Abstract
This comparative study examines the possible influences of Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, and British Aestheticism on José Asunción Silva. Upon establishing the concept of the artist as an impressionistic or creative critic in Pater's *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873) and Wilde's essays “The Critic as Artist” (1890) and “The Decay of Lying” (1889), I go on to trace the evolution of such a notion as it relates to the characterization of José Fernández, the decadent and dandified artist-protagonist of Silva's *De sobremesa* (1896, published posthumously in 1925). Whereas Pater and Wilde promote impressionistic criticism primarily in an effort to eschew imitation and mimesis, reject realism in form and content, shun morality and public opinion, and uphold the creation and appreciation of an autonomous sphere for a particular type of art and the artist, Silva reorients the aims of the creative critic in an effort to ensure that the relationship between writer-text-reader (or, more broadly conceived: artist-art object-receptor) is not akin to that between producer-commodity-consumer. In the ideal promoted by Silva's protagonist, the reader acts as another artist in an ongoing creative process that rejects consumptive reading and the commodification of art.

Keywords: Aestheticism, José Asunción Silva, Oscar Wilde, Walter Pater, impressionistic criticism

Resumen
Este estudio comparativo examina las posibles influencias de Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde y el esteticismo británico en José Asunción Silva. Después de establecer el concepto del artista como “crítico impresionista” o “crítico creativo” en *El Renacimiento: Estudios sobre arte y poesía* (1873) de Pater y en los ensayos “El crítico como artista” (1890) y “La decadencia de la mentira” (1889) de Wilde, destaco la evolución de tal noción con respecto a la caracterización de José Fernández, el protagonista artístico de la novela silviana *De sobremesa* (1896, publicada póstumamente en 1925). En mi concepto, Pater y Wilde promocionan la crítica impresionista para evitar la imitación y la mimesis, rechazar el realismo en forma y en contenido, rehuir la moralidad y la opinión pública y promocionar la creación y el aprecio de una esfera autónoma para un nuevo tipo de arte y de artista. De otra forma, Silva reorienta los objetivos del crítico creativo para poder asegurar que la relación entre escritor-texto-lector (o, más ampliamente considerado, entre artista-objeto de arte-receptor) no es lo mismo que la que hay entre productor-mercancía-consumidor, ya que el lector ideal de Silva actúa como otro autor en un proceso creativo continuo e incesante que rechaza tanta la lectura consumista como la “comodificación” del arte.

Palabras Claves: esteticismo, José Asunción Silva, Oscar Wilde, Walter Pater, crítica impresionista

In Colombian author José Asunción Silva’s turn-of-the-century novel *De sobremesa* (1896, published posthumously in 1925), the dandified and decadent Latin American protagonist reads aloud from his European travelogue to a group of intimate friends. The written diary records José Fernández’s experiences in France, Switzerland, and England over a two-year-and-seven-month period in the early 1890s. During the four months that Silva’s artist-hero resides in London, he becomes immersed in the study of various local and contemporary art movements, particularly British Romanticism, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and the English Arts and Crafts Movement. Fernández reads poetry by Shelley and Keats; he embarks on “la contemplación incesante de los cuadros y la lectura de los versos de Rossetti” (297), views artworks by Holman Hunt, commissions a painting from Burme-Jones, and acquires a portrait by the fictive but nonetheless significantly named J.F. Siddal; he makes references to leading figures from the decorative arts such as Walter Crane and William Morris. Interestingly enough, however, it may be the two figures from the late nineteenth-century London scene that are conspicuously not mentioned in the novel, namely Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde, that have the greatest influence on José Fernández’s artistic temperament. Similarly, it may be the artistic movement of British aestheticism, which again is curiously unnamed in this novel overflowing with literary and artistic references, that corresponds most closely with Silva’s position regarding the desired role of art and the artist.

In what follows, I intend to demonstrate that José Asunción Silva models his protagonist on the type of impressionistic or artistic critic promoted by Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde. By first locating the artist as an impressionistic critic in Pater’s *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873) and Wilde’s essays “The Critic as Artist” (1890) and “The Decay of Lying” (1889) in British aestheticism and then tracing the continuation of such a concept in Latin American modernismo with Silva’s novel, this comparative study examines how all three authors insist that the sources for artistic creation should be found neither in life nor in nature, but rather in the aesthetic sphere as the artist intentionally distances himself from the social realm of reality and from bourgeois society altogether. Pater, Wilde, and Silva redefine the role of the artist and promote the philosophy of art for art’s sake. Yet in the case of Silva’s novel, the artist-protagonist uses Pater’s and Wilde’s concept of the artist as critic not so much to critique the moral or ethical limitations that society places on art...
or to criticize imitation or realism in art (which are the dominant targets for both Pater and Wilde), but rather to undermine and undo the commodification and consumption of art. José Fernández protests the commodification of art by refusing to publish his work or introduce it into the literary marketplace, since he shares his private writing only with a limited group of intimate friends capable of appreciating aesthetic beauty, and thereby prevents art from becoming a commodity and the artist a producer or commodities. He also protests the consumption of art because the method of producing new art based on and inspired by previous art cancels out the definition of “consumer goods” and ensures that art remains a “raw material” to be used in further and ongoing creation processes.

Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde, the leading figures of late nineteenth-century British aestheticism, redefine the artist as a type of impressionistic or artistic critic and place great importance on the powerful effect of art on the receptor. In The Renaissance, Pater rejects the concept of universal beauty and insists that beauty is relative, that the fundamental step in aesthetic criticism becomes, in a significant twist to the famous Arnoldian dictum, knowing “one’s impression as it really is” (71). It is no longer the concrete art object, but only one’s impression of it, that can truly be known. One should strive to answer the questions: “What is this song or picture, engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to me? What effect does it really produce on me?” (71, emphasis added). Pater insists that art affects life, since for him the aesthetic critic seeks to know how his “nature” is “modified” by the “presence” or “influence” of the art object, which brings about “a special, a unique, impression of pleasure” (72). Pater argues that the aesthetic critic must possess “a certain kind of temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects” in order to experience “the elevation and adorning of our spirits” that art affords (72, 91). It is “the love of things of the intellect and the imagination for their own sake” that leads to “new subjects” of poetry and “new forms” of art, and, more importantly, to “new experiences” for both the artist and the artistic receptor (Pater 76-77). In short, Pater suggests that the effect of an art object on the receptor of art can turn the receptor (i.e. the impressionistic or creative critic) into an artist of new artworks.

Like Pater, Wilde purports that a beautiful artwork can cultivate “a beauty-sense” (394), an “artistic temperament” (400), and a “creative instinct” (396) in the receptor as it prepares humans for the experience of “new desires and appetites” (400), a “larger vision and . . . nobler moods” (400). In “The Preface” to The Picture of Dorian Gray, he declares that “[t]he critic is he who can translate into another manner or a new material his impression of beautiful things” (xi). Wilde expands on this notion and Pater’s method of reworking previous artworks to make new ones in “The Critic as Artist,” where he contends that for the highest critic, “the work of art is simply a suggestion for a new work of his own, that need not necessarily bear any obvious resemblance to the thing it criticizes” (388). The artist’s creation “may be merely of value in so far as it gives to the critic a suggestion for some new mood of thought and feeling which he can realize with equal, or perhaps greater, distinction of form, and, through the use of a fresh medium of expression, make differently beautiful and more perfect” (388). Wilde thus celebrates being further removed from the real, since artistic or impressionistic criticism treats neither Life nor Nature, nor an imitation thereof, but rather a creation already detached from the social realm and isolated in the aesthetic sphere. The “highest Criticism,” then, proves to be more creative than creation as the critical and cultured spirits “grow less and less interested in actual life, and […] seek to gain their impressions almost entirely from” art (375). Similarly, in “The Decay of Lying,” Wilde’s protagonist, Gilbert, promotes Pater’s mode of artistic criticism, deeming it “right” insofar as “the meaning of any beautiful created thing is, at least, as much as the soul of him who looks at it, as it was in his soul who wrought it. Nay, it is rather the eye of the beholder who lends to the beautiful thing its myriad meanings, and makes it marvellous for us” (367). Wilde’s mouthpiece then asks rhetorically: who “cares whether Mr. Pater has put into the portrait of Mona Lisa something that Lionardo never dreamed of?” (“Decay” 366). Obviously Wilde does not “care” about art’s relationship to anything original or real, as he too celebrates the possibility of the critic as an artist of newly refashioned artworks.

In De sobremesa, Silva establishes his protagonist as an artistic or impressionistic critic in the Paterian and Wildean sense, and it is thus through comparisons with the ideas of Pater and Wilde that I shall locate a similar rejection of the role of the traditional artist and an analogous celebration of the creative aspects of the critical faculty on the part of José Fernández. Yet whereas Pater and Wilde promote impressionistic criticism primarily in an effort to eschew imitation and mimesis, reject realism in form and content, shun morality and public opinion, and uphold the creation and appreciation of an autonomous sphere for a particular type of art and the artist, Silva reorients the aims of the creative critic in an effort to ensure that the relationship between writer-text-reader (or, more broadly conceived: artist-art object-receptor) is not akin to that between producer-commodity-consumer. In the ideal promoted by Silva’s protagonist, the reader does not simply consume the text as one would a commodity; on the contrary, the reader acts as another producer in an ongoing creative process that rejects consumptive reading.

The opening dialogue of the novel’s titular scene sets the tone for the protagonist’s ideas regarding artistic production. Having let the last two years pass without writing a single line, José Fernández, the once-famous Latin American poet, staunchly declares: “no volveré a escribir un solo verso . . . Yo no soy poeta” (232). Fernández’s most intimate friends, those with whom he engages in after-dinner conversation, deem it “un crimen” that he is willing to waste his writing talents and artistic abilities “y dejar que pasen los días, las semanas, los años enteros sin escribir una línea” (231). They believe that “lo mejor” of their friend consists in his “vocación íntima” and his “alma de poeta” (232). Despite their complaints, the former poet insists: “No, no soy poeta . . . Eso es ridículo. ¡Poeta yo! Llamarme a mí con el mismo nombre con que los hombres han llamado a Esquilo, a Homero, al Dante, a Shakespeare, a Shelley... Qué profanación y qué error” (231, 232). Unwilling to equate himself with his artistic heroes, Fernández adamantly rejects the classification of poet.

Yet part of José’s abdication of the role of poet stems from his fear of not being understood by the public, since this accounts for much of his reluctance to publish. “Es que yo no quiero decir sino sugerir;” insists Fernández, “y para que la sugestión se produzca es preciso que el lector sea un artista” (236). Convinced
that the modern public is not, however, a group of artists, he laments: “¿qué efecto producirá la obra de arte? Ninguno” (236). The former poet believes that half of art “está en el verso, en la estatua, en el cuadro,” whereas the other half is in “el cerebro del que oye, ve o suena” (236). In José Fernández’s estimation, however, the public “es casi siempre mesa y no un piano” insofar as the masses want to consume poetry as one would food (236); they are not capable of counteracting the forces of consumption by turning one creation into another. The public does not possess the critical and artistic faculty which Pater and Wilde, and now Silva’s protagonist too, endorse. Silva further expresses his distrust of the traditional art critic in his poem entitled “Un poema.” After devoting the first 38 of 40 lines to the process of “forja[ndo] un poema,” Silva ends with the deceptive reality of the proud poet vis-à-vis an inept and clueless critic:

Complacido en mis versos, con orgullo de artista,
Les di olor de heliotropos y color de amatista...
Le mostré mi poema a un crítico estupendo...
Y lo leyó seis veces y me dijo... ¡No entiendo! (49)

Here we clearly see the artist’s fear of not being understood or appreciated, and this points to the necessity of rethinking the role and function of both the artist and the critic.

Silva’s protagonist admittedly recognizes that “[p]ara el público hay que ser algo,” and thus the label poet reflects how they have chosen to classify him, however erroneous such an appellation may seem to its possessor (233). Curiously enough, the omniscient narrator of the frame story also uses “ese etiquete” to refer to Silva’s protagonist—calling him “poeta” once and “escritor” twice in the four pages which precede the commencement of the journal excerpts (i.e., the novel’s embedded narrative)—even though he knows of, indeed narrates, the character’s repudiation of such a role (233, 236, 239). Silva’s decision to underscore this professional label in spite of his protagonist’s disavowal of it is an intriguing yet puzzling move. De sobremesa presents an ambivalent attitude toward artistic production as well as a curious commentary on the role and place of the artist figure in turn-of-the-century Latin American society. It is our task to establish the extent to which José is in fact an artist. Likewise, it is our responsibility to decipher the ways in which he does or does not conform to the role of aesthetic producer in turn-of-the-century Latin American society.

Whereas I will argue that José Fernández is an artistic and impressionistic critic, others have deemed him a failed artist who “seems incapable of carrying out any project,” since his fixation on Helena serves as “a displacement for his abortive artistic ideal” and “a substitute for his frustrated creativity” (Hazera 75, 79, 72). I disagree with this analysis and argue instead that José Fernández manages to create three artistic works throughout the scope of the novel, and these include: (1) the written European travelogue which becomes the novel’s embedded story, (2) the fictionalized image of Helena that occupies so much of the journal’s subject matter, and (3) the decorating and adornment of the protagonist’s Latin American home, his so-called “Villa Helena.”

Evidence of José Fernández’s Paterian and Wildean approach to aesthetic production can be seen throughout his first artistic creation within the scope of the novel: the European travel journal that constitutes the embedded narrative. The writing of the journal begins with a reference to reading as the first words José Fernández writes of his Parisian experience are “la lectura” (239). The protagonist thus underscores the notion that one work of art can serve as a catalyst for the creation of another. He himself attributes his previous literary production to the fact that “la lectura de los grandes poetas [l]e produjo emociones tan profundas” (232). In this instance, Fernández has been reading two texts which together form “una perfecta antítesis de comprensión intuitiva y de incomprendimiento sistemática del Arte y de la vida” (239). Wholly ignorant of both art and life is Max Nordau—whom José terms the “grosotico doctor alemán” (240)—in his Degeneración; keenly aware of both the social and aesthetic spheres is María Bashkirtseff—whom Fernández calls “una de las almas más vibrantes y más ardiendas del tiempo presente” (240)—in the two volumes that comprise her diary. Part of the praise of the Russian memoirist undoubtedly stems from the fact that she shares Silva’s hero’s artistic method and sets off to create art only after engaging with other artistic works, in sharp contrast to Nordau whose only reaction to the artists he names is to classify their supposed manias and to undermine their aesthetic achievements. Thus, in a manner identical to Silva’s protagonist, María Bashkirtseff uses aesthetic reception as a catalyst for artistic production. As a result of “varias horas de lectura de Balzac,” she brings to fruition “el proyecto del cuadro con que suenía” and realizes “el milagro de trasladar[lo] al lienzo” (241). Likewise, María turns a recent reading of Hamlet into a symphony—thereby proving quite literally to be more like a piano than a table—since according to José Fernández:

Sentada ella en el piano, al vibrar bajo sus dedos nerviosos el teclado de marfil, se extendía en el aire dormido la música de Beethoven, y en la semioscurecía, evocada por las notas dolientes del nocturno y por una lectura de Hamlet, flotaba, pálido y rubio, arrastrado por la melodía como por el agua pérrea del río homicida, el cadáver de Ofelia, Ofelia pálida y rubia, coronada de flores. (243)

Additionally, José notes the frenzy in which the Russian artist wrote in her own diary upon discovering Kant, much as he himself has done upon reading Bashkirtseff (247). In each of these instances, we see evidence of José’s belief that one work of art may serve as a suggestion for a new aesthetic creation, as the artist figure turns to art, not life, in search of sources already far removed from reality.

The second phase in José’s mode of artistic production involves the fictionalized image of Helena that occupies the subject of so much of the diary. Moving now to a detailed analysis of Helena’s function in the novel, I find it pertinent to review the previous scholarship regarding her role: some deem her the artist’s muse (Schanzer 47), while others see her as either a symbol of the artist’s soul (Díaz Rinks 35) or a substitute for the artist’s frustrated creativity (Hazera 72). Finally, other scholars deem her “un ‘fantasma’, una ‘autosugestión’” on the part of José Fernández (Hinterhäuser 102). As my analysis aims to demonstrate, Helena is neither José’s muse nor the product of his artistic impotence or abulia; rather, she is a consciously fashioned art object, and as such she cannot be the source of her own inspiration or a sign for José’s lack of creative force. As I intend to demonstrate, Helena
represents one phase in José’s mode of artistic production, one which clearly involves the artistic recycling of the creative critic.

From the moment José first sees Helena in the private dining room of his Geneva hotel, he continually likens her to women in the visual and literary arts. In her admirer’s estimation, Helena parallels a multitude of literary heroines. Numerous references to Dante’s Beatrice abound in José’s ruminations of Helena. The importance of Beatrice as Dante’s spiritual guide in La vita nuova and the Divina Comedia is very familiar to José, who imagines himself in a conversation with the Italian poet’s beloved. Perhaps believing in Dante’s contention that “la persona que le dirija la palabra [a Beatriz] no puede tener mal fin,” Silva’s protagonist reflects: “Cuando en ti pienso, Beatriz, que me harás ascender desde el fondo de mi inferno hasta las alturas de tu gloria, los versos de Alighieri, suenan dentro de mi alma como un canto de esperanza y de consoladora certidumbre” (294). More importantly, in the only words he imagines Helena directing to him, she insists: “no te alejes de mi camino, pobre alma oscura y enferma, yo seré tu conductora hacia la luz, tu Diotima y tu Beatriz” (272). José thus considers himself on a journey from the depths of hell to the height of heaven, a spiritual quest that leaves reality in favor of the divine. Likewise, Diotima, the Greek Priestess who educates Socrates on the nature and role of love in Plato’s Symposium (a work whose title clearly parallels that of Silva’s novel insofar as “de sobremesa” invokes the classical definition of a symposium as a party, usually following a dinner, for drinking and conversation), serves a similar purpose to Beatrice in that she relates a theory of love in which one progresses from first loving the beauty of the young body to later coming to see the beauty in all bodies, from then noticing the beauty of the soul to being able to identify the beauty in all souls, from finally appreciating the beauty in the laws and the structure of all things to lastly discovering the beauty of the forms or divine ideas. Love is thus important because it starts and continues one on the path to the divine. In addition to naming Beatrice and Diotima and evoking the spiritualized ideas of love associated with them, José also recalls the divine soul addressed in “[]las estrofas dulcísimas de Fray Luis de León” in relation to Helena (273); he thinks of “la princesa Helena del idilio de Tenysson” given the similarity of their names (274). His friend, Camilo Monteverde, rightly accuses José of dreaming in some Dulcinea (346). What these female literary figures—Beatrice, Diotima, Elaine, Dulcinea—share is their ability to love in an incorporeal and sacred manner that does not require direct manifestation in the social or physical sphere. Helena is thus a phantom of various women who themselves are already disembodied and etherealized personages, not to mention literary constructs.

Such references to fictive women are coupled with connections between Helena and female images in the pictorial arts. As José Fernández notes, Helena resembles “el retrato de una princesita hecho por Van Dyck” (270). Her long, pale hands recall those of “Ana de Austria en el retrato de Rubens” (270). She appears “ingenuo y puro como el de una virgen de Fra Angélico” (271). In another moment, her long, dark silhouette once again recalls Fra Angélico’s painted virgins (275). Owing to these comparisons, most critics agree that Helena is an evasive figure—one “vista más en los cuadros que en la realidad” (Lovetuck 24). She is “poco más que un cuadro, una pintura viviente, y Fernández siempre la contempla enmarcada de diversos modos” (Elmore 207). Nonetheless, José does more than turn to the art of past ages in his search for models on which to base or with which to compare his beloved. He soon becomes aware of the fact that his image of Helena—both in dream and waking reality—is curiously intertwined with a portrait of her own mother, on the one hand, and the image of his own grandmother, on the other hand. Within the fictional world of the novel, then, Helena is a trace of formerly painted women from the two generations which precede her.

Additionally, José’s interest in these two portraits in particular is linked to his overall obsession with a “real” artistic movement outside the fiction, namely the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. This new artistic interest conveniently overlaps with José’s decision to reside in London, where he embarks on “la contemplación incesante de los cuadros y la lectura de los versos de Rossetti” (297). José’s research into Helena’s whereabouts leads him not to her present location (at least not to her living location, but only to her grave); rather, he acquires only “unas cuantas piezas nuevas de la belleza” that emerged from his investigation into “los nobles artistas que ilustraron la cofradía” (295). Given his piqued interest in this particular mid- to late-nineteenth-century British art movement, José enters “con loco entusiasmo al estudio de los orígenes y del desarrollo de la escuela prerrenacentista, de las vidas y de las obras de sus jefes” (295). In particular, he seeks to know the causes that determined the apparition of Helena’s mother in the world of art (295). Silva’s hero learns that the painting of Helena’s mother is by J.F. Siddal, a Pre-Raphaelite artist whom “[n]o mencionan los críticos que han escrito sobre la Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, ni figura su nombre en ninguna galería, ni catálogo de museo” (311). In this way, Silva merges the protagonist’s own initials with the last name of the real-life woman, Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal. He seems to suggest that his own protagonist is partially responsible for the creation of the painting, which would indeed explain why no one has heard of this particular artist. Yet the simultaneous reference to Siddal points not only to the wife of the painter and poet Dante Rossetti, but also to the favorite model of the most renowned British painters of the Pre-Raphaelite tradition: Holman Hunt, Millais, and Rossetti himself. It is important to note that Siddal sat as the model for John Millais’s drowned Ophelia; she also posed for the figure of Beatrice in three of Rossetti’s paintings: Beatrice Denying Dante Her Salutation (1851-2), Dante Drawing an Angel on the Anniversary of Beatrice’s Death (1853), and Dante’s Dream at the Time of the Death of Beatrice (1856). Thus, the connections between Helena and both fictive and real women become blurred as “life” within the novel comes to look more and more like “art.” As a result of all of his research into the Pre-Raphaelite movement, José admits: “quiso saber de Helena, y he sabido detalles de la vida del Beato Angélico de Fiesole, leído cartas de Rossetti y de Holman Hunt, canzones de Guido Cavalcanti y de Guido Guinicelli, versos de William Morris y de Swinburne, visto cuadros de Rossetti y de Sir Edward Burne Jones” (295-296). He finally recognizes the extent to which his detour into the world of Pre-Raphaelite art and poetry has prevented him from actually finding Helena: “habría pasado cuánto tiempo sin buscarla, soñando en Ella, con la imaginación dando vueltas alrededor de su radiosa imagen, y los ojos persiguiendo en poemas y cuadros, frases y lineamientos que me hicieran recordarla” (296). Yet what interests me is
how this seeming delay further underscores the validity of my interpretation of Helena as an artistic creation.

Helena is an art object that results from and leads to the discovery of other art objects, since her image is constantly reworked in an ongoing process of artistic recycling. Given her origin in beatific female characters from the literary and pictorial arts, it comes as no surprise that she functions as an ideal creature (or ideal creation), as the asexual, unearthly, and saintly alternative to the other seven female characters in the novel, the so-called “horizontales” whom José consumes, exchanges, discards, and even, on two occasions, treats violently.

Consummating a relationship with a woman causes suffering rather than joy, disgust as opposed to pleasure, in Silva’s protagonist, who longs desperately to return to the time when, as he explains, “amar sin satisfacer el amor i inmortalizando el nombre de Ella en canciones o en estatuas . . . fue empresa de hombres” (336). He laments the misery and deceptiveness of his contemporary society “en que el adulterio es fácil y practicable sin peligro, como un sport; en que la vida de la mujer es toda entera una lenta y gradual preparación para la caída y en que los maridos vienen a visitar al afortunado para pedirle favores” (337). José thus contrasts this love in past ages with that of the present, in which love (or the beloved) becomes a commodity to be bought, sold, and exchanged. The resistance on the part of José to consummate, that is profane, the relationship with Helena is significant. His desire to maintain the beloved as an ideal can be seen clearly when he symbolically imagines Helena moving “sin tocar la alfombra . . . incontaminada por la atmósfera de la tierra” (277). Similarly, when José’s British psychiatrist, Dr. Rivington, asks his patient: “¿Usted tiene intenciones de casarse con esa hermosa joven si la encuentra, y de fundar una familia?...” (284), José’s response is one of shock as indeed such bourgeois notions had never occurred to him despite all of his searching for Helena. “¡Dios mío,” he reflects, “yo, marido de Helena! ¡Helena mi mujer! La intimidad del trato diario, los detalles de la vida conyugal, aquella visión deformada por la maternidad... Todos los sueños del universo habían pasado por mi imaginación menos ese” (284).

And just as he cannot imagine Helena in an intimate husband-wife relationship or as the mother of a child, so too does he fail to conceive of her death in terms of a decomposing physical body. This becomes poignantly clear in the diary’s closing scene, when, upon discovering Helena’s tomb in a Parisian cemetery, José begins to doubt whether she ever really lived:

¿Su tumba? ¿Muerta tú?... No, tú no has muerto; tú estás viva y vivirás siempre, Helena [ . . . ]

¿Muerta tú, Helena? ...No, tú no puedes morir. Tal vez no hayas existido nunca y seas sólo un sueño luminoso de mi espíritu; pero erez un sueño más real que eso que los hombres llaman la Realidad. Lo que ellos llaman así es sólo una máscara oscura tras de la cual se asoman y miran los ojos de sombra el misterio, y tú erez el Misterio mismo. (350, emphasis added)

As this poetic reflection suggests, there can be no wasting away or deterioration of Helena’s body. She is an intangible creature—more spiritual than material, more art than life. Helena is, for the Latin American poet-protagonist, a dream more real than that which we call reality. Given José Fernández’s previous critique of reality as “todo lo mediocre, todo lo trivial, todo lo insignificante, todo lo despreciable,” it is revealing that at the close of his diary, he redefines Helena as that which lies behind this reality (242). The spiritual alternative that loving, or perhaps more accurately phrased—creating, Helena promises is linked to her role as art object: just as the love for Helena remains unconsummated, so is art unconsumed; just as there is no end to this eternal and immortal love, so is the art object refashioned over and over again.

As the examples of the diary and of Helena show, the creation of one work of art stems from reading, viewing, and recycling other artworks. Just as Helena is the product of other fictions both from within and without of the novel, so too can she can be treated as an artwork used to stimulate the creation of third and final creation, namely the Villa Helena. If we recall Pater’s argument that “the love of things of the intellect and the imagination for their own sake” leads to “new subjects” of poetry, “new forms” of art, and “new experiences” for both the artist and the artistic receptor as well as Wilde’s notion that “the work of art is simply a suggestion for a new work of his own, that need not necessarily bear any obvious resemblance to the thing it criticizes,” since the artist’s creation “may be merely of value in so far as it gives to the critic a suggestion for some new mood of thought and feeling which he can realize with equal, or perhaps greater, distinction of form, and, through the use of a fresh medium of expression, make differently beautiful and more perfect,” then we can make sense of the change in form and medium as José goes from creating Helena to constructing and adorning his Villa Helena (Pater 76-77, Wilde “Critic” 388). De sobremesa begins and ends with a description of the room in which the titular after-dinner conversation takes place. Even before the protagonists are described or their conversation begins, the decoration and adornment of the setting are highlighted, as if the passing light of a camera or the movement of an artist’s brush were focusing on various objects, decorations, or props on the staged scene of another artistic creation—the performative recitation of the written journal. The fact that almost the exact same language is used in the opening and closing scenes to describe the adorned space warrants attention and consideration. The narrator chooses to repeat almost word by word the description of six concrete art objects, and such conscious and conspicuous repetition serves to remind us of the artistically constructed space in which the narration takes place.7

Interestingly enough, José is criticized by his friends on account of the collection of art objects that adorn his villa. They accuse him of living an isolated existence “entre los tesoros de arte” in an effort to “aislar[se] de la vida real” (232). José’s friends suggest that he ought to get rid of his riches, move out to the country, and live a simple life, so as to save himself from himself and be able once again to produce poetry. The invited guests believe that “hard work” will cure Fernández (344), and at one point the protagonist is convinced, stating: “Voy a pedirle a vulgares ocupaciones mercantiles y al empleo incesante de mi actividad material lo que me darian mi el amor ni el arte, el secreto para soportar a la vida” (348, emphasis added). Here it is suggested that in order to tolerate life, Silva’s protagonist must avoid both love and art, and instead embrace work. This is a surprising and puzzling resolution, since work is clearly antithetical to the ideals the novel has promoted all along. As
Evelyn Picon Garfield correctly notes, José Fernández “mira hacia el arte y el amor como salvavidas” (268). It is in this light that we can understand José’s final declaration—“¿no me he ido [a New York]!”—as evidence of his belief that hard work and North American industrialness are not viable solutions (344). Moreover, this passage underscores the notion that “artistic production”—the creative work he has demonstrated throughout the novel—differs from “capitalistic production.” The ideal the novel posits is precisely that José find a way to exist in the realm of art, rather than the realm of life—and it is in this regard that the overlap between Pater and Wilde’s aestheticism and Silva’s modernismo becomes evident. Indeed, Fernández clearly agrees with Wilde’s contention that “[i]t is through Art, and through Art only, that we can shield ourselves from the sordid perils of actual existence” (“Critic” 380).

By transforming the artist into an impressionistic critic who turns previous art and literature into sources for new literary creations and creates for a private audience outside the literary marketplace, Silva redefines the role of the artist, protests the commodification and consumption of art, and promotes the philosophy of art for art’s sake. It is important to note that one of the main artistic creations in the novel, namely the journal itself, is neither published nor presented to a public readership; rather, José Fernández reads excerpts from his private diary to “el grupo,” a select assembly of chosen receptors, i.e., his closest and most intimate friends. He insists on several occasions that he writes only for himself, as his notes serve to calm him and distract him from his moments of anguish. On the other hand, he also admits that he takes up the pen because he is possessed—as a true impressionistic critic would be—by the “eterna manía de convertir [sus] impresiones en obra literaria” (302, emphasis added). Whether the journal was meant only for José or whether he intended to turn it into a work of literature with a corresponding public, the truth remains that he shares his verses only with his friends, and it is through this structure that Silva presents his novel to us. José Fernández’s guests need to hear “la lectura de algo inédito” in order to “desinfectar[se] el alma” (229, 238, 237). We see here evidence of the notion that art, when kept out of the public and mercantile sphere, can serve a spiritual role with regard to its receptor. Confining art to the private sphere seems to be one way of preventing it from becoming a commodity or object of exchange, which is what would happen if it were introduced into the literary marketplace.8

Moreover, given his private audience and unpublished work, Fernández can also distance himself from the occupational qualities typically associated with the artist figure in Latin America’s burgeoning market economy, and this is something Silva clearly aims to do. Lamenting the wasted existence of those who die having lived “encerrados en una profesión, en una especialidad, en una creencia, como en una prisión que tuviera una sola ventana abierta siempre sobre un mismo horizonte,” José Fernández praises ephemerality and insists on the importance of varying one’s endeavors and roles (234). It is thus important to recognize that even when he does follow his passions into the artistic realm, it is never permanently, and certainly not in the vulgar bourgeois sense of having an occupation. José is proud to confess: “es que como me fascina y me atrae la poesía, así me atrae y me fascina todo, irresistiblemente” (233). As a result, he cannot conform his actions to any single sphere simply in order to “ponerse a cincelar sonetos” (233). Yet the problem for him does not seem to be as much with the sonnets themselves, as it is with the act of setting out to chisel them, that is, with consciously aiming to create them, rather than being inspired to create them as a result of the reception of some other aesthetic object. As he explains elsewhere in the novel, one should not actively seek to produce art, since “[l]os versos se hacen dentro de uno, uno no los hace, los escríbe apenas” (236). Stimulated by one aesthetic creation to make another, the artist has to be moved and inspired by art in order to create art.

This leads us to a consideration of the final way in which De sobremesa redefines the role of the artistic producer and rejects the consumption of the art object is by promoting a form of artistic recycling. The recycled art work, that is, the critic’s conversion of one art work into another, refuses to be a consumer good, owing to the fact that its production process is never-ending. The term “consumer good” refers to products that are ready for consumption in satisfaction of human wants and are not utilized in any further production. In light of this definition, we see that the production of new art based on, or inspired by, previous art cancels out the definition of consumer goods, since such aesthetic recycling ensures that art remain a raw material to be used in further creation processes. The recycled material, then, is this impression of beauty, the aesthetic value of the work of art—not something tangible, sellable, marketable, or exchangeable. As a result of such recycling, Silva’s appropriation of Pater’s and Wilde’s impressionistic or artistic critic for his protagonist serves to protest the commodification and consumption of art and transplant the philosophy of art for art’s sake to the Latin American subcontinent—creating a viable link between British aestheticism and Latin American modernismo.

It is important to note, of course, that my use of the verb “to recycle” differs from the general conception of the term. As it is commonly understood, to recycle means to reuse or make something new out of the container, medium, or outer shell of a product in which the content has already been consumed and used up, whereas I will examine the ways in which one’s impression of art is altered and reused. Silva’s protagonist recycles the impression caused by the artwork, as opposed to its concrete aesthetic form or specific artistic content, and this key difference ensures that art’s substance is not copied, consumed, or commodified. If consumption is defined as the act of using up, taking away, wasting, or eating and as a process that “involves the destruction of matter” and is “equivalent to destruction, waste, decay—in short, to a death-directed process,” then it comes as no surprise that consumption has traditionally been viewed as “the end of the road for goods and services, a terminus for their social life, a conclusion to some sort of material cycle” (Williams 5-6, Appadurai 66). Thus, the difference between a mode of production (artistic or otherwise) based on recycling versus one based on consumption is a significant one: the former leads to creation and rebirth; the latter leads to destruction and death.

Given these considerations of the artist as critic and the recycled as art in De sobremesa, it becomes clear that such a characterization of the artist and art object proves to be a useful strategy in the Latin American context. The Spanish American modernista artists at the turn of the century felt bitterly the decline of artistic value and aesthetic taste that was
Against the Grain

we learn that “Dorian Gray had been poisoned by a book,” either die or commit suicide as a result of the ways in which modern capitalist society is hostile to the success of the artist figure and inimical to the appreciation of aesthetic value, Silva allows his protagonist—although regrettably not himself—to overcome the difficulties faced by the Latin American artist10, and this involves aligning his character with the type of artistic critique of which Pater and Wilde write. We can therefore conclude that José Fernández does become involved with artistic creation, even if he rejects the label of poet, namely because he redefines what it means to be a poet as someone who is moved and influenced by “las dulces ingenuidades de los pintores prerrafaelistas, las sutilezas del arte japonés, las grandiosas sinfonías de Wagner, los dolorosos personajes que atraviesan la sombra gris de las novelas de Dostoiewsky, las extraterrestres creaciones de Poe” (268).

Yet, in spite of this and other lengthy lists of authors, artists, and artistic movements named in De sobremesa, it appears to be the unnamed influences of Pater, Wilde, and British aestheticism that best account for José Fernández’s artistic method.

In closing, I find it necessary to attempt an answer to the highly anticipated question: why do these influences of Pater, Wilde, and British aestheticism remain unnamed in the novel if indeed they are so strong? Just as in Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray we learn that “Dorian Gray had been poisoned by a book,” and not just by any book, but by “a novel without a plot, and with only one character, being, indeed, simply a psychological study of a certain young Parisian, who spent his life trying to realize in the nineteenth century all the passions and modes of thought that belonged to every century except his own” (165, 141), yet never get a direct reference to what is clearly J.K. Huysmans’s 1884 novel À rebours (Against the Grain or Against Nature) as neither the author nor the title are mentioned, so too can we speculate that Silva refrains from mentioning the authors and works that most influence him or his protagonist. Whereas Rossetti is mentioned eleven times, Nietzsche six times, Baudelaire three times, and Poe and D’Annunzio one time each in De sobremesa, Pater, Wilde, Huysmans, and Mallarmé are not mentioned at all. Arguably, then, it is the unnamed authors (along with the seldom-named ones such as Poe and D’Annunzio) that have the greatest impact on Silva and his artist-protagonist, as published studies on the influence of Poe (see Englekirk, Torres-Rioseco, and Cross), Huysmans (see Villanueva-Collado), Pater (see Jaramillo) and Wilde (see Cobb) on Silva attest. Furthermore, José Fernández’s own claims about the type of art he wishes to create—“Es que yo no quiero decir sino sugerir y para que la sugestión se produzca es preciso que el lector sea un artista”—reveal that he will not “tell,” but will only “suggest,” and it is thus up to the critical and creative readers of De sobremesa to decipher his most significant “suggestions” (236). Similarly, Fernández contends that “[I] ni mitad de [. . . la obra de arte] está en el verso, en la estatua, en el cuadro, la otra en el cerebro del que oye, ve o suena,” and as such it is our task to hear, see, or dream the influence of Pater’s and Wilde’s impressionistic critic (236). Seeking critical, as opposed to common, readers, Silva requires active and discerning receptors, as did Pater and Wilde. Of course, another explanation is simply that the artists and works that influenced Silva are not necessarily those that influenced his protagonist; the author may have been reading Pater and Wilde (and indeed he did meet Wilde while in London), while the protagonist was (in theory, of course) reading from the long list of authors and artists mentioned in the novel.

Notes
1 The significance of the reference to one J.F. Siddal is explained on pages 11-12 of this essay.
2 José Asunción Silva took a European journey similar to that of his protagonist from 1884-1886, in which he too visited Paris, London, and various cities in Switzerland. According to Juan Carlos Ghiano in his book José Asunción Silva, the real-life author met Oscar Wilde while in London, and this historical event lends additional validity to my analysis of Wilde’s influence on Silva (14).
3 In “Los cánones modernos de la ‘Carta abierta,’” María Dolores Jaramillo examines the influences of Pater and Poe on Silva’s artistic vision in “Carta abierta,” a letter Silva wrote to Rosa Ponce de Portocarrero on November 1892. Jaramillo’s reading of this letter suggests that “Carta abierta” analyzes “los beneficios durables” of the “passión artística” and the “sentido que le da a una vida humana,” and although she links this aspect to Poe rather than to Pater, the similarities with the latter figure are obvious and significant (121). Quoting from the letter itself, Jaramillo mentions Silva’s claim that art generates “siempre que produce el arte,” and although she links this aspect to Poe rather than to Pater, the similarities with the latter figure are obvious and significant (121). Quoting from the letter itself, Jaramillo mentions Silva’s claim that art generates “siempre que produce el arte,” and although she links this aspect to Poe rather than to Pater, the similarities with the latter figure are obvious and significant (121). Quoting from the letter itself, Jaramillo mentions Silva’s claim that art generates “siempre que produce el arte,” and although she links this aspect to Poe rather than to Pater, the similarities with the latter figure are obvious and significant (121). Quoting from the letter itself, Jaramillo mentions Silva’s claim that art generates “siempre que produce el arte,” and although she links this aspect to Poe rather than to Pater, the similarities with the latter figure are obvious and significant (121). Quoting from the letter itself, Jaramillo mentions Silva’s claim that art generates “siempre que produce el arte,” and although she links this aspect to Poe rather than to Pater, the similarities with the latter figure are obvious and significant (121).

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Nevertheless, Cobb concludes his essay by arguing that “it would be unprofitable to press similarities between these two authors” and ends up suggesting that a more fruitful comparison would actually be between Silva and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. I, however, wish “to press” the similarities in new ways.

4 See Jiménez Panesso’s “Lectores-mesa y lectores-piano: para una poética del lector artista en Silva” for a discussion of Silva’s notion of the reader as table versus the reader as piano.

5 The negative relationship between the poet and the critic portrayed in Silva’s “Un poema” is strikingly similar to that discussed by Théophile Gautier in the famous “Preface” to his 1834 novel Mademoiselle de Maupin.

6 For a comparison of these two works see González’s “Estómago y cerebro: De sobremesa, el Simposio de Platón y la indegestión cultural.”

7 This focus on the interior of the home recalls the content of Huysmans’ À rebours and reminds us of the decorating dandies and aesthetes on which Des Esseintes—and quite likely José Fernández, too—was modeled, namely Ludwig II, Edmond de Goncourt, Barbey d’Aurevilly, Charles Baudelaire, and Comte Robert de Montesquiou. It also points to the rising importance of the decorative arts in late nineteenth-century Western culture.

8 See Silva’s short story “La protesta de la musa” for a commentary of the negative aspects of converting “las formas sagradas” into commodities to be sold to the masses (70).

9 Although José Fernández shares much of Silva’s own occupational ambivalence, there are important distinctions between author and character. Whereas Silva suffered from continual financial setbacks, his literary personage enjoyed a life of continual wealth and luxury. Whereas the author failed to find lasting solace in art, the protagonist manages to elude the realm of reality and escape into the world of art. For an autobiographical reading of the novel, see Villarreal Vásquez. For what I deem to be a more nuanced consideration of the similarities and differences between author and protagonist, see González’s “Retratos y autoretratos: El marco de acción del intelectual en De sobremesa.”

10 In this regard, Silva’s hero attempts to avoid the negative fate commonly suffered by the modernista artist, a fate that is best outlined by Ángel Rama in Rúben Darío y el Modernismo (Circunstancia socioeconómica de un arte americano) and by Rafael Gutiérrez Giradot in his chapter “El arte en la sociedad burguesa moderna” from the book Modernismo.

Works Cited


Oscar Wilde’s only novel, The Picture of Dorian Gray, can be considered a revolutionary piece of literature not only because it broke out of the traditional value and belief pattern of the Victorian society but also because it replaced the traditional pattern with new concepts coined by Wilde and his former tutors. Several themes such as homoeroticism, an aesthetic lifestyle or influence and corruption, were issues that many had been afraid to address in the time before Wilde. In this research paper, I will place my main focus on the matter of aestheticism, the causes that it has and the conse... 2. Aestheticism and Wilde’s Concept of Art. The artist can express everything. Thought and language are to the artist instruments of an art. View Walter Pater Research Papers on Academia.edu for free. Resulta difícil nombrar el lugar de Walter Pater en la Historia del Espíritu Europeo. Sus páginas son un aleph en el que confluyen con singular intensidad las literaturas y filosofías que lo precedieron, al tiempo que se anticipan prodigiosamente en ellas las inquietudes fundamentales del arte que lo sucedió. Walter Pater (1839–1894) is best known for his phrase “art for art’s sake.” His subjectivist and “impressionistic” criticism, once attacked by the likes of Eliot and Pound, who called for a return to a depersonalized classical objectivity, is now regarded with renewed interest; not only did it influence figures such as Oscar Wilde but it is now also seen as anticipating several strains of modern theory, including those which derive from Nietzsche and Derrida, as well. Needless to say, the views of Pater, Wilde, and other aesthetes and impressionists brought them into conflict not only with the builders of systems and the defenders of religion or morality, but also with those Victorian writers who saw art and literature as having a high moral purpose and civilizing function.