Aesthetic Matrices of Decay and Transcendence in Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis*

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Abstract: In this article, I advance a comparative and multi-faceted reading of Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* (2012), setting the novel against an intertextual background of myth, legend, poetry and history, particularly linking it with the tradition represented by Baudelaire's *Artificial Paradises* (1860), De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821), and Walter Benjamin's theoretical configurations of the modern city, decay and history. It positions opium not simply as a drug but as an aesthetic apparatus wherein the shattered socio-cultural and postcolonial topography of Bombay is played out. The article proceeds in a structure that first frames the dialogic entanglement of the novel with the genre of addictive literature as well as Benjaminian thought, mixing a dense web of decay and transcendence. Then follows a close reading that shows how the fractured, montage-like prose and hallucinatory imagery of Thayil's novel enact a corporeal poetics of marginality that echoes Spivak's epistemic fractures of the subaltern and Bhabha's theorisation of the liminal. These formal and thematic elements combine to expose a palimpsestic story of *Narcopolis* that sheds light on permanent anarchy and defies progressive temporality, suggesting the dialectics of urban entropy and physical collapse. The final part of the analysis underlines the novel's moral ambiguity and ambivalence, its residence in the paradox of suffering and redemption, bondage and liberation, and provides an astute reflection of addiction as both a cultural symptom and mode of aesthetics in contemporary postcolonial literary studies. This contribution situates *Narcopolis* as a fundamental extension of furthering the interdependence of substance, subjectivity, and urban modernity.

Keywords: Narcopolis, opium addiction, Postcolonial Bombay, Walter Benjamin, aesthetics of decay, subaltern subjectivity

Introduction

In many ways, Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* (2012) is a dense, multi-layered story in which opium is not simply a drug but rather an aesthetic vector that revolves around the contested socio-cultural landscape of Bombay. The novel's origin in Thayil's own poetry gives its prose an 'evocative cadence' that captures a city as a mediated relief rather than a simple story, and is sinuous with a sensuous detail of opium's multi-dimensional entanglement in the city as a historical and psychic ground. The blurring of poetic form and historical consciousness makes *Narcopolis* part of the global tradition of literature about addiction, along the lines of Baudelaire's *Artificial Paradises* (1860) and De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821), both of which represent the contradictory relationship that exists between narcotic intoxication and aesthetic pleasure. Baudelaire's oeuvre, and of course foundational in articulating the 'aesthetics of addiction', theorizes this as a dialectical form where contradictions of the drug state are brought into the sublime. In his therapy, opium becomes a force that, like the work of De Quincey, "[reorganizes] minds, bodies, and even power itself" (De Quincey, 2009, 35), producing creativity as well as destruction. This ambivalence, swing-

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ing between the sublime and the monstrous, has its spatial and temporal correlates in *Narcopolis*, where the drug opium results in "a deliberate rupture of sensory and cognitive registers". The novel, therefore, parallels the sense of "aesthetic pleasure" intertwined with "insolent scorn" (De Quincey, 2009, 318) that De Quincey imagines and leads to an elevated hyperconsciousness, a sublime state characterized as much by transcendence as absurdity.

Adding yet another layer to the phenomenology of addiction, Baudelaire theorizes the opium-induced "rhapsodical and immethodical thought," whereby everyday phenomena become possessed of "exaggerated intensity of interest" even as the intellect is both enslaved and transported. (Baudelaire, 1996, 60) Thayil too accepts this intensified semiotic field in his narrative, for opium is present in the book not just as something that takes hold of character experience, but functions as a causal agent framing the contours of the book's narrative time and space. Thus, the sprawling cityscape of Bombay itself modulates within the opiate haze, refracting the city's textures and rhythms through the prism of addiction. Moreover, this seductive process of aestheticizing the suffering to which addiction renders individuals/entities vulnerable echoes some of Susan Sontag's arguments about the paradoxical ethics involved in representing suffering, articulated in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003). Sontag details the two-way street of aestheticization in both revealing and concealing the corporeal experiences of trauma, a dialectic which *Narcopolis* engages with a fine hand through its engagement with opium as both signifier and phenomenal vector, reconfiguring sensibility and narrative ontology. In this liminal space of Thayil's making, flesh, psychic dislocation, and social historical memory converge in a layered poetics that registers the multitude of contradictions of colonial and postcolonial Bombay.

Hence, the opium motif operates as both a physical and symbolic locus where the atemporal recollection of the city meshes with individual personal narratives, embedding the narrative into a concrete lived historical ambience. The narrator of Thayil, eternally torn between the pit of his own splintered psyche and the warm clutch of the drug that cradles him: "I, which isn't said in the Rastafari way to indicate we, but to separate the two I machines, the man and the pipe, the who and the who" (Thayil, 2012, 10) inhabits a dialectical space, each I defined by the other, a nexus of self and substance, of presence and absence, of memory and oblivion. The social milieu of the opium dens themselves is likewise dramatized by Thayil: "soon the place was packed with regulars and tourists and all kinds of unlikely people who came just to visit," (Thayil, 2012, 112) a microcosm of the sorts of spheres that could function together as nodes of cultural exchange, economic activity, and spaces for existential refuge. The synesthetic particularity of the narrative, "a smell of molasses and sleep and illness" (Thayil, 2012, 10), recreates a sensory field that is both welcoming and sickening, a meeting point of the personal and political histories of Bombay that converge and dissolve.

The poetics of addiction in the novel, which emerges alongside its historical consciousness, traces the addictive notas pathology but as an aesthetic and an epistemological category: "yes, lovely – and now, in the same city, though it's a lifetime later and here we are, I and I, telling this story about a long-ago time." (Thayil, 2012, 10) This structure asks the reader to adjust towards the realities of not just opium as a corporeal substance but as an imaginative and cultural echo, "slow pull to start with, to draw the smoke low into the lungs, yes, oh my" (Thayil, 2012, 8), opening a threshold into interdependent relations of addiction, narrative, and urban landscape. Spanning from the 1970s to the 2000s and focusing on the fading opium dens of Bombay, *Narcopolis* breathes life into an often overlooked urban subculture. The story revolves around Rashid's opium khana located on Shuklaji street, a busy lane known for its "rooms of sex and nasha" (Thayil, 2012, 120) where one turns to smoking opium as both a ritual and a coping mechanism to deal with the cruel city. Rashid is a businessman and owner of a local den known for "trained staff" and "genuine Chinese opium pipes" (Thayil, 2012, 120), attracting a crowd ranging from tourists to celebrities. This context features Dimple, a hijra and pipe-maker, who becomes indispensable to the making of the shared opium experience, and therefore integral to the life of this community.

As an addict, Dom (the narrator) creates a tone that is both personal and collective, luring us into the feverish rush of intoxication permeating the drug subculture of Bombay. Opium dens functioned as a liminal space where histories and identities cross paths, a manifestation of that urban marginality Homi K. Bhabha characterizes with his notion of the third space — a hybrid and negotiating site outside colonial binaries (Bhabha, 1994). *Narcopolis* imitates this by locating the characters and setting in a broken fragment of Bombay, peering through what it refers to as a "microcosm" of this city — a city caught in the throes of communal violence, rampant capitalist development and remnants of colonialism. Dimple's haunting recognition from the 1993 riots: "The world is ending... Anything can happen to anyone at anytime" (Thayil, 2012, 177) emphasizes the instability of urban life at the margins. The khana of Rashid itself serves as a figurative 'colonial toxin', where opium addiction implicates the wider metropolitan histories of imperialism and cultural dependency. Packed with "hallucinatory" imagery and the language of addiction, the novel's prose embodies the repetitive hopelessness and short-lived high of its people. Dom provides reflective musings on a city that is equal parts "beautiful and dangerous" (Thayil, 2012, 226), a 'narcocity' in which time unfurls and collapses in the smoke and the shadows. Highlighting postcolonial constructions around *Narcopolis*, the novel rejects a simplistic reading of addiction. It interrogates the urban margins of Bombay as sites of cultural negotiation and survival, and as national/sub-national souls taking on the hybrid identities of "the in-between" (Bhabha, 1994). By centring people like Dimple, Rashid, and Dom, *Narcopolis* provides a layered and intimate experience of how Mumbai has been changing, and how its shadow-spectres endure their turns in the city's beating heart of opium.

This study is therefore addressed with the following research question: how does Jeet Thayil use opium in order to create an aesthetic matrix of decay, transcendence and altered states within *Narcopolis* through atextual analysis of its language, vivid hallucinations, and its reproduction of Bombay's subcultural atmospheres—an investigation that is rooted in Walter Benjamin's critical approach. In the novel the reader is plunged into a "curious dialectics of intoxication," whose "structure…is homologous with that of revolution", (Mertins 2006, 229) a concept reverberating with Benjamin's conceptualization of history as a space of 'plural time,' where fragmented instants coalesce into dialectical images, interrupting linear temporality. The detailed account of opium's appealing and debilitating effects evokes both a bodily and spiritual mire of decay, tied up with "profane illumination" (229). To the extent that Thayil is conscious of this history, his depiction of Bombay's narcotic underbelly resonates with Benjamin's predicament of "nihilism [as] the innermost core of bourgeois coziness," (158) a temporal awareness crossed with the 'colportage phenomenon of space,' where "we simultaneously perceive all the events that might conceivably have taken place here" (Benjamin 2006, 28).

Linguistically, Thayil's prose conjures a "a train of thought suggested and dictated by the outer world and the hazard of circumstance" (Benjamin 2006, 138), mirroring the opium smoker's somnambulated cognition accompanied by ecstatic and disorderly thought. The novel's corporeal imagery represents the liminal threshold between visceral degeneration and ecstatic insight, a phenomenological "diffusion of experience," which Benjamin has recognized as a mimetic force animating both flaneur and inebriated subject. This dialectical mode rejects "histrionic or fanatical stress on the mysterious side of the mysterious" that marks Surrealism, and contrasts ecstasy, as "humiliating sobriety" between historical time. (Mertins 2006, 229) In a fashion which would not be incongruent with Benjamin's incisive genius claiming that the state induced by drugs crystallizes "literary residue…a figure which takes on the form of a flower," (Benjamin 2006, 12) *Narcopolis*, through montage-like fragmentation and a kind of immersive "intimate contemplation," conducts a poetics of urban decay and flickering light, placing Bombay's underclass in a "waking dream" in which "time and space" form "a manifold resonant fabric." (Benjamin 2006, ix)

In this article, I will argue that, far from simply portraying merely some aspects of opium addiction, Thayil makes use of the drug as an aesthetic and epistemological vector to interlace decay with transcendence and altered states to reproduce the disjointed socio-cultural and historical context of

Bombay. Based on the critique of Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin, I argue that the past opens a symbolic and physical site through which articulations of colonial and postcolonial images, urban otherness, and fractal identity take place, resulting in a poetics of fleshy monstrosity and flashes of ecstatic perception. Its deliberate, nonlinear temporal and spatial structure echoes the rhythms of De Quincey's *Confessions* and Baudelaire's *Artificial Paradises*, while enacting a deliberate rupture of sensory and cognitive registers, producing a narrative that transcends narrative, time and space, and positions it as fragmented, what might be seen as the temporality of addiction and of urban violence. The first part elaborates on the theoretical and historical contexts surrounding the analysis, oscillating between the two faces of opium and the contested space of postcolonial Bombay. It establishes the novel's aesthetic ancestry, its dialogue with both addiction literature and Benjaminian thought. In what follows, the second section moves forward with a textual close reading that elaborates upon the novel's denaturalizing language, hallucinatory imagery, and geomorphic metaphors, arguing that these formalisms instantiate opium's phantasmal effects and corporeal price, and thus embody wider regimes of intersocietal disarticulation and urban dissolution.

Decadence and Dialectics: Opium, Urban Ruination, and Historical Consciousness

Decay serves as a central aesthetic frame, via which a complex, multilayered enquiry into physical, ethical and civic decay plays out in Thayil's *Narcopolis*. This theme of degeneration, inseparable from the colonial opium trade, operates as much as a symptom of decline as an agent of decline in the dense urban fabric of Bombay. Here, Walter Benjamin's theoretical insights in *The Arcades Project* (1982) furnish a critical perspective for contextualizing these opium dens within a broader landscape of ruination. As Benjamin poignantly observes, this rhythm of obsolescence is what imbues the products of the nineteenth century with this taste of decrepitude. They are sites of what Benjamin called the "ruin of dream-history", serving as "sites of remembrance" with "premature iron" and "glass before its time," turfs of the telltale weakness of the material order of modernity (Benjamin cited in Miller 2006). Thus, the opium den crystallizes as a spatial and corporeal archive of urban and temporal collapse.

A jagged, even fragmented narrative voice pervades Thayil's prose, a prose that quite literally rots alongside the subject it writes about. The physical rupture of bodies like that of Rashid, whose addiction-ravaged frame, then, is the literal embodiment of urban decay, represents the blending of corporeal destruction and urban decline. While fragmentation is ostensibly an aesthetic choice, it's a phenomenological expression of urban entropy where the postcolonial metropolis comes to embody its dying premise by way of its chronicling of 'decaying infrastructure' and 'contagious bodies'. Reconsidered within the conceptual frame of Bhabha's foundational work on the "third space," the opium den occupies a liminal space that disrupts master narratives. It becomes a site par excellence of both decay and resistance, where the clash of the sense-making rationality of philosophy and the sense-altering properties of opium resonantly unfolds. They are ambiguous terrains, occupying liminal spaces that validate and subvert the relational dispensation from the city's social marginality, signalling the semiotics of interiority dragged into the public domain. (Kunapulli 2022) In this place, spatial and subjective breaks condense, making it a loophole of resistance in the middle of the collapse.

Benjamin's assessment of *Haussmannization* as "the art of demolition," involving the obliteration of "not merely of living spaces but also …living means"— reinforces a reading of Bombay's decline as a process of institutionalized violence and restructuring (Miller 2006, 215). *Narcopolis* places addiction and decline at the intersection of material destruction and moral decay, depicting how bodily degradation and infrastructural decay mutually reproduce each other. This perspective on the systemic nature of urban and personal ruin means that the two are not just linked through an understood causal chain but are co-constitutive processes. Intoxication and the montage-like sensibility of urban experience infuse the very syntax and topography of *Narcopolis*, as the fragmented prose and visceral imagery connote "the colportage phenomenon of space" (Doherty 2006, 157), a

notion introduced by Benjamin. The poetics of ruination thus entwines corporeal dismemberment, metropolitan chaos, and moral ambiguity, so that Bombay's opium dens fall within "dreamy epochs of bad taste", socially sordid yet ever rebellious (158). They appear not only as sites of decay but also as palimpsests inscribing the city's 'nihilism' with its perennial vigour. And the dens also attract a whole parade of 'unsavoury types' who are emblematic of a city that is crumbling and merging with transnational modernity. A "tall Australian" who "smoked all day and drew pictures" becomes a liminal witness only to be rumoured later to be "a famous musician," whose work in turn, reverberates his Bombay experience and resonates with the cosmopolitan dislocation interlaced with urban decay (Thayil 2012, 112). The simultaneous arrival of the son of a "well-known director" searching for the "atmosphere" for a film scene set in an opium den reveals the layering of decay and commodification of the new media representations that led to "decadent" *seguidores*.

Sensory excess entails more than degradation or opulence within the dens. The heavy smoke, "…that fell from his pores to the floor of the room and filled the corners and pushed inwards," becomes a metaphor for a kind of pervasive urban spoilage and anonymity — the smoke filling bodies like it fills the street corners (Thayil 2012, 143). This "white living vapour" also penetrates the subject to the point of annihilation, as when a character discovers "the smoke was in her own mouth now, in her own nostrils," a material inhalation of degradation (Thayil 2012, 143). These images reinforce the way decay is entering not just buildings, but the very threshold of subjectivity. Additionally, the temporal dislocation incited by the poem, described at the beginning of the novel, about the boy left behind in a bureaucratic, puritanical, plague-ridden, dystopian Morocco (Thayil 2012, 32), is echoed in the novel's broader reflection on territorial and social poverty. This allegory foregrounds the human costs embedded within the disjoined urban and political regimes, bolstering and sustaining decay. Situated through an experience of auditory and intoxicated ingestion, the narrative begins by suggesting that this telling, like all such tellings, is an immersion into "night-time tales that vanish in sunlight like vampire dust," creating a world where memory, addiction, and decay coalesce in the nocturnal dust of the city (Thayil 2012, 8).

The narrator's almost sensuous relationship with opium—"lighting the bowl, one for me and one for me, … savouring the colour and the bouquet"—contextualizes a ritualistic interaction with degeneracy as at once individualistic and urban (Thayil 2012, 13). Working with Baudelairean multi-levelled aesthetic of decay, *Narcopolis* enacts a fractured poetics of ruination that seeks to convey the physical and ethical fragmentation of Bombay. Through aleatory storytelling, sensational excess, and theoretical resonance with both Benjamin and Bhabha, the novel grounds opium dens as contested 'sites of dream-history' where decay, resistance, and moral indeterminacy converge, tracing the ways urban entropy constitutes and is constituted by the bodies and narratives of the city. The socio-cultural degeneration that infests Bombay subculture brings to life the complex dimensions of subaltern marginalization, embodied in characters such as Dimple, a *hijra* whose identity functions as a material referent for the ontological and socio-political cracks that Gayatri Spivak outlines in her seminal essay on the subject, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1985). To cite Spivak herself, the subaltern "is defined as the being on the other side of difference, or an epistemic fracture" (Spivak 2010, 94), enriching our understanding of Dimple and her precarious and liminal position in a hegemonic capitalist and patriarchal order. This structural positioning serves to silence her voice amidst certain dominant narratives. The "mode of production narrative," as the text highlights, "effaces" subjects such as herself, because they are "insufficiently represented or representable in that narration" (Spivak 2010, 36).

Such systematic subalternity is manifest in Dimple's retreat to opium as a literal and semiotic retreat, paralleling Spivak's formulation of the subaltern caught in "conditions of impossibility" (Spivak 2010, 61) where any attempt at "speech" is met with nothing but a "moot decipherment by another" (94). Here, the use of drugs is more than just a form of narcotic escapism, it is a corporeal marker of "contracting poverty" and denial of "economic citizenship" that has a cumulative impact

through expanding the socio-economic and physical disintegration of the subaltern body within Bombay's urban milieu. In addition, Spivak's emphasis on gender as an essential "pattern of domination" highlights the multiplicative and intersecting forms of oppression experienced by *hijras* like Dimple, trapped within the interconnected regime of caste, class, and layered with the stigmata of sexuality. It is through the positions at these locations that a new kind of subaltern silencing emerges, one in which the subaltern can only enter hegemonic circuits through mediated/performance-based acts, a fact that leaves the subaltern either"mute" or "made to upspeak herself posthumously." (61) This dynamic forcefully enacts Spivak's observation that the subaltern "speaks in some way" only through the facilitation and "interception" of others. As a result, the ongoing development of the subaltern to fulfilment remains thwarted by what the text describes as "imperialist epistemic social, and disciplinary inscription" (326) within the parameters of the inquiry, and Bombay's socio-cultural decline becomes a semiotic space of articulation through absence, silence and subjection.

Thayil's poetic style supplies an aesthetic register in which to achieve a form of the subaltern with its plenitude through the repetitive and cyclical moods of the addict's compulsive spirals as a naïve parallel. This notion of formal repetition operates in a way reminiscent of Roland Barthes's musings in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975), wherein he characterizes the experience of literature as producing a "drift, something both revolutionary and asocial" (Barthes, 1975, 23). In this way, the text cultivates an impossible reading that denies the conventional closure of narrative and instead aligns with textual jouissance like the repeat-junkied heroin hits Dimple craves. This structuring of repetition foregrounds the "verticality of language and of its destruction" (12) through a 'disfiguration of language' that challenges understood meaning, creating a deeper aesthetic relationship, as divisions vibrate and break down, inserting the reader into fragmentary pleasure.

The parallels here between Thayil's circular phrases that refuse closure and Barthes's proclamation that the text "is not a naive residue" but rather an "atopic"(23) entity become evident in the "slightest resistances" and "irregular pattern of its veins" (37) that mark the temporality of addiction. This resistant texture is in granularity with Barthes's formulation of pleasure: a "homogenous... practice" (37) that saturates the reader, creating an almost dream-like reader engagement in which linguistic disorder, as Barthes points out, increases affective charge, where pleasure in the text "pursues its own ideas," (237), functioning independently of the reader's conscious intentionality. (17) *The Politics of the Governed* (2004) by Partha Chatterjee further provides a critically complementary glimpse into colonial legacies that continue to be etched into the fabric of postcolonial urban spaces such as Bombay. Again, socio-cultural decay represents the imprint of the violent processes of imperial extraction (the opium trade and its residue left across the social and political ecology of the city).

In this context, the opium economy rises as a colonial device that combines the socio-economic destruction tied to political disenfranchisement, a condition that is located within the "dark zones" (Chatterjee, 2004, 50) of the political society, areas of partial state control and local actors navigating their mode of survival in a reality of structural violence. This deterioration is more than simply symptomatic of its terminal disintegration: it is an indicative gesture toward a liminal space of aesthetic and political complexity, redolent of Baudelaire's dialectic of beauty and decay. Dimple's story is a potent overview of this ambivalence. Her indomitable spirit, even though in the most corrosive material conditions, gestures toward regenerative potentialities that "produce those effects on claims and representation that [is] the urge for democratization" (50), thereby complicating an apparent mercenary arithmetic of decay by beginning new forms of social solidarity and governance in the urban periphery.

In moments of extreme corporeal and psychic alienation, Dimple herself and her spectral embodiment and marginalization are foregrounded as dramatic tensions within the narrative. For example, it mentions that "her hair had started to thin, and her body had lost its roundness" with "new lines around her mouth" and "her skin was darker", things which are ascribed to her wearing the burkha every day as a daily shield. (Thayil 2012, 156) The imagery around her standing at night "under the street lamp outside Mr Lee's", "her eyes turned up to the white light... very still, except for her lips,

which seemed to be moving, though he could not hear what she was saying" is quite literally a chronicled image of tacit entreaty and haunted resilience. In her face, the narrator sees "no light... not even the reflected light of the street," reads her as a "woman who understands death," a vivid visualization of this kind of embodied subalternity-shaped by an intimate understanding of annihilation. (156) What this aesthetic registers is both socio-political marginalization, corporeal transcendence, and spectralization, and it thus complicates stories of victimization in standard terms. Most revealing is the way that Dimple finds herself responding to Chemical: a new type of opium or drug. Right from the start of Chemical, we see her in a position where "she felt herself slipping through the mat into the floor," "awake but removed from her body," floating into "a thick layer of cotton wool and below that... the blue pools of her nightmares" (Thayil 2012, 161). The descent into somatic and psychic dissolution encapsulates the distance of the subaltern from socio-political reality, echoing the subaltern's "moot decipherment" and the embodied alienation created by structural violence and addictive regression. Then, not only pharmaceutically, but Chemical is ontologically a space within which Dimple negotiates the "contracting poverty" caused by her socio-economic marginalization.

In this context, the opium dens themselves function as the socio-political microcosm of the Bombay subaltern world. Here, figures like Rashid and Bengali loom over intricate webs of substance abuse and sovereign control. The silent ingestion of drugs evident in the methods of managing reputation, "a man's reputation depended on never seeming intoxicated" (Thayil 2012, 135), speaks to the unsettling social order that exists in engaging with these spaces. The khana, then, transforms into a space of consumption of not just narcotics but also social practice and performance, a setting through which characters such as Dimple negotiate their visibility and invisibility, agency and subjection. Thayil's linguistic style, interwoven with the social realities, accentuates the thematic pulse of addiction and marginality. The text evokes a still atmosphere of frozen affect: for example, during moments of narrative stasis and frozen temporality: "All sound and activity had frozen... the beggar woman was completely still, a black marble statue listening intently to the decades as they passed" (Thayil 2012, 135). This suspension mirrors the affective states generated through addiction, filled with simmering tension and history. Likewise, the recurrent metaphor and sensory imagery, "the sound of water, running water, as if a tap were open somewhere, or not the sound of water exactly, but a voice imitating the sound of water," (Thayil 2012, 41) encapsulates the liminal relation between presence and absence, reality and hallucination, speech and silencing, and the subaltern.

Fragments of Flesh and City: Language, Memory, and the Liminal Spaces of Addiction

Transcendence, having the role of an aesthetic foil to the inevitable decay of existence and decay as sublimation, is the movement of breaking out from the "normal, everyday experience [that] is seen as illusory, unreal, profane" into the regions of sacred immanence, an ontological transition thoroughly discussed in the phenomenology of religious experience by Mircea Eliade. Rather than an ontological category of being, Eliade's concept of the sacred arises as "values [that] are themselves facts." In this case, it is a valorization process where quotidian experience becomes an "authentic, real, sacred" object when viewed in a specific way, a *hierophany* (Rennie 2007, 78). In this scaffolding of ideas, opium serves a similar purpose, functioning as a psychotropic vector to halt the abject dissolution of the everyday and propelling consciousness into higher spiritual realms. The experience of the narcotic compels an 'in-between' state where the corrosive aesthetic of decay is made into a "compelling causal narrative" that allows the individual to navigate the stream of being "with more confidence, control, and consistency" (93). Thayil uses just this type of novelistic language to explain the work in *Narcopolis* and the tension in its creation, peppering his prose with the reverberating "multivalence" of Eliadian religious symbolism. This multivalence is marked in what Eliade says: "the symbolism… expresses simultaneously several meanings, the unity between which is not evident on the plane of immediate experience" (84).

Within the lush dreamscape created in Thayil's writing, intoxication becomes a phenomenology of semiotic plenitude: disintegration of the senses paradoxically yields an overabundance of meaning facilitated by "new material technologies… [that] make possible a range of symbolism… strongly suggested by the data of empirical experience" (Rennie 2007, 84). This example of linguistic alchemy captures the reciprocal epistemology Eliade posits, that "experience of the world is a reciprocal affair", and that "without some pre-existent conception of infinitude we could never recognize the infinitude manifested to us." (Eliade 1959, 132) Expanding this dialectical exchange a bit further, Eliade's assertion that "there are no facts or objects… which are simply or properly religious" has a companion in the opium experience that states its value structurally and needs not to be proselytized thereafter (Meagher 1980, 13). The narcotic state itself is an incisive process (into many degrees of it) through which profane reality is transubstantiated to a "vision of the sacred" (Rennie 84), inscribing into the individual a transcendence necessarily bracketed within temporal and material circumstances. This phenomenological "vision" becomes intertwined with the embodied self, forging an intermediary zone between the material and the sacred.

It is a liminal state that oscillates between intoxication and transcendence, but also a dialectical paradox vividly captured in Baudelaire's *Artificial Paradises* (1860), in which the drug high reaches both an apotheosis and a nadir. Descriptions convey the scenario of the opium-eater subsumed in a world of clear sunshine of moral affections, a world, to some extent, is the great luminary of the high intellect, a symbol of celestial effulgence, which rescues the ego from the spirits and burdens of the terrestrial pathways. However, even this elevated state of intellectual euphoria is continually plagued by decay, left at the end, reason is "reduced to a wreckage at the mercy of every" external influence by the forces of the outside world, yielding a tragic dialectic that threatens to tip that precarious balance of the spiritual and corporeal (Baudelaire 1996, 60). In Baudelaire, the drug experience is depicted in vegetal and luminous terms, and is explained as a threshold space between disintegration and shining.

When in a hashish trance, physical borders "[seem] to dissolve until it became completely transparent", being flooded by resonating cascades of multi-coloured gemstones, arabesques and flowers (Gautier 1843). Such a visual lexicon conjures a transfiguration of the body into liquid, iridescent entities, a kind of liminality to matter where the material is haunted by immaterial transcendence. At the same time, ubiquitous light images—from the "steady flame of a lamp" to the "embers of a fire" (Baudelaire 1996, 60) serve metaphorically as tenuous markers of awareness, teetering dangerously between visibility and void. Thus, even amidst such heavenly exaltation, the intoxicated subject, as Baudelaire pungently conveys, is ever aware of their earthly limitations, for the "celestial choirs and …divine paintings of surpassing beauty" (Balzac to Madame de Hanska, cited in Baudelaire 1996, 72) are undermined by what Baudelaire famously calls the subject's almost unavoidable fall into the regions of the "drowsy and completely drained" will (Balzac cited in Baudelaire, 1996, 72). Balzac's unwillingness to surrender completely to hashish by weighing his "love of dignity" (Baudelaire 1996, 72) represents a stoic refusal to be relegated to the chains of physical degradation and death.

Taking the study of transcendence in limited spaces one step further, the ideation of *The Poetics of Space* (1957) by Gaston Bachelard refracts the opium den as an immediate place where confined dwellings become sites of mutual poetic magnificence. As Foucault and Miskowiec suggest, "we do not live in a homogeneous and empty space, but on the contrary in a space thoroughly imbued with quantities and perhaps thoroughly phantasmatic as well" (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986, 23). The opium den transcends its physical containment, catalyzing an interiority in which "the exterior spectacle helps intimate grandeur unfold" and where "vast thoughts" wash up on a "immense horizon" rife with self-reflexivity, functioning as "not other setting than itself" (Bachelard, 1994,192-195). It is this dialectic between enclosure and infinite expanse that suggests the resonance of a "transcendental geometry," in which everyday objects, "shells and doorknobs, closets and attics," become psycho-symbolic loci, reflecting a latent significance (Bachelard, 1994, ix). Additionally,

Bachelard's claim that "the lyrical spirit takes strides that are as vast as synthesis," explains the way the opium den can conjoin opposites, small and great, personal and universal, embodying "extasy" as "immensity with no other setting than itself" (Bachelard, 1994, 192–195). Here, the den serves as a "quiet place" that allows for immersion in "vast subjects of contemplation" (190), reminiscent of the moral and poetic sublime captured by Baudelaire. It is thus a space that erases physical distance to allow form to "transcend the contradiction of small and large" and the spirit to partake in an aqueous glare of a renewed world. (192)

Moreover, in the story Thayil narratively distinguishes drug usage as a form of "obliterat[ing] time," which emphasizes the craving of the addict "to die, or, at the very least, to not live" (Thayil 2012, 40). This rejection of linear temporality corresponds to a sacred time like Eliade's, where time is suspended phenomenologically and moves beyond the constraints of chronological time. The experience of the drug evokes a sort of spiritual poverty that is taken as symptomatic of the alienation of modernity, and which the transcending of this poverty through narcotic means aims to cure. Combining a symbolic archetype with a real-world embodiment of this in-between archetype is Xavier's characterization as an "opium-smoking bandit" (Thayil 2012, 78). The hierophanic power of opium is even more apparent in the scenes when characters interact with each other and see each other. In one passage, the narrator describes how Dimple goes to distressing lengths to retrieve an item that would ordinarily be mundane, a "school textbook with illustrations" (Thayil 2012, 164). Similarly, this moment exemplifies the larger thematic preoccupation with exposure and disguise embodied by the character's dependence on the burkha, "which, she knew, was no easy thing," both mask and sanctuary (Thayil 2012, 164). It is across these thresholds that sacred experience unfolds, between what is hidden and what is revealed.

The ambivalence towards public spaces of drug use is further elaborated on the very next page as "Rashid came by with a bag of fresh vegetables and a dabba of mutton masala and rotis still warm from his kitchen" only to remark "Don't go out, the mobs have taken over, they've appointed themselves our executioners" (Thayil 2012, 164). This intertwining of violence and tenderness expresses the fraught intersection of historical contingency and sacred transcendence, whereby the physical and social environment conditions the possibility of elevation. Furthermore, the text highlights the problematic cultural aspects of narcotic experience, namely Rashid finding excitement in the new drug "Chemical" (Thayil 2012, 161) and the narrator presenting the feature film *Haré Rama Haré Krishna* (1971), which illustrates the interconnectedness between spiritual belief, narcotic use, and identity in the postcolonial urban environment (Thayil 2012, 161). Those moments speak to the greater symbolic economy that transcendence and decay both float within. The language of Thayil enacts a back-and-forth movement throughout the novel, between "the sound of water, running water" and "smoke [that] was seeping from his ears and collecting in pools around his skin" (Thayil 2012, 44), motifs that summarize the liquidity and opacity of the drug state. In this way, this kind of linguistic imagery enacts a kind of symbolic drama of the bodily experience of the addict: sensorium disrepair is juxtaposed with spiritual depths and concealments.

Narcopolis embeds itself in a contrived intertextual matrix that converses with previous literary depictions of opium, and especially the literary representations of opium depicted by Thomas De Quincey in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*. De Quincey's book has often been pointed to as an example of how opium turns the 'trivial...an exaggerated intensity of interest' into a 'curious benefit', and thus the opium entails a lens to the metaphysical. (De Quincey 2009) Thayil thus takes this thematic inheritance and refracts it through the dense, multileveled socio-historical matrix of South Asia's urban and postcolonial condition, weaving opium's twilight effects into the fabric of Bombay's in-between spaces. Hence, this ancestral lineage of literary texts lies tenuously at the heart of those tensions inherent in the narrative of *Narcopolis*, especially those articulated through the disembodied diction of Dom. The ambivalence inherent in opium intoxication, embodied in the dichotomy between both characters' perspectives on leisure, is discernible in Dom's narration,

echoing De Quincey's acknowledgement that addiction represents the "eternal tyranny" of "the passionate and cultured imagination" (Baudelaire 1996, 60, 79).

This dynamic is not just an abstract philosophical dilemma, but a lived reality, an experience shaped, in its details, peculiarities, and intricacies, by the specific spatial and socio-political context of Bombay. Dom's transcendence brought upon him by drugs is a 'dreamy epoch' in which he temporarily exists away from the structural violence that Frantz Fanon writes about – the colonial complicity of the oppressed and the oppressor. Yet Thayil's body is insistent, through prose that is not shy to connote its corporeal cost: the 'beatitudic' transcendence Rashid flouts is viscerally purchased in his pulverised body, a symbol for urban decomposition, the corporeal destruction that circumscribes any liberatory promise umbilically tethered to the ephemeral gifts of opium.

That dialectic finds a valuable analytical frame in Walter Benjamin's reflections in his series of notes, *On Hashish* (1972; 2006). This intoxication is one in which "reason is reduced to a wreckage" and the "intellect formerly at liberty becomes enslaved" (Benjamin 2006, 60), reminding us of the fugitive and illusionary character of the metaphysical release his narrative suggests is available through the use of drugs. Benjamin's recognition of the hashish high as both "a poetic faculty and a form of oppression" opens up a way of reading the opium dens described by Thayil, existing both as a site of opening up the imagination and a site of extreme oppression (Doherty 2006, 158). In this reading, transcendence in the opium-smoking world of Bombay takes on a socio-political charge as a mode of escape and location of subaltern resistance. Thayil evocatively recalls Fanonist colonial alienation literature, as the oppressed internalize colonial structures, creating a "divided self" in search of "authentic liberation". It is therefore that the opium dens turn out to be Bhabha's "third spaces" – inclusive yet transgressive precincts, where the marginally situated negotiate identity and agency beyond hegemonic frames (Kunapulli 2022). In here, opium transcendence is less a pure metaphysical flight than that 'a temporary decolonization of the psyche' as insurgent psychic praxis, marked by Benjamin's diagnosis of "nihilism" as the "innermost core of bourgeois coziness". (Miller 2006) Dom's trajectory distils the moral chasm inherent to the ethical mixture of intoxicated transcendence when placed against corporeal destruction. *Narcopolis* echoes Susan Sontag's admonitions against the aestheticizing of suffering, her warnings of how such representation risks 'effacing agency and pain.' This tendency gives the text a seductive veil of epiphany through opium, but it persists in putting the destruction of agency to the forefront by foregrounding addiction's erasure of subjectivity. Thayil's nuanced inter-implicative engagements thus weave together literary, philosophical, and socio-political antiquity, with opium as both metaphor and material agent in the fraught negotiations of identity, memory and corporeal decay.

The temporal structure of the narrative, in addition, echoes the montage theory of Eisenstein: episodic memories, scattered voices merge in the lines of the film to form a dreamlike recollection of society's experience of history, contrasting in turn the polluted "decayed beachfront" and the neon lit urban refuse of the skyline. At the heart, this dynamic of memory, history, and the experience of opium underscores that the clash between philosophy's sense-making rationality and opium's sense-altering properties happens not just having the potential to be played out psychically but spatially as well. So the city itself becomes "the hero or heroin of this story" (Thayil 2012, 8), linking the high and the low, the intoxication of the drug with the dislocations of the spaces that contain them. Dom's interior monologue spirals toward horror, each haunting sentence reflecting the apparent collapse of borders between self and other, between dream and wakefulness, between closeness and distance, as he engages and struggles against his boon and bane, the drug, and the landscape around it. The eyes that evade colour description because "smoke was seeping from his ears and collecting in pools around his skin" (Thayil 2012, 143) suggest an almost ghostly representation: a corporeal metaphor for the liminal state between existence and oblivion. The phrase "smoke level", which "touched her mouth with the taste of sewage" and which was in "her own mouth now, in her own nostrils, filling her with its white living vapour," embodies both the inescapable physicality of addiction and its hermetic enclosure of consciousness (Thayil 2012, 143).

In *Narcopolis*, Thayil makes a complex palimpsest of poetic, historical and political discourses to both reconfigure and question the literary tradition inaugurated by De Quincey and already under interrogation by Benjamin and Bhabha. Opium as 'the balm for the nature's trampled and defeated by harsh and thankless daily toil' resonates but is refracted in and as the prism of Bombay's fractured urban modernity and postcolonial tensions. The critical and empathic ambivalence that exists throughout the novel is embodied in Dom's trajectory, encapsulated in the "lovely stories" that "lighting the bowl … tasting it one last time," (Thayil 2012, 13) becomes an arc of transfigured suffering forever haunted by the double spectre of obliteration and an ethical injunction to reside in the trouble of suffering and agency. Engaging with addiction, memory, and urban identity as networks of change and mourning in the global postcolonial, this dialectical palimpsest provokes contemplation of all these sutured vectors.

Conclusion

Narcopolis, then, is an ambitious and richly layered meditation on the materiality of addiction, the process of urban decay, and the corporeal implosion of the city in the socio-historical and phenomenological context of Bombay as a particular human and environmental experience. Opium, which in the novel is no mere chemical compound but an aesthetic vector inextricably interwoven with memory, identity, and spatial liminality, makes evident an ambivalent dialectic of ruination and creative transcendence. This dialectic, situated within a constellation of *theoria* (not the least of which are Walter Benjamin's developments of a "ruin of dream-history" to characterize modernity, the corporeal and infrastructural obsolescence that structures the nineteenth-century urban milieu), reveals *Narcopolis* as a resonant palimpsest of postcolonial anxiety and epistemic dislocation.

To the extent that the text eschews a linear plot in favour of fragmented prose and a montage-like narrative structure in a manner perhaps reminiscent of what Benjamin had called the 'colportage', the structure evokes those very cracks in the material and ethical fabric which constitute Bombay's opium dens (themselves conceived as a liminal "third space," following Bhabha). With characters like Rashid and Dimple, Thayil performs a corporeal poetics of marginality that resonates with the locations of what Spivak first referred to as the "subaltern" between paradigms of silencing, gendered and sexual 'in-betweenness' and the materiality of addiction that reverberates Spivak's critical imperatives about their epistemic discontinuities that mediate subaltern subjectivity and representation. This ethical tension informs the arc of the narrative between annihilation and rescue, oppression and hope, but also calls for an ambivalence inherent in the ethical aesthetic of the novel; a dwelling in the predicament of suffering, the paradox of emancipation, of redemptive closure.

Additionally, the evocation of Baudelairean aesthetics, expressed through an opium-induced "rhapsodical and immethodical thought" and "exaggerated intensity of interest," imbues *Narcopolis* with a phenomenological richness that disrupts rational epistemologies, and highlights altered states as either instruments of cognitive enslavement or sublime emancipation. This liminal swerve between bewitchment and bondage is even sharpened by Benjamin's notion of hashish ecstasy — an "intellect" now reduced to "a wreck" and now enslaved, rendering the metaphysical hope of narcotic liberation, ultimately evasive and illusory. In this way, the novel refracts addiction through a kind of kaleidoscopic lens, whereby the corporeal, urban, and epistemological registers inflect and fracture one another, producing a set of complex interdependencies and contradictions.

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