Pre-Raphaelite Female Imagery in Spanish American Poetry

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Much has been written about the influence of French literature on the Spanish American literary movement of the nineteenth century, *Modernismo.* The Spanish critic Juan Valera in his "Prologue" to Rubén Darío's seminal *Azul, ...* referred to the "Parisian spirit" (41) that pervaded the book and called it "mental gallicism" (62).[1] Yet, although we know that the Nicaraguan Darío and the Colombian José Asunción Silva much admired the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood (Saporta Sternbach 38), little has been said about it as a source of *Modernista* inspiration. Perhaps this oversight is due to the fact that it is not known which Pre-Raphaelite paintings or writings influenced the *Modernistas* and that Pre-Raphaelitism is an English artistic movement that started earlier than *Modernismo,* which began around 1880 and continued into the early twentieth century. These two artistic movements, however, share several characteristics that point toward a unity of taste, which is articulated with a preference for details that fill the canvas and a richness of language that pervades the page, and a conspicuous common attitude toward woman.

In this essay I will compare the representation of woman in a poem by Darío, "Ecce Homo" (1885), with the female imagery of one of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's female portraits, *Bocca Baciata* (1859). Darío's poem belongs to the early part of *Modernismo*, when aestheticism and decadentism predominated. When Darío praises Rossetti as the "exquisite Pre-Raphaelite" in his essay on "Max Nordau" (1905) (171), he reveals an admiration for the artist and the Pre-Raphaelites and acknowledges that they share as leaders of their movements the

language of Symbolism through which they articulate their iconic attitude towards woman.

Spanish American *Modernismo* is a literary movement that brought to completion the cultural independence of the region. By bringing together the word pregnant with the connotations of Symbolism with the precision and passion for form of Parnassianism, *Modernismo* gave form to Spanish America's feelings and ideas, and at the same time revolutionized the metric and language of Spanish literature. *Modernismo* should not be confused with English Modernism or with Brazilian *Modernismo*, which appeared after the crisis of the turn of the century and are similar to Spanish American vanguardism in their concerted effort to break with tradition, to search for new forms, values, and themes with which to express the alienation and despair of the individual.

Under the influence of *Modernismo*, the Spanish American artists eagerly caught up, in forty years, with one hundred years of European literature. As the Mexican poet José Emilio Pacheco sustains, *Modernismo's* original explosion in the Spanish American letters takes place in "a moment of universal circulation of ideas and styles" (xi). Yet, there is a common *Weltanschauung* shared by the movements that points toward a predetermined desire by the *Modernistas* to emulate the English brotherhood with which the Spanish American poets identified.

Modernismo identified with the sensualism and metaphysical quest found in the Pre-Raphaelite symbolic depiction of woman. Both movements lovingly depicted women as objects of their devotion while capturing their mysterious and enigmatic side; misogynist feelings and fear of women imbued their work. Their repetitive poses capture an abstraction filled with ambiguous meaning and with the artist's need to see himself as the owner of the image, which is an object of his gaze and artistry. The woman the *Modernistas* chose to represent "seemed to emphasize negative aspects of womanhood" despite her beauty (Saporta Sternbach 44). The same sentiment is found in Rossetti's portraits, where he toned down the models' fea-

tures and conflated several women's faces into a composite of stereotyped physical aspects that contained for him sexual allure, such as the rosebud mouth, the sweeping curve of the neck, and the sensuous and ethereal expression (Casteras 16). This yearning sensuality was deeply disturbing for the public. In Rossetti's work we can perceive a tension between the contradictory iconography of "blessed damozels and merciless ladies" (Praz 49), who allegorically represent polarized values of good and evil. Even more, in Pre-Raphaelite and *Modernista* aesthetics the transitory quality of women's beauty serves as a reminder of death.

Both *Modernismo* and Pre-Raphaelitism reacted to capitalism, which had placed materialism and money over art and beauty, with an aestheticism and interest in the occult. Because of their aestheticism, which is vividly sensual, Pre-Raphaelitism and *Modernismo* were misunderstood and suffered vilification. Just as the Pre-Raphaelites behaved outside the social stringent norms and were amply criticized for that, deserving a chapter in Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1892) where they were characterized as hysterical and degenerate, the bohemian desire to *épater les bourgeois* defined the *Modernista* art and course of action and their reception or rejection in the region. The *Modernistas* and Pre-Raphaelites were denounced as aesthetes with a love for preciosity and for art for art's sake, who sought unity in beauty, in detail, and in exotic historicism. The Pre-Raphaelites wished to return to the medieval period, a poignant reaction against the modern times:

> They saw that medieval modes of apprehending reality were productive of great and satisfying works of art, as the modern modes of mixed science and sentimentality were not. They attempted, by exploring the possibilities of allegory and symbolism, to restore a harmony they thought modern life had lost. (House 129)

The *Modernistas* shared with the Pre-Raphaelites "their disgust with contemporary changes [which] led them to believe that beauty existed only in *preindustrial* settings" (Modernismo, Modernity, 150).

Both artistic movements share the belief in the transposition of the arts into one another. This idea was embraced with little hesitation in England, probably due to the European tradition of the 'sister arts'. There is an on-going cycle of influences where the Pre-Raphaelites influenced writers such as D'Annunzio, while they themselves "were saturated with suggestions from the literary field" (Praz 5). The influence of literature on Rossetti, who was a poet and translator of early Italian poetry, is well known.

In Spanish American letters, instead, the transposition of the arts together with the use of synesthesia had become a sign of corruption and decadence (Olivares 68). Horace's simile *ut pictura poesis* ("as is painting so is poetry") in *Ars Poetica* had been duly forgotten. For Valera in the prologue quoted earlier, literature was above all other arts because its medium of expression, its "raw material" -- the word -- was in itself a form of thought. Hence, it was a modern foresight of *Modernismo*, a welcoming of evolution and progress (because each art improved on the other) to espouse the transposition of the arts, which is precisely what Darío did in his essay "Catulle Mendèz. Parnassians and Decadents" (1886). In this essay about the French poet, dedicated to Sarah Bernhardt, Darío states:

> Some believe and are sure that to take the art of the word to the realm of the other arts, for example of painting, sculpture, and music, is to overextend poetry and prose. No. It is to give all its sovereignty to the written thought, it is to make of the human gift par excellence a refined medium of expression, it is to utilize all the sonorities of language by exposing all the clarity of spirit of what it conceives. (168-169)

Rossetti and Darío were attracted to occultism, spiritualism, and mesmerism as alternatives to a less materialist conception of the world and as forms of ancient knowledge that had been forgotten. Rossetti sought refuge in a simple medievalism to contend against the materialist changes that were responsible for English men losing "their belief in the Invisible..." as Carlyle said (Hunt 262). Since the same incredulity was shared in Spanish America, Darío compared negatively modern progress as the enemy of dream. Both artists

were strongly attracted to the supernatural and had to struggle with the Christian religion that was part of their *Weltanschauung* to find a middle position between scholastic notions and pantheistic theories. Darío cultivated the fantastic in his short stories where reincarnation, ghosts, and occultism were treasured themes that reflected his own beliefs in the esoteric. Rossetti, an agnostic, also had great interest in the supernatural, as reflected in his tales and in his philosophy of painting which demanded an "almost supernatural connection" between the original and its representation (Sonstroem 32).

For these artists, spirituality is a state of the soul reflected in the struggle for perfection of form. Rossetti and Darío truly desired to evoke through their paintings and poetry a spiritual harmony, which could be perfectly captured through the arts. Darío searches for this unity in the "Pythagorean constellations" ("En las constelaciones," 1157), and Rossetti in the "hand and soul" of his alter ego Chiaro (157). This incorporation of esoteric traditions was due as much to a desire to confront the alienation of modern times as to a need for integration. Darío and Rossetti embraced Neoplatonism because it reflected the belief that the arts are interpreters of a universal harmony that counterbalances the disintegration and alienation felt by the artists. The *Modernistas* and Pre-Raphaelites sought to resolve, through their art, questions, "about fundamental values and the use of material resources, establishing a dual vision that was simultaneously philosophic and practical" (Modernismo, Modernity, 21).

The imagery of female beauty as expressed by Rossetti and Darío gives form to their spiritual quest for harmony by connecting the concepts of Neoplatonism with the ideal woman. In the iconic beauty of the heavenly lady, who held the key to all the mysteries of the Universe and the artist's soul, the Neoplatonic symbolic correspondences that sought beauty in art and the belief in the pre-existence of the soul and of love as a mutual recognition and meeting of twin souls coalesce. Rossetti's and Darío's female icons reflected their own souls, the *état d'âme*, and thus were vacant of any personal traits. Darío's women appear like cold, perfect statues of alabaster, just as Rossetti's female portraits lack psychological character and are

more like empty abstractions; they represent ideas rather than women of flesh and bone. The artists were not escaping through their art, but were actively discovering or uncovering the lost harmony of their souls.

This depiction of woman is not unique to our artists but characterizes *Modernismo* and Pre-Raphaelitism as we can see in poems by other *Modernistas* like the Cuban Julián del Casal such as "Tras la ventana" (1886), "Camafeo" (1891), or his collection of ten poems, "Mi museo ideal" (1892) inspired by Gustave Moreau's paintings. The same can be said of the Pre-Raphaelites who reworked themes in which women were the centre of attention, such as Sir John Everett Millais's *Ophelia* (1853), William Holman Hunt's *Il Dolce far Niente* (1860), Sir Edward Burne-Jones's *The Golden Stairs* (1880), John William Waterhouses's *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* (1893), among others.

Although Darío has recorded in much of his poetry his fascination for women and eros ("Loor" (1884), "Garçonnière" (1896), "Venus" (1889), "Leda" (1892), or "Carne celeste de la mujer! Arcilla..." (1905), etc.) and Rossetti has devoted a series of portraits in which he immortalized his predilection for stunners (*Veronica Veronese* (1872), *Proserpine* (1877), *Pandora* (1869), etc.), I have chosen "Ecce Homo" and *Bocca Baciata* because they singularly contain the anxiety the artists felt towards woman, who was for them both redeemer and evildoer. In these works we see woman in her full sensuality and carnality. Darío paints the female body with definite strokes, just as Rossetti lovingly portrays his model. The detail and sensuality of these descriptions, however, emphasizes the transitoriness of woman's beauty and is part of the artists personal quest for transcendence.

Darío's poem "Ecce Homo" (444-455) is a lengthy social denunciation, in which woman has a central place, of the material values of the times, which the poet inscribes in the beloved's body where all the feelings of hope and disillusionment coalesce. In twenty-six stanzas the poet invokes a God that has forgotten humanity, criticizes society and nature, examines the politics of the new Spanish American nations and the much-taunted values of progress and education, and

concludes that it all is worthless.

In it Darío gives us a detailed depiction of an "indolent" woman, lying about; the image reflects the torpor and *spleen* of a time that God has forgotten and that has forgotten God (stanzas 1-11). Woman stands for the repetitive dullness and conspicuous consumption of modern life, which has turned nature -- another female symbol -- into "something repugnant," unable to inspire the poet anymore. This attitude towards nature and woman reflects the aesthete's belief that artists must create an artificial environment of beauty that can be regulated by man. Darío's criticism encompasses all of society, princesses and whores, because he expresses his complete disenchantment with the times he must live in. The poet falls inevitably in a nihilism that reflects his complete alienation: the bourgeoisie is the enemy, but the proletariat with its "eternal chain around its neck" (450) cannot be seen as an ally either. Darío with one stroke presents the anxiety of the artist caused by woman and the social changes occurring under the sign of progress.

Through this entire diatribe God is a continuous presence; He is summoned because He has forgotten man on earth and He is perceived as a last refuge from these tumultuous days. Yet, the poet fears that He might have abandoned man to his *spleen*. Only religion and beauty provide solace to the artist. The artist's religion, however, is not the traditional Catholic faith, but one that promotes spiritual regeneration, and an alternative to the soulless and materialist progress of the modern times. The artist embraces a series of spiritual beliefs that free the imagination; similar to what Dijkstra calls "intellectual mysticism" in Europe (236). The poet seeks in woman's beauty a refuge from the chaos of modern times:

> Beauty! Women! .../Oh magnificent beings,/who are nothing else/but a herd of beautiful Lucifers/Give me one so I can see her: she is very lovely;/of pure form and incomparable sweetness;/she is a pretty rose/that charms with her splendid freshness! (452)

The poet proceeds to undress this woman and to strip her of her

artificial beauty: off with her costume (corset), off with her make up (rouge and fake braid) because he wants "true beauty" (452):

> Loose, loose the hair/down the silky throat,/and the eyes open/to the delight and to the pleasure awoken;/the white and smooth forehead, crowned/by playful curls,/and half-opened the red mouth/that is the origin of many temptations;/in her naked and palpitating breast,/the softness of a Greek statue;/ limp the hanging arm,/and fat the thigh where lust plays/with delectable burning;/curves that belong to a supple model,/and the shoulders poised and fallen/such as a dove ready to fly. (452)

Woman is described in all her sensual loveliness. Her hair, that powerful symbol of her sexuality, is loose and out of control; the emblematic colours of white for her skin and teeth, and red for her lips emphasize the perfection of this being; and her body is presented in unusual detail. The breasts, arms, thigh, curves and shoulders are depicted with a series of similes that remind us of the beauty of a perfect Greek statue. Darío, however, seems to be distancing himself ironically from the Parnassianist ideal of perfection, by stressing her carnality and potential for evil. This woman is supple, lustful, burning and posed to fly; she is not a frozen, childlike and innocent figure. The transformation from fresh and pure flower to lustful and lascivious *femme fatale* lies in the evident delight she takes in awakening desire through her sexual autonomy. In the end, this natural beauty is dissected with a scalpel, leaving us with a truth which is beyond the artifice of modern society: underneath all female beauty there is a skeleton, wherein lies death.

These sobering thoughts lead us to a search for pure beauty, a beauty that is not to be found in any real woman; after all the connection of woman with death has been made clear. A sacrificial slaughter then takes place in which this "magnificent being" is left naked and butchered: "The rough knife plunges in her breast,/and we can see the muscles and arteries, and everything, and everything, and the naked truth/showing its miseries..." (453). This dissection is a violent metaphor that leaves woman most vulnerable. Her breasts are naked

and "the roundness full/of luxuriating life,/are nothing more but compressed flesh" (453). The sexual autonomy and attractiveness of this woman has been stripped away with a destructive and analytical misogynist fury, which reminds us that she is nothing more than a "sack of bones and flesh" (453). The poet sadistically overpowers the woman who has been divested of her beauty and agency to then continue his quest for Truth.

This quest will take Darío to Her, the Neoplatonic notion of a twin soul which gives true peace and calm. The twin soul being true resides inside him, in his own soul (just as in Rossetti's alter ego Chiaro in "Hand and Soul"): "Here in my heart I keep/my small Eden illuminated/by the light of an indefinite dawn/where, in the midst of the tempest, we find calm/together *She* and I, /my adored, my beauty.../Our souls kiss sweetly" (455). It is at this point of the poem that mystical inspiration and the ideal woman come together. The religiosity of the quest lies in the fact that it takes place in a metaphysical world of ideas and imagination. The door to this world is the beauty of a real woman, but she is just the entry to a more spiritual and transcendent world. While her beauty here on earth can cause harm and be a source of evil, as she passes on to the higher realm of the heavens, she fulfills her transcendent potential and can eventually meet with her twin soul, the artist.

The earthly woman is no longer a source of comfort; she is completely obliterated since Darío and Rossetti pursue a Neoplatonic ideal of perfect beauty that reflects the woman's soul. Their fascination for and hostility against woman leads them to destroy their beloved creatures by turning them into empty objects of their desire or quest. As Jullian writes, the Pre-Raphaelites: "created a new type of beauty when they imposed on their contemporaries a choice between a threatening or sacrificed version of the Renaissance ideal [...] woman" (45).

Rossetti's obsession with women's beauty responds to a society where women were more and more constricted to specific roles and "art provided an approved way of articulating questions of sex" (Marsh

78). For Rossetti, woman and art became a natural and effectual manner to respond to a social fabric under stress, since he saw "an analogy between love, metaphysical insight, and the contemplation of art" (Stein 132). *Bocca Baciata* was painted from Fanny Cornforth and commissioned by George Boyce. The inspiration for this painting comes from the Italian poet Boccaccio: "The mouth that has been kissed loses not its freshness; still it renews itself even as does the moon" (Pollock 128). Although Rossetti does not dissect woman with the same scalpel that Darío employs in his poem, the painting elaborates every carnal detail of this lovely woman, devoiding her of any personal qualities; to the extent that in its time its contemporaries perceived the painting as an immodest, indecent and pornographic picture (Marsh 86). *Bocca Baciata* is a key turning point for the artist from medieval, narrative watercolours to "single figure paintings of sensuous women" (Pollock 128). Art mirrors a dream rather than actual life (Casteras 15-16) and Rossetti moves through self-conscious artifice from the depiction of heavenly *Madonnas* to that of *femmes fatales*. During this new phase, Rossetti painted his stunners and invested them with an abundance of meaning, since for him women had the potential of enclosing the ultimate mystery. As he writes in "True Woman": "How strange a thing to be what man can know/But as a sacred secret!" (93).

As Pollock points out, we should hesitate to call these paintings portraits because they lack a psychological imprint of the model. The representation is more iconic, actually fetishistic, than interpretative of personal qualities. What Rossetti seeks to capture is physical loveliness. The models in these paintings are the same (much as Darío's women) and a remote, abstract look characterizes their anonymity. As Jerome Hamilton Buckley remarks in "The Fear of Art":

> Drawn from countless models and from pure imagination, the type of the Beloved varied little from picture to picture, from poem to poem. Her head poised upon an odd 'swanlike' neck, her lips slightly parted, she peered nostalgically from a Florentine casement, [...] with the same bemused 'commemorative' eyes [...]. (191)

In *Bocca Baciata* the female body is fragmented into a *corp morcelé* primarily through the fetishization of the mouth. The flowers and roses present in a trellis and in the necklace, which possibly suggest the female genitals, surround this woman who has just been kissed. The rose is a sexual flower belonging to the iconography of love, which contrasts with the religious symbolism of the lily. The sensuality of the velvet robe, the period-less dress and jewellery, all create a fantasy of a woman. The apple on the right, a symbol of the sinner, expresses that deep-rooted anxiety that became a fascination for the Pre-Raphaelites: the fallen woman. As for Darío, in Rossetti's painting woman can represent art, beauty, and soul, but is also a sign of danger and seduction. The ambivalent meaning of the *femme fatale* is confirmed since Eve is also a positive sign, the mother of us all. Woman possesses a polarized meaning; on one side of the coin is Mary Magdalene, on the other lies the Virgin Mary.

Darío's and Rossetti's women are all potential saviours even at their most evil, because they are able to awaken in their creators a desire that, although sexual in nature, has spiritual reverberations. When the borderline between science and magic becomes as fluid as that between the delight in terrestrial beauty and the worship of divine goodness, the beautiful woman synchretically expresses what is true in every object or phenomenon in nature as it partakes of the celestial energy (Panofsky 133-134). Dijkstra argues that in the Victorian period "the male who roamed from woman to woman was seen as a poet in search of the ideal. Among the variegated shadows of a single undifferentiated form, he made a ceaseless, heroic search for the perfect embodiment of his sense of beauty" (224). Darío and Rossetti could justify their passion for women and beauty since their quest for love and the ideal woman was supported by the Platonic metaphysical concept of the One (Ideal form) and the many (matter), as applied to woman. Woman's divinity was identified with her partaking of the spiritual substance, which is the essence of the matter that constitutes all souls (*Rubén Darío*, 92).

For Darío and Rossetti love and sex had a sacred origin, they shared in the divine, and art was the mediator between the artists' transcen-

dent quest and the magical, mysterious power of love residing in woman. In the Victorian age sexuality and sanctity were opposed but complementary aspects of womanhood (Marsh 9). As God is everywhere He is also in the woman. She holds the key to decipher the Universe, and the attraction between man and woman becomes an integral part of a universal harmony. Sexual love and the male/female union is a means to a primordial pleasure found before separation from the whole and a way to approach divinity, the One. In a woman's body a fragment of paradise resides and man can find for a moment eternity.

Through this Neoplatonic interpretation of love, the ideology of courtly love is inscribed in the works we have seen. In the *Modernistas* as in the Pre-Raphaelites "a large element of their artistic inspiration came from this very desire to elevate and idealize women" (Marsh 18). Jan Marsh remarks that the Middle Ages was a romantic refuge from technological and industrial progress: "The code of chivalry was, for example, seriously elaborated as the basis of the nineteenth-century English gentlemen's sense of honour, and attentive courtship of married women was accepted as a legitimate form of adultery" (93). Furthermore, the legendary heroes and heroines "were conceived as types of true Victorian masculinity and femininity, and as models for idealized relations between the sexes" (94). Darío and Rossetti's yearning for a more primordial age led them to embrace Neoplatonism and courtly love, which transformed the beloved into a cult object. The chivalric paradigm, which provided them with an infinite source of inspiration, put Darío and Rossetti in touch with the duality of love and death, the physical and the spiritual. This ideology also fitted society's attitude toward woman. Woman was a mysterious and mindless being that had to be protected and prevented "from getting befuddled by thought" (Dijkstra 188).

The preoccupation with romantic medievalism was very much in vogue in London during 1855-1858 as the themes, costumes, and heraldic devices in art and literature show (Ball Bandelin 39). Rossetti's translations of the early Italian poets made him aware of the concept of chivalric love, and his father had carried out investigation

on Dante and Medieval Neoplatonism. In Darío's case the chivalric system is perhaps less obvious. Yet he embraced with fruition the Neoplatonic ideology of analogy or correspondences. As a Symbolist, Darío believed in the poet as a seer of cosmic correspondences, who articulated them in the word. Darío perceived the Universe as "a vast network of signs" containing "the enigmatic unity of creation as a whole" (Skyrme 21). His attitude towards woman could be encapsulated in the courtly love system, which stemmed from Neoplatonism and analogy: "Whatever physical stimulus the man may have found in woman, the poet certainly saw in the female body the incarnation of the enigma of the universe and in the act of love a sacrament of communion with its motive spirit, music and mystery in one" (Skyrme 27).

This Neoplatonic chivalrous quest has at times a mystic undertone, which has led critics to interpret our artists' work as quasi-religious. Skyrme, for example, identifies Darío's eroticism as deeply seated in mysticism (27), and Doughty remarks that "Rossetti entered imaginatively, with all the intensity of his poetic nature, into that service of the soul whose symbol is idealized woman, for him the soul's image" (162). Darío and Rossetti claimed, by advocating analogical relations, that women could contain the heavens. In this manner they transformed religion into an active fusion of spirit and flesh. The woman as soul, as incarnate of the spirit, is the light that guides Darío and Rossetti. They try to preserve the fantasy of the heavenly woman by separating "body's and soul's beauty" (Wiehe 119). This mysticism did not, however, mask the sensual pulsations that drive the quest of our two artists. Most critics seemed only to recognize in *Bocca Baciata* women's ability to awake desire in man because, like Darío's woman, they are "beautiful lucifers," eluding altogether the fusion of flesh and spirit that reflected Rossetti's own belief that "a mutual sexual desire would result in a blended, mutual spirituality, a condition that is really what [he] meant by salvation" (Sonstroem 28).

Neoplatonic analogy comes to fruition in the artists' depiction of women. The symbolic richness of detail in painting and of hyper-aesthesia in poetry are intuitive efforts to aesthetically capture the

moment of harmony and complete beauty. Poetry and painting emanate from the same source: the quest for transcendent beauty. The artists had to reconcile in their muse or ideal woman their private metaphors produced by what Casteras calls, referring to Rossetti, "a brooding paradox of the ideal and the sensual, a voluptuously exotic image of woman, which served as the prototype for the *femme fatales* in Art Nouveau" (18). The loving details of the neck, mouth, and face of the model in *Bocca Baciata* reverberate in Darío's description of the thighs, hair, and mouth. Both artists give us a representation of woman as "she fills their dream" where women can paradoxically possess both demoniacal and virginal powers (de Girolami Cheney 159). It is important to note the significance of the hair, both in the poem and the painting, since tresses played a meaningful role in the expression of the virgin/whore duality. Hair is a symbol of energy; if it is braided it is under control, and if it is loose -- as Darío and Rossetti evoke it -- it has connotations of "temptation, power and beauty" (de Girolami Cheney 160). Also the emphasis on the woman's languid pose in Darío and the heavy-lidded eyes of Rossetti's model reproduce a characteristic "sensual beauty, peace, languor, sadness, pleasure, [which] mingle to form... a ravishing harmony of flesh and spirit" (Doughty 160-161).

Undoubtedly, aside from the metaphysical and artistic explanation there is a social one to the objectification of women as an *objet d'art* during the nineteenth century in Europe and Spanish America. During this time men increasingly feared middle class women's agency and felt the need to enclose them in the private space of the household and to limit their intellectual and social choices. Hence in the artists' mystical Neoplatonic quest for harmony resides a more modern anxiety, produced by the "new uneasiness in the relations between men and women" (Gibson 23). Darío and Rossetti were not able to mediate between the women of their fantasies characterized by a medieval chivalrous prototype and the modern woman. Consequently, the spirit of the time prevails and these artists find a solution by dividing woman into virgin and whore. Although courtly love spoke of the ideal woman, it also provided the artists with a

dichotomy that found deep roots in their modern age: the idea of sacred and profane love based on a system with clear class connotations where the lady was a heavenly and spiritual being, while the workingwoman was sexualized. Thus we see our artists practicing an adulterated version of courtly love, corrupted by the misogynistic anxiety of the period, and driven by the fear of women that induced the artists to want to be able to give life and to destroy their creatures -- something unthinkable in courtly love.

Darío and Rossetti were, against their will, thrown into a period for which they were simply not prepared as a consequence of the dislocation of living in a modern world while emotionally and ideologically submerged in atavistic time and values. As Humphrey House claims, the revivalism of the courtship of the past was not always possible: "There seemed to be an irreparable cleavage between the facts of modern society and the depths it was recognized poetry ought to touch" (129). Inevitably, the idealization of sexual love and of woman led them to the same antagonism their courtly predecessors had experienced "between their amatory and their religious ideals" (Lewis 17).

It appears that as hard as they tried, Darío and Rossetti were unable to control their amorous feelings so that they did not become uncontrolled sensual passion; their desire became a natural urge, a blind force. Darío and Rossetti could not curb their very modern sexual impulses, as their promiscuous love life shows. Rossetti's Siddal was not a damozel, but a working class woman with scant education and Darío had to leave his country at the young age of fourteen to avoid a quick marriage. The beauty of their models could fulfill the prototype of physical loveliness that was far from reflecting, however, the strong ethical code imbued in courtly love. Darío and Rossetti were passionate but it is questionable that the quality of their devotion realized the courtly ideal. As we know from their biographies they had a tendency to fall madly in love and plunge into socially unacceptable behaviour. Rossetti felt responsible for Lizzie's suicide and Darío could not divorce his second wife to marry the mother of his second child, Francisca Sánchez.

Darío presents female beauty as statuesque and mythical, and his favourite goddess is undoubtedly Venus. Rossetti favours his stunners to embody women's beauty. Jan Marsh's comment on the Pre-Raphaelites can well be applied to the *Modernistas:* "Maybe the enslavement of art to the representation of woman, which began in worship of loveliness and virtue, was now being expressed in terms of fetishism and mystic arts" (120). In their search for their ideal woman, their twin soul, our artists fell into an excess that captured the inability of language and painting to express their mystical quest for the unity of the Universe. The infinite symbolic connotations, precious descriptions, extravagant decors, wonderful details, and vivid colours testify to the impossibility of Darío's and Rossetti's objective: the artists' impotence to capture the harmony of the Universe.

Nevertheless, both artists under society's modern *Zeitgeist* agreed on the power of woman in the Universe: she can give life and death. Since they were nothing but men of their times, old fashion misogynous values dominate their depiction of women. The mystical and Neoplatonic image of woman as an intermediary between this and another world was replaced by the notion "of the perilous principle in the world being female from the first" (Rossetti qtd. in Allen 286). Although in "Ecce Homo" Darío seems to reunite in a kiss "sweetly our souls" (455), this harmonious moment is overcome by the violent depiction of woman's evil. In the end, as in Rossetti's "Hand and Soul" much of Darío's quest is enclosed in the artist himself ("My poetry is mine in me") ("Palabras liminares," 611), transforming the transcendent search into a Narcissistic act. The pure beauty becomes encased in a marble that has no feeling and whose sole objective is to destroy man, as Darío warns us: "Let's not spend the Carrara marble/in sculpting a beautiful body or face/that which hammers and chisels do/we see it alive in the din/of orgies and bordellos" (454). Until the end Darío is torn between the transcendent beauty of woman as his twin soul, and her potential for evil, for corrupting the good. Just as Boccaccio's words about the kissed mouth seem to free woman from any negative judgment about her sexual agency, when we see Rossetti's portrait, however, we are left with the image of a

sensual woman devoid of a personality with an apple as a symbol of her destiny, luring the viewer into carnal pleasures.

Modern woman cannot stand for the damozel of courtly love, as she is the beauty that makes men lose their mind. In "Ecce Homo" and *Bocca Baciata* we see the artists could not escape from representing the idea of woman of their time. Rossetti and Darío in dealing with their contradictions and feelings of fragmentation and alienation sought transcendence in art and in the primordial simplicity of an ideal woman found in the damozel of Neoplatonic courtly love, who as an icon embodied harmoniously heaven and earth, spiritual and physical beauty, religious feelings and desires of the flesh, good and evil. This project, however, was paradoxical from its beginning since the artists were attempting to idealize sexual love, to assuage their guilt feelings about their strong sensuality and to articulate a modern anxiety -- fear of the modern woman -- with a medieval Neoplatonic paradigm.

Artistically, Rossetti opted for a vacuous and empty look that fragmented woman's body, and Darío for the exoticization and fetishization of the female body. In this manner, their quest took them to a creature of their imagination, a divided woman, and an artifice, which depicted a polarity that could not be farther from the beloved of courtly love. Dijkstra summarizes men's contradictory feelings towards women: "The turn-of-the-century male's fascination for, horror of, and hostility toward woman, culminat[ed] in another uncontrollable urge to destroy her, to do violence to that perverse, un-Platonic reflection of the Platonic ideal of perfect beauty he was so eager to pursue" (149).

Although the *Modernistas* and the Pre-Raphaelites rebelled against the materialism and consumerism of their times and tried to embrace higher spiritual values, they could not escape the modern *Zeitgeist*. The constantly shifting state of culture in a period in which the "patriarchal social structure was under stress" (Marsh 10) required a new construction of gender definitions that would regulate the revised patterns of social relationships which resulted from the capitalist development in the economy.

This essay is the beginning of what could be a fruitful endeavour in comparative studies. Undoubtedly, there are many works by Darío and Rossetti and other artists of the brotherhoods that deserve analysis. Such studies will establish further influences that will explain how Darío and Rossetti's work, separated by distance and time, remarkably contained the same production of meaning, which defined woman as a bauble, depository of the sexual anxiety and repression of the time, who only existed in the male artists' imagination. This vision of woman determined her representation in the arts and literature in Europe and Spanish America for decades to come.

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Notes

1. All translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

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