

**Crises in Turn-of-the-Century Argentina: Homophobia, Nationalism, and Modernity in the
Literature of Carlos Octavio Bunge**

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Prepared for delivery at the 2010 Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, Toronto,
Canada October 6-9, 2010.

Crises in Turn-of-the-Century Argentina: Homophobia, Nationalism, and Modernity in the
Literature of Carlos Octavio Bunge*

* I have changed the title of this presentation to “Carlos Octavio Bunge, or the Man Who Wasn’t”

“Usted no es hombre para esas cosas” (qtd in Cárdenas and Payá 214). This unsettling diagnosis was offered by the physician employed by Argentina’s Escuela Naval Militar after 15 year old Carlos Octavio Bunge was admitted to the infirmary for suffering a nervous breakdown. During this *sui generis* meeting between doctor, school director, father, and son, it was determined that he should be excused from the military school and allowed to pursue a career as a writer (215). Young Carlos Octavio was deemed incapable of performing the particularly manly role of military officer; not a man of arms, but of the pen, *de pluma*.

Perhaps in spite of this beginning, Bunge would grow to become a prolific author, publishing fiction, legal opinions, education manuals, and psychological and sociological studies of international fame. As Jorge Salessi notes in *médicos maleantes y maricas*, Bunge was a key contributor to the legal and hygienist discourses regarding *fin de siglo* degeneration (185). He was fascinated by “feminine” men and “masculine” women, and concerned by immigrants and members of the working class who were seen as threats to the status quo (Salessi 189). This concern is also evident in Bunge’s creative work, which exposes the fragility of gender roles in a key moment of economic, political, and social stress in Argentina. I would like to add to this discussion an analysis of the tropes Bunge uses to link gender and erotic desire. I want to show how specific characters are utilized to create erotic tension, to comment on the boundaries between public and private, and even to compensate for the masculinity that the author was judged to lack.

As Salessi points out, the author struggled with issues of gender and sexuality throughout his life. A telling example is the commemorative edition of the magazine *Nosotros*, published the month following the author’s death in 1918, in which Manuel Gálvez describes the first time that they met in 1903:

Era ya célebre. Su fecundidad, su talento, la originalidad de su espíritu y la novedad de sus ideas, inquietaban en el mundo de la sociedad y en el de las letras. Agréguese a todo esto, un singular tipo de hombre del norte, una distinción aristocrática, cierto dandysmo en el vestir y un temperamento rebelde y agresivo, y se comprenderá que, durante dos o tres años, Octavio fuese ‘un caso’. (365)

We can see how Bunge held influence not only through his writing, but through his unique and original “spirit,” as Gálvez calls it. Describing his pose as a dandy and his unstable personality, Gálvez hardly veils an underlying desire to pathologize his supposed mental and corporal deviance. We should note that Gálvez is judging from a unique position: as both a leader of the Nationalist movement (*nacionalismo*), with the accompanying anti-positivist (and homophobic) baggage, and as Bunge’s brother in law. He would have been privy to the family’s intimate discussions and internal arguments, as well as its unspeakable secrets. Gálvez is cordial enough in his obituary, though he marks Bunge as a man who does not fit in, seeming to repeat: “Usted no es hombre para esas cosas”.

Bunge’s first major creative publication, *Thespis*, is a collection of short stories published in 1907. Following such naturalist works as *En la sangre* and *La Bolsa*, in this work Bunge also comments on shifting racial and class structures and changing notions of gender and sexuality. He opens with a carefully orchestrated prologue in which he mixes *modernista* aesthetics with personal confession:

Pues este libro es un manojo de cuentos y fantasías, escrito en los más varios estados de ánimo. Presenta, puedo decirlo, distintos personajes y diversos estilos. Por mi rostro han pasado también las máscaras de lino, ya trágicas, ya cómicas... ¿No es acaso todo escritor—poeta, dramaturgo ó novelista, —la sucesiva encarnación de sus personajes? Él siente, actúa y habla por ellos, ellos por él. (8)

Willing the audience to an autobiographical reading, Bunge clearly describes the two overarching sections of the book, “máscaras trágicas” and “máscaras cómicas”, as representative of aspects of his own life. The mask is a central metaphor in this collection, applying not simply to dramatic convention, but to narrative structure and the relationship between the text and the author. José Quiroga mentions the liberating potential of the mask in his introduction to *Tropics of Desire*, and in Bunge’s case we could say that the character as mask metaphor serves to open a discursive space for exploration. Rather than hiding, the mask reflects the author. As in Eve Sedgwick’s definition of the closet, it holds potential discursive energy. I will focus on two short stories, the first, “El Chucro,” deals with masculinity in excess, while the second, “El Capitán Pérez,” shows masculinity *in absentia*. These two stories remind us of the author’s struggle with his own gender performance, and, as he admits function as a testing ground for his “fantasies”.

The environment in “El Chucro” is folkloric, set on the banks of the Río Paraná. A mysterious creature, “El Chucro”, referred to by the “popular imagination” as an insatiable ogre or supernatural beast, has been stealing cattle in the area and has even been blamed for the disappearance of Pepa la Gallega, a cook on the local *estancia*. Bunge emphasizes El Chucro’s mythological characteristics, relying on rural legend to generate suspicion and intrigue. The provincial authorities are called upon to deal with this terrifying creature. While searching the

islands where he is rumored to live, Peñálvez, the police scribe, is captured by El Chucro, in reality a leather-faced gaucho, who with “herculean arms” drags the frightened officer back to his camp, where he is bound.

There Peñálvez is shocked to find that Pepa has been living with El Chucro for the past eight months, but even more so to see how she is acting. When she lived on the *estancia*, Pepa was famous for transgressing feminine protocol: “Respondía a su marido, pegaba á sus hijos, insultaba á los peones, encarábase con el mismo patrón y vociferaba el día entero. Propios y extraños tenían miedo á su lengua ponzoñosa y á su genio luciferino” (49). She used to dominate men with her devilish speech and even her physical strength. Add to this the fact that Pepa is a foreigner and she is clearly the type of woman that poses a threat to society, recalling what turn of the century *higienistas* referred to as the “third sex” (Salessi 51-52). Though, if she was previously too independent, too *masculine*, she has now been tamed, disciplined, and silenced. She is a changed woman, now subservient to El Chucro’s every demand. She is also unmoved by the desperate pleas uttered by Peñálvez; even when he reminds her of the domestic life that awaits her should she decide to set him free and return with him to the *estancia*: “Todos te recibirán con los brazos abiertos, Pepa, si quieres volver...Se sabe que el Chucro te robó contra tu voluntad... ¡Nadie te diría una palabra!” (51). Still she is silent, and we start to wonder whether she may actually be content with her new role in this master/slave relationship. Could she actually *like* living with El Chucro?

In the end the gaucho savagely kills Peñálvez, and despite orders to the contrary, Pepa places a cross on the gravesite. Infuriated, he bashes her on the head and leaves her there to die. She eventually recovers and in a symbolic gesture, drags herself back to El Chucro’s side, leaving the reader to ponder the agency invested in this character. Described as a “polluelo friolento” (60) it seems that she is simply incapable of breaking away from this mythical gaucho. She seems unsavory for her dominating personality while on the *estancia*, but she is depicted as transgressive for abandoning—or at least not returning to—her family. Her desire is also transgressive; she is at once fascinated and paralyzed by the exacerbated virility of El Chucro. Returning to the mask metaphor, we could ask whose fantasy this really is, or whose desire is reflected by this character. I think we could even ask whether the fascination with El Chucro responds to a masochistic undercurrent, a desire to be possessed by barbarism.

A similar formula is used in “El Capitán Pérez.” In this story the narrator paints a grim picture from the beginning: “Primero perdió en especulaciones toda la fortuna el padre y jefe, don Adolfo. Poco después murió, dejando ‘en la calle’ á su viuda, doña Laura, y sus cuatro hijos: Adolfo, Ignacio, Laurita y Rosa, la pequeña, á quien llamaban ‘Coca’” (175). As with *La Bolsa*, the crisis of the financial market reveals the fragility upper class hegemony. This reminds us of the overarching historical panorama in which the influx of foreigners and the growth of new

industries began to change the dynamics of power between Argentina's "oligarchical" class and the rest of the population.

Left with few alternatives, the remaining members of the de Itualde family, Adolfo and his two sisters, decide to move to Tandil, a small town in the Province of Buenos Aires, while Ignacio remains in the capital where is stationed in the military. This is clearly a family in distress, and when a wealthy eligible bachelor named Mariano Vázquez sends word that he will be moving to Tandil, the sisters immediately begin to plot how they might take advantage of this opportunity. Coca chides her older sister: "Es preciso que usemos todas nuestras armas...para vencerlo y que quede en casa, contigo, y si tú no quieres ó no puedes, aunque sea conmigo..." (179). "Conquering" don Mariano seems their most direct way to improve their economic situation. As with the previous story, attempting to dominate men will have disastrous consequences. The sisters propose contrasting methods of courtship, with Laura intending to be "buena y franca," and Coca "coqueta y mentirosa," (180). The plot advances when the sisters agree to employ these methods on Vázquez.

He is promptly invited over for dinner and when the conversation turns to the availability of the two girls, Coca boldly claims that she is being pursued by a Captain and friend of their brother named Pérez. The narrator helps us understand her logic: "Lo importante era inventarse un novio, ya que no lo tenía verdadero, para despertar los celos en Vázquez... ¡Los hombres debían sentir los celos antes del amor!..." (184). Coca intentionally creates a homosocial rivalry between Vázquez and Capitán Pérez, hearkening Sedgwick's analysis of the Girardian erotic triangle. It seems that in order for Vázquez to feel love for her, he must first feel desire for Pérez. This imaginary figure becomes the standard against which all men in Tandil are measured; a mirror reflecting a collective homosocial desire.

As Vázquez grows ever more desperate to discover the identity of his rival, the sisters literally flesh out this fantasy. Piece by piece we learn about Pérez as Vázquez does, through his questions and the girls' inventions; through the filter created by the erotic triangle. Finally, Vázquez can take no more and blurts out to the town judge that Coca must be in love with someone else, some captain named Pérez. This revelation spreads like wildfire: from the judge to the doctor to the pharmacist, to the *Club Social*. By nightfall Tandil is consumed with intrigue: Coca de Itualde is engaged to Capitán Pérez. This is of course completely false, but once Coca's "engagement" is made public there is no way to stop the flow of information. All of Coca's now *former* suitors feel defeated by this unknown captain. Pérez is a dispositive that facilitates the idealization of a masculine subject while he interpellates almost the entire male population of Tandil in this homosocial rivalry.

One of Tandil's two journalists, Jacinto Luque, actually claims to have met the illustrious gentleman among the high society of Buenos Aires. The narrator explains how other supposed

rivals follow his lead: “Habiendo afirmado Jacinto Luque la suma distinción del capitán Pérez, todos los ‘dandies’ del Tandil declararon conocerlo, siquiera de vista. El presunto novio de la beldad local llegó así á tener cierto renombre en el pueblo. Los innumerables pretendientes de Coca excusaban su derrota adornando al vencedor de excepcionales cualidades” (195). Notably, the group charged with visualizing Pérez is the not the de Itualde sisters, but the town dandies, men like our author. It is through their collective imagination that the reader participates in this rivalry. The narrative invites us to share in this process by parsing out fragments of information; the audience, like the public, is also captivated by the intrigue.

Thus integrated into this melodrama, we are also surprised when the town’s other reporter, Publio Esperoni, inspired by jealousy, claims that Pérez has been accused of “traición a la República” in a Buenos Aires newspaper (200). This is a monumental accusation, but one that receives little explanation, a discursive silence that begs the audience to speculate along with the shocked *Tandilenses*. Though Bunge compares this debacle to the Dreyfus Affair, I think we can also connect “El asunto Pérez” to the scandal that occurred in Argentina’s Escuela Superior de Guerra in 1906—the same year that this text was written—in which two officials were accused of having homosexual relations (Bazán 165). In this way the narrative itself seems more like a piece of gossip, one that serves as a preview for a select group of “entendidos”. Also, in keeping with Sedgwick’s argument, it brings the homosocial rivalry between Pérez and Vázquez; Esperoni and Luque back into the realm of desire. After all, the debate quickly turns personal, with Esperoni calling the long-haired aspiring poet Luque an “afeminado esteta” (202). This confirms the centrality of homophobia to the competitive relationship in which the entire town has been implicated by referencing another turn of the century scandal, that of Oscar Wilde.

As we have seen the gender tropes that Bunge utilizes in his fiction allow the author to explore alternative forms of masculinity and femininity from the safety of literary convention. Pepa is a deviant character for her transgression of gender norms, but even more so for her queer desire. In contrast, Pérez is a fantasy, a symbol, but also the reflection of a collective desire. These stories rely on an exacerbated masculinity which stems from a profound sense of collective (and individual) anxiety. But I think these characters respond to something more than just the author’s desire to explore deviance; they point to the relationship between family structure, gender performance, and intimate speech. It seems that it is only through the failure of the patriarchal model that gender deviance is made intelligible; that the social and economic concerns prevalent in these stories are also problems of family dynamics and intimacy. Gender and the family seem to be mutually dependant: when one fails, the other will surely follow. Importantly, this connection is made through intimate speech like gossip, rumor, and intrigue. El Chucro is born of gossip and Pérez is seemingly willed into existence by Tandil’s vortex of speculation. These discursive mechanisms enact the limitations of speech, and in that sense serve as a method of social control, bringing us back to the boundaries between public and private. In the case of Bunge’s fiction these limitations are not simply expressed by correcting

deviant gender roles, but they are reflected in the narration of the family and in the space, the mirror, that divides author from his characters.

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