so, his essay offers ways of thinking through the rhetorical repertoires and affective affinities linking the love that dare not speak its name to a phenomenon whose nature is the “improper use of names.” Queerness, too, is said to register as a vague sense of ontological instability, or of something fora do lugar. Like the mode of national belonging Schwarz describes, it is often defined in terms of its deviation from the manifest logic of capitalist (re)production. Cast as counter to economic and political rationality, both are figured as an excess of affect or style, as a failed or flawed (pro)creation, always already a parody or pastiche; both are associated with the language of melancholia, abjection, shame, and anachronicity, giving rise
to an impression Elizabeth Freeman describes as “temporal drag.” Nor is it irrelevant that the very period Schwarz singles out in explaining how ideas out of place became a symptom of “Brazilian” identity also saw the emergence of the category of homosexuality. In the United States, where the Plessy v. Ferguson decision of 1896 ushered in the era of Jim Crow segregation that would prop up its system of racial capitalism, Siobhan B. Somerville has shown how “the simultaneous efforts to shore up and bifurcate categories of race and sexuality... were deeply intertwined.” In Brazil, too, scientific discourses on sexual identity were steeped in evolutionary and eugenics narratives of progress, and interracial and same-sex desire often overlapped in the cultural imaginary; but just as the country had no legal equivalent to Jim Crow, it also had no sodomy laws like the ones that contributed to the codification of homosexuality in the United States. In a country where racial mixture was acquiring a symbolic charge, and where “unproductive” relations of patronage formed the basis of the social bond, it is perhaps unsurprising to find figures such as João do Rio, the celebrated flâneur and journalist whose chronicles of Rio de Janeiro offered a glimpse of everything from candomblé rituals to the lifestyles of the lettered elite: a light-skinned mulatto notorious for his liaisons with other men, he easily overcame opposition to win election to the Academy of Letters in 1910 at the age of twenty-nine. Indeed, Schwarz’s thesis that Brazilian modernism arises out of (and not despite) the experience of backwardness resonates with Heather Love’s more recent description of a queer mode of modernism invested in “feeling backward.” Reading the work of authors such as Walter Pater and Willa Cather, Love sees their gestures of refusal and attachments to failure and loss as a mode of resistance to the emergence of more public and explicit forms of homosexuality. Whereas Schwarz counters the developmentalist teleology on which liberal nationalism rests by pointing to economic dependency as a precondition and enabling element of (rather than obstacle to) “Brazilian” identity, Love emphasizes queer identity’s ties to a history of social exclusion and the contradiction at the heart of homosexuality, which can be “experienced as a stigmatizing mark as well as a form of romantic exceptionalism.” Schwarz concludes his essay by pointing to “the global reach that our national peculiarities [nossas esquisitices nacionais] have and can have,” arguing that the precarity and irreality of liberalism in Brazil casts its contradictions into relief in a way less likely to occur in places where ideology’s illusions rest on a more solid base (159). In a similar way, Love argues that “reading for backwardness calls attention to the temporal splitting at the heart of modernity” (6). And while Schwarz invokes musical metaphors (dissonância, desacordo, desafinação) to describe the off-kilter relationship between representation and its referent in Brazil, Love rejects the quintessential modernist icon Prometheus and instead makes a case for Orpheus, who descends into the underworld and secures the release of his wife Eurydice with his music, only to lose her again when he disobeys the divine injunction
against looking back and turns around on their ascent to assure himself of her presence.

Love does not mention it, and perhaps it is only a coincidence that most critics consider the first opera to be Monteverdi’s *L’Orfeo*, composed in 1607 for the court of Mantua. But Theodor Adorno would surely affirm the logic of this connection. Writing in 1955, Adorno noted that opera, reified and rendered irrelevant by new modes of mass culture such as cinema, had come to seem “peripheral” and “indifferent,” a symptom of a more general malaise afflicting the entire institution of the stage. With the exception of Alban Berg’s atonal *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*, opera had resisted all efforts at innovation and was now a parody of its former self. And yet the parody, the German critic insists, simply unveils the true nature of this extravagant art, because in essence “all opera is Orpheus”: while its rise in the seventeenth century coincided with the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie, what it portrayed were feudal relations already on their way to becoming obsolete. Opera fosters attachments to outmoded ways of life, transforming the past into the lost object of desire, so that “what happens on the operatic stage is usually like a museum of bygone images and gestures, to which a retrospective need clings” (41). At the same time, however, this backward-looking form prefigures the mass medium whose invention would signal its demise; the “conventionality” and “freakishness” that lend the libretti of so many nineteenth-century operas a dated air are signs of their commodity character, and in this respect as well as in their mobilization of all the technological trappings of stagecraft they act as “placeholders for the as-yet-unborn cinema” (34).

Adorno makes another crucial connection when he notes that the “retrospective need” for social structures no longer on the cusp of capitalist production and development is often linked to a desire for those on the geographical or cultural periphery of capitalism. A “bourgeois vacation spot,” opera since at least the nineteenth century “has shown an endless love for those who are of foreign blood or otherwise ‘outside’”—whether for the gypsies of Bizet’s *Carmen* or the Africans in *Aïda*, Verdi’s love story about an Egyptian general and Ethiopian slave, which was commissioned by the ruler of Egypt in 1871 and debuted at the Khedivial Opera House in Cairo two years after the building’s inauguration in honor of the opening of the Suez Canal (35). Edward Said has situated the opera’s genesis in the context of Egypt’s deepening dependency on European finance, a process spurred by the Napoleonic invasion of 1798 and accelerated by the U.S. Civil War, when the supply of cotton from the United States to Europe was interrupted and the Nile Delta region picked up the slack. Emphasizing the opera’s debt to orientalist archaeology and musicology as well as universal expositions, Said describes its formal qualities in language similar to Roberto Schwarz’s depiction of liberal ideas in Brazil, remarking on its “unevenness,” “falsity,” “anomalies,” and “incongruities” and characterizing it as a “peculiar” and “composite work, built around disparities and discrepancies.” At the same time, he argues (in
a critical move that by now should strike readers as familiar), its eccentricity is exemplary of the genre as a whole, since “Aida, like the opera form itself, is a hybrid, radically impure work that belongs equally to the history of culture and the historical experience of overseas domination” (123).

Despite his insights, there is one detail Said neglects to note: grand opera found its most fertile ground not among the imperial powerhouses of England and France but in Germany and Italy, where political consolidation of the nation-state had occurred relatively late and the race for foreign territories was still incipient. In a footnote to his ruminations on opera’s posthumous survival and growing popularity, Mladen Dolar speculates on the success of Wagner and Verdi and posits that in Germany and Italy, “the opera assumed the place of the missing state, as it were,”19 playing a role not unlike it had for the absolute monarchy, acting as a lever or the “grain of fantasy needed to constitute the real community” (4). The grandiloquence of operatic art, his statement suggests, should not be seen as a direct expression of political and economic power but rather as a response to the experience of uneven development within Europe: much as Schwarz claims in the case of Brazil, aesthetic excess or overproduction compensates for the weakness of material and institutional ties. According to Dolar, people now recognize the fictitious aspect of the nation-state; nevertheless, opera lives on and even thrives as what he calls a “redoubled or mediated fantasy” (3). The lost object of desire is no longer the mythical community but the fantasy itself, a time in the past when people are said to have believed in and been united by the beautiful lie, a time when ideology was “in place.”

And so it is that through a curious temporal twist, São Paulo’s Theatro Municipal now appears all the more operatic in its (lack of) essence, strangely ahead of its time—and maybe even kind of “avant-garde.” Like other opera houses built in Brazil around the same time, it was always already a redoubled idea-out-of-place, always a desire to believe in a bourgeois fantasy regarded as rightfully belonging to someone else. Although there is evidence of occasional opera performances as early as the mid-eighteenth century, the local allure of the art is tied to the year 1808, when the Portuguese royal court resettled in Rio after fleeing from Napoleon’s invading army.20 During its thirteen years as the seat of the empire, the city became a hub of operatic activity, with musicians and singers arriving from Europe to perform in the multiplying theaters and staff the new conservatory. After independence the new imperial government would continue to subsidize opera productions, but most of the companies were Italian (even if some of the singers and musicians were local), and although a series of attempts to create a national opera company between 1857 and 1863 could count the great Carlos Gomes as a success, the emperor quickly awarded the young composer a stipend to study in Italy, where he would spend most of his illustrious career.21 Meanwhile, during the Belle Époque, the flow of opera from Europe to the Americas only increased.22 A few of the iconic opera houses that dot the principal cities of
Brazil are early exemplars of neoclassicism, such as the Theatro São Pedro (1858) in Porto Alegre and the Theatro da Paz (1878) in Belém, where the local composer José Cândido da Gama Malcher succeeded in staging several of his own operas (with libretti in Italian); but a number of other theaters were completed during the age of imperialism’s twilight, among them Fortaleza’s Teatro José de Alencar (1910), with its art nouveau façade, and Natal’s Teatro Alberto Maranhão (1904). The Teatro Municipal do Rio de Janeiro (1909) keeps company with the national library, the supreme court, and the municipal palace on the famed Cinelândia square; its counterpart in São Paulo is now hemmed in by a sea of newer high-rises, but even as these take on the air of relics, periodic renovations keep the theater looking preternaturally young. And then there is the Teatro Amazonas (1896), a neoclassical monument painted pink and crowned by a dome covered in bright yellow, green, and blue ceramic tiles—a gaudy homage to the Brazilian flag. Built in the jungle city of Manaus at the height of the rubber boom, it was in use for just over a decade before the boom started to bust, and no operas were performed again until the 1990s, when the government of the state of Amazonas created a standing ballet corps, choir, and orchestra—with most of the musicians contracted from Russia, Germany, and Belarus—and began to host an annual opera festival. 

São Paulo is not the jungle, but it too was a place where the incongruities of the postemancipation period were on dramatic display. Looking back on the origins of modernismo in 1942, Mário de Andrade would prefigure Schwarz in arguing that the movement could only have taken shape in Brazil’s “second city”; Rio de Janeiro was more worldly and its artistic scene more mature, but São Paulo was more open to the modern, in part because it was still so provincial. For most of the nineteenth century it was a rustic outpost of mineral prospectors, a frequent butt of jokes among the residents of Rio, home to the Portuguese royal family following its escape from the Napoleonic invasion and later the seat of the imperial court. The winds began to change in the second half of the century with the shift away from the cultivation of sugarcane to coffee in São Paulo State, which would provide half the world’s supply by 1900. With coffee plantations came more slaves, and later on waves of immigrants from countries including Italy, Portugal, Spain, Greece, Germany, and (after restrictions on Asians and Africans were lifted) Japan. The abundance of cheap labor and coffee export earnings also attracted foreign investment and drove the development of railroads and light industry. In 1870, the first official census counted 31,385 residents in the city; by 1920 it had swelled to around 580,000 (over a third of them foreign-born) and it would more than double over the next twenty years. Economic power also gave the state political clout; throughout this period the presidency alternated between politicians from São Paulo and Minas Gerais in accordance with a pact known as a política do café com leite (coffee with milk politics), an allusion to the primary products of these two states.
By the dawn of the century civic leaders had begun to talk of building a new theater worthy of a city on the rise and able to accommodate the increasing numbers of European companies arriving on tour. The municipal government put out the first call for proposals from entrepreneurs in 1895, offering long-term tax exemptions as an incentive, but proposals were slow in coming, and then there were several false starts as plans were derailed by an economic crisis, failed deals, unexpected deaths, and other contretemps. Eventually the state senate deliberated on whether it was proper to invest huge sums of public money in a project likely to benefit a single class. Apparently its answer was yes, because it set about purchasing and expropriating land in the Nova Cidade, an area opened to development in 1892 when a viaduct was built across the Valley of Anhangabaú, a ravine formed by a river whose name means “demonic spirits” in the language of the indigenous Tupi and Guarani. The site chosen for the theater was on the Morro do Chá (Tea Hill), a high point overlooking the vale, which at the time was half-wild. This would change as the opera house, like other theaters built in Brazilian cities at this time, became the anchor for an urban expansion plan. In 1903, the state ceded the land to the municipality; the city council voted to foot the bill for construction and granted the contract to a group of architects led by Francisco Ramos de Azevedo, whose name now graces the small plaza on which the theater stands.

Ramos de Azevedo was Brazilian, his two partners were Italian, and their design was inspired by the Ópera de Paris, though the building in São Paulo is one-third the size in terms of total square footage and the similarities (at least to my untrained eye) are slight. A forty-two-page booklet distributed on opening night concluded with a list of materials used in construction, along with the companies from which products were purchased and their geographical location: statues from Paris, stained glass from Stuttgart, ventilation equipment from Frankfurt, mosaics from Venice, plasterwork from Milan, marble sculptures from Florence, electrical installations from Berlin, paving tiles from New York, ironwork from Düsseldorf... and São Paulo’s Lyceum of Arts and Crafts filled in the holes. The Teatro Municipal was “out of place,” but clearly part of its purpose was to serve as a concrete display of São Paulo’s integration into international commodity circuits. According to a commemorative plaque handed out on opening night, some 90 percent of the laborers and craftsmen involved in building the theater were either from Italy or of Italian descent—so who was to say it was not “authentic”? Construction took eight years, and as the final touches were finished, the city began to transform the Valley of Anhangabaú into a sweeping pedestrian walkway lined with imperial palms and statues in accordance with a plan by the Parisian architect Joseph Antoine Bouvard.

After a one-day delay when props failed to arrive on time, the theater opened on September 12, 1911, with a performance of Ambroise Thomas’s Hamlet starring the celebrated baritone Titta Ruffo. As a concession to
nationalist sentiments, it was decided the orchestra would first play the overture to *Il Guarany*—the grand opera about a heroic Indian who risks his own skin to save his white ladylove from his less civilized cousins, which had assured the fame of local boy Carlos Gomes when it debuted at La Scala (the epicenter of Italian opera) in 1870. Only after this would the Italian cast commence with its rendition of a Frenchman’s remake of a Shakespearean play. Theatergoers must have arrived early to linger in the grand foyer and partake of edibles and libations in the elegant bar–cum–tea salon. Perhaps they debated the merits of the Venetian mosaics in the vestibule at the top of the “noble” staircase, which depict the Ride of the Valkyries and a scene from *Das Rheingold*—a bold homage to Wagner that must have rankled the diehard Italophiles. Eventually they were allowed to enter the lavish, horseshoe-shaped auditorium, where depending on whether they were in the orchestra or in a box they would have looked up or down at the prosценium stage, ringed by medallions inscribed with the names of Verdi, Bizet, Bellini, Rossini, Mozart, Gounod, Beethoven, Weber, Wagner, and Carlos Gomes. According to all accounts, the crème de la crème turned out in full force to fill the 1,816 seats: unlike the Colombo, another city-owned theater (though leased and managed by private interests), the Theatro Municipal charged prices well beyond the means of most residents and dispensed with the standing-room area that in many theaters offered more economical access.
Backward Futurisms

Ten years and change is hardly a long time when it comes to a building that took eight years to construct and at least as long to conceive. In other words, the Theatro Municipal wasn’t exactly a relic of a bygone era when the soon-to-be-modernistas stormed its stage, nor were all of their own faces as fresh as some claimed. Twenty years later one critic, echoing what was by then already a cliché, would describe the Semana de Arte Moderna as an event that “left the path clean and clear for the following generations,” opening up a new era of creativity “in poetry, in the novel, in essays, in all of the genres except theater.” A more accurate assessment is that the Semana de Arte Moderna was at once a testament to the intensity of the changes São Paulo and Brazil as a whole had undergone and a vivid illustration of how familiar categories continued to set the terms. Many of the participants were members of the so-called paulista oligarchy, but some came from the growing middle class, and a few were foreigners (e.g., the Polish architect Georg Pryzmbel and the Swiss painter John Graz) or first-generation immigrants, in most cases of Italian origin such as the sculptor Victor Brecheret and visual artists Zina Aita and Anita Malfatti (whose mother was from the United States). The presence of several women also signaled a change from the past. Yet as others have noted, financial backing for the Semana, as for the modernista movement as a whole, came not from the emerging industrial class but from the landed elite, namely from Paulo Prado and Olivia Guedes Penteado, heirs to two of São Paulo’s great coffee fortunes.

This connection became a sore spot even before the event itself, with the much ballyhooed “futurist” debate. São Paulo’s opera house was less than a year old when Oswald de Andrade returned from his first trip to Europe with a copy of the Italian futurists’ first manifesto in his bag, but the term gained traction only after Anita Malfatti’s controversial solo exhibition at the end of 1917, and what really put it on the map was when Oswald wrote an article around the middle of 1921 hailing Mário as “O meu poeta futurista,” or “my futurist poet.” Oswald was one of the aforementioned scions of the elite; Mário was one of what Sérgio Miceli refers to as modernismo’s “poor relations,” a professor of music history at the conservatory and son of a mulatto typesetter/bookkeeper/journalist/self-made man. Oswald heaps compliments on his friend’s forthcoming collection of poetry, linking the “strange” but beautiful rhythms of Paulicéia desvairada to “the daily, formidable alteration of the very physiognomic grace” of an “uncontained [incontida], absorbent, diluvial metropolis of new people.” In a particularly florid passage he describes the lanky poet as a “livid and long, well-mannered Parsifal,” the local counterpart to Wagner’s virgin knight, and evokes the opera’s vaguely Christian overtones of self-renunciation, sacrifice, and chastity—all traits still commonly attributed to Mário (229). It is an excessive and effusive but presumably sincere paean, a glowing endorsement
from a well-connected insider of an unknown. Readers must have been taken aback, then, when the object of homage published a piece titled “Futurista?!” in which he vehemently rejected the honor.

The cordial but visibly tense tête-à-tête between the two Andradas is one of modernismo’s milestones and an early harbinger, many say, of the differences that would later bring its “heroic stage” to an ugly end. For one, it marks Mário’s turn against “futurism” (a term he, like many other protomodernistas, originally embraced), which is typically seen as a sign of his desire to distinguish a movement he was coming to view as national in its aspirations from a foreign (or as he describes it, “international”) trend—a trend led, moreover, by Filippo Marinetti, whose sensationalism and fascist politics Mário abhorred. Some also depict his response as a desperate attempt to mitigate the emotional and financial damage caused by his public outing. (Supposedly he lost students at the conservatory after being labeled a futurist.) Evidence for all of this exists, but perhaps the key to this brief text lies in what is not said and cannot be definitively proven. Is the reader expected to recognize a connection between the “physiognomic grace” of the city and the “livid” or dusky physiognomy of the poet? Is Mário being coded as gay?

Such suspicions find fodder in the strangest aspect of this encounter, which is all the more intriguing because literary historians rarely mention it: neither Oswald’s original article nor Mário’s rebuttal names the poet in question as Mário himself. Oswald dangles the identity of his subject before his readers saying, “He is called . . . I can’t tell you his name. He forbid it, the chaste, good, timid man. I will recount for you his figure and his art.” Mário subsequently claims to respond on behalf of their mutual friend and perpetuates the ruse of anonymity with a sly wink: “The parity that exists between me and my friend, the ‘futurist poet,’ is well known; it will be understood, therefore, that my ideas published here are exactly the same as those of the unhappy author of ‘Paulicéia Desvairada.’” What is this all about? A question mark hangs over the affair just as it hangs over the acrimonious end of their friendship in the late 1920s, when Oswald publicly ridiculed Mário as “Miss Macunaima,” a feminized version of the race-changing, childlike “hero without any character” of his now-classic novel Macunaima. In “O meu poeta futurista,” Oswald appears to be forcing Mário into a position of prominence, capitalizing on his status as an outsider—an eccentric Parsifal and an Everyman—as a way of opening up the insular literary scene. For his part, Mário recognizes and responds to this interpellation, which is also an implicit offer of patronage (surely there is a hint of condescension in the possessive meu poeta), only to deflect its force by distancing himself from the persona imposed upon him. From the very first, in other words, his relationship with the public is characterized by obliquity and evasion, a dual movement of revelation and self-effacement. Critical acuity, ethical judgment, chastity, and an ambiguous racial identity are all linked in a figure who (to borrow Schwarz’s words) has “no name, because the improper use of names was its [his] nature.”
“A livid and long, well-mannered Parsifal . . .”: given the frequent references to Wagner in the writings of the Brazilian intelligentsia at this time, certain readers might have picked up on the complexities involved in this depiction of Mário as an (improper) version of a fictional figure born four decades earlier on a European stage. The protagonist of Wagner’s last work also first appears as a mysterious stranger, a young hunter wandering through the medieval forest of northern Spain who is unable to say who his father is or where he is from and cannot recall his own name. He is also at a loss to explain how he arrived at the castle occupied by the Knights of the Holy Grail, whose king suffers from an incurable wound caused by his own Holy Spear during a tryst with a witch-turned-temptress sent by the evil magician Klingsor, who seeks revenge after castrating himself in a misguided ploy to gain admittance to their elite gentlemen’s club. This man-child of dubious parentage, a.k.a. Parsifal or the “pure fool,” dutifully complies with his destiny by recovering the Spear after valiantly resisting the charms of nubile women, weeping copious tears of guilt for abandoning his mother, and searching for years until he finds the path back to the Grail. In one of Wagner’s characteristically overblown finales, he arrives at the castle and, touching the Spear to the sovereign’s side, cures his wound and thus absolves him of his guilt before commanding the unveiling of the life-giving Grail as the Chorus hails him as the Redeemer and new King.

Oswald de Andrade was a member of the opera-going elite who had spent several years in Europe, and as a musicology professor with a keen interest in German culture and Wagner in particular, Mário de Andrade likely knew that all this brotherly love and jostling of phallic weapons had not gone unremarked by contemporary observers. In the decades following its debut at Bayreuth in 1882, critics had openly debated whether Parsifal was a “homosexual opera”; meanwhile, Nietzsche condemned its celebration of chastity as contrary to nature even as he warned readers not to succumb to the “decadent” sensuality of the music lest they wind up like the protagonist and end up “forgetting [their] manhood under a rosebush.” According to Nietzsche, the sterility of Wagner’s main men was simply the dramatic counterpart to the “dissonant,” “fragmentary” quality of his music, which was evidence of his incapacity to create an organic work of art—a failure caused by the desire to theatricalize all of the other arts and pander to the abject instincts of the womanish masses. Wagner was an “incomparable histrion” who debased music by attempting to make it “visible,” forcing sound into the service of semantic signification and subordinating it to the logic of corporeal gesture (172). The composer himself, however, drew on the same organicist metaphors to depict his “theater of the future” as the culmination of a heterosexual act in which the “procreative seed” of Poetry impregnated that “glorious loving woman, Music.” As Wagner saw it, the “unnatural” genre of opera degraded drama by turning it into a mere pretext for the display of vocal virtuosity rather than acknowledging music’s proper (feminine)
function as an “art of expression.” His proposal to join all the arts into a Gesamtkunstwerk or “total work of art” was also a call to slay this “majestic mummy” in order to restore the marriage of music and word found in the songs and dances of the German folk (41).

By the time Oswald anointed his nameless friend a Parsifalian futurist, Wagner himself had been dead for four decades, yet his cult continued to grow. Marinetti derided the phenomenon in a 1914 manifesto titled “Down with the Tango and Parsifal!,” a missive addressed to certain “cosmopolitan women friends” known to host tea parties where guests collectively cooed over the “mystical tears” of a “forty-year-old virgin” and performed affected imitations of a dance that simulates unconsummated sex (no wonder “inverts” like Oscar Wilde love the tango, Marinetti suggests). It is reasonable to assume that some inkling of this antagonism found its way to Brazil, though the paulista vanguard may have also recognized that like many other “revolutionary” artists of the era, the Italian futurists were themselves dogged (and driven) by the Wagnerian specter of a total artwork able to subsume every other medium and genre. “O meu poeta futurista” plays up this dynamic of disavowal and dependence by collapsing the figure of the avant-garde poet with the late Romantic knight, creating a character who is anachronistic but oddly apt in a country where Wagner is not yet yesterday’s news and cultural development all too obviously deviates from the temporal (and sexual) logic it supposedly follows in Europe. Parsifal depicts a “conquering race” whose rituals of purification have lost their performative power because the cult objects around which they revolve have been stolen or concealed, and by recovering the Spear and restoring the Grail to the realm of sight the hero reactivates their aura and restores their devotees’ “virility”: heterosexual desire is sublimated into religious devotion in an allegory of the composer’s attempt to impregnate Music with the Word in order to re-“consecrate” the stage and redeem the German Volk from the corrupting influences of modern culture (including Jews). In contrast, São Paulo is said to be an “absorbent” city of “new” people, and rather than progressing toward redemption and revelation Oswald lavishly veils the identity of his reluctant hero in purple prose, transforming him into a tarnished relic. The opening line reads, “He is long like a taper and to my recollection evokes the chalice of the Grail suspended before the avid lips of the Babylonian girl that is this city of a thousand doors” (22). Oswald picks up on the queer subcurrent of Parsifal and plays it to the hilt: instead of the active agent who reunites the Spear and Grail, Mário is the impossible object of desire, both taper (an ineffectual phallus) and chalice (a womb-like vessel of mixed rather than pure blood). Although he serves as an intermediary between the vanguard knights and the city (not the folk but a flapper/flag hag), sublimation is incomplete, and what results is nothing so holy as a symbolic bond.

It is obvious why Mário might find this offensive, but parsing his response is complicated by his complicity in creating his Parsifalian persona. Although
Paulicéia desvairada does not directly cite Parsifal, a scattering of other Wagnerian allusions points to its protagonist as one of many models for the lyric pseudo-subject that reappears throughout the collection of poems as a wise fool, a modern-day harlequin and mercurial flâneur (identified in several instances as “Mário”) who paints impressionistic scenes of the equally “harlequin” city and lives out the doctrine of desvairismo (delirium or disorientation) proclaimed in the preface. Just a few years later Mário would begin to argue for the need to form a single raça brasileira from the synthesis of Brazil’s diverse cultural traditions, an idea most fully developed in the unfinished libretti he produced in collaboration with composers who shared his desire to develop a truly “Brazilian” opera (a topic I discuss in the following chapter). Although the accent falls more heavily on divisions and disparities in Paulicéia desvairada, here too musical motifs are racialized and endowed with popular value. The harlequin is also a “Tupi Indian strumming a lute,” an indigenous troubadour whose musical madness allows him to pass freely through the city, while in the poem “Nocturno” a guitarist strolling through the immigrant district of Cambuci is described as “a golden mulatto / with hair like lustrous wedding rings [alianças polidas]” (55). Whereas Parsifal revolves around metaphors of purity and primeval origins, Mário emphasizes the eclectic racial makeup of a city characterized as a site of incongruities and impurities, a quality obliquely reflected in the motley attire and mental vagaries of the harlequin, who has no discernible objective and never assumes the symbolic mandate of authority and reason. Instead he occupies a position José Miguel Wisnik identifies as the purview of the mulatto—a figure “on the frontier between exclusion and inclusion, the part that is neither rejected nor granted admittance but which guards the unspeakable secret [o segredo inconfessável] of the whole.” At the heart of this secret are the “primitive” processes of which Marx wrote—the extraction of gold from the New World mines and experiences of enslavement and sexual violence, transformed into aesthetic value via a musical mulatto with wedding rings for curls.

This move to reclaim racial mixture as a source of poetic authority was paradoxical and precarious, not least of all because the rhetoric of race was so unstable at this time. In November 1921, just a few months after Oswald and Mário crossed swords, the writer Menotti del Picchia devoted his column in the Correio Paulistano to a lineup of the rising stars (himself included) of what he boldly dubbed futurismo sensacional. Del Picchia was already well known as the author of Juca Mulato, an epic poem about a mixed-race ranch hand who pines for his boss’s daughter but heroically resigns himself to a life of labor and a wife of his own standing. Here, too, a similar logic seems to be at work in his choice of a protagonist: first on the roster of this round table of “futurist” knights is Mário de Andrade, whose name is followed by a cryptic “definition” that likens the poet to the “fair at Tiradentes Square, with its stunning cosmopolitanism of unsettled races [raças mal acampadas]
and long Parsifalian lilies mixed with Leghorn and Carijó hens.” The reference to the famous plaza in Rio, named for an eighteenth-century martyr of independence, could be related to Mário’s editorial collaborations with intellectuals in the capital city, though a suspicious reader might wonder at the implicit analogy between the “unsettled races” who gather there for market and the merchandise on display: Leghorns originally came from the Italian city of Livorno and are white, as opposed to the speckled Carijós, whose name comes from an indigenous group enslaved and exterminated by the early Portuguese colonizers. Once again Mário is not openly identified as mulatto, but those in the know can be expected to recognize the meaning behind his metaphorical depiction as a medium for cross-racial encounter and economic and cultural exchange. (Tiradentes Square was also the site of two theaters where operas were often performed.) His imagined link to this eclectic public space operates as a source of symbolic capital for his fellow futuristas, yet Del Picchia also puts a nasty spin on the Wagnerian motif with his juxtaposition of poultry and Parsifalian lilies, which reads like a parody of the harlequin-like juxtaposition of high and low culture in Paulicéia desvairada.

The tension between these two writers was an open secret, and like many of the other alliances among artists who took part in the Week of Modern Art, their mutual membership in the so-called Group of Five (also composed of Oswald, Tarsila do Amaral, and Anita Malfatti) would later give way to animosity. It is not hard to see why. Just two days prior to the inauguration of the Semana de Arte Moderna, Del Picchia wrote a column in which he attributed the region’s cultural vitality to its role as a racial melting pot, boasting that “São Paulo—cradle of a racial, industrial, economic futurism—is the cradle of cultural futurism.” Writing under the pseudonym Hélios, he wields the triumphant tone of those who have emerged victorious from the “fecund violence” of São Paulo’s “clashing racial characteristics” —as beneficiaries of a uniquely dynamic form of entrepreneurial capitalism that broke with the ancestral customs of the “patrician” North. As evidence he invokes the bandeirantes, early colonial prospectors who also led expeditions to capture indigenous slaves and whom Del Picchia euphemistically credits with achieving the “fixation of nationality,” leading to a natural “weakening” of the nation’s “first ethnic stratum” that in turn helped fertilize the ground for the new waves of “Latin” immigrants. Even at this stage, in other words, the writer was voicing ideas later linked to the protofascist faction of modernismo known as verdeamarelismo, or “green-goldism” (in honor of the national flag). With the influx of people from elsewhere and the disappearance of Indians (there is no mention of blacks), he boasts that it is “as if a piece of the world had moved [se deslocasse], geographically, to America.” As a result, São Paulo was the site of a cultural vanguard “as modern, as alive as the most evolved in the rest of the world”—as would be seen in the upcoming events at the Theatro Municipal.
Chapter 4

In the Shadow of the Operatic Stage

There are no detailed accounts of the negotiations leading up to the Week of Modern Art; history did not record how or why Oswald backpedaled from “futurism,” although presumably Mário’s opposition and the troubling connotations it acquired in the hands of Del Picchia played a role. It is clear that the participants must have come to some kind of last-minute accord, because when the big day arrived, several of the speakers felt the need to clarify that this motley crew was absolutely not “futurist.” At this point, however, no alternative had yet been proposed. What did they have in common, despite all their differences? For starters, most of them had whiled away many an hour in the Theatro Municipal: some had attended political meetings held in the auditorium and many were no doubt regulars at the bar, but at some point most had also come to catch the latest production of *Rigoletto* or perhaps *Manon*. Thus it should come as no surprise that they articulated their call for the “new” in and against the idiom of opera.

That the artists themselves saw the setting as significant is evident from the fact that on day 2, Menotti del Picchia concluded his speech and prefaced the afternoon’s performances with an allegorical coda about an “unheard-of thing” [*coisa inaudita*] that had taken place only a few months earlier on the very stage where he stood: the fourth act of Arrigo Boito’s *Mefistofele*, an opera said to have sparked a riot at its debut at La Scala in 1868 over its obvious affinities with the mythic music-dramas of Wagner. Del Picchia doesn’t cite this detail, but he does offer a blistering description of the grand finale as a “ridiculous” *comparsaria*, a preposterous hodgepodge of Faust, ancient Greece, and Roman gods. The lawyer-cum-journalist-and-poet heaps scorn on the opera’s eclectic aesthetic and blithe disregard for chronology while lambasting the artificiality of the mise-en-scène, scoffing that the regal crowns on the heads of the gods were cobbled together out of cans while the mighty sword of Mars was tin and the “gold” adorning their togas was only flimsy painted paper. Of course, he may be embellishing a bit to prove his point, namely that the “Parnassian” decadence on display in this shoddy spectacle is precisely what the vanguard is out to overturn. The language of his critique conjures the very specter that *l’art pour l’art* seeks to keep at bay, portraying Boito’s revue of “readymade gods” (*deuses de fancaria*) as an accidental allegory of the decline of the aura.

Grand opera musters all of its performative power to create a sense of ritualistic presence; yet this is opera “designed for reproducibility” (to borrow Walter Benjamin’s description of art in the age of mechanical reproduction), not only because so many of its constituent parts are mass-produced but also because it is opera for export, an Italian company playing another gig on the South American circuit. What is the solution? Give up the ghost and actualize the aesthetic, make art reflect reality, write poems relevant to the age of automobiles, and recognize that “the modern nymphs dance *maxixe* to the sound of jazz.” Del
Picchia wants to update the objects art represents, but he indicates no need to change the social form or function of representation, nor does he suggest artists actually take up the new cultural practices he extols. If anything, his digression on the performance of *Mefistofele* is a call for reform to prevent the lines between cultural spheres and social classes from collapsing. Throughout his speech he is at pains to prove that he and his comrades are *not*, as some would have it, a “band of Bolsheviks of the aesthetic,” not “outlaws [cangaceiros] of prose, verse, sculpture, painting, choreography, music, mutineers in the banditry [jagunçada] of the literary Canudos of Paulicéia Desvairada.”

One wonders how the audience responded to this jumble of allusions: was the mention of Mário’s (still-unpublished) collection of poems meant and/or taken as a dig? The speaker compares the hallucinatory vision of São Paulo conjured in the book’s title to the colony in the northern backlands of Bahia where a millenarian sect of former slaves, landless peasants, and uprooted Indians held out against the authority of the republic for several years before being massacred by the military in 1897. From the context it is clear Del Picchia regarded Canudos as a sign of the disorder and backwardness Brazil had to overcome, and in light of his earlier allusions to Mário’s race this comparison of Canudos to *Paulicéia desvairada* seems like an effort to quiet fears of a connection between Mário’s literary “madness” and challenges to established social hierarchies. The “century of discoveries” led by Wagner, Cézanne, Rodin, and Rimbaud is over, Del Picchia says. This is the century of construction, and it has fallen to those assembled in the theater to achieve the “foundational fixation [fixação basilar] of a new aesthetic, in which we will be, in the future, the neoclassicists.” “Desvairada”? On the contrary, this is a vanguard ready to lay down a new law.

If Del Picchia’s protomodernista parable begins by conjuring (only to critique) a prior performance of an operatic scene, it ends with a gesture of abstraction, divesting opera of its ties to the physical stage in order to redeem it as an ideal. In an indirect allusion to the protagonist of his novel *Juca Mulato*, Del Picchia evokes “the national cow-boy” who, in the Rio Preto region of São Paulo State, “reproduces the equestrian odyssey of Orlando Furioso” just as Edu Chaves (a famed local aviator) “reproduces with paulista audacity the dream of Icarus.” But the star with top billing is the city of São Paulo itself, depicted as a modern industrial polis composed of neatly defined classes and corporatist groups: “the worker claiming his rights” shares a stage with “the bourgeois defending his coffer,” “functionaries gliding on the tracks of regulations,” “the industrialist fighting the struggle of competition,” and even “woman breaking the bonds [algemas] of her age-old slavery.” Nothing is awry in this fully rationalized system; everyone sings his or her designated part. African slavery has left no legacy, clientelism has ceded to free competition, and we get no glimpse of any coffee planters or pickers, the agricultural basis of the export economy on which São Paulo’s industrial growth relied. For Menotti del Picchia, liberal ideas aren’t out of place in
Brazil; the country can successfully replicate the classic stages of capitalist development (just as it can reproduce its classic myths), and the role of the avant-garde is to consecrate its golden age. And so he concludes by presenting the “revue” of artists who will illustrate his words and banish the specter of Mefistofele’s tawdry gods by turning the stage into the site of avant-garde music, dance, poetry, and prose—all of the old arts, except theater.

This vision of São Paulo as a heroically operatic metropolis surely appealed to the interests of the festival’s financial backers, who billed it as an event of international import as well as proof of São Paulo’s unique character as a place of self-made men. But not all of the participants played to the audience’s sense of self-importance with such an utter lack of irony. Oswald de Andrade was more tied to the money than most: it may have been due in part to his family connections that the audience on opening night included Washington Luís, the state governor and future president of Brazil.

Perhaps for this very reason Oswald felt at liberty to turn his scathing humor on one of the local gods—Brazil’s sole claim to operatic fame, and the only national composer who appeared alongside Verdi, Wagner, Bellini, and all the rest in the list of names inscribed above the stage of the Theatro Municipal. There is no record of the exact words Oswald uttered onstage, but they were apparently of the same tenor as a column he wrote for Jornal do Commercio the day before the Semana began, in which he cut to the quick:

Carlos Gomes is horrible. We’ve all felt it from the time we were small. But since he’s one of the family’s pride and joys, we swallowed the whole jingle of Guarani and Schiavo—inexpressive, fake, heinous. And when someone speaks to us of the absorbing genius from Campinas, we wear a smile like a stage trap, like someone saying: “It’s true! Better for him not to have written anything at all . . . A talent!”

Carlos Gomes é horrível. Todos nós o sentimos desde pequeninos. Mas como se trata de uma glória da família, engolimos a cantarolice toda do Guarani e do Schiavo, inexpressiva, postiça, nefanda. E quando nos falam no absorvente gênio de Campinas, temos um sorriso de alçapão assim como quem diz: “É verdade! Antes não tivesse escrito nada . . . Um talento!”

Leave it to Oswald to poke his finger in the wound. Gomes’s operas, he suggests, do act as a kind of cultural glue, but not because the music evokes genuine emotion or because anyone actually believes the trite stories are good. Au contraire! The family’s pride and joy is also its secret shame. “Conventional opera” (he specifies: “Italian opera”) had its “era of legitimate affirmation,” but it was back in the days of Monteverdi and Scarlatti, back when those “tenors covered in rouge” and “sopranos strangled by lyrical hypocrisy” were false yet still in sync with the ideology of the times and
opera “went with the era, marked it, honored it” (77). That moment was long past when Gomes came along and hitched his wagon to Polichinelli and other lackluster Italians rather than following the lead of Wagner, whose “revolution of Bayreuth” joined poetry and drama to music and in doing so “brought to the theater an unknown vigor and corrected it, intellectualized it” (78). If Del Picchia cites Wagner as a master whose era has been overcome, Oswald hails the German as the vanguard of his day and credits his “union” of the arts with granting theater a theoretical validity it had hitherto lacked. By the time he began to write for the stage in the early 1930s, a period marked by his turn toward communism, Oswald would view Wagner’s notion of the total work of art with far more ambivalence. As I argue in the final chapter of this book, his sprawling “spectacle” O homem e o cavalo (Man and the Horse) satirizes the Nazis’ appropriation of the composer’s legacy and grapples with the rise of mass spectacle as a tool of authoritarian regimes by opposing a dialectical vision of world history to the logic of immediacy and “total” theatricality. Here, however, he echoes the admiration of Wagner shared by many modernizers in Brazil. The medieval knights of Tristan und Isolde and the Norse giants who lumber through Die Götterdämmerung and Die Walküre (says Oswald) succeeded in making the Völkisch spirit visible. In contrast, Carlos Gomes “succeeded in profoundly defaming his country, making it known via Peris wearing gourd-colored bathing suits and gaudy feather dusters on their heads, roaring indomitable strength on terrible stage sets.” (Peri is the indigenous protagonist of Gomes’s opera Il Guarany.) Gomes gave audiences in Paris and Milan the spectacle of the exotic other, and its artificiality only makes visible a cultural and racial divide that is all too real.

Still, Gomes is “our man,” not despite but by virtue of his operas’ egregious flaws. “We” swallowed it whole, we hum the discordant tune, we carry the contradiction deep within. The basis of “our” bond isn’t our common identification with an exemplary scenario onstage but our sense that what we hear and see is a sham—something nefando, or abominable, atrocious, unspeakable, morally wrong. (Note, though, that Oswald avoids saying why dressing white actors up as Indians and calling their resistance to the colonizer “ours” is wrong.) How do we register “our” recognition? By mouthing words that mean the opposite of what they say while exchanging a complicitous smile—the hidden hole in the stage, the gap in the ground of representation through which bodies pass. Oswald exposes the lie at the core of high culture in Brazil, yet the “we” to and of whom he speaks is ambiguous. While his critique of the cult of the maestrino nacional accurately diagnoses the cultural malaise of the postcolonial elite, he performs the ideological sleight of hand Schwarz describes by projecting the shame of one class onto the country as a whole. And as is so often the case, he does so in order to justify his own “national” cure: as it turns out, his lampoon of Gomes is a lead-in to a plug for Heitor Villa-Lobos. The composer of Kankukus and Kankikis,
Oswald argues, is in touch with the times, on par with Stravinsky and Italian contemporaries including Malipiero and Castelnuovo-Tedesco, working in the same vein as experimental artists such as Jean Cocteau. Villa-Lobos is from Rio (no one is perfect), but Oswald confidently predicts, “São Paulo is going to hear him. And since São Paulo is the city of miracles—heir to migrations and entradas—it is going to accept him.”

Funny how an article that begins by cutting paulista pride to the quick ends up reaffirming the region’s exceptional status, invoking São Paulo’s violent history as a colonial frontier as evidence of its capacity to assimilate its “others.” Funny, too, how for all his differences with Menotti del Picchia, Oswald also solves the issue of opera-as-national-embarrassment by eliding its theatrical component, which conscripts human beings as the material matter of representation. The “terrible stage sets” of Gomes’s allegories of racial miscegenation will give way to Villa-Lobos’s African-inspired “dances” for piano; São Paulo will hear the carioca composer’s music, and if it resonates as an authentic expression of “Brazil,” that is because it spares its listeners the shameful sight of a white man in Indian drag. Whereas Wagner strove to stage the social totality by conjoining all the arts, the musical ingénue of modernismo eliminates all but the drama’s aural trace. There can be no counterpart to Lohengrin and Die Walküre in a country imperfectly forged in the fires of conquest and slavery.

But the Brazilian vanguard did have a Parsifal. Mário de Andrade—that chaste, good, timid man—did not pillory the family’s pride and joy or even mention opera at all, at least not as far as the record shows. On the afternoon of the second day, as part of the lineup following Menotti del Picchia’s speech, he was called onstage to give the audience a preview of Paulicéia desvairada, but he apparently spent little time onstage, and his words were inaudible above the crowd’s—cheers? Or boos? The one vivid depiction of this moment in the local press mocks the hype with which he was introduced and claims that after reciting two poems, “there was so much applause and so many ‘encores!’ and cock-a-doodle-dos that the incommensurable poet refused to say any more. . . . He was satisfied. For his glory it was sufficient! And he fell silent [embatucou].” This reticence comes across as doubly ironic because the writer pegs him as one of the “two Andrades of Futurism, bandeirantemente!” Recycling a trope from “O meu poeta futurista,” the text emphasizes the disparity between his intensely public persona and his aversion to the limelight, which is seen as a sign of arrogance. In contrast, most modernistas attributed it to shame, shyness, or fear. Three decades later, Oswald recalled the caustic jibes he himself endured—jibes that continued when his sidekick took the stage. But whereas Oswald had ignored the crowd (or so he claims), “Mário, with that saintliness that sometimes distinguished him, shouted: ‘I won’t recite any longer like this!’ [‘Assim não recito mais!’] There was enormous laughter.”

Who knows what mix of emotions made Mário exit the stage in a rush? Still, it is hardly a stretch to imagine he felt uncomfortable in his role as
a poster boy for racial “futurism,” especially given that people coded as mulatto or black rarely appeared on such a prominent stage as the Theatro Municipal. No eyewitness accounts allude to these factors, and it would pose a problem for the argument advanced in this chapter had the audience been so indiscreet. In retrospect, however, the premature conclusion to his debut in the hallowed halls of São Paulo’s operatic elite lends significance to the setting of his second solo performance, which occurred later that same day following a recital by the celebrated pianist Guiomar Novaes. The program makes note of a “Talk [palestra] by Mário de Andrade in the foyer of the Theater” during the intermission of the main-stage show; according to accounts by two fellow participants he spoke on painting and theories of modern art amid “heckles and sarcasm,” though other observers simply summarized his subject as “modern art” and made no note of the audience’s response. Over the decades, however, the work of critical commentary and commemoration has transformed this moment into one of the defining “manifestos” of modernismo, and in the process it has become ever more nebulous and opaque. Some critics couch their claims as speculation, but others boldly state that Mário read a draft of his “very interesting” preface to Paulicéia desvairada.

Far more often, however, it is said that he read an early version of The Slave Who Is Not Isaura, a text published two years later with the subtitle “A Speech [discurso] on Some Tendencies of Modernist Poetry.” Yet in another speech delivered twenty years later, Mário referred to his earlier talk as a “lecture on plastic arts”—a solution that has the virtue of simplicity, since it confirms all other available evidence while also explaining his decision to stand on the stairs leading from the foyer up to the auditorium doors, where he could command a view of the spectators gathered below while gesturing by way of illustration to the paintings and sculptures on display (figure 4.2).

Why the discrepancies? Given all the hype for Mário’s collection of poetry during the Week of Modern Art, it is easy to see how its preface could come to usurp the place of his untitled talk. But the later speech in which he offers a conflicting story is a well-known text, so why the refusal to take the speaker at his own word? Is there meaning in the mistaken identification of his performance as a reading of The Slave Who Is Not Isaura? A now-canonical text often invoked in passing but rarely discussed in detail, the essay is regarded as the first formulation of modernismo, a concept its author defines not only in reference to Brazil but as a zeitgeist evident in figures as diverse as Amy Lowell, Francis Picabia, and Vladimir Mayakovsky, whose desire for a “leap into the future” he recognizes as salutary in a revolutionary society but impossible—and undesirable—to achieve because it ignores the utility of the old in constructing the new. This sympathetic critique of Russian futurism (which in some ways echoes the one Trotsky was making at this very same time) is part of a broader argument about the partial and relative nature of poetry’s autonomy from its historically accumulated conventions and its immediate social contexts. Mário summarily grants the legitimacy of “free”
verse, comparing it to the “infinite melody” of Wagner, but in an obvious jab at Marinetti’s call for the total destruction of syntax (“words in freedom”) he declares, “Subject and predicate will eternally exist” (234). Arguing that new media and modes of transportation have made us “simultaneous inhabitants of all lands,” he notes his passionate identification with other cultures and countries, yet he also states that while he could live in Germany or Austria, “I live in a patchwork way [remendadamente] in Brazil, crowned with the thorns of ridicule, vanity [cabotinismo], ignorance, madness, stupidity” (266). Ultimately what he proposes is “poetic polyphony,” which seeks to capture the simultaneous existence of contradictory facts and sensations—though unlike the superimposed melodies of polyphonic music, it is textually mediated and can only be apprehended retrospectively as a “TOTAL FINAL COMPLEX SENSATION” (269).

None of this explains the significance of the essay’s title. In fact, neither Bernardo Guimarães’s novel nor the institution of slavery is mentioned in the text, and other than the half-mocking nod to his own martyrdom cited above, there is little to mar its breezy, cosmopolitan tone. Nevertheless, the title clearly creates an interpretive frame for the elaborate allegory with
which the essay begins. A comic parable, it tells the story of the “slave of Ararat,” a woman Adam “tore from his tongue” (or, alternatively, “from language”) and then displayed atop the mountain where Noah’s Ark had come to rest until the discovery of sin leads him to cover her parts with the proverbial leaf; over the subsequent centuries each generation and each new “race” adds on an item of apparel (a Roman tunic, a Chinese fan, etc.) until one day a wayfarer by the name of Arthur Rimbaud comes along and clears away the heap of frippery only to discover her “nude, anguished, ignorant, speaking in musical sounds, unaware of the new languages, savage, coarse, free, guileless, sincere” (201–202). This is the slave who is not Isaura—not the classically beautiful slave (phenotypically white but part African by blood) who is smothered in the sentimentalism of Romantic abolitionism and ultimately liberated into marriage by a bourgeois crusader, but the slave known as Poetry who is emancipated from the burden of cultural tradition by a symbolist boy-poet notorious for his colonial adventures and embrace of the Paris Commune, not to mention his (homosexual) love affairs. Yet by the very virtue of her conspicuous absence, the slave who is Isaura haunts the metaphors of freedom versus bondage to which Mário repeatedly returns in his ensuing exploration of the paradoxes of artistic autonomy. An oblique critique of liberalism’s whitewashing of race, the essay also enacts its own ironic debt to this tradition by overtly avoiding the topic, with one notable exception: after elaborating his theory of simultaneity, the author tentatively offers himself up as its embodiment when he notes that “three races meld [se caldeiam] in my flesh . . . Three?” (266).

Although it is unlikely that these were the words Mário spoke as he overlooked the lobby of the Theatro Municipal, they are all the more resonant given the one tenuous clue connecting his performance to The Slave Who Is Not Isaura. Emiliano di Cavalcanti’s design for the posters announcing the Week of Modern Art and the cover of the catalogue of works included in the art exhibition depicts a woman on a pedestal against a “primitive” background of lush vegetation, her head hung in shame and her nudity partially covered in an apparent evocation of Eve’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden (figure 4.3). No other image is so closely associated with the modernista movement or so often reproduced in the context of discussions of the Week of Modern Art; yet it typically appears without commentary, as if there were nothing noteworthy about an image of abjection so seemingly antithetical to the ethos of the avant-garde. Never is it linked to the opening parable of Mário’s essay, nor does anyone note its resemblance to another iconic scene of original sin: that of a slave woman standing on the auction block.

Finally, there is the curious caricature published in a local satirical weekly the day after the festival ended (figure 4.4). A startled observer stands before a statue of a nude with women’s breasts and male genitalia; the caption below reads “aesthetic disequilibrium and ecstatic disequilibrium,” suggesting a link between sexual perversion and the avant-garde’s stylistic deviations from
classical norms. Could onlookers have associated this image with the figure of Mário standing at the top of the stairs? Is the ecstasy to which it alludes a result of glimpsing the forbidden sight—the impossible union of taper and chalice (to refer back to Oswald’s characterization of him in “O meu poeta futurista”)?

Retrospective Need and the Harvest of Remembrance

There is another scene hovering in the background of Mário de Andrade’s solitary silhouette. On September 7, 1822, just outside of what was then the small settlement of São Paulo, Prince-Regent Dom Pedro is said to have stood before his men and renounced all fealty to the Portuguese sovereigns (i.e., his parents) with the not-exactly-original proclamation “Independence or Death!” Although the location was probably a coincidence, this *Grito* or “Cry” of Ipiranga (named after a nearby creek) provided a historic pretext for proud paulistas to claim supremacy in national affairs. In Rio, the
yearlong celebration of the centennial was interrupted in July when junior army officers stationed at a fort in Copacabana led a failed revolt demanding changes in the electoral process and an end to the corruption and cronyism of the oligarchic federalist system. Although São Paulo would explode two years later as the epicenter of a more far-reaching tenentes revolt, dissent was held in check for the time being, and the carousing carried on with little more than a hiccup. In the months before and after the Week of Modern Art, the Theatro Municipal played host to patriotic speeches, gala balls, and an extra-extravagant opera season that included the local premieres of Die Gotterdammerung and Die Walküre, a clear sign of Wagner’s growing appeal. Meanwhile, representatives of the Italian community colonized the terrace leading down to the Valley of Anhangabau with an elaborate ensemble of bronze sculptures consisting of allegorical figures representing Italy and Brazil, along with characters from the operas of Carlos Gomes, all of them clustered around a towering likeness of the man himself.

In the midst of this operatic pomp and circumstance, and only a month or so prior to independence day, Mário’s Pauliceia desvairada made its long-promised appearance in print. In all likelihood, most of those who purchased

Figure 4.4. Caricature in A Garoa, February 19, 1922. The accompanying headline reads, “Desequilibrio estethico e desequilibrio extatico” (Aesthetic Imbalance and Ecstatic Imbalance).
it had already heard or read a number of the poems; the closing piece may have come as a surprise, though for different reasons it, too, must have elicited a sense of déjà vu. “As enfibraturas do Ipiranga” (translated as “The Moral Fibrature of the Ipiranga”) is a script for a “profane oratorio” featuring a cast of 550,000 singers—roughly the population of São Paulo in 1922—clustered into four competing choirs radiating out across the city from the Teatro Municipal. Standing at the theater’s windows and on its balconies are the Conventional Orientalisms (Orientalismos Convencionais), described as a “large, imposing, finely-tuned chorus” of mixed voices belonging to “writers and other praiseworthy artisans” (escritores e demais artífices elogiáveis). The Palsied Decrepitudes (Senectudes Tremulinas) are millionaires and bourgeois castrati who sing their primly measured lines from other loci of economic and political power, including City Hall, the Hotel Carlton, the Automobile Club, Weisflog Printing Company, and “even the Alves Book Store in the distance.” Seated on the terrace are around five thousand musicians, and just below them, standing in the soil of the Valley of Anhangabaú, are the Green-Gilt Youths (Juvenilidades Auriverdes)—untutored tenors identified in the cast list as nós, or the collective “we” of the Brazilian avant-garde. These three choirs engage in a battle of operatic manifestos before an “onstage” audience made up of the Indifferent Pallbearers (Sandapilários Indiferentes), workers and poor people who shout their lines in baritone and bass voices from the viaduct that overloeks the valley and connects the older part of the city to the newer development anchored by the Teatro Municipal (78–79).

As if to preempt any doubt as to whether this farce was an allegorical depiction of the Week of Modern Art, its author had alerted potential readers to the connection in the pages of a newspaper just two days before the festival began. Framed as a rebuff to a critic’s attack on São Paulo’s “futurists,” his brief note mentions the title and peculiar generic classification of the unpublished piece but withholds all details about the plot, revealing only that the cast includes a choir called As Juvenilidades Auriverdes. As proof of how distant from futurism the “lads” of the Week of Modern Art are, Mário rattles off a list of the real-life members of this juvenile group. The poet Guilherme de Almeida, he says, is a “marvelous aristocrat” and a “fan of Wilde” who “would be scorned by futurism”; Menotti del Picchia is a “prosodist” (in his latest book “the best of d’Annunzio persists”) and would be “insulted by the futurists”; another Brazilian “aristocrat,” Sérgio Milliet, was educated in Switzerland and wrote his recently published poetry collection (which Mário hails as a masterpiece) in French. The list continues as the author fires off one dubious compliment after another, pointing to the persistence of outmoded, imitative social structures and styles—a gesture almost certainly meant to pull the rug out from under Del Picchia and others who, even at this late date, were still flying the futurist flag. These Green-Gilt Youth, Mário concedes, may “lack rehearsals,” but one thing is clear: “They bandeirantemente refuse the baton of Marinetti.”
If the Italian futurists sought to create spectacles “born of improvisation, from a spark of intuition,” this reference to rehearsals invokes a different theatrical logic in which both artistic creation and national identity arise out of repetition and the reworking of prior experiences. The title of the oratorio, with its allusion to the Cry of Ipiranga, superimposes the vanguard’s struggle for cultural autonomy onto the ritual reenactment of an earlier (and incomplete) political break. The classic device of metatheatricality affords ironic distance from the haphazard performance that results: as the stage directions explain, the four choirs and five thousand musicians (directed by “maestros . . . from abroad”) have gathered to perform a profane oratorio called “As enfibraturas do Ipiranga,” a play-within-the-play that shares the same name and genre as the frame text (79). All 550,000 singers clear their throats and take “exaggeratedly deep breaths”—yet when the Green-Gilt Youth kick off the concert it is with trepidation, declaring their existence in hushed tones (the “libretto” is marked ppp) and rolling off a litany of tropical flora and fauna in irregular rhymes and mellifluous alliterations:

We are the Green-Gilt Youths!
The fringed banners of the banana trees,
the emeralds of the macaws,
the rubies of the hummingbirds,
the lyricisms of the sabiás and the parakeets,
pineapples, mangoes, cashews,
long to station themselves triumphantly,
in the thundering glorification of the Universal! (81)

Nós somos as Juvenilidades Auriverdes!
As franjadas flâmulas das bananeiras,
as esmeraldas das araras,
os rubis dos colíbris,
os lirismos dos sabiás e das jandaias,
os abacaxis, as mangas, os cajús
almejam localizar-se triunfantemente,
a na fremente celebração do Universal! (80)

It could be that some of the items in this catalogue of exotica had grown in the soil where the singers stand before the Valley of Anhangabaú was converted into an elegant esplanade, but others originate in parts of Brazil where few if any of these “aristocrats” (to recall Mário’s earlier depiction of them) had ever set foot. As if to drive home this point, the effect of their soulful rubato is undercut as instruments play off-key and strings snap at inopportune intervals. But if the naïveté of their nationalist aspirations is the object of humor, the more polished performance of their opponents comes across as equally absurd. Comfortably ensconced in the Teatro Municipal, the
Conventional Orientalisms also commence with an act of self-identification, though unlike the Green-Gilt Youth they follow official grammar rather than popular usage in omitting the redundant pronoun nós, and their verses end in comically contrived rhymes:

We are the Conventional Orientalisms!  
The foundations must never fall again!  
No ascents or verticals whatsoever!  
We love the boring flatness!  
We hack down peroba trees with uneven branches! (83)

Somos os Orientalismos Convencionais!  
Os alicerces não devem cair mais!  
Nada de subidas ou de verticais!  
Amamos as chatezas horizontais!  
Abatemos perobas de ramos desiguais! (82)

The Conventional Orientalisms occupy the epicenter of performative power, yet their name marks them as an idea out of place—and is perhaps meant to redefine Europe (their cultural model) as the Eastern periphery of a Brazil-centered world. Guardians of the ideology of order and progress, these cultural mandarins disavow their natural environs and call on science to classify and pacify the “irregularities” that the vanguard aims to enshrine as the essence of a national art. As the oratorio progresses it becomes clear that the Conventional Orientalisms are in cahoots with the Palsied Decrepitudes, who sing their short lines to the tempo of a courtly minuet and later a gavotte. A parasitic elite, these castrati are unwilling to invest in infrastructure (“Widen the streets? And the institutions? . . . Can’t be done!”) or incorporate the masses into the national imaginary (87). Wagner’s chromatic innovations hold little appeal for such philistines, who only value art for its cultural capital and attend the opera because it offers “elegance by precept! / But what a bore [paulificância]” (85).

Despite the lighthearted tone, there are occasional hints of the historical violence underlying this cultural conservatism. Hermann von Ihering, founder of São Paulo’s natural history museum and an advocate of exterminating the indigenous population, is among the local icons of positivism the Conventional Orientalisms invoke, and the shadow of slavery hangs over their threat to punish those who commit the crime of dissonance: “Our choruses are all on the note of ‘do’! / For those off-pitch a lesson with the whip!” (83; Temos nossos coros só no tom de dó! / Para os desafinados doutrina de cipó! [82]). Even so, the avant-garde’s promise of radical change fails to win over the vox populi—the Indifferent Pallbearers, whose name in Portuguese (Sandapilários) refers to the men in ancient Rome who carted the bodies of slaves and the poor to their graves. In their only chorus, immediately following
the opening number by the Green-Gilt Youth, the pallbearers fire back with a five-line salvo, bawling down from the viaduct overlooking the valley to stop with the “noise” (*Vá de rumor!*) and professing their desire to snooze in peace. Even Puccini’s “E lucevan le stelle,” they say, is preferable to this racket—quite the insult given that the famous aria from the final act of *Tosca* was often dismissed by opera connoisseurs as hackneyed and trite (80–81).

For the critic Benedito Nunes, who interprets *sandapilário* as a pejorative neologism based on the root word *sandeu* (fool), this depiction of the plebes as hostile to artistic innovation is a symptom of the residual elitism of Mário and his fellow modernistas. Yet in his desire to witness an imaginary reconciliation between the vanguard and the masses, Nunes overlooks the critical charge of the oratorio’s quasi-operatic form. For slightly different reasons, Vicky Unruh makes the same slip in her reading of the piece as a “performance manifesto,” one of a number of dramatic works by Latin American vanguard writers that “display the type of art that they espouse, portray art as a ‘doing process’ that incorporates its recipient into the doing, and dramatize the desired spectator’s participation in an encounter of conflicting artistic positions within a context of cultural affirmation.” Unlike Nunes, Unruh appears untroubled by the possible elitism reflected in the disinterest of the Pallbearers, nor does she detect any hint of irony or self-deprecation in the depiction of the Green-Gilt Youth; despite her own observation that “As enfibraturas” is “fundamentally not performable,” she persists in reading the oratorio as its own defiant “performance” of the modernista spirit (47). But one might also ask what the apparent failure of the avant-garde performance represented within the text—that is, the youth’s inability to impress any of their audiences—has to do with the ostentatious “unperformability” of the text itself.

Unruh’s own investment in the project of “cultural affirmation” may explain why she, like Nunes, ignores the oratorio’s obvious spoof on *Die Meistersinger*, Wagner’s only comic opera—a detail clearly announced in the cast list when the Green-Gilt Youth are identified as “Tenors, always tenors! Just ask Walter von Stolzing!” (*Tenores, sempre tenores! Que o diga Wal- ter von Stolzing!* [78]). Frequently interpreted as an allegory of Wagner’s own compositional practice, *Die Meistersinger* revolves around a song contest held among the famed guild of Mastersingers in sixteenth-century Nuremberg to determine who will win the hand of the town goldsmith’s daughter. Walther von Stolzing is the aristocratic young knight who, driven by his desire for the woman offered as the prize, enters the contest only to find his inspired but unschooled singing rejected by some of the Mastersingers, middle-class burghers whose craftsman-like approach to art hints at the bourgeois division of labor Wagner railed against. With the help of the cobbler-poet Hans Sachs, Walther composes a song that weds romantic self-expression with socially consecrated norms and wins over the people because “it sounded so old / and yet it was so new.”
It is telling that Wagner resorted to comedy in depicting this rejuvenation of the body politic through art, and even more so that in São Paulo it cannot be staged. Mário adopts the plot of the song contest, but instead of opera he opts for the oratorio, a genre that is closely related but distinct in two key regards: first, the subject matter is sacred rather than secular, and second, the music is usually performed as a concert piece with little to no costuming, props, or dramatic action. Oratorios first gained popularity in early seventeenth-century Italy and often served as a substitute for operas during Lent, when the Catholic Church enforced a ban on public spectacles. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, their religious subject matter was no longer in vogue, and their lack of dramatic display seemed weirdly outdated in the context of the era’s ever more expansive theatricalism. In his Art-work of the Future (1849), Wagner denounced oratorios as “the sexless embryos of Opera” and an “unnatural abortion” of the “true” drama, in which “each separate art can only bare its utmost secret to their common public through a mutual parleying with the other arts.” Their failure to visualize the action aurally evoked was a symptom of social fragmentation; in contrast, the theater of the future would create a synthesis of the senses, and with it, a fusion of all classes with the Folk.

In a critique of Wagner, written at a time when his operas were being assimilated into the official repertoire of the Third Reich, Adorno argued that the aim of this drive toward synesthesia was to create the illusion of a self-generating work of art. Like the commodity form, this “phantasmagoria” dissimulates the social relations involved in its production in order to foster the fiction of communal integration—a dynamic dramatized in the reconciliation of the feudal and bourgeois orders enacted by Walther’s winning song and its acclamation by both the guild of master singers and the Volk. By contrast, what “As enfibraturas do Ipiranga” dramatizes is the failure of the phantasmagorical illusion in Brazil. The title recalls the foundational act of independence, yet in lieu of the univocal grito (cry), it depicts the collectivity as a composition of competing and ultimately irreconcilable “fibratures.” Instead of ending on a rousing song extolling the virtues of German culture, the piece concludes as the vanguard is lulled to sleep by My Madness, a shadowy figure who surfaces at odd intervals throughout Paulicéia desvairada as both the internal mistress and muse of the poet’s demented “school.” In the final lines, “the Green Gilt Youths and My Madness sleep eternally deaf; meanwhile, from the windows of the palaces, theatres, print shops, hotels—wide-open, but blind—there comes the enormous derision of whistles, cat-calls, and stamping of feet” (99). Deaf or blind: the fragmentation of the senses corresponds to a fragmented social order, just as the unfinished form of the oratorio indexes the incomplete embodiment of national culture in Brazil.

As a point of fact, however, readers do not see or hear the Conventional Orientalisms and Palsied Decrepitudes’ noisy disapprobation (except in the
mind’s ear), because “As enfibraturas” is not actually an oratorio but a seemingly unstageable libretto for a nonexistent score. Like *Prometeo vencedor*, the philosophical drama by José Vasconcelos discussed in chapter 1, the text resembles what Martin Puchner refers to as an “exuberant” closet drama—a play written-to-be-read that “willfully exceed(s) the limits of theatrical representation” and in doing so casts those limits into relief.79 Puchner contrasts the closet dramas of modernists such as Stéphane Mallarmé and Gertrude Stein with the Wagnerian imperative of total theatricality and the performative politics of the European avant-garde. Yet if, as he argues, this modernist antitheatricalism is deeply ambivalent—the hyphen betrays its dependence on the theatricalism it critiques—its ambivalence was even more marked among the Brazilian futuristas-cum-modernistas. Mário’s over-the-top oratorio does indeed lampoon Wagnerian and futurist fantasies of immediacy (only in a metaphorical sense is it possible to perform a play with 550,000 actors).80 But part of the joke is that the material and ideological infrastructure needed to sustain those fantasies is lacking in Brazil. One could even read the Shakespearean epigraph to the piece as a comment on the *disavowal* of theater at the Week of Modern Art: “O, woe is me / To have seen what I have seen, see what I see!” Spoken by Ophelia after she witnesses Hamlet’s apparent unraveling, the line evokes a traumatic sight that turns the seer mad by exposing the lie at the heart of social “reason”—a sight, perhaps, such as white actors wearing fake Indian headdresses and colored tights. But if the antitheatricalism of Brazilian modernismo is partly imposed, it also enables a curious kind of agency. As Puchner and others have noted, modernist closet dramas are often sites for the imaginative enactment of nonnormative modes of sexuality: sheltered from the strictures of society and liberated from the exigencies of the physical stage, male characters can change into women (and vice versa), or gender identification can be left ambiguous or undefined.81 Such is the case of My Madness, the coloratura soprano and figure for the author’s own broken but would-be lyric voice who comes crawling toward the Green-Gilt Youth across the Valley of Anhangabau. In *Die Meistersinger*, the song contest is capped off by nuptials: heterosexual desire drives artistic innovation and institutional change, inheritance is bequeathed on the basis of Walther’s hereditary as well as natural nobility (his innate musical talent), and his marriage to Eva assures the controlled reproduction of the race. In “As enfibraturas,” however, the star soloist is an epicenic subject who sees the social contradictions and is split, just as the oratorio (that “sexless opera-embryo”) is split between sight and sound.82 The strange, mystic recitatives of My Madness send the song contest spiraling into a shouting match between the Conventional Orientalisms and her followers, who (whether by coincidence or design) are gathered on a site that the historian James N. Green notes was a well-known cruising-spot for men in search of same-sex relations.83 The cautious innovations of the Green-Gilt Youth devolve into a frenzy of neologisms and exclamations of


desire for self-immolation before the singers lose their last shred of coherence, “shouting in irregular cadence” and “screaming” one-word epithets at their opponents (93). Finally, even their capacity for insult runs dry and they can only utter a blank space, which according to parenthetical instructions should be completed with “the filthiest word that the reader knows” (95). So much for the phantasmagorical illusion of a self-producing work of art.

The oratorio comes to a close as the Green-Gilt Youth shed tears of repentance and My Madness sings them to sleep with a lullaby. “Weep! Weep! Then sleep! . . . Your final kisses, your first tears / for the white fecundation!” Her voice convokes a brotherhood of intellectuals, off-key singers whose shared experience of failure sows the seeds of the future: “But in twenty years the sown fields will blossom! . . . You will have the harvest [cultura] of remembrance!” (97). This is a community constituted through a deferral of its promise to represent the totality, an avant-garde whose performative power works in retrospect. In a final flare of irony, the author often called the “pope” of modernismo interrupts the catcalls of the operatic elite and concludes his profane oratorio with the exclamation “LAUS DEO!” (99).

In Anima Nobile

As it turned out, the fecund tears of the modernistas did indeed reap a rich harvest of remembrance. By the end of the 1920s, the warring factions of the avant-garde had lionized the Week of Modern Art through their competing claims to its legacy, and in the 1930s the involvement of many modernistas in the expanding cultural and educational apparatuses helped endow it with the aura of a foundational myth. In 1942, when Mário addressed a group of intellectuals gathered in Rio to commemorate the twentieth anniversary, he referred to scenes he clearly assumed were familiar to his audience:

How did I have the courage to participate in that battle! It is true that I’ve been scandalizing my country’s intelligentsia for a while now with my artistic experiments [or experiences], but only ever exposed in books and articles, which means those experiments aren’t executed in anima nobile. I’m not present in body, and that softens the shock of stupidity. But how did I have the courage to say those verses in the face of jeering so rowdy I was unable to hear what Paulo Prado was shouting to me from the first row? . . . How did I manage to give a lecture on plastic arts, on the stairs of the Theater, surrounded by strangers who were roundly mocking and offending me?

Como tive coragem para participar daquela batalha! É certo que com minhas experiências artísticas muito que venho escandalizando
a intelectualidade do meu país, porém, expostas em livros e artigos, como que essas experiências não se realizam in anima nobile. Não estou de corpo presente, e isto abranda o choque da estupidez. Mas como tive coragem pra dizer versos diante duma vaia tão bulhenta que eu não escutava no palco o que Paulo Prado me gritava da primeira fila das poltronas? ... Como pude fazer uma conferência sobre artes plásticas, na escadaria do Teatro, cercado de anônimos que me caçoavam e ofendiam a valer?  

On the one hand, these scenes enact the quintessential vanguard move of establishing an adversarial role with the public; even the heavy-handed overtones of martyrdom and sacrifice recall the Promethean ethos of the avant-garde. Yet Mário is not the aggressor in this encounter. Far from adopting an assertive stance, he expresses disbelief at his own ability to withstand the audience’s ridicule, acknowledging his vulnerability and dwelling on the image of himself frozen before a crowd of hostile strangers who see and judge. Out of place on the operatic stage, this Brazilian Parsifal looks across the chasm to Paulo Prado, the coffee baron who just a few years later would publish his famous Retrato do Brasil (Portrait of Brazil), where he attributes the country’s “melancholic” character to the avarice and extravagance of slavery and the shameful “vice of our mestizo origins.” Prado (it appears) tries to offer Mário encouragement but he fails because the lines of communication are cut off, because all the money in São Paulo can’t silence the noise of the old order separating a not-quite-white intellectual from the rogue aristocrat whose money and prestige facilitate his appearance on the city’s premiere stage. Refusing the injunction to perform, Mário abandons the inner sanctuary of representation in a move toward the emerging mass public beyond the theater’s doors, though he doesn’t leave to go perform in the street and what he reads isn’t a “manifesto,” the favored genre of the futurist avant-garde; instead he delivers a lecture on art, a more scholarly, conventional genre, “exposing” himself once again to mockery in the lobby, o entre-lugar, or space in-between. Standing on the stairs leading to the vestibule adorned with the Venetian murals of Wagner’s operas, he enacts something similar to what Heather Love, in her readings of Walter Pater, calls an “epistemology of the vestibule,” convoking a community of subjects who occupy a “liminal, semipublic space” defined by way of “indecision” and “delay.” 

Why did this moment strike such a chord? Why were so many people invested in imagining a grown man quaking in fear? If Mário’s fellow participants and Mário himself continually retold the tale, I suggest, it is because the constitution of modernismo as an intellectual public and the paradoxical authority of modernismo’s pope are bound up in—and bound together by—a sense of backwardness and shame. In recalling his experience Mário demurs and insists, “My merit as a participant is the merit of others... I wouldn’t have had either the physical or moral force to look into the eyes of that
tempest of humiliation. . . If it had been up to me, I would have given up.”

He renounces his individual agency, transferring it to the emerging avant-garde, and it is his body that takes the hit: his visually striking physique coded as racially mixed and queerly asexual is where the lines separating stupidity from intelligence are drawn.