OPIATE EXPERIENCES AND MODERNITY IN JOSÉ ASUNCIÓN SILVA’S *DE SOBREMESA* AND JOSÉ MARÍA VARGAS VILA’S *LIRIO NEGRO*

Philip Clark Hollingsworth

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Romance Languages (Spanish)

Chapel Hill
2011

Approved by:
Juan Carlos González Espitia
Rosa Perelmuter
María A. Salgado
ABSTRACT

PHILIP HOLLINGSWORTH: Opiate Experiences and Modernity in José Asunción Silva’s *De sobremesa* and José María Vargas Vila’s *Lirio negro* (Under the direction of Juan Carlos González Espitia)

During the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, opium use became increasingly common in Europe, the United States and other parts of the world. Two influential European authors, Thomas De Quincey and Charles Baudelaire, wrote about their own opiate experiences and how it impacted their creative production. Colombian authors José Asunción Silva and José María Vargas Vila employ the opiate experience in their novels *De sobremesa* and *Lirio negro*, respectively. Whilst being a means of pain relief and escape for the protagonists José Fernández and Flavio Durán, the use of opium becomes integrated in the discourse of illness. Like illness, a subject under the influence of opium is in an ambiguous state between life and death: a personal purgatory. The present work will study the opiate experiences in *De sobremesa* and *Lirio negro* as both remedy for and symptom of anxiety caused by modernity of Latin America during the turn of the twentieth century.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

OPIATE EXPERIENCES AND MODERNITY IN JOSÉ ASUNCIÓN SILVA’S
DE SOBREMESA AND JOSÉ MARÍA VARGAS VILA’S LIRIO NEGRO………………1
Opium use spread throughout Europe, Asia and the United States during the nineteenth century and became increasingly present in other parts of the world. In the first half of the century in England, it was considered a panacea and would be prescribed by doctors or sold by druggists to cure a variety of ailments such as toothache, dysentery, cholera, and insomnia (Berridge 32). Originally cultivated in Turkey and other parts of Asia, this alkaloid derived from the pod of the poppy flower entered its height of popularity in Western society in part by England’s involvement in the Indian opium trade with China (Berridge 3). By the second half of the century, opium traders had reached South America by way of Chinese immigrants smuggling the drug into Peru (Booth 177). At the same time North American and Latin American businessmen found themselves involved with the British opium trade (Booth 121). It did not take long for opium to appear as an aesthetic literary device and a form of experimentation for European writers of the Romantic period and beyond.

Thomas De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* is a seminal work in the Romantic period’s depiction of drug use and addiction. After its publication in 1821, and especially with the advent of the Decadent movement, other European authors such as Charles Baudelaire and later J.K. Huysmans reflected upon their own drug use and explored this theme within the experiences of their protagonists.¹ Consumption of opium and its

¹ Baudelaire describes the opiate experience of hashish in depth in “Le Poème du haschisch,” part of his book *Les Paradis artificiels* (1860). In the novel *A Rebours* (1884), Huysmans’s anti-heroic protagonist, Des Esseintes, finds his use of laudanum - a popular opiate of the time- to have only “irritated his nerves and robbed him of his sleep” (160). Many English writers such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas De Quincey, and George Crabbe wrote extensively on their opiate experiences. American author Edgar Allan Poe also references opium addiction in short stories such as “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839). De Quincey and Baudelaire’s descriptions of the alkaloid will be further discussed later on in this essay.
derivatives during the nineteenth and early twentieth century in Europe and the United States became a rite of passage for Romantic authors. Opium was viewed as an exotic substance, originating from colonial states and later refined by European scientists. For these Western intellectuals the use of opiates—whether in the form of laudanum, hashish, or morphine—became the crossroads of the discourses of self and society. It provided its user with an intense exploration of the self that, in their understanding, would lead to an enhancement of poetic creation, thus exposing the poet’s audience to new possibilities of the human experience (Hayter 43). Some believed that for the erudite mind opium could open new possibilities of thought and provide a greater personal understanding of human existence.²

In the context of Latin American literature, two Colombian writers, José Asunción Silva (1865-1896) and José Marfa Vargas Vila (1860-1933) explore opiate experiences in the novels De sobremesa (written in 1896, but published posthumously in 1925) and Lirio negro (1920). I will show that although both authors make reference to De Quincey’s Confessions, their respective narratives treat opium as an oblique theme that does not necessarily mirror the European Romantics’ depiction of its consumption. While being a means of pain relief and escape, opium for them is a symptom of illness. The protagonists, José Fernández and Flavio Durán, use the drug in these novels serves to alleviate the angst connected to their experience of modernity in Latin America, and specifically, Colombia. As in the case of extreme illness, a subject under the influence of opium is in an ambiguous state between life and death, that is, in a personal purgatory. In reference to the rewriting of De sobremesa after a shipwreck destroyed Silva’s original manuscript for the novel, Benigno Trigo writes, “Por

² For more in-depth information in relation to the meaning of opium use for 19th century European artists and intellectuals see Opium and the Romantic Imagination by Alethea Hayter.
un lado, la discusión le presenta al lector dos formas complementarias de leer un texto; como si éste fuera un síntoma de la enfermedad del autor, o un ejercicio terapéutico” (143). The idea of literary production as both therapeutic exercise and symptom of sickness can be applied to the novels of both Silva and Vargas Vila with relation to the use of opium and its derivatives in their literary work. In that sense, the present work will study the opiate experiences in *De sobremesa* and *Lirio negro* as remedy for and symptom of anxiety caused by Latin American modernity during the turn of the twentieth century.

To approach this study I will first establish a point of comparison between the two Colombian authors and two predecessors who had written on opiate experiences, Thomas De Quincey and Charles Baudelaire. Through their discussions of opiates, we will gather information on the cultural views and use of opiates during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Later, I will describe the opiate experiences as described in *De sobremesa* and *Lirio negro* and finally how these experiences can be analyzed as a remedy and symptom of the protagonists’ anxiety due to modernity. In the closing remarks I will show how the structure of the narrative of both *De sobremesa* and *Lirio negro* can be read as a metaphor of an opiate high.

Before investigating how the opiate experiences in *De sobremesa* and *Lirio negro* function as both a remedy for and symptom of anxiety caused by modernity, it is necessary at this point to manifest that I understand modernity in the sense described by Alejandro Mejías-López. He affirms that modernity began with the Hispanic colonization of the Americas, yet this historical understanding became excluded from the modern discourse in the mid-eighteenth century due to northern Europe’s dominance in defining the concept of the modern (Mejías-López *Inverted* 11). Mejías-López also explains that there are two stages
of modernity: the first being the process of colonization and the second stage (modernization) only made possible by the first, therefore stating that “America has always been modern” (*Inverted* 18). According to Jürgen Habermas:

> The concept of modernization refers to a bundle of processes that are cumulative and mutually reinforcing: to the formation of capital and the mobilization of resources; to the development of the forces of production and the increase in the productivity of labor; to the establishment of centralized political power and the formation of national identities; to the proliferation of rights of political participation, of urban forms of life, and of formal schooling; to the secularization of values and norms; and so on. (2)

The culmination of these processes provides the individual with the “experience of modernity” which Habermas defines as the “dialectics of modernization and modernism” (16). However, this modernity should not be considered only as a European experience. Silva and Vargas Vila do not place their protagonists in Europe to suggest that modernity can only be experienced in Paris or London. In the case of *Lirio negro*, relatively little of the narrative takes place in Europe. Much of the novel takes place on the Atlantic Ocean, the passageway between Europe and the Americas, reminding its reader of the journey that led to Spain’s colonization of America, or the first stage of modernity. Héctor Orjuela notes that although much of the action of *De sobremesa* takes place in Europe, the narrative is marked with an American context, highlighting the work’s American-ness (20). Modernity in Latin America—as well as many other Western cultures during the nineteenth century—is considered the ultimate goal for society, yet it is never completely attained. For this reason Mejías-López notes that “a central aspect of the myth of nineteenth-century modernity [is]…the belief that the modern was ‘somewhere else’” and that this notion of “somewhere else” was not unique to the Spanish American experience (*Inverted* 24). The perception of “somewhere else” by nineteenth-century modernists is fundamental in the understanding of
the opiate experiences—as well as the experience of modernity—of José Fernández and Flavio Durán.

In order to understand the relevance of the opiate experiences of José Fernández and Flavio Durán it is necessary to establish a point of comparison and understand the literary depictions of opiate use during the nineteenth century. To that purpose, I will focus on two literary antecedents of Silva and Vargas Vila previously mentioned and who wrote extensively on the subject: Thomas De Quincey and Charles Baudelaire.³ De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* was one of the most influential books on opium use published during the European Romantic period. De Quincey depicts key moments in his life that led to his heavy opium use and gives detailed descriptions of his fantastic dreams while under the alkaloid’s influence. Baudelaire references his use of opiates in various works, including the previously mentioned *Les Paradis artificiels* and *Le Spleen de Paris: Petits Poèmes en prose* (1862). In these works Baudelaire both praises the ecstasy of the experience while condemning the dangers of opiate habituation, claiming that “the intelligence, formerly free, now becomes enslaved” (*On Wine* 65).⁴

The cultural views surrounding opium and its derivatives during the nineteenth century in Europe differ from the current view of such substances. Many of the opinions in relation to opiates in the past were due to a lack of knowledge dealing with the effects of the drugs and what caused the effects experienced by its users. For many doctors, opium was a

---

³ De Quincey has been chosen because of his undeniable influence on the writings of opium in the nineteenth century and because both Silva and Vargas Vila make explicit reference to his work in the novels studied here. Baudelaire’s writings were a significant influence on many authors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, including the two Colombian novelists. Also, Baudelaire’s French translation of De Quincey’s *Confessions* in his work *Les Paradis artificiels* may have been how Silva and Vargas Vila accessed the Englishman’s descriptions of his opiate experiences.

⁴ *On Wine and Hashish* is the English translation by Andrew Brown of Baudelaire’s *Les Paradis artificiels* excluding De Quincey’s *Confessions.*
miracle drug since, unlike other pain killers available at the time, it was very effective. Furthermore, the alkaloid proved to be a reliable sedative and a cure for fever that saved thousands of lives from dysentery and cholera (Booth 58). Paregoric was a tincture of opium given to children to cure diarrhea and also rubbed on the discomforted gums of teething babies (Wigal 12). In England during the first half of the nineteenth century there were popular national brands of opiates including Dover’s Powder, a powdered form of opium for curing the gout, and Godfrey’s Cordial, which was an elixir for children to cure a variety of ailments that ranged from “fretfulness” to colic (Berridge 24). One of the more popular forms of opium, a tincture of opium and alcohol called laudanum, was widely available, inexpensive and easy to acquire. As Thomas De Quincey states regarding his easy first purchase of laudanum in order to cure pain from a toothache: “My road homewards lay through Oxford-street;…I saw a druggist’s shop…and when I asked for the tincture of opium, he gave it to me as any other man might do: and furthermore, out of my shilling, returned to me what seemed to be real copper halfpence” (70-71). Although some concern about the dangers of opium began to arise in England during the 1830s, limited legislation restricting the selling and distribution of opium would not be passed until 1868 (Booth 65). Despite the effort to limit public consumption, opium remained an ingredient in many over-the-counter drugs.

Opium’s pain-relieving qualities became of interest for many scientists and doctors. Morphine was discovered in the 1820s in part because of the efforts of European scientists to extract the pure pain-relieving quality found in the poppy flower pod without the side effect of addiction (Booth 70). Other forms of opium such as codeine and heroin were also developed by these scientists in their quest to find a non-addictive, yet potent pain reliever.
The term “addiction” was rarely used, since people during this time thought habitual use was due to one’s appetite for a particular substance. Therefore scientists wanted to circumvent the dosing of opium orally to avoid acquiring “an appetite” for the drug (Booth 72). It was believed that if the patient did not digest the drug through the stomach, there would not be the possibility of addiction. In fact, the hypodermic needle was developed in the early 1850s and used for the administration of morphine in part because doctors believed addiction could be avoided by applying the medicine by way of injection.

Thomas De Quincey wrote his Confessions when opium use in England was not restricted. But for De Quincey, his book was not a relation of the typical experience of an opium-eater. While his dreams and visions under the influence were due in part to opium, according to him, they were also due to his philosophical mind, which gave him “an inner eye and power of intuition for the vision and the mysteries of our human nature” (34). De Quincey separates his experience from that of the everyday man by declaring that “if a man ‘whose talk is oxen,’ should become an opium-eater, the probability is, that (if he is not too dull to dream at all) – he will dream about oxen” (33). Within a few years after taking his first dose in 1804, the writer was addicted to laudanum, continually increasing the amount and frequency of use. Eventually, due to his lack of productivity, De Quincey reduced his laudanum intake but continued its use until his death at the age of seventy-four (Hayter 254).

Early on in his description of the opium experience, De Quincey provides a contradictory view of the drug on the human body and psyche: “Opium! Dread agent of unimaginable pleasure and pain!” (70). Yet he focuses his first section of his opiate experiences on the pleasure surrounding the drug, claiming that “here was a panacea…for all human woes: here was the secret of happiness, about which philosophers had disputed for so
many ages, at once discovered” (72). The praise for opium seems to overshadow his later descriptions of the pains of opium, especially when he praises opium directly: “Thou only givest these gifts to man; and thou hast the keys of Paradise, oh just, subtle and mighty opium!” (83).

Later in the text De Quincey gives his description of his years of heavy opium use that resulted in increased dependence on the drug and decreased literary productivity. Although earlier in the text De Quincey denies that opium causes lethargy or torpor (77), he admits that his increased usage led to his inability to write: “He [the opium-eater] lies under the weight of incubus and nightmare…just as a man forcibly confined to his bed by the mortal languor of a relaxing disease…he would lay down his life if he might get up and walk; but he is powerless as an infant and cannot even attempt to rise” (102). What is significant here is that De Quincey compares his opiate experience to a “relaxing disease,” in spite of the fact he also praised opium as a panacea, a universal cure for all suffering. In his revision of Confessions for his complete works in 1856, thirty-five years after its first publication, De Quincey adds that his contradictory descriptions of his opiate experience exemplify the mystery of the drug, even for a veteran user such as himself (206).

Despite the dangers of habituation, many of the writers in the nineteenth century were convinced that opium use heightened poetic creation (Hayter 43). According to Susan M. Levin: “Taking opium may be read as a metaphor for involving oneself in renovating polarities, for loosening the dark side of the mind, for opening the ‘doors of perception,’ for discovering what is necessary to write one’s life” (30). For De Quincey, opium became a kind of performance-enhancing drug that allowed what he considered the already advanced mind to expand its horizons even further. Although he cites pains and horror associated with
these experiences, he never condemns the use of opium, nor does he advocate its use. In 1845, after being blamed by critics for perpetuating opium abuse in England, De Quincey defends himself in his article “Coleridge and Opium-Eating,” claiming that his intentions upon publishing *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* were not to promote opium-eating but rather to “[report] the case to the world” (130). What remains in De Quincey’s text is an undeniable ambiguity with regards to opium use: Does it increase or does it inhibit poetic production? Does opium damage the body or is it safe under moderate consumption? The only conclusion given by De Quincey in his *Confessions* is restated in the aforementioned 1845 article: “Opium gives and takes away” (128).

Charles Baudelaire likewise offered a contradictory view of opiate experiences. His *Les Paradis artificiels* was dedicated to describing the consumption of wine and opiates. The first part includes “Le Poème du haschisch,” a prose work reflecting on the experience of taking this drug, which according to Baudelaire “is composed of a decoction of Indian hemp, butter, and a small quantity of opium” (17). The second part of the work includes a translation with commentary of De Quincey’s *Confessions*. “Le Poème du haschisch” is a reader’s guide to the opiate experience by way of hashish. Frank Hilton states: “Baudelaire adopts a variety of postures towards the reader in his presentation of the drug. He is guide, mentor, sophisticated observer, precise delineator of the sequence of events the novice can expect to experience during its use” (26). Baudelaire warns that, like taking a more concentrated opiate, hashish may enhance genius, yet it takes away the will. He therefore concludes that “it gives us imagination without the faculty of being able to benefit from it” (81). In his conclusion to “Le Poème du haschisch,” Baudelaire questions the use of such a
drug, arguing that although it can take a person to the "Artificial Ideal," if it ultimately enslaves the user: "What is the paradise that you purchase at the cost of your soul?" (81).

Two years later, in Le Spleen de Paris: Petits Poèmes en prose Baudelaire praises the altered state. In select prose poems of this work Baudelaire directly references opiate experiences and the use of other substances in order to be outside oneself and outside society. The most famous of these references appears in poem thirty-three "Enivrez-vous." This poem is a glorification of intoxication by any means: “It’s time to get high! So as not to be the martyred slaves of Time, get high; get high constantly! On wine, on poetry, or on virtue, as you wish” (89). Although the poem does not directly reference opium, the poet encourages everyone to find something with which to get inebriated. Unlike his conclusions in “Le Poème du haschisch” Baudelaire’s poet advocates the escape from reality whether from the use of substances or art.

In the fifth prose poem, “The Double Room,” the poetic voice declares: “Here in this world, narrow but so filled with disgust, only one familiar object cheers me: the vial of laudanum, an old and terrifying friend, and like all woman friends, alas! fertile in caresses and betrayals” (7-8). The vial of laudanum is an extension of “the double room,” a physical place that “resembles a reverie” (6). Both are contradictions of each other. Like De Quincey’s accounts in Confessions, the poetic voice finds the opiate experience to be both comforting and debilitating. For both of these authors the drug has a dual nature—an enigmatic panacea that can cure but can also cause pain (an element relevant to our later discussion on the work of the two Colombian novelists). Furthermore, Baudelaire also highlights in “The Double Room” the return to reality after getting high. The poet’s cares are erased momentarily by laudanum, only to haunt him again in due time: “Yes indeed! Time
has reappeared; Time reigns as sovereign now. And with that hideous old man the whole diabolical procession has returned, Memories, Regrets, Spasms, Fears, Anguishes, Nightmares, Rages, and Neuroses” (8). Baudelaire introduces a very important aspect of the opiate experience: its pleasant effect is only temporary.

Opium may facilitate one’s amazing vision and may create a reverie free from the worries of the world, but the escape is knowingly temporary. If this fact of opiate consumption is known by users, why do they continue to take the drugs? Emmanuel J. Mickel Jr. states that “Baudelaire attributes man’s weakness in this respect to his unquenchable thirst for the infinite” (129). According to Baudelaire, opiate consumption is a result of man’s dissatisfaction with his surroundings and his circumstances. The search for the infinite is a search outside of one’s corporal body that inevitably will expire. Following Baudelaire’s understanding of the opiate experience, man’s thirst for the infinite can also be found at the turn of the twentieth century in Colombian writer José Asunción Silva. In his Modernist novel De sobremesa, the protagonist José Fernández reads from his diary, which relates his failed search for Helena, a young woman representing (for Fernández) perfection. Throughout the novel José Fernández allows himself to delve into various sensory explorations, including experimentation with drugs such as chloral and opium. Flavio Durán, the protagonist of Vargas Vila’s Lirio negro, relies heavily on the use of morphine not only to relieve the pain of his amputated hands, but also to forget: “el uso inmoderado de la morfina para calmar los agudos dolores…y, ¿por qué no decirlo?...para olvidar…” (70).

---

5 Chloral hydrate was used in the second half of the nineteenth century as a sedative and was also thought to be useful in the treatment of insanity (Berridge 70).

6 Morphine was isolated from poppy pods early in the nineteenth century in an attempt to extract the pain-killing agent of opium (Berridge 136). This process was also believed to remove the addictive quality of the alkaloid and was used for a variety of ailments including inflammation, menstrual pains, rheumatism, and post operation pain relief (Booth 72).
Although much has been discussed in past studies on De Quincey and Baudelaire regarding their personal use of opiates in addition to their literary production on opiate experiences, my study here is not concerned with establishing connections between life and work, or in Silva and Vargas Vila’s personal opiate experiences or lack thereof. There is no reliable source allowing us to know whether these two authors had personal experiences with opium or morphine. For this work, it is of no consequence whether they experimented with drugs or not. The focal point for this essay is the opiate experiences of their protagonists José Fernández and Flavio Durán in De sobremesa and Lirio negro respectively.

Many of the critics that have studied De sobremesa have mentioned the opiate experiences of José Fernández within the context of the novel. Renowned Silva scholar Héctor Orjuela states that “José Fernández utiliza las drogas como un estimulante o como un soporífico en los momentos de crisis” (55-56). In her 1978 study of the literary work of Silva, Betty Tyree Osiek notes that Fernández takes opium in order to forget his night with Nini Rousset, the starlet who ruined his plans to follow a chaste life (104). Osiek later affirms that “with such fluctuations in his emotional states, where drugs, mysticism, and sexual orgies alternate with periods of sexual abstinence, Fernández apparently has mental aberrations” (108). Sonya A. Ingwersen argues that Fernández’s sexual forays and opium use followed by complete abstinence demonstrate the protagonist’s existential dualism (57). In her English translation of Silva’s novel, Kelly Washbourne attributes opium use to the Decadent aesthetic: “Drugs too, and their attendant altered states are part of the Decadent arsenal in that they are deliberate exacerbations of sense” (16). Although these critics have touched upon the function of opiates in the novel, there has not been significant work devoted solely
to the opiate experiences of José Fernández in *De sobremesa*—a void that will begin to be addressed in this study.

The use of opium is ever-present in the novel. In fact, Silva aesthetically bookends *De sobremesa* with the smoke of Oriental opiated cigarettes. In the opening scene of the novel, the narrator describes the luxurious surroundings of José Fernández’s home: the Chinese tea cups, fine crystal, lace, a cut-crystal bottle filled with a rare liqueur, and European artwork. In order to create a linkage between the objects in the room to the participants of the Platonic *sobremesa* Silva writes: “El humo de dos cigarrillos, cuyas puntas de fuego ardían en la penumbra, ondeaba en sutiles espirales azulosas en el círculo de luz de la lámpara, y el olor enervante y dulce del tabaco opiado de Oriente se fundía con el del cuero de Rusia en que estaba forrado el mobiliario” (31). In the last paragraph of the novel, following Fernández’s reading of his diary, Silva closes with almost the exact images with which he begins the narrative: “El humo tenue de los cigarrillos de Oriente ondeaba en sutiles espirales en el círculo de luz de la lámpara atenuada por la pantalla de encajes antiguos” (228). The placement of these two passages frames the novel within an opiated experience. The reading of Fernández’s diary is a means of pain relief for his friend Saenz, who suffers from tuberculosis. Like an opiate experience, the protagonist’s reading provides a temporary escape from the pains of reality.

Exotic images such as opiate cigarettes were popular in the Romantic and Decadent literature of Europe and especially France during the nineteenth century. France’s refreshed interest in things from the Far East dates back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Once France had established trade with East Asian countries such as China, the possession of

---

7 For a discussion on the subtext of Plato’s work in Silva’s novel, see “‘Estómago y cerebro:’ *De sobremesa*, El *simposio* de Platón y la ingestión cultural” by Aníbal González. In the article González argues that *De sobremesa* can be read as a parody of Plato’s *Symposium*.  

13
these imports became extremely popular (Mickel 59). Interest in the exotic soon became a literary recourse for Romantic writers, and later Decadents. Exoticism was a way to escape the ordinary European life and to access a completely new experience. Opium and hashish are present in many literary works “merely to add an exotic atmosphere” (Mickel 67). Silva apparently provides this “exotic atmosphere” at the beginning and end of his novel. However, the presence of opium is not simply an exotic artifact, like the Chinese teacups that adorn Fernández’s home. In De sobremesa, the protagonist’s opium use plays an important thematic role in the development of the narrative.

José Fernández’s first writings on opium experience at the intradiegetic level of the diary take place in the August 9th entry in Geneva. After escaping to the countryside following the attempted murder of his former lover María “Lelia” Legendre, Fernández returns to the city life determined to end the debauchery that led him to criminal activity. He has resolved to abstain from women and drugs that have only stimulated his anxieties and caused him physical and mental anguish. His resolve is immediately challenged. Fernández begins the August 9th entry: “Acabo de levantarme, después de pasar cuarenta y ocho horas bajo la influencia letárgica del opio, del opio divino, omnipotente, justo y sutil, como lo llama Quincey…Ha sido absurdo, pero no podía hacer otra cosa después de la escena horrible. Quería huir de la vida por unas horas, no sentirla” (95). Later on Fernández describes his encounter with Nini Rousset, a woman whom the protagonist both despises and is attracted to. After giving into what he seems to consider temptation, Fernández takes a heavy dose of opium. Unlike De Quincey, Fernández does not take opium to enhance his poetic abilities. It is a means of escape very much like the one depicted in Baudelaire’s
“Double Room.” Not only does Fernández seek asylum from his reality, he also intends to “no sentirla,” to anesthetize himself from such reality.

Another important aspect of Fernández’s description of opium is that of its dual nature. As in the descriptions of De Quincey and Baudelaire, Fernández believes that while opium is an amazing substance it has very dangerous properties. For Fernández it is both “divino” and a “droga funesta.” The drug causes him to lose all sense of time, yet when he returns from his opiate stupor, his face seems to have aged considerably: “Al asomarme al espejo ayer para vestirme me he quedado aterrado de mi semblante. Es el de un bandido que no hubiera comido en diez días; represento cuarenta años; los ojos apagados y hundidos en las ojeras violáceas, la piel apergaminada y marchita” (96). There is a loss or extrication of time through the mind of the character, but his body seems to age exponentially during the forty-eight hour opium binge—a characteristic that underlines the contradictory nature of the drug.

The most significant event right after the forty-eight hours that Fernández is under the influence of opium is his encounter with Helena, the young, ethereal, and idealized woman—characteristics that place her indeed at the level of an opiate hallucination—who becomes an obsession throughout the rest of the narrative. According to Alejandro Mejías-López, “La fijación en la persona de Helena como objeto único de su deseo cuya falta lo llena [a Fernández] de ansiedad…hasta el punto de hacerle temer la locura” (“El perpetuo” 342). Although Fernández continuously searches for Helena during his European travels, her existence is continuously questioned by friends and doctors. As I just mentioned, adding to the mystery of her existence is the possibility that Fernández has had this vision of her
because of his opium use. The drug becomes an avenue for doubt, yet it is the same substance that may have provided Fernández with the vision of his ideal Helena.

Although Fernández does not directly state that he is under the influence of opium after his encounter with Helena, there are many other instances throughout the book that underscore that Fernández was regularly using the drug. There are several instances in London and in France when his doctors tell him that he must cut out his opium intake. Dr. Charvet lets him know that his drug use is unnecessary: “sobran las drogas” (146). While he is in London Fernández makes reference to his continued use of opiates: “Por la noche me envuelve una pereza del cuerpo que me hace sonreír...y aspirando el humo opiado y aromático de un cigarrillo del Oriente, me siento cerca al fuego para contemplar los derrumbes de negros castillos…” (110). In this scene the opiate is part of Fernández’s nightly routine, indicating that perhaps his use of the drug is continuous throughout the narrative and not only confined to the few moments in which he specifically mentions taking the drug. Therefore, Fernández’s only encounter with Helena could be read as an opium induced hallucination. In this sense, the ideal modernity or change that Helena represents can never be realized; it can only be accessed temporarily and furthermore only accessible artificially. Fernández, thus, returns to his homeland unable to bring with him the ideal; the poet has resigned himself to creating a world of the appearance of modernity and resorts to the opiate Oriental cigarettes to remedy his anxiety due to his European experiences and his inability to realize his (opiate-induced) dreams.

More than two decades after Silva’s completion of De sobremesa, but five years before its posthumous publication, José Marfa Vargas Vila published the definitive version of

---

8 In the August 9th entry Fernández states that he has just risen after his two-day opium binge, thus dating the beginning of the opium experience on August 7th. He encounters Helena for the first time on August 10th, as described in the entry on the 11th of the same month.
Lirio negro. In this novel opiate consumption is more explicit. The protagonist Flavio Durán never alludes to his drug use, rather he is always direct and upfront. He frequently describes the reasons and the sensations of his opiate experiences, particularly during his journey across the Atlantic on the Britannia. Furthermore, Durán takes morphine, a much more potent opiate than laudanum, hashish, or most likely the generic dose of opium José Fernández takes in Geneva. Like Fernández, Durán notes how his use of opium has aged him considerably; such aging is further exacerbated when compared to the youthfulness of his son:

al lado suyo siento que he envejecido hasta la decrepitud;
el uso de los narcóticos me ha hecho magro, mis cabellos empiezan a caer, y, mi hermosa dentadura vacila;
mi vejez prematura se parece enormemente a la decrepitud; (16)

Once again, Flavio Durán’s drug experience is more intense than that of José Fernández. After his forty-eight hour opium binge, Fernández feels as if he has aged ten years. For Durán his continued use has aged him considerably more, even to the point of decrepitude; a fact that Durán deems necessary to mention twice within three statements.

Like Fernández’s experience in Geneva, Durán spends “dos días deliciosos, bajo el sopor de la morfina” onboard the Britannia (19). This period of forty-eight hours is unique to the two Colombian authors with regards to De Quincey’s description of his opiate experience. For De Quincey, the effects of opium would last for an eight hour period, which suggests that both Fernández and Durán took back to back doses during their two day bender. However, Flavio Durán’s description of the experience, much like that of the authors mentioned earlier in this study, relates the dual nature of the drug. Durán claims that morphine “nos da una Vida sin Dolores, y, una Muerte sin agonía” (19). Like Baudelaire he equates the opium experience to a “paraiso artificial” and then claims that it is also “un verdadero paraíso” (46). Once back in South America, Durán and his son Manlio stay in their
rooms, continuously under the lethargic effects of morphine: “como por una especie de envenenamiento de la célula cerebral, nuestros insomnios eran completos, y sólo la absorción diaria de los narcóticos, nos proporcionaba un sueño débil, intermitente, exaltado, lleno de alucinaciones y de demencias” (155). Flavio Durán and Manlio become the living dead through the use of morphine—a drug that simultaneously is used to cause and remedy their current condition. This contradictory nature of the drug is vital to the understanding of the opiate experiences of both Flavio Durán and José Fernández as it relates to modernity and the anxiety experienced due to the rapidly changing Western society.

For both protagonists the opiate experience becomes a remedy for their experience of modernity and the anxiety that is associated with the radical changes taking place in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One of the requirements of modernity/modernization according to Habermas is the secularization of values and norms. This change is quite radical considering the power of religious institutions over Western societies in general and even more so in the particular case of Latin America, in regard to private behavior since the Middle Ages. In this respect, Silva and Vargas Vila both push the limits of what is socially acceptable for their protagonists, especially in terms of sexuality. Opiates for both Fernández and Durán are used in an attempt to suppress desire. In *De sobremesa* Fernández attempts to “cure” himself of his carousing with women and his subsequent academic and poetic lethargy by a “cleansing” dose of opium. This allows him to rid himself—although only temporarily—of the memories that have caused him self-hatred and sickness. It is the aftermath of this moment of intoxication that provides him the opportunity to see for the first time Helena, who represents the ideal beauty, the cure for Fernández’s anxieties. As I mentioned before, Helena can be read as a metaphor of
modernity, and Fernández’s opiate experience in Geneva, together with the vision of Helena, can be seen as the element that purifies him of his deviant behavior. Opium also allows him to escape from the anxiety and troubles experienced in Paris, the exemplary city of culture and modernity.

In London Fernández relaxes by the fire and lethargically contemplates the pleasantries of life while smoking the opiated cigarettes of the Orient. In this stupor he thinks to himself, “¡cuán lejos estáis del brutalismo gozador de mis noches parisienses” (111; emphasis mine). These imported amenities, including the opiated cigarettes, allow Fernández to escape his reality, if only momentarily. This scene is reminiscent of the interactions in America between Fernández and his companions, indicating an opiated refuge away from the passion, violence and anxiety associated with his Parisian experience. Alfredo Villanueva-Collado also considers Fernández’s Colombian home a refuge from European culture: “París produce en Fernández el odio inmenso hacia la cultura occidental. Para Fernández, retornar a Colombia significa un rechazo de esa cultura y un retorno a lo primitivo en el sentido de primario” (54). Fundamental in this escape from the Parisian modernity is the use of opiates, a means that—according to Fernández—facilitates the dandy’s ability to relax and ponder “lecturas de Shakespeare y de Milton en el silencio de las madrugadas insomnes” (111).

As for Flavio Durán, opiates only curb his sexual appetite to a certain extent. While onboard the Britania he notes that “la morfina que agota la potencia, pero, no el deseo del amor” (46). When his doctor takes away his morphine and his syringe due to a violent outburst while under the influence, his lustful and violent nature becomes more intense. In this period he begins his affair with the starlet Lidia Brecklin, who incidentally offers him opiated cigarettes. Without morphine, Durán’s thoughts become even darker as he becomes
convinced that Brecklin is a vampire and that his only option is to kill her. This murderous inclination gets stronger as he reaches the shores of America, an urge that is only subdued by the return of his morphine paraphernalia by the ship’s doctor:

el Médico de a bordo ha venido a verme;
ha tenido piedad de mí, y me ha devuelto mis jeringuillas y mis frascos;
mañana en la mañana debemos desembarcar;
me hago una inyección, y soy feliz;
entro de nuevo al Paraíso. (93)

After continuing his journey from New York to his homeland, Flavio Durán injects himself once again with morphine in a futile effort to escape his inevitable return to his native country. Unlike the character in Silva’s novel, for Durán opiates are used to remedy his anxieties of returning to his homeland, which becomes a prison and not a refuge as depicted in De sobremesa.

Morphine is also used by Flavio Durán to alleviate the pain resulting from the loss of his hands. This amputation can be read as a representation of the loss of man’s productivity due to the Industrial Revolution and the diminished importance of physical labor. His manufactured prosthetic hands replace Durán’s flesh, an ever-present reminder of the mechanization of modernity. But although opiates in these novels serve to remedy the protagonists’ anxiety in relation to modernity, the opiate experiences contradictorily represent a symptom of their anxiety. In this sense, Durán opiate consumption because of the loss of his hands both relieves the pain and thus becomes a by-product of modernity that caused the loss of his hands. This loss provides Durán access to the drug, which later gives him the opportunity to escape the pains of modernity. On several occasions Flavio Durán remarks that his use of morphine is a means of forgetting. As he boards the Britannia, Durán finds himself amputated and accompanied by an unwanted son—both being consequences of his
experience of a European modernity. He does not take morphine only to alleviate the pain of his amputated hands, but also the pain of remembering his past mistakes. It is impossible for him to forget these mistakes that are perpetually recalled by his prosthetic hands and by the presence of Manlio, who is the consequence of Durán’s past sexual assault with an Italian peasant. Morphine becomes a direct means of momentariliy escaping his past as he inevitably returns to his homeland, an existence that Durán hopes to alter completely with the use of opiates and alcohol.

Unlike the opiate experiences of European authors such as De Quincey and Baudelaire, the experiences in De sobremesa and Lirio negro are purely literary, and have no direct link to the author’s personal experience. Both novels relate the experiences of the protagonists, creating a distance between the author and the use of opiates in the fictional work. The consequence of this literary opiate experience converts the drug and its use into a pure literary symbol, a completely artificial symbol. Baudelaire spoke of the artificial paradise produced by the consumption of opium. Both authors—in true decadent fashion—take the artificiality of this experience one step further by removing the possibility of the author’s personal endeavors invading opiate consumption as described in the novels. This move further intensifies the distance between Silva and Vargas Vila and the modernity they attempt to access by the opiate experiences of their protagonists.

For both Fernández and Durán the use of opiates become symptomatic of an anxiety derived primarily from the futile search for modernity; not only within their own countries, but also within other nations. The search for modernity is not only spatial, but also mental, as Mejías-López observes that modernity is always “somewhere else” (Inverted 24). In these novels we have a constant movement, a constant search for something else. Drug use is a
symptom of this modernity as well as a need to find the other place in which one can achieve such modernity. It is also a means to search for the más allá without spatial relocation. However, the opiate exacerbates the anxiety of the individual by always returning the subject to his/her original state, perhaps amidst what he might see as backwardness and stagnation. Like the fleeting glimpse of Helena or the inevitable return of the Britania to Durán’s homeland, opium only serves to briefly show the image of possibility for its user. The ideal is never attained. In other words, modernity is never completely attained in the same way that Helena remains elusive to Fernández. Durán is never able to find his own center. Both novels end without a unified or clear resolution, only various options, and other paths to explore.

Just as Flavio Durán crosses the Atlantic, the Latin American and European nations of the turn of the century are on the passageway towards modernity. The journey becomes claustrophobic and anxiety-stricken, with passengers impatient to reach their destination. For Vargas Vila’s protagonist, the destination is equally, if not more, disappointing as the European continent from which he began his journey. Lirio negro intensifies the assumption that modernity is “somewhere else.”

In both of these texts, the protagonists fill their American homes with European luxuries, just as European socialites spent their time in search of unique objects from exotic locations. For these Spanish Americans, products from Europe are not a desire to be European; these palpable things represent a desire to be a worldly, cultured individual, separated from the drudgery of quotidian Colombian life that in turn represents the exotic for the European or North American. Flavio Durán, like José Fernández, “fills his home with objects to reproduce the sensation of peace and culture that he felt in Europe, trying to fill the void of obscurantism in his country by incorporating foreignness” (González Espitia 84-85).
In a spiritual sense, Durán attempts to fill his existential void with the use of morphine. Helena, for Fernández, seems able to also fill an existential void, albeit only through the use of opium.

The use of opiates to fill a void is especially important in understanding the structure of the narrative of *De sobremesa*. As noted before, the novel is set within the parenthetical smoke of opiated cigarettes. It is also possible that the vision of Helena is a direct result of opium consumption. In this respect it could be argued that the two primary actions of the novel—the reading of the diary and the search for Helena—are a consequence of the protagonist’s opiate experience. The reading of the diary fills the silence of the uneventful evening conversation; the search for Helena gives Fernández’s European travels purpose after his nights of abstinence followed by debauchery. The novel itself can function as opiates within the narrative. According to Nicolás Fernández-Medina, “*De sobremesa* serves as a remedy to the void left by the original, but it also tries, as Silva tells us, to replace the irreplaceable, and in so doing, the original will always ‘poison’ its copy within a metonymic frame of nagging instability and temporal and spatial displacement” (76). In this sense for both *De sobremesa* and *Lirio negro*, opiates serve as the remedy to the void left by the empty promise of modernization and modernity. José Fernández and Flavio Durán use opiates in an attempt to replace the anxieties of modernity with a feeling of euphoria, attempting to obliterate the past while under the influence. To use Fernández-Medina’s terms, the protagonists “poison” themselves in their attempt to fill the void.

Both of the protagonists fail in their efforts to modernize their homeland. According to Aránzazu Borrachero Mendíbil regarding *De sobremesa*: “La búsqueda fracasa, y la novela se cierra circularmente cuando finaliza la lectura del diario, regresando el
protagonista, y con él el lector, al exquisito salón donde el ennui se hace más soportable entre ‘las tazas de China’ y el ‘aguardiente de Dantzing’” (19). Viewed through the lens of the present work, the entire novel can be read as a representation of an opiate experience. Fernández takes his readers away from their current reality to a literary journey through his personal, isolating experiences in Europe or “somewhere else.” His efforts temporarily relieve the pains of illness of his friend Oscar Sáenz, but by the end of the night, all members of the sobremesa return to their current state. Ultimately, nothing has changed. Fernández and his company get a momentary glimpse of the ideal, but end up returning to the—as Baudelaire states—“Memories, Regrets, Spasms, Fears, Anguish, Nightmares, Rages, and Neuroses” (8). Fernández rejects the European experience as a remedy for Latin American modernity. Like opiates, Europe both alleviates—by filling his home with European arts and objects—and also becomes a principal cause of his mental anxiety. He returns home, after discovering that the ideal (Helena) is dead and the promise of a European modernity was an illusion as well.

Flavio Durán does not reject the possibility of a modern Europe, but rejects the promise of modernity in his native land. For Vargas Vila’s protagonist the return home is like coming down from his opiate high. He takes a large dose on the Britania right before arriving to his destination in South America. From here the narrative, just as the ship, goes south, arriving at its final destination in what he considers the deepest depths and darkest obscurities of the human experience; a novel that ends with Durán giving into his incestuous desires with his daughter next to his son’s lifeless body. In this way, the journey of Durán from Europe to South America likewise can be read as a parallel experience to a dose of morphine. The Atlantic Ocean serves as a space of reverie, much like in Baudelaire’s “Double Room.”
sea serves as an ambiguous space, neither Europe nor South America, but the nebulous
region in between. But despite Flavio Durán’s attempts to escape, the trip inevitably comes to
an end. He is right back where he started, never retaining the ecstasy of his opiate experience,
the ecstasy of modernity. He decides to wait for death in his American home, isolated from
the rest of civilization. Durán and Manlio stop eating or sleeping, only subsisting on the
lethargic artificial paradise of a morphine injection. Like Fernández, Durán’s journey also
leads him back where he started. However, he finds himself even more disintegrated: he has
lost his hands, his son, and his will to move forward. His attempts to remedy his ailments
with morphine only lead to the exacerbation of his anxiety and lack of progress. Morphine
allows Durán to imagine, to temporarily experience the “Divino Paraíso,” yet the same
substance robs him of the ability to realize this potential in his homeland; just as De Quincey
states in his essay on his Confessions that “Opium gives and takes away” (128).

Both Durán and Fernández arrive at the same conclusion, although by different
means. Fernández rejects the European model while Durán critiques his homeland. Yet both,
in part through their opiate experiences, search for modernity “somewhere else.” For Flavio
Durán, more so than José Fernández, the return after failure takes the individual even further
away from the aspirations of living in a modern Latin America.

The protagonists of De sobremesa and Lirio negro are in a state of eternal waiting, a
yearning for the change that is supposedly on its way, a change that also brings with it new
anxieties. José Fernández returns from Europe without any answers or insight in relation to
his search for Helena. Yet he has created in his home a completely modern sanctuary, filled
with luxuries from various parts of the world. Durán decorates his home in a similar manner,
yet his voyage and his self-sequestering only lead to an act of incest; an act bereft of progress
that leads only to a continuation of the past. This metaphoric search for “somewhere else” is intensified by their opiate experiences. Their medication exacerbates the problem before arriving at the solution, or the cure. Opium provides the hallucinatory possibility of arriving at a new destination, opening the door to a new experience, however at the same time both characters return to the same state—or even a slightly worse state—from where they had originally began. The lack of progress leads to illness. In an effort to remedy one illness—the anxiety of modernity—the opiate experiences of José Fernández and Flavio Durán cause another illness: torpor. José Asunción Silva and José María Vargas Vila both criticize the dominant Euro-centric view of modernity while criticizing their own society’s efforts to modernize. Modernity was an elusive concept, much like the experience of opium; paradise was within reach, yet never attained.

I have shown how both Silva and Vargas Vila took a common symbol of European Romantic and Decadent literature and re-imagined its use for the Latin American experience. For these authors the opiate experience does not only represent a personal exploration like that of Romantic authors such as De Quincey. The use of opium or morphine represents the possibility of the future of their nation. Opium as a representation of modernity for these authors demonstrates the complexity and nuance of Latin America’s experience with modernity. It also represents the frustration of foreseeing the possible future of a nation unable to arrive at said destination. While it is true that both Silva and Vargas Vila were heavily influenced by French writers, this influence was not unique to Latin American writers (Mejías-López 56). But influence does not necessarily indicate a repetition of a literary approach. In the case of Silva and Vargas Vila this influence undergoes an evolutionary process. As the experience of modernity is specific to each developing country,
José Fernández and Flavio Durán’s literary opiate experiences are unique to the individuals as well as unique to their Latin American context. This experience reflects the frustration of a nation in the throes of modernity; the protagonists experience a reality not fulfilling its promises for the future: a modernizing world behind the writers’ modern mindset.
Works Cited


Huysmans, J.K. *Against the Grain (A Rebours)*. 1884. Trans. Havelock Ellis. New York:


