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De Quincey and the Dilemma of Romantic Autobiography

Of all the major nineteenth-century English authors who sought to leave some fragments of autobiography behind them, De Quincey is perhaps the most intimate and the least revealing. For after traversing the whole of De Quincey's *commedia*—from the Inferno of laudanum to the Paradiso of childhood—we are no closer at last to an understanding of the artist or the man than we were at the beginning. I think it is a fair question, therefore, to ask whether Thomas De Quincey can be said to have existed in any but a purely circumstantial sense of that word, whether, that is, we can perceive him through his writings as an embodied literary consciousness. If we assume, as I shall for the duration of this essay, that literary autobiography—and particularly literary autobiography of the “confessional” variety (e.g. Rousseau)—exists for the purpose of bringing before the public evidence of the inner integrity and wholeness of the life revealed in its pages, then what can we say of an explicitly confessional work that fails to achieve this goal? Unlike the religious or “spiritual” autobiography, literary autobiography cannot finally vindicate its subject by appealing to some extrinsic standard of excellence—such as divine grace, for example, or God's judgment in eternity—but must rely upon those very qualities, necessarily intrinsic qualities, for which the literary artist is remembered in the first place.¹ At the very least, literary autobiography must place before the reader an image of its subject that is not only memorable but also psychologically plausible: the artist himself must exist for us as an intelligible object of contemplation, as something more than the sum of his biographical parts. With regard to De Quincey, the position I will adopt in this essay is that he simply fails to crystallize that image of a creative and reflective self which is the primary desideratum of literary autobiography. It is my belief that his various attempts at self-recovery and self-invention—*Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, *Suspiria de Profundis*, and miscellaneous personal sketches—lack not only the psychological reality of a nuclear self, but

even that continuous structure of life experiences from which an ideal conception of self can be derived.²

It is the absence of such a structure from De Quincey's narratives that strikes one immediately upon first encountering his work; at times his writing most resembles a labyrinth of dreams, personal anecdote, and stylized rhetoric, all designed to disorient and mislead the unwary reader in search of a plot or "story." It would be a mistake, of course, to impute a motive to deceive on De Quincey's part. His mind seems to have functioned associationally, if we can trust his account of it, from the earliest stages of consciousness, a tendency that easily developed into a literary mannerism under the combined influence of opium and the conversation of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Unfortunately, the memoir, the confession, the personal essay—in short, all of the literary vehicles De Quincey exploited in his attempts at self-portraiture—demand, as narrative forms, an essentially linear progression of incident and ideas that he must have found very difficult to sustain, at least to judge from those innumerable instances when he subverts either the narrative thrust of an episode or the ostensible purpose of a particular recollection. But even where a minimal narrative sequence is maintained, as in *Confessions*, De Quincey repeatedly gravitates towards isolated and often melodramatized moments of intense emotion, moments occasionally lacking either antecedence or consequence, and often climaxed by an intimation of momentous or visionary changes about to befall the subject, just beyond the limits of the present narrative. An aggregate of such moments constitutes the closest thing to an epoch in De Quincey's life-history:

One night, when we were pacing slowly along Oxford Street, and after a day when I had felt unusually ill and faint, I requested her to turn off with me into Soho Square. Thither we went, and we sat down on the steps of a house which, to this hour, I never pass without a pang of grief and an inner act of homage to the spirit of that unhappy girl, in memory of the noble act which she there performed. Suddenly, as we sat, I grew much worse . . . From sensations I then had, I felt an inner conviction of the liveliest kind, that without some powerful and reviving stimulus I should either have died on the spot or should, at least, have sunk to a point of exhaustion from which all reascent, under my friendless circumstances, would soon have become hopeless. Then it was, at this crisis of my fate, that my poor orphan companion, who had herself met with little but injuries in this world, stretched out a saving hand to me. Uttering a cry of terror, but without a moment's delay, she ran off into Oxford Street, and in less time than could be imagined, returned to me with a glass of port wine and spices that acted upon my empty stomach . . . with an instantaneous power of restoration . . . O youthful benefactress! How often, in succeeding years, standing in solitary places and thinking of thee with a grief of heart and perfect love—how often have I wished that, as in ancient times the curse of a father was believed

to have a supernatural power and to pursue its object with a fatal necessity of self-fulfillment, even so the benediction of a heart oppressed with gratitude might have a like prerogative, might have power given to it from above to chase, to haunt, to waylay, to overtake, to pursue thee into the central darkness of a London brothel or (if it were possible) into the darkness of the grave, there to awaken thee with an authentic message of peace and forgiveness and of final reconciliation.³

The heroine of this passage is identified by the author as Ann _____, a prostitute whom De Quincey meets and befriends, and with whom he walks the pavements of that "stony-hearted stepmother" Oxford Street during the period of his "novitiate" in suffering as a homeless truant in London. Of her past we know very little—De Quincey hints at a tale of seduction and betrayal—but more importantly, of her future we know absolutely nothing. She exists for us merely as a transient and mysterious figure, bordering on anonymity, and therefore as an appropriate symbol of the anomie that infects all who dwell in that urban Hades known as London. De Quincey assures us, in a later passage, that after being restored to the good graces of his family he sought her out repeatedly, but that, ignorant of her surname or whereabouts, he was unable to find her at last. Whether this later pursuit of "Ann" was indeed sincere or only half-hearted is an intriguing but most likely unanswerable question; for our purposes it will suffice that her sudden and total disappearance becomes the precondition of her memorialization. In fact, had her material existence been known to De Quincey (or to the reader) he could hardly have transfigured her into the "Magdalen" of Oxford Street whom he encounters only in his dreams. Even in the passage before us we can see how her real presence is subtly spiritualized as the author suddenly shifts temporal perspective (moving from the narrative present to the future) and imagines, or perhaps hopes, that she has died.

The possibility of her death does not distress him; on the contrary, it represents an imaginative sequel to their relationship that prudently sublimates the evident passion he feels for her, and permits him the comfort of expressing a paternal affection for this prodigal daughter. But however imaginatively satisfying this fantasied rendezvous in death may have appeared in reverie, De Quincey refuses to pursue this subject any further in fact. What follows this episode, incongruously, is a breezy, often coy, and rather lengthy account of his complicated dealings with Jewish money-lenders, an episode as comic and verbally demonstrative as the account of his deliverance was tragic and (comparatively) muted in tone. There is, admittedly, one further reference to Ann of Oxford Street, ten pages later, where, once again, De Quincey expresses the hope that she has "long since [been] laid in the

grave," but never again will she reappear as a narrative subject, except as a fleeting and perplexing image in a dream, where her image merges with that of exotic and spiritual lands, utterly removed from her natural setting. Like other beloved women from whom De Quincey is parted by either fate or death, Ann becomes a free-floating metaphor of passion and sorrow, a portion of the *disjecta membra* of anxiety and longing that permeate the author's consciousness. In De Quincey's own words, she is attached to that "link of suffering" that stretches from childhood to infinity, but had she never lived at all, she could conceivably have been replaced by any other women who might have touched De Quincey's heart or conscience in a similar way. There is, in short, nothing in Ann herself or in her relationship to De Quincey that forces him to acknowledge her *separate* reality; he displaces and then absorbs her into his private world of reverie, at which point her continued existence becomes not only a matter of conjecture, but practically speaking a matter of psychological irrelevance.

Nor does Ann figure later as a catalyst in the process of opium addiction—the presumptive subject of *Confessions*. De Quincey offers the reader several conflicting etiological accounts of his addiction, but in none of them does Ann appear as a cause or even a pretext for his dependence upon the drug. If she is related at all to the history of his illness, it is through a process of association, by which all of De Quincey's encounters with grief and longing become one insatiable need for surcease of pain, but to achieve *this* vision of De Quincey's condition one must abandon altogether the narrative structure he has in fact imposed upon his recollections—a structure of ceaseless musings and digressions. Within such a narrative no focus or "centering" of consciousness is possible, and in place of sequence, De Quincey substitutes recurrence, and particularly the recurrence of obsessional images, as the sole principle of narrative order-within-disorder. Thus, the episode we have just examined is no closer to the center than to the periphery of De Quincey's narrative consciousness, nor does the "crisis" he relates impel him irreversibly in any particular direction.

The effect of opium upon a mind already predisposed to disorder was, predictably, shattering, yet for all its manifest terrors, the drug also offered De Quincey a fleeting (if delusive) glimpse of freedom: freedom from the self, and from time, though not from guilt. Within this hallucinatory world of opium visions De Quincey discovers the protean nature of consciousness, wherein the mind can brood upon eternity or wallow in the "Nilotic mud" with apparently equal satisfaction. Passing beyond time and space, he also passes beyond pleasure and pain into an ecstatic state that is neither pleasurable nor painful, strictly speaking, but simply intense, and his attempts to differentiate

the pains from the pleasures of opium are therefore unavailing. The insane splendor of his dreams betrays his feeble attempt to "find himself" within the hallucinogenic panoramas of a drug-besotted imagination:

The morning was come of a mighty day—a day of crisis and of final hope for human nature, then suffering some mysterious eclipse and laboring in some dread extremity. Somewhere, I knew not where—somehow, I knew not how—by some beings, I knew not whom—a battle, a strife, an agony, was conducting, was evolving like a great drama or piece of music, with which my sympathy was the more insupportable from my confusion as to its place, its cause, its nature, and its possible issue. I, as is usual in dreams (where, of necessity, we make ourselves central to every movement), had the power, if I could raise myself, to will it; and yet again had not the power, for the weight of twenty Atlantics was upon me, or the oppression of inexpiable guilt . . . Then came sudden alarms, hurryings to and fro, trepidations of innumerable fugitives. I knew not whether from the good cause or the bad; darkness and lights; tempest and human faces; and at last, with the sense that all was lost, female forms, and the features that were worth all the world to me, and but a moment allowed—and clasped hands, and heart-breaking partings, and then everlasting farewells! And again, and yet again reverberated—everlasting farewells!¹⁴

De Quincey is nowhere and everywhere in this world; at once god and helpless fugitive, he is reduced to a paralysis of wonder as he beholds the contending forces of his will and the deepest longings of the self (for reunion with those lost "female forms") as a staged spectacle over which he has no control. Within the opium trance passivity is the coefficient of intensity, and the more resplendent and apocalyptic De Quincey's dreams become, the more horrifying the sensation of apathy and self-negation.

The ultimate price exacted for these visions, of course, was nothing less than the sacrifice of that unity of being which, for De Quincey as for so many Romantics, constituted the philosophical ground of individuality.⁵ Instead, De Quincey finds himself drawn into a centrifuge of associative memory and fantasy, within which (and unlike the Hartlean system of association) the mind moves in ever-widening circles, further and further away from that synthesis of experience and judgment and sensation that should, ideally, confer a sense of identity upon the individual consciousness. Frequently, in search of some psychological datum upon which to base his hope of attaining unity of self, De Quincey reenters his past in pursuit of a "spot of time," and like his mentor Wordsworth he uses childhood as the point of reentry. But nowhere is the contrast between these two sensibilities greater. For Wordsworth the recovery of childhood memories or intuitive experiences is fundamentally restorative, the past self bound to the present

by "natural piety." For De Quincey, childhood is a psychic barrier, not unlike the Freudian unconscious, in which some of the most traumatic experiences of his life lie partly buried. No continuity of past and present experience can possibly be adduced, therefore, in defense of the unity of the self, a disturbing fact De Quincey could neither conceal from himself nor overcome. Thus, he observes:

The minutest incidents of childhood or forgotten scenes of later years were often revived [under the influence of opium]. I could not be said to recollect them, for if I had been told of them when waking, I should not have been able to acknowledge them as parts of my past experience.⁶

But if opium is an agent of recuperation, it is also, and even more emphatically as we have seen, an agent of self-disintegration, destroying the very time-space continuum within which the narrative self must be found. What De Quincey uncovers, then, upon each of his descents into the past, is a "hole" rather than a "spot" of time: the realization that something or someone has been lost irrecoverably, that past time itself is beyond present consciousness, and that the child simply cannot father the man.

Yet in spite of his repeated failures to find in his past some justification for believing in the cohesiveness and continuity of his inner life, De Quincey continued to assert his belief that, somehow, the unity of being he sought could be found in reverie and recollection:

Man is doubtless *one* by some subtle *nexus*, some system of links, that we cannot perceive, extending from the new-born infant to the superannuated dotard: but as regards many affections and passions incident to his nature at different stages, he is *not* one, but an intermitting creature, ending and beginning anew; the unit of man, in this respect, is coextensive only with the particular stage to which the passion belongs. Some passions, as that of sexual love, are celestial by one-half of their origin, animal and earthly by the other half. These will not survive their own appropriate stage. But love, which is altogether holy, like that between two children, is privileged to revisit by glimpses the silence and the darkness of declining years; and possibly, this final experience in my sister's bedroom, or some other in which her innocence was concerned, may rise again for me to illuminate the clouds of death.⁷

De Quincey wavers here, as he often does in the presence of some emotionally potent idea, between a metaphysical and an empirical account of the growth of the self or "soul." Empirically, as he explains, the notion of "unity" of self can only refer to a particular "stage" of personality development, at which certain "passions" predominate, and thus determine individual behavior *at that stage*. But to assert the existence of a transcendent "nexus" linking the infant consciousness to that of the dotard—and once again one recalls, inevitably, Words-

worth's image of the child fathering the man—De Quincey must step out of processive time altogether, abandon the Hartlean concept of psychophysiological phases, and with it the assumption that man is a being whose essence reflects those changes wrought upon him by time and age. Instead, De Quincey offers us an atemporal, almost visionary concept of a self that is necessarily static and unchanging, an intuitive belief in the child who *is* the man, and of the man who will never be anything more than a child. De Quincey is quite aware of the strangeness, and partly aware of the psychological peril, of this latter notion when he speaks (elsewhere in *Suspiria*) of the adult who “sympathizes with himself in childhood because he *is* the same, and because (being the same) yet he is *not* the same.” Such an identity of past and present selves rests, he perceives, upon a fragile paradox of ontological stasis that both allows for and at the same moment annuls any change which the self may undergo in time. To sustain this paradox and locate the true and abiding self in a childhood remembered and recreated by the empathic imagination becomes the avowed purpose of *Suspiria de Profundis*.

Part of the difficulty De Quincey experiences in carrying out this plan, however, arises from the centrifugal nature of his thought and narrative method. Thus, even when opium is not the subject of his discourse, De Quincey writes as if it were, in ever-widening circles of associative reminiscence and imaginative extemporization. But even when he succeeds in locating and fixing the traumatic center of his childhood—i.e., the death of his beloved sister Elizabeth, and his sudden entry into the realm of death-consciousness—De Quincey still cannot consciously relate the child's *experience* of fear and wonder in the presence of death to the adult's *knowledge* of mortality and the uncertainties of faith in a world where the divine presence cannot often be felt. In place of a reflective response to the disparity of insight and perspective between young and age, De Quincey offers us an extrapolative response as he attempts, through an act of Romantic “ventriloquism,”⁸ to reenter the consciousness of the child who was once Thomas De Quincey in the hope of reexperiencing death as a form of terror and revelation:

. . . and whilst I stood, a solemn wind began to blow—the most mournful that ear ever heard. Mournful! That is saying nothing. It was a wind that had swept the fields of mortality for a hundred centuries. Many times since, upon a summer day, when the sun is about the hottest, I have remarked the *same* wind arising and uttering the *same* hollow, solemn, Memnonian, but saintly swell: it is in this world the one audible symbol of eternity. And three times in my life I have happened to hear the *same* sound in the *same* circumstances, namely, when standing between an open window and a dead body on a summer day.

Instantly, when my ear caught this vast Aeolian intonation, when my eye filled with the golden fulness of life, the pomps and glory of the heavens outside, and turning when it settled upon the frost which overspread my sister's face, instantly a trance fell upon me. A vault seemed to open in the zenith of the far blue sky, a shaft which ran up forever; and the billows seemed to pursue the throne of God; but that also ran before us and fled away continually. The flight and the pursuit seemed to go on forever and ever. Frost, gathering frost, some Sarsar wind of death, seemed to repel me; I slept—for how long I cannot say; slowly I recovered my self-possession and found myself standing, as before, close to my sister's bed.⁹ [*Italics mine*]

But if this death-bed vision—or “epiphany,” which seems the more appropriate term—is indeed revelatory, what is it revelatory of? Is the soul, as the Lake poets fervently believed, an Aeolian harp upon which eternity plays a mournful yet consoling tune? Or is the child's trance and lapse into unconsciousness—reinforced metaphorically by the gathering frost—really the focal point of this waking dream? Is it, in other words, a moment of redeeming faith or premonitory despair? And where is the adult narrator, standing in the present, who will interpret this experience for us? De Quincey does assure us, and in the very next paragraph, that only “in after years” was he able to decipher the symbolic meaning of this dream-vision, and that having deciphered it he was then able to confound all of the “falsehoods of philosophers,” but in fact he neither divulges that hidden meaning at any point in this essay, nor does he even specify which “falsehoods” this vision was a refutation of. It should be noted that broken promises are nothing new to readers of De Quincey's prose—he spent a lifetime projecting the publication of unwritten *summata*—but his refusal at this point in his narrative to follow the linear and logical path of recollection back to adulthood is more revealing in itself than any explication he might have contrived, years later, for an encounter that (for him) remained dissociated from, or at least independent of, any later experience or point of view.

De Quincey's narrative instinct, of course, remains clear enough. The Biblical analogue of Jacob's ladder that remains just below the surface of consciousness (as a subliminal metaphor), and the recurrent rhetorical emphasis given to the idea spiritual constancy (or “sameness”) and continuity, both drive home the point that the revelations of childhood transcend time and change. What De Quincey cannot (or will not) do, however, is find some means of embodying this notional belief in the narrative present, or demonstrate how the specific moral qualities that underlie the adult self derive logically and chronologically from these first encounters with death. This disjuncture, I believe, follows from a radical split in De Quincey's experience of time, a

temporal dualism, in effect, that casts to one side all that is mutable or variable in consciousness, or represses it, and then attempts to subsume all that is constant or persistent under the twin categories of unity-of-self and immortality-of-childhood. As for linear time, the cumulative, quotidian time of ordinary lives and conventional autobiography, that experience of time remains little more than an existential embarrassment for De Quincey, the stuff of which (as he demonstrated in *Confessions*) a thousand apologies and digressions can be made. When left to his own imaginative devices, De Quincey naturally inclines toward the stasis of regression, toward a pseudo-temporal state cut off forever from even the possibility of change, or psychic healing, or forgetting.¹⁰

No, De Quincey can neither escape from nor wholly assimilate the traumatic-ecstatic experiences of childhood, or later opium, and so the only alternative left to him as the narrator of his own neurosis is that of fixation and repetition. Thus, there is not only one child who grieves and one sister who dies in *Suspiria*, but many spirits and presences—the Ladies of Sorrow, the Dark Interpreter, the Spectre of the Brocken, the Daughter of Lebanon, the Wandering Jew, Savannah-la-Mar—all of them representations of a double, or buried self, or psychic shadow, emanating from a private mythological world of timeless desolation. Had De Quincey possessed a more aggressive, other-worldly faith, the sensibility of a Novalis, for example, this propensity for the mythic and the apocalyptic might well have led him toward genuine mysticism; but as it is, he stops half-way, intrigued by the possibility of the soul's passage beyond time and by the identity of all moments in the ineffable moment of union with God, but unable at last either to find the God of visions or to resist the gravitational pull of memories too painful or too intense to be transfigured. Of all the powerful emotions that he evokes in his later essays, perhaps the strongest is that of solitude, of separation from both the human and the divine. If we were to place him at all within the established spectrum of mystical experience, we would have to place him within that portion of the spectrum known to Catholic mystics as the "dark night of the soul," in which the throne of God and all hope of earthly redemption appear increasingly unattainable. For the true mystic this experience is a transient one, a phase in the process of self-surrender and transcendence; for the failed mystic, the dark night is nothing but an infinite prolongation of an endless, hopeless waiting without real faith or love.

If it is not possible, then, for De Quincey to rescue his dream-child self from the mythological solitude to which he has condemned it, of what value is the narrative self within the present, or the intervening

history of adolescence, early manhood, marriage, etc., if the autobiographer resolutely suppresses all references to them? Obviously, of no value at all. Indeed, De Quincey's failure to "connect," as E. M. Forster might have put it, raises the categorical question of the value of history as such for a Romantic sensibility that "outlives" itself or turns to a private mythology of regression in the hope of vindicating its struggle with reality. For it is here that the dilemma of the Romantic autobiographer manifests itself most clearly: where self-invention and self-recuperation are perceived as incompatible objectives, and the temporality of narrative is devalued beyond recovery. A life history that consists entirely of visions, or fugitive images of an increasingly elusive identity is not really *history* at all, but a more nearly fictive mode of narrative whose true source is to be found in the miscellany of consciousness. There is, after all, a practical limit to just how much "automythology" (to borrow Paul Zweig's term)¹¹ any autobiographical work can absorb without altering radically its generic character. Now as a Romantic *mythographer*, De Quincey is of course entitled to invent, or transform, or even extrapolate events without limit, conforming only to the dictates of his imagination; but as the writer of a confessional history, or even as the archeologist of his own consciousness—De Quincey's celebrated metaphor of the mind as palimpsest seems to demand this explicatory metaphor in turn—he simply cannot ignore the persistence of an historically traceable and (presumably) variable ego whose medium is successive, progressive time. An autobiographer cannot—as a character in a Dostoyevsky novella once suggested of Rousseau—"lie about himself out of vanity."¹² Verisimilitude, not vision, must be the basis of his story, and a verisimilitude whose external point of reference, i.e. the presumption of historical fact, must serve as the outward limit of narrative presentation. Or more plainly expressed, an interiorized autobiography is merely a *monologue intérieur*—hence a work of fiction—by another name.

Had De Quincey actually found the means to "lie about himself," or more precisely, had he, like Goethe or Carlyle, been in a position to create a wholly fictional analogue to his life experiences, he might have found some way of resolving this dilemma. Curiously enough, his one sustained attempt at fiction—the historical novel *Klosterheim*, published in 1832—was both imitative and psychologically unrevealing; apparently, De Quincey needed at least the narrative pretext of historical authenticity to create an original literary setting for his *psychomachia*. But unlike his two great predecessors in the genre of confessional autobiography—Rousseau and Wordsworth—De Quincey could not create a dramatically plausible image of himself in the act of becoming. Instead, he tries his hand, from time to time, at self-portraiture,

offering his reader a fashionable image of a gentleman-scholar, learned, urbane, an "intellectual creature" at heart, for whom opium was just a fleeting episode in a life otherwise devoted to the classics and philosophy. Unfortunately, De Quincey cannot sustain this *persona*, and for the obvious reason that it is a mask, an ideal self-image totally incongruous with the passionately neurotic temperament he displays in his more ecstatic moments, and historically indefensible in the light of his life-long addiction to the drug. But having given up that role by the end of *Confessions*—where he concedes to the reader what has been obvious all along, namely, that opium, and not Thomas De Quincey, is "the true hero of the tale"—De Quincey found that he was not really prepared to come before the English reading-public as a frankly narcotized seer, and so the tone and manner of his later writings in the autobiographical mode tends to vary from the rapt, ecstatic voice of the visionary poet, to the confiding, slightly ironic voice of the confirmed anecdotalist, to the somber, scriptural voice of one who meditates constantly upon man's fate and tragic end, with no one particular voice ever predominating. But even had De Quincey at last succeeded in finding a tone that captured all of the nuances of his dissociative personality, it would still have been just a voice, a dramatic device for bringing the narrator stage front and center. Behind the role there would still have been a great vacuity which no manipulation of literary manner would have been sufficient to disguise.

De Quincean ventriloquism fails, therefore, at the very point in his confessions where the self must appear as a manifold presence, the sum of all the narrator has been and has become, the *terminus ad quem* of all his earlier experiments in self-definition. De Quincey's failure to arrive at that terminus is, I believe, a function of his disbelief in time as a directional force, impelling us out of the past into the specious present. The "true and actual present," he once wrote, is so "incalculably narrow" that it can scarcely be said to exist. How could he be expected, then, to believe in or identify with a self whose necessary point of return was always the non-existent now? Deprived of a secure, substantive narrative present, the autobiographical self fragments into a kaleidoscope of evocative images, only some of which have any ground in experiential reality; and as this Romantic narrative of self approaches the modality of myth, its specifically *narrative* structures are gradually displaced by the lyric/dramatic structures of a timeless, endless text in which the "I" exists only in the form of existential nostalgia: the self I used to be, or might have become.

Harold Bloom has written convincingly of "the high cost of Romantic internalization,"¹³ and of the attendant anxieties that beset the romantic artist in quest of a self or soul, but it is only in a maimed

Romantic like De Quincey that we can calculate that cost in literary as well as psychological terms. For De Quincey consumes the autobiographical form in the act of transcending it, shattering the very self his confession is designed to memorialize. The tenuous paradox of his achievement, therefore, rests upon our awareness of his failure to resolve, in narrative terms, the dilemmas that time, loss, and consciousness itself constantly placed before him.

NOTES

1. William C. Spengemann in *The Forms of Autobiography: Episodes in the History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1980), p. 108 and *passim*, observes in his chapter on "Philosophical Autobiography" that autobiographies like those of De Quincey "create the self they reveal." Juxtaposing Wordsworth's *Prelude* and Rousseau's *Confessions* with De Quincey's *Confessions* and *Suspiria*, Spengemann finds that the inescapable subjectivity of Romantic autobiography places the writer in the position of having first to find the self that he intends to memorialize, and then to establish its transcendence of events and circumstance.
2. Two recent critical studies of autobiography also stress the centrality and the problematical nature of the self in autobiographical writing: James Olney, *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1972), and Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Imagining a Self: Autobiography and Novel in 18th Century England* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1976). For Spacks in particular the analogy between autobiography and fiction turns upon the common problem of characterization. Elizabeth W. Bruss' *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 93-126, offers a counter-view to the thesis I have adopted in this essay. Bruss places the still center of the De Quincean self in the realm of dream-visions, and vindicates De Quincey's digressive, disintegrative presentation of self by redefining the purpose of autobiography as that of linguistic performance rather than historical documentation.
3. *Confessions of an English Opium Eater and Other Writings*, ed. Aileen Ward (New York: The New American Library, 1966), pp. 43-44. All citations from De Quincey's essays will be taken from this text, cited hereafter as *Confessions*.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
5. Chapter xii of the *Biographia Literaria* is devoted, in part, to establishing both the inherent unity of consciousness and its ultimate (transcendental) unity in the divine consciousness. Both Coleridge and De Quincey shared a common interest in German transcendentalism and a common dread of the loss of self-unity and divine grace, as well as a common addiction to opium.
6. *Confessions*, p. 91.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
8. *Vide*, Edward E. Bostetter, *The Romantic Ventriloquists* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1963). Bostetter's title is taken from a remark of Coleridge's ("I regard truth as a divine ventriloquist") and his study focuses on the self-projective devices of Romantic poetry.
9. *Confessions*, pp. 131-2.
10. J. Hillis Miller, in *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1963), Chap. 2, argues that De Quincey's abandonment of linear time reflects the absence of a Deity who is continually sought (in space and time) by Romantic and post-Romantic writers alike, but never found. Bruss notes this same phenomenon, and the fact of De Quincey's fixated anguish (*op. cit.*, p. 98) but concludes that the essence of his literary personality is to be found within this fixation.
11. *Three Journeys: An Automythology* (New York: Basic Books, 1976). The most successful exposition to date of De Quincean autobiography as myth can be found in V. A. de Luca's *Thomas De Quincey: the Prose of Vision* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1980).

12. The Novella I refer to is *Notes From Underground*, where the nameless narrator of this fictional autobiography, alluding to a remark by Heinrich Heine, asks whether it is even possible to write a "sincere" (i.e. truthful) autobiography, and concludes it is not. Spengemann, *op. cit.*, has commented extensively on the relationship between autobiography and fiction. His commentary on the sublimatory drama of *David Copperfield* can easily stand as a paradigmatic statement on the psycholiterary function of fiction as a representation of the autobiographical self: "Irreconcilable historically or philosophically, Dickens's past and present selves assume the guise of characters in a domestic novel and commune among themselves in that invented world. Like Rousseau, Dickens saw in his past experiences not the tangled root system of a single self but the seeds of many separate selves, all of whom had some ineffable kinship with each other but could be brought together only upon a fictive stage (p. 130)."
13. "The Internalization of Quest-Romance" in *Romanticism and Consciousness*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1970), p. 6.