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**Delinquency (if I may coin that word) and the
Conditions of an English Leg-Puller**

Abstract: In 1821, like a messenger out of the dark (or a literary leg-puller), the English Opium-Eater arrived as if offering some saving play of mind in an obdurately literalising age. He conflated the two most reputedly chthonic regions: Hell, and the East. The language was ravishing, precise, unpredictable, and viscerally xenophobic ('...in China or Indostan... I was kissed, with cancerous kisses, by crocodiles; and laid, confounded with all unutterable slimy things...'). De Quincey was not to be taken too seriously.

But the author of 'Confessions' has inspired some poised indignation. For example, for Albert Goldman, De Quincey was more of a literary taker than a giver, and not least as Wordsworth and Coleridge's most prolific plagiarist. Arguably though, such a criticism looks unhelpfully hard-nosed when one considers the self-consciousness of De Quincey's secondariness, the deeply disturbed state of his mind, and the counter-inflationary quality of his sense of humour.

Keywords: De Quincey, Wordsworth, Coleridge, journalism, humour.

In 1821...I went up to London avowedly for the purpose of exercising my pen, as the one source then open to me for extricating myself from a special embarrassment,

(failing which case of dire necessity, I believe that I should never have written a line for the press).¹

If we are to believe the fifty-five year old De Quincey's claim, above (published in *Tait's* in 1840), the first 'Confessions' of 1821 was written by a man who did not actually want to write for magazines for a living, and who would have preferred instead a lifetime of unbroken scholarly seclusion in the cottage at Town End, Grasmere, formerly occupied by Wordsworth. At any rate, by 1821, at the age of thirty-six, De Quincey was at work as an autobiographer journalist, an activity that surely inhibited his recollection of much in tranquillity, and rather compelled him to find the most compelling words for his own life story. He had to keep the proverbial wolf (if not the imagined Malay) from the door.

The magazines and newspapers, which were at the time proliferating at an unprecedented rate in Great Britain, had readerships consisting increasingly of people with little or no classical education, which presented opportunities for contributors to appear more scholarly than they were. Hence the handful of more classically confident critics who have since alleged De Quincey to have been in some ways the unreal thing, deceptive if not deceitful, but certainly untrustworthy and not quite what he appeared to be – a light skirmisher rather than a true scholar. For example, for René Wellek (and for Albert Goldman, quoting Wellek here with such approval), De Quincey's

display of omniscience, the pontifical tone, the constant self-congratulations, the mysterious hints of enormous hidden knowledge on faraway subjects... are not only temperamental failings, but must be explained by conformity to the tone of the

magazines for which [he] wrote and the hopes which he had to raise in editors and readers.²

On top of the charge of tonal ‘conformity’, De Quincey has also been noted for remaining unfree throughout his career of the influence of Wordsworth and Coleridge. He seems to have acknowledged that he might never have received the ‘ray of a new morning’³ had he not read the *Lyrical Ballads* at the age of fifteen; the fire might not have descended, and his spiritual air might have remained a vacuum.

He would become the famous English Opium-Eater, beside himself, as it were, with a kind of gratitude to the two Lake Poets who had presented him with the means to understand himself indirectly and safely. The two founding fathers of English Romanticism seemed to De Quincey to have written with intimate knowledge of him. Having thus found startling connections between his own life and the works of the two greatest living English poets, he would go on to discover their fire and ice at his own fingertips.

The 1810s was the period of De Quincey’s greatest intimacy with the poets, including the privilege of being among the few to read Wordsworth’s long autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*, in manuscript form. During that decade, Wordsworth became a tax collector and canvassed for the Tories, and Coleridge prioritised putting it about that he (Coleridge) had never really been all that radical.⁴ By the beginning of the 1820s, English Romanticism – part of that ‘convulsion’, as John Masefield would later define it, ‘urged by many longings in millions of minds... hungry for freedom to use the inventive faculties special to each human soul’⁵ – had lost Wordsworth and Coleridge as its most essential energisers.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the settling of the so-called Romantic convulsion, De Quincey conceived and delivered ‘Confessions’ in some excitement, and the first instalment was

published in September 1821. Wordsworth and Coleridge's boldest enthusiast had decided on an ambitious appropriation of their earlier (*Lyrical Ballads*-era) ideas and insights. In doing this within the realms of persona (that is, as the Opium-Eater), De Quincey avoided over-analysing personal experience: from the watchtower of his pseudonym, he was able to extend the scope of the literary essay and introduce to it his own peculiar appreciation of autobiography, history, medical science, and poetry.

During the 1810s, De Quincey (not yet famous as the Opium-Eater) experienced the special freshness and force of the energies coursing through Wordsworth's writing and living alike. But he also found that he could do nothing to add to or assist the enterprise.⁶ He had arrived at the Lake District with his soul wide open. He was prodigiously acquisitive, but also rather passive, looking for guidance. He could only be a taker and not a giver in this circle. He could never freshen and revitalise here, only poison and weaken. Wordsworth's work was what it was because all of a piece, his values, his people, including his wife and sister, and his friend Coleridge, from whom he learned so much, down through all the minutiae of the plain living behind the high thinking, the family's discussions of books, their wanderings in the countryside, Dorothy's collecting wild flowers to plant in their garden, her sowing of vegetables, and her journals, with her observations of the natural world that so encouraged and inspired her brother into poetic utterance. De Quincey knew he would never really enjoy the beauty of what was made in the Wordsworth circle. He knew that no parasite inherits the bee's knowledge or the secret of its honey. However, in remaining so long *in situ*, and in absorbing the atmosphere in his own way, De Quincey acquired saleable cultural verdigris.

Pulling One

There is a sense that with 'Confessions' Wordsworth's ideas have degenerated. Edward Sackville West has suggested that this degeneration has been the result of 'four evil qualities' which 'preponderate dismayingly' in De Quincey's writing: 'Pedantry, Digression, Prolivity, and Facetiousness.' For Sackville West, 'These bad fairies were present at De Quincey's birth, and they may be said to have been largely successful in encompassing his ruin; for, if the bulk of his work is so little read to-day, the responsibility must be laid at their door.'⁷

By 1821, De Quincey had something of a debt to pay. Wordsworth's books had been more to him than books. They had moved him in a way that only true things could. For example, he knew exactly what it is like to lose a sister in childhood. (The knowledge of the experience would remain folded up out of sight in – and perhaps from – him until he came to write the 'sequel' to 'Confessions', 'Suspiria de Profundis', in the 1840s.) The first sister he lost in childhood was called Jane. *Wordsworth's* 'little Jane' in 'We Are Seven' must therefore have seemed to De Quincey to recognise him and reach for him out of the familiar dark:

The first that died was little Jane;
In bed she moaning lay,
Till God released her of her pain,
And then she went away.

So in the church-yard she was laid,
And all the summer dry,
Together round her grave we played...⁸

Not until 'Suspiria de Profundis' (1845) would De Quincey recollect, in print, his own sister Jane's death:

I knew little more of mortality than that Jane had disappeared. She had gone away;
but, perhaps, she would come back. Happy interval of heaven-born ignorance!
Gracious immunity of infancy from sorrow disproportioned to its strength! I was sad
for Jane's absence. But still in my heart I trusted that she would come again. Summer
and winter came again – crocuses and roses; why not little Jane?⁹

The loss of Jane, 'the first wound in my infant heart', healed easily enough.¹⁰ But the next loss, of Elizabeth, was the big one, and it would be with a Wordsworthian sense of the mysterious osmosis of love and understanding between children that De Quincey would cling to and conserve her memory. In 'Suspiria' he would ask: 'But what was it that drew my heart, by gravitation so strong, to my sister?' He would answer his own question, first by saying that it was not the fineness of Elizabeth's mind. 'Serene and capacious as her mind appeared to me upon after review, was *that* a charm for stealing away the heart of an infant? Oh, no!'¹¹ It must have been something much stronger than intellectual ability that made him treasure Elizabeth, 'my leader and companion', so dearly. 'Hadst thou been an idiot, my sister, not the less I must have loved thee – having that capacious heart overflowing, even as mine overflowed, with tenderness, and stung, even as mine was stung, by the necessity of being loved... That lamp lighted in Paradise was kindled for me which shone so steadily in thee; and never but to thee only, never again since thy departure, *durst* I utter the feelings which possessed me.'¹²

In Wordsworth's poetry, De Quincey found images that helped him to fathom his own life. So perhaps he might have hesitated more than once before the thought of trying to repay some fraction of his debt to Wordsworth by offering the public a piece of work – 'Confessions' –

evidently influenced by Wordsworth, and yet also decidedly un-Wordsworthian in the Opium-Eater's eloquent consciousness of his own transgressions, and his not infrequent facetiousness and scurrility.

For Wordsworth's books did not relish transgression, and they did not have facetiousness and scurrility. They were records of intense spiritual struggles. Wordsworth's characters were ageless and elemental beings, buffeted by the passions. Wordsworth had learned from his own deep, personal suffering,¹³ which had left its peculiar mellow light over his characters, and by this light his everyday domestic tragedies were as vivid as his social cataclysms. Hence the equally spellbinding nature of his homely English Lake District and his war-torn France (his Betty Foy and his Michel Beaupuy; his idiot boy and his hunger-bitten girl).

But work that paid needed to be done, and so De Quincey had no time to worry about whether the Wordsworth family would be able to forgive his 'Confessions' – or, for that matter, any of his other writings¹⁴ – their imperfections, their inadequacies, and their not infrequent facetiousness and scurrility. In order to prosper rather than perish in the biosphere of journalism and deadlines, De Quincey kept his favourite poetry as the star he could be guided by without always having to look humble in its light. He had his drug habit to finance and his family to feed.

'Confessions' was produced through De Quincey's 'ransacking' of his own 'memory and invention, for all sorts of combinations of periphrastic expressions'.¹⁵ And yet, also, it was crafted as something of a pre-emptive extension of *The Prelude* (which was not to be published, be it remembered, until after Wordsworth's death in 1850). De Quincey's speaker – his English Opium-Eater – is more cultured, damaged, glamorous, and refined than Wordsworth's plainer and mentally healthier speaker. From the curse of his own secondariness and the backwash of his

own troubled psychology, De Quincey knew how to pick out what was punchy and marketable, and put himself first in the fickle public's eye.

'Confessions' has the ambiance of a defining moment in literature, as if before its publication and after are as different as land and sky. One might imagine De Quincey's *Opium-Eater*, Baudelaire's *Samuel Cramer*, and J. K. Huysmans's *Des Esseintes* finding their way down into a Decadents' collective unconscious – a land of dreams, in which refuge may be found in extravagant illusions, alone and apart, far from the world of getting and spending that is too much with us. The atmosphere is suggestive of a more cordial epoch, and less odious surroundings:

Paint me, then, a room ... Make it populous with books: and, furthermore, paint me a good fire; and furniture, plain and modest, befitting the unpretending cottage of a scholar. And, near the fire, paint me a tea-table; and ... place ... two cups and saucers on the tea tray ... paint me an eternal tea-pot...¹⁶

The outlaw figure of 'Confessions' has stolen from Wordsworth's *Prelude* and other works not so much the thoughts, images and striking expressions as the spiritualized realism, the intensity of vision, the attainment of inwardness, and the enchantment of the glass that Wordsworth has already held up to the world in which ordinary people and things – such as an ordinary sister like Elizabeth or an ordinary wife like Margaret De Quincey (née Simpson) – take upon themselves a mute magnificence, steeped in an atmosphere purer than that of this earth:

...paint me a lovely young woman, sitting at the table. Paint her arms like Aurora's, and her smiles like Hebe's.— But no ... not even in jest let me insinuate that thy power to illuminate my cottage rests upon a tenure so perishable as mere personal

beauty; or that the witchcraft of angelic smiles lies within the empire of any earthly pencil.¹⁷

Pulling the Other

Coleridge's influence on 'Confessions', too, is everywhere apparent, from the very title to the theme of the book, inspired by the addict's endless enslavement to the cycle of drug-taking and guilt about it:

...the powerless will

Still baffled, and yet burning still!

Desire with loathing strangely mixed

On wild or hateful objects fixed... (Coleridge, 'The Pains of Sleep')¹⁸

Details, such as the nightmare of being 'stared at, hooted at, grinned at, chattered at' and being 'buried, for a thousand years, in stone coffins...in narrow chambers at the heart of eternal pyramids', and being 'kissed, with cancerous kisses, by crocodiles; and laid, confounded with all unutterable slimy things',¹⁹ have obviously been suggested by Coleridge's 'slimy things' that 'did crawl with legs / Upon the slimy sea' (*The Rime*), 'viper thoughts, that coil around my mind' ('Dejection: an Ode') and 'the fiendish crowd / Of shapes and thoughts that tortured me' ('The Pains of Sleep').²⁰

All De Quincey had to do to fix his 'compass of diction',²¹ and set himself up for a career as 'Romantic acolyte, professional doppelgänger,' and 'transcendental hack',²² as Frances Wilson has put it, was lower himself into the lives and works of Wordsworth and Coleridge and remain there. He did not have to go anywhere else.

Apart from a visit to Ireland in the summer of 1800, De Quincey would never go abroad. His 'aversion to travel' was well known to his family and friends. As Alexander Japp, acquainted with De Quincey's daughter personally, said:

Mrs [Florence] Baird Smith [De Quincey's daughter] informs me that it was one of the childlike foibles of her father to allow himself to be interestedly enlisted in the talk of his guests about visits to foreign places, and that he would often advance to the point of speaking as though it were possible for him to join his friends in their excursions on the Continent.... but he never actually set out on any of these excursions.²³

For all that, say, Scandinavia had been to Mary Wollstonecraft, Africa to Mungo Park, or the Alps to Wordsworth, such actual travels seem beside the point when it comes to the English Opium-Eater's nightly experiences in his own imagined Orient: in the forcing-house of inherited and unchallenged prejudice, the opium dreams flourished, and by September 1821 those dreams had become as elemental as the air in which the essayist could apostrophize, attitudinize, and instruct.

De Quincey lets the reader see how he has repurposed the routine racism of the blooming Englishman as the symptoms of a much more gorgeous and exotic sickness.

I have been every night... transported into Asiatic scenes... The causes of my horror lie deep...The mere antiquity of Asiatic things, of their institutions, histories, modes of faith, &c. is so impressive, that to me the vast age of the race and name overpowers the sense of youth in the individual. A young Chinese seems to me an antediluvian man renewed... Man is a weed in those regions...I am terrified by the modes of life, by the manners, and the barrier of utter abhorrence, and want of

sympathy, placed between us by feelings deeper than I can analyze. I could sooner live with lunatics, or brute animals.²⁴

Any other piece of contemporary prose more clearly the outcome of good mental health might look merely local, punctilious, and pedestrian. The prose is so preposterously – so leg-pullingly – purple that it would make anyone's sense of colonial supremacism seem tragically, or comically, redundant.²⁵ And yet De Quincey seems somehow to have amplified the anxieties of the scrappy outsider into a more resoundingly respectable disorder.

De Quincey's presentation of seemingly tangled feelings glitters with the allure, disquiet, weariness, and moral fatigue of a man who has been on a long and perilous journey. Journalists and their readers, as the writer of 'Confessions' knew and exploited, are symbiotically prejudiced and self-regarding. In 'Confessions', it is as though the same battered but unbroken spirit of nationalistic candour (at odds somewhat with the 'Guilt and misery' that 'shrink, by a natural instinct, from public notice') has been writhing around inside both reader and writer for years, underneath 'that delicate and honourable reserve',²⁶ biding its time.

The Opium-Eater establishes himself not just as a purveyor of guilty pleasures, but also as essential reading. Unmarked by his ambivalences and unmoved by his raptures, one risks remaining a lost person with visions behind one's eyes and no power to render them true or untrue as one wishes. Matthew Arnold would later catch it nicely: 'Wandering between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born' ('Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse', 1855).²⁷ Having invoked the 'fierce chemistry of [his] dreams',²⁸ De Quincey can cook up stray chauvinism and mainline it back into the magazine-habitué's reward system. It is as if the Opium-Eater is half-clandestinely, half-laughingly helping his reader to put a stop to some

pernicious withering of his freeborn archetypal Englishness. It is as if he is offering the reader a way to reenergise or reinvent himself undreamt of by narrow scholars, parochial prudes, or any of the other well-heeled, well-fed, and well-trained mediocrities who have never rocked a metaphorical boat let alone actually whored, taken drugs, or slept rough.

Like a messenger out of the dark (or a literary leg-puller), the Opium-Eater arrives as if offering some saving play of mind in an obdurately literalizing age. He conflates the two most reputedly chthonic regions: Hell, and the East. The language is precise, ravishing, unpredictable, and vascular with xenophobic feeling ('...in China or Indostan...I was kissed, with cancerous kisses, by crocodiles; and laid, confounded with all unutterable slimy things, amongst reeds and Nilotic mud...'). It feels as immersive as a Shakespearean hero's soliloquy and as free as Shakespeare himself from anxiety about Aristotelian unities.

Psychologically searching though De Quincey's Opium-Eater is, most who read him know he ought to be taken, like Swift's Lemuel Gulliver, with a pinch of salt. The Opium-Eater is a salesman. He has made merchandise of the monstrous vegetations of his own sick mind. *Hic sunt dracones*. He has written up an appreciable proportion of his inner life as gothic travelogue. His vision has an artificial sheen that blinds the way only the fake can. The reader squints into the glamour, looking to make sense of it, while the salesman's voice goes about its persuasions.

Under the connecting feeling of tropical heat and vertical sun-lights, I brought together all creatures, birds, beasts, reptiles, all trees and plants, usages and appearances, that are found in all tropical regions, and assembled them together in China or Indostan...I was stared at, hooted at, grinned at, chattered at, by monkeys, by paroquets, by cockatoos. I ran into pagodas: and was fixed, for centuries, at the

summit, or in secret rooms...I was buried, for a thousand years, in stone coffins, with mummies and sphynxes, in narrow chambers at the heart of eternal pyramids.²⁹

Swiftly, the patter of the salesman can segue into the incantation of the psycho-naut. The above – part adrenalized flyby, part leg-pull – runs on the plausibly common childhood ‘power of painting, as it were, upon the darkness, all sorts of phantoms’ and the ‘semi-voluntary power to dismiss or to summon them’.³⁰ The braggadocio apparently borders on dementia when the writer’s willingness to engage with his own intense emotions reaches its limit.

And I turned, as if to open my garden gate; and immediately I saw upon the left a scene far different; but which yet the power of dreams had reconciled into harmony with the other. The scene was an oriental one; and there also it was Easter Sunday, and very early in the morning. And at a vast distance were visible, as a stain upon the horizon, the domes and cupolas of a great city – an image or faint abstraction, caught perhaps in childhood from some picture of Jerusalem. And not a bow-shot from me, upon a stone, and shaded by Judean palms, there sat a woman; and I looked; and it was – Ann! She fixed her eyes upon me earnestly; and I said to her at length: ‘So then I have found you at last.’...Her looks were tranquil, but with unusual solemnity of expression; and I now gazed upon her with some awe, but suddenly her countenance grew dim, and, turning to the mountains, I perceived vapours rolling between us; in a moment, all had vanished; thick darkness came on; and, in the twinkling of an eye, I was far away from mountains, and by lamp-light in Oxford-street, walking again with Ann – just as we walked seventeen years before, when we were both children.³¹

Ann, the child prostitute, exists – like the Malay – outside the confines of the literal world, which is why she comes and goes in ‘Confessions’ as unaccountably as a damsel with a dulcimer.

‘Confessions’: Depths yet to be sounded

But the actual events that had disrupted De Quincey’s life most profoundly – the death of his sister Elizabeth when he was six, and the death of Wordsworth’s daughter Catherine when De Quincey was twenty-six – were still (in 1821) too painful to contemplate head on. He found in ‘Ann’ a way to put the full force of his grief at the losses of Elizabeth and Catherine on hold. Operating pseudonymously, he found he could manage his life story, for the time being, at a defensively half-forgetful, half-remembering remove from himself.³² For all its squamous weeds and reptiles, ‘Confessions’ considered as autobiography is largely about looking away. It is about real battles postponed. It is merely the beginning of De Quincey’s odyssey proclaimed from the top of a shelving beach he has yet to descend.³³

In the meantime, in 1821, the pilot Opium-Eater shows the public how streetwise and industrious he has been so far, and how he has invested himself with an uncommonly advanced scholarly power. ‘At thirteen, I wrote Greek with ease; and at fifteen my command of that language was so great, that I not only composed Greek verses in lyric metres, but could converse in Greek fluently, and without embarrassment – an accomplishment which I have not since met with in any scholar of my times’.³⁴

Having left the childhood ‘phantoms’ behind, the adult has reached such a pitch of intuition and scholarly aptitude that his, and only his, assessment of the myriad-minded Coleridge could mirror that myriad-mindedness to such unmatched nicety. If, like the rest of us, the Opium-Eater is able to doze and watch the night revealing the thousand sordid images of

which his soul is constituted, he is also, in addition, able to rearrange and reuse those constituent images. He will not, however, furnish readers with an account of how he does this until 1845.

Rarely do things perish from my memory that are worth remembering. Rubbish dies instantly. Hence it happens that passages in Latin or English poets which I never could have read but once, (and *that* thirty years ago,) often begin to blossom anew when I am lying awake, unable to sleep. I become a distinguished compositor in the darkness; and, with my aërial composing-stick, sometimes I “set up” half a page of verses, that would be found tolerably correct if collated with the volume...³⁵

The overall outline of the 1821 Opium-Eater at work (knotting and weaving the strands, each carrying a charge of energy) might usefully be appreciated as the beginning of an artistry that is sculptural and gestural – life-writing in the round, beyond the jobbing journalist’s wildest dreams. Under the hands of the ‘distinguished compositor’, forms emerge from the chaos. Where, in the 1821 ‘Confessions’, there was only warp and weft, there is, much later, in the 1845 ‘Suspiria’, distinct form emerging from the flux. The invisible artist continues adding detail to the pictures with insolent facility, using what he calls ‘the higher faculty of an electric aptitude for seizing analogies, and by means of those aërial pontoons passing over like lightning from one topic to another.’³⁶

In beginning (in 1821) to beckon readers into his life story with ambiguities, chimeras, flux, and sorceries, the Opium-Eater is more than merely a sick man or a madman; and he is more than a scholar and a sufferer. He is a shaman. He can disturb and inspire, if not cure, others as well. By the age of fifteen his special intellectual supremacy was established, as he says early on in his ‘Confessions’: ‘That boy,’ said Rev Nathaniel Morgan (Headmaster of Bath Grammar School) in the late 1790s, ‘could harangue an Athenian mob, better than you or I could address

an English one.’³⁷ What better circumstantial evidence could there be of the burgeoning illusionist’s bewitching power? How could the 1821 ‘Confessions’ be more teeming with fossilised dreams, conscious corpses, and the gossip of ghosts? In 1845, the Depths would deliver stirring responses to such questions.

The Opium-Eater is a sick man who has healed himself. The very appeal of the prose of ‘Confessions’ is its medicinal albeit shady nature; the vagaries of art disciplined by the writer’s – and reader’s – need to arm himself with an attitude that will remain unfazed by academe, commerce, fad, and fashion. The Opium-Eater has been cured neither by conforming nor rebelling, but by sieving his own heroic intransigence through conservative restraint. The Opium-Eater, courteous Reader, is a close and knowing mimic of conventional decorum. Apparently, he has saved himself, and in the process made a countercultural icon of himself. Writing in the past tense, he shows readers how he has experienced the fulfilments of genius (which to the hoi-polloi might look like torment, insanity, pretentiousness, or perhaps even just plain silliness). He has endured, survived, and self-improved.

Even as he makes it back from one of his exotic opium nightmares to the waking consciousness of his bedroom and beloved children, he can find no comfort or security in their presence even in broad daylight, with the crawling chaos right at his back.

The cursed crocodile became to me the object of more horror than almost all the rest. I was compelled to live with him...for centuries. I escaped sometimes, and found myself in Chinese houses, with cane tables, &c. All the feet of the tables, sophas, &c. soon became instinct with life: the abominable head of the crocodile, and his leering eyes, looked out at me, multiplied into a thousand repetitions: and I stood loathing and fascinated.³⁸

If he cannot set domestic order against the chaos, perhaps he can transmute the experience into the stuff of poets:

And so often did this hideous reptile haunt my dreams, that many times the very same dream was broken up in the very same way: I heard gentle voices speaking to me...and instantly I awoke: it was broad noon; and my children were standing, hand in hand, at my bed-side, come to show me their coloured shoes, or new frocks, or to let me see them dressed for going out. I protest that so awful was the transition from the damned crocodile, and the other unutterable monsters and abortions of my dreams, to the sight of innocent *human* natures and of infancy, that, in the mighty and sudden revulsion of mind, I wept, and could not forbear it, as I kissed their faces.³⁹

[Please insert image here:

<https://pixabay.com/photos/girl-child-crocodile-reptile-swamp-5462505/>

Caption: ‘in the mighty and sudden revulsion of mind’]

Seeing his children’s familiar features in the midst of such monstrosity is the crowning horror. This was all catnip for a class of reader on the rise post-Waterloo: the armchair spiritual tourist.

For readers of ‘Confessions’ in 1821, things they had dreamed of were suddenly made real by language that was more *performative* than *informative*. The prose has a protean amenability to differing interpretations and yearnings. It is as if De Quincey can dig into the unconscious mind he shares with the reader for a marriage of forms. Disquieting, queasy, and unreadable realities from every night’s endless waking sleep are revealed with De Quincey’s ‘extemporaneous excitement’.⁴⁰ He uses language not so much to inform as to actualise. Where

else but from the author himself has one ever heard of Ann of Oxford Street? (Catherine Wordsworth, with her three-syllable Christian name and her four short years, is a matter of historical record. Ann is a syllable from the Depths.) Where else but in De Quincey's prose – his cathedral dedicated to endless self-reflection – has one ever heard of the 'doctrine of the true church on the subject of opium: of which church I acknowledge myself to be the only member – the alpha and the omega'?⁴¹

For all the brio of his performance of himself in every sentence, De Quincey was not greatly exercised by a need for factual accuracy. For example, as Robert Morrison has pointed out, the passage about De Quincey's children at his bedside cannot be literally true: 'De Quincey has confused the date. "Children" could not have stood at his bedside in May 1818 because at that time he and Margaret had only one child, William Penson De Quincey. Their second child, Margaret Thomasiana De Quincey, was not born until 5 June 1818'.⁴² The life of De Quincey seems rather illusory, an alchemical and improbable sequence of events. It is so because he sensed in his public an appetite stronger for synaptic than linear life-writing, and he guessed that his confessional mode of expression, alloyed more with humour than contrition, would make paying addicts of his readers all the more expediently. Decent drapery indeed.

If honesty was not always De Quincey's strong point, neither was modesty. (He told his mother in 1818 that 'I might become the intellectual benefactor of my species', and that 'I should accomplish a great revolution in the intellectual condition of the world').⁴³ He had in abundance, though, a shinier quality: charm. This has resulted in his being written off by some (Goldman, for example) as shallow and treacherous. Yet charm is a distillation of human enjoyment, dazzling, beguiling, giving saddening moments meaning, and making meaningless moments shine. Whereas one might roll an eye and resolve not to trust De Quincey but still feel better for

it, Goldman's unsympathetic omniscience (like Norman Fruman's on the subject of Coleridge or Frank Hilton's on the subject of Baudelaire) is not without its funny side. The supposedly swamp-draining seriousness of such a critic does tend to drive the reader back to the resplendent and fault-ridden original with whetted appetite.

The impact of that account of his first opium hit with the reading public – 'oh! Heavens! what a revulsion! what an upheaving, from its lowest depths, of the inner spirit! what an apocalypse of the world within me!' – was not easily forgotten:

That my pains had vanished, was now a trifle in my eyes: – this negative effect was swallowed up in the immensity of those positive effects which had opened before me – in the abyss of divine enjoyment thus suddenly revealed. Here was a panacea...for all human woes: here was the secret of happiness, about which philosophers had disputed for so many ages, at once discovered: happiness might now be bought for a penny, and carried in the waistcoat pocket: portable ecstasies might be had corked up in a pint bottle...⁴⁴

Such was the manner of magazine article in which De Quincey first began to organise his authenticities and inaccuracies, as if to see if they would react against one another until they reached their own compromise, finally interacting to bring about the equable and enduring atmosphere to be found in, say, Shakespeare, Milton, or Wordsworth. Yet perhaps there could never have been any such movement towards that stability after all, which might only have led to the cessation of the expression of human truth the instability supports. What we lack in factual clarity De Quincey has made up for in his pursuit of a *jeu d'esprit*, to see where it leads, and perhaps to question whatever beliefs about ourselves we hold fast to. We all metabolise sensation. We all consume and pollute. We all remember and misremember. We all try to

manage the world's reception of our warts and all when we cannot erase them. To echo De Quincey's latest biographer, Frances Wilson, 'we are all De Quinceyan now'.⁴⁵

Delinquency ad infinitum

As he re-wrote the 'Confessions' in the mid 1850s, he enlarged the work considerably, but he soon doubted the desirability of such a revisiting. A letter to his youngest daughter, Emily De Quincey (1833-1917), dated September/October 1856, shows the extent of those misgivings:

To justify the enormous labour it has cost me, most certainly it *ought* to be improved. And yet, reviewing the volume as a *whole*, now that I can look back from nearly the end to the beginning, greatly I doubt whether many readers will not prefer it in its original fragmentary state to its present full-blown development...Here again, as in thousands of similar cases, is a conflict – is a call for a choice – between an almost *extempore* effort, having the faults, the carelessness, possibly the graces, of a fugitive imagination – this on the one side, and on the other a studied and mature presentation of the same thoughts, facts, and feelings, but without the same benefit from extemporaneous excitement.⁴⁶

At the beginning of his writing career the tension between containing and capitalising on the nightmare of his own delinquencies had given his best work its tautness, and the crackle of 'extemporaneous excitement' had been sent out as an urgent and affectionate greeting to souls in similar crises. Look at this early paragraph of the 1821 version:

I have often been asked, how I first came to be a regular opium-eater; and have suffered, very unjustly, in the opinion of my acquaintance, from being reputed to have brought upon myself all the sufferings which I shall have to record, by a long

course of indulgence in this practice purely for the sake of creating an artificial state of pleasurable excitement. This, however, is a misrepresentation of my case.⁴⁷

But during the 1820s, 30s, 40s, and 50s that tension was loosened and lost in journalistic improvisation, padding and recycling, and the relentless need to provide editors with copy. Long-windedness would take over. Look at the 1856 version:

I have often been asked – how it was, and through what series of steps, that I became an opium-eater. Was it gradually, tentatively, mistrustingly, as one goes down a shelving beach into a deepening sea, and with a knowledge from the first of the dangers lying on that path; half-courting those dangers, in fact, whilst seeming to defy them? Or was it, secondly, in pure ignorance of such dangers, under the misleadings of mercenary fraud? Since oftentimes lozenges, for the relief of pulmonary affections, found their efficacy upon the opium which they contain, upon this, and this only, though clamorously disavowing so suspicious an alliance: and under such treacherous disguises, multitudes are seduced into a dependency which they had not foreseen upon a drug which they had not known: not known even by name, or by sight: and thus the case is not rare – that the chain of abject slavery is first detected when it has inextricably wound itself about the constitutional system. Thirdly, and lastly, was it (*Yes*, by passionate anticipation, I answer, before the question is finished) – was it on a sudden, overmastering impulse derived from bodily anguish? Loudly I repeat, *Yes*; loudly and indignantly – as in answer to a wilful calumny.⁴⁸

Phrase by phrase, the writing still looks brisk enough to reach directly into familiar psychological concerns: paddling at Broadstairs, Margate, or Ramsgate has its parallels with

dabbling in laudanum. The reader may well remember the feeling of lowering himself down that ‘shelving beach’ from innocence into deepening experience. But all the superfluous phrases (‘...the misleadings of mercenary fraud ... oftentimes lozenges...’) – surely the detritus of the earlier, more essential ‘Confessions’ – have become the niggling regatta on a tide of prolixity too far. The aged Opium-Eater has become merely *amusing*,⁴⁹ whereas his original entreaty in the autumn of 1821 had been an inspired delight (and the sequel in 1845 had offered an even darker and brighter development of that delight). Baudelaire didn’t bother with the long-winded ‘Confessions’, but rather based his translation entirely on the original version, to which he added sections of ‘Suspiria.’ He saw at once that the original book epitomised, most concisely, both the spiritual anguish and the restless frivolity of modern times: the slow crumbling turn inward, the self-embalming drug use, and the sheer resourcefulness with which a delinquent scholar on the make might mask the stench of self-promotion.

¹ *21st-Century Oxford Authors: Thomas De Quincey*, ed. Robert Morrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 471. Hereafter, De Quincey, *Selected Writings*.

² René Wellek’s ‘De Quincey’s Status in the History of Ideas’ is quoted in Albert Goldman’s *The Mine and the Mint: Sources for the Writings of Thomas De Quincey* (Carbondale, Illinois, 1965), 167.

³ Robert Morrison, *The English Opium Eater* (London, 2009), 35.

⁴ Alan Vardy has written very insightfully about Coleridge’s (and later his family’s) attempts to reconstruct his image for the British public, and Vardy has called the *Biographia Literaria* ‘Coleridge’s most obvious act of reinvention’ (*Constructing Coleridge: The Posthumous Life of the Author* (Basingstoke, 2010), 5).

⁵ John Masefield's take on Romanticism, in *Thanks Before Going* (London, 1946), 1, has a few verbal echoes of Leigh Hunt's Preface to *Foliage; or poems original and translated*, 1818 (quoted in Jonathan Bate, *Radical Wordsworth: The Poet Who Changed the World* (London, 2020), 311).

⁶ See Robert Morrison's account of De Quincey's unhappy time as editor and go-between for Wordsworth's pamphlet, 'The Convention of Cintra' (*The English Opium-Eater*, 140-6)

⁷ Edward Sackville-West, *A Flame in Sunlight: The Life and Work of Thomas De Quincey* (London, 1936), 240-1.

⁸ William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797-1800*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 75.

⁹ De Quincey, *Selected Writings*, 265.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 268.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ In *Radical Wordsworth*, Jonathan Bate writes vividly of a number of Wordsworth's shaping sufferings, including his childhood separation from Dorothy (26-7), the death of his father (65-6; 87-8), and his and Dorothy's dependence as orphaned children on the cruel Cooksons (65, 66).

¹⁴ For example, his three 1839 articles that appeared in *Tait's* under the title 'William Wordsworth' (De Quincey, *Selected Writings*, 165-229).

¹⁵ Ibid., 9

¹⁶ Ibid., 54.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poetical Works*, ed. J. C. C. Mays, 6 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), i. 754.

¹⁹ De Quincey, *Selected Writings*, 65.

²⁰ Coleridge, *Poetical Works*, i. 381, 700, 754.

²¹ De Quincey, *Selected Writings*, 9.

²² Frances Wilson, *Guilty Thing: A Life of Thomas De Quincey* (London, 2016), 5.

²³ Alexander Japp, *De Quincey Memorials* (New York, 1891), ii. 236.

²⁴ De Quincey, *Selected Writings*, 64-5.

²⁵ As H. Jayson Althofer and Brian Musgrove have put it in “‘A ghost in daylight’: drugs and the horror of modernity”, De Quincey has an addict’s ‘awareness of the economic co-dependence of Britain and Asia’ (<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-018-0162-0>).

²⁶ De Quincey, *Selected Writings*, 3.

²⁷ *Arnold, Penguin Poetry Library*, ed. Kenneth Allott (Harmondsworth, 1985), 206.

²⁸ De Quincey, *Selected Writings*, 60.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

³² In this way, he perhaps foreshadowed T. S. Eliot’s notion that, ‘Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality’ (‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, *The Egoist* (September 1919), v. 73).

³³ ‘I have often been asked – how it was, and through what series of steps, that I became an opium-eater. Was it gradually, tentatively, mistrustingly, as one goes down a shelving beach into a deepening sea, and with a knowledge from the first of the dangers lying on that path; half-courting those dangers, in fact, whilst seeming to defy them?’ (*Selected Writings*, 453).

³⁴ Ibid., 8-9.

³⁵ Ibid., 280.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 474, 9.

³⁸ Ibid., 65.

³⁹ Ibid., 65-6.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 446.

⁴¹ Ibid., 39-40.

⁴² Ibid., 497.

⁴³ *De Quincey Memorials*, ii. 111.

⁴⁴ De Quincey, *Selected Writings*, 37.

⁴⁵ Wilson, *Guilty Thing*, 342.

⁴⁶ De Quincey, *Selected Writings*, 445-46.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 453.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 446.