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De Quincey's Opium Experiences

As every reader of the *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* knows, Thomas De Quincey made use of opium throughout the whole of his adult life. As a student with a toothache he bought his first bottle of laudanum on a rainy Sunday afternoon in 1804, at a chemist's in Oxford Street. He returned to his lodgings, and there took the prescribed dose:

. . . in an hour, O heavens! what a revulsion! what a resurrection, from its lowest depths, of the inner spirit! what an apocalypse of the world within me! 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; and peace of mind would be sent down by mail.¹

More than half a century later he was to write to James Hogg, "I have been very ill (— all for want of laudanum) through 36 hours. But tomorrow morning I will put all to rights . . ." ² Between the dates of these two passages — one surging with the first delights of the drug, the other bleakly suggestive of the later effects — lies the history of an addict.

There is no need to trace that history — the account in the *Confessions* is sufficiently familiar — but there is value in placing certain of the central episodes in it in the context of De Quincey's total life, beginning with his childhood in Manchester. From such an exercise one can gain considerable insight into the values which De Quincey claimed for his opium experiences, for, painful though his experiences

under the drug often were, De Quincey, like Coleridge, found in those experiences rewards of surpassing worth.

From early childhood De Quincey knew the power of deeply moving experience to waken and develop the human mind and spirit. In an early paper of his *Autobiographical Sketches* he describes himself as "a modest child of profound sensibilities" (I, 277), and later, in the General Preface of 1853 to the edition of his collected works, referring to those moments in the *Sketches* when "the narrative rises into a higher key", he writes:

Most of all it does so at a period of the writer's life where, of necessity, a severe abstraction takes place from all that could invest him with any alien interest; no display that might dazzle the reader, nor ambition that could carry his eye forward with curiosity to the future, nor successes, fixing his eye on the present; nothing on the stage but a solitary infant, and its solitary combat with grief — a mighty darkness, and a sorrow without a voice (I, 9).

That De Quincey's sensibilities were unusually keen and deep, and that his combat with grief began while he was yet a small child, is obvious from what he tells in the *Sketches* of the effect of the deaths of his two sisters, Jane and Elizabeth, and his father. Long after his boyhood at Greenhay he was to conclude a passage in "The Dark Interpreter", one of the *Suspiria*, with a most significant phrase:

A nature which is profound in excess, but also introverted and abstracted in excess, so as to be in peril of wasting itself in interminable reverie, cannot be awakened sometimes without afflictions that go to the very foundations, heaving, stirring, yet finally harmonizing; and it is in such cases that the Dark Interpreter does his work, revealing the worlds of pain and agony and woe possible to man — *possible even to the innocent spirit of a child.*³

No matter how painful the cause, De Quincey seems to have recognized early in his life that deeply felt experience could move his entire being to a mysterious inner harmony in which all discordant elements either passed from his consciousness or blended into a new concord of body and spirit. In this concord he gained an insight into the world within him, and, whatever else it did to him, opium provided his adult years with many more such experiences than come in normal lives, and enabled him to look within himself with an ever more penetrating vision. True, it brought new experiences of a particular kind, horrors not known to most men, and these were to leave their mark upon him so clearly that Carlyle could make his tragically appropriate comment, "Eccovi — this child has been in hell",⁴ but

before turning to opium he already knew what it was to suffer, and he knew that even suffering could bring great benefits in its train.

Although convinced of the values of suffering, however, De Quincey recognized a "besetting infirmity" of his nature, a constant desire for a state of happiness. In the *Confessions* he speaks of himself as a "Eudaemonist" (III, 399-400), and the admission is significant in the light of the early effects of opium upon him, for his initial experiences with the drug were not at all unpleasant: rather, they were distinctly blissful. Opium had the power to tranquillize all nervous irritations (III, 224), and to communicate "serenity and equipoise to all the faculties" (III, 383). In much the same vein Coleridge had written to the Reverend George Coleridge in April 1798, "Laudanum gave me repose, not sleep; but you, I believe, know how divine that repose is, what a spot of enchantment, a green spot of fountain and flowers and trees in the very heart of a waste of sands!"⁵ What both De Quincey and Coleridge describe is the euphoria evidently characteristic of early opium experiences. In this delusive state of well-being the drugged person knows a sensation of relief from distress — physical, mental or nervous — and a "buoyancy of spirits".⁶ There is an easing of inner tensions; pleasure and calm replace pain and agitation. The effect of the drug, in other words, is such as to overpower and silence all disturbances in the human organism and leave it temporarily in a state of physical and neural bliss, that state which De Quincey has in mind in the opening lines of his apostrophe in the *Confessions*:

O just, subtle, and all-conquering opium! that, to the hearts of rich and poor alike, for the wounds that will never heal, and for the pangs of grief that "tempt the spirit to rebel," bringest an assuaging balm . . . (III, 395)

De Quincey probably had a peculiarly keen experience of this euphoristic state. In our century research into the effects of opium has indicated that the intensity of the early pleasure derived from the drug often depends upon the degree of instability of the user,⁷ and there can be little doubt that the young De Quincey's highly strung temperament, his morbid sensibility, would mark him as one for whom that early pleasure would be a sharp reality. In the *Autobiographical Sketches* he himself has told of his quite abnormal relationship with his domineering older brother, William: of the misery which he endured as William's unhappy henchman in the battles with the factory boys, of his despair

when William (fresh from a reading of Lord Monboddo) reduced the inhabitants of Thomas's kingdom of Gombroon to underdeveloped monstrosities with tails, of William's contempt for his weakness, and of the resultant "passion for being despised" (III, 60) which developed in him. This relationship of the weak child dominated by the strong left its mark on De Quincey when he passed into adolescence, and yet to come were his unhappiness at the Manchester Grammar School, his hardships in Wales, his near-starvation and sickness in London, and his loss of Ann, the girl of Oxford Street. By the time he first used laudanum, therefore, he was a ripe candidate for addiction, and in his first experiences he found much more than relief from a toothache alone: he found an escape from all the difficulties and sorrows which, as a result of his life thus far, were pressing upon his spirit. The opium-induced euphoria succeeded the unhappiness of day-to-day living.

Furthermore, although the initial euphoria is normally a characteristic of only early indulgence in opium, De Quincey seems to have known something very much like it over a period of about ten years. He tells in the *Confessions* that he became a confirmed addict to the drug in 1813 when, as a result of painful stomach trouble, he began taking daily quantities of laudanum:

. . . from this date the reader is to consider me a regular and confirmed opium-eater, of whom to ask whether on any particular day he had or had not taken opium would be to ask whether his lungs had performed respiration, or the heart fulfilled its functions (III, 400).

Before 1813, however, he took opium only at carefully regulated intervals, of two to three weeks, and during this period of controlled use — when he knew the heightened awareness of the pleasures of the opera and of the social intercourse of the London market — he could pass into a euphoristic state with each dose of laudanum. Laudanum was then a pleasurable stimulant, rather than a necessary anodyne.

De Quincey's clearest description of what he found in his euphoristic experience comes in the *Confessions*, in his comparison of the pleasures of opium with those of wine. He tells here that while under the influence of the narcotic he knew a state of chronic — rather than acute — pleasure. Where the effect of wine could be likened to a flickering flame, that of the narcotic would be described as a steady, equable glow. In this pleasurable state one's mental faculties achieved an

exquisite order, legislation, and harmony; one knew a heightened self-possession; and one's entire being experienced a perfect serenity and equipoise. One's temper took on a new warmth and benevolence, quite unlike the maudlin, passing affability of drunkenness:

. . . the expansion of the benigner feelings incident to opium is no febrile access, no fugitive paroxysm; it is a healthy restoration to that state which the mind would naturally recover upon the removal of any deep-seated irritation from pain that had disturbed and quarrelled with the impulses of a heart originally just and good (III, 383).

One's whole nature, under opium, knew composure in place of agitation, concentration rather than distraction:

In short, to sum up all in one word, a man who is inebriated, or tending to inebriation, is, and feels that he is, in a condition which calls up into supremacy the merely human, too often the brutal, part of his nature; but the opium-eater (I speak of him simply *as* such, and assume that he is in a normal state of health) feels that the diviner part of his nature is paramount — that is, the moral affections are in a state of cloudless serenity, and high over all the great light of the majestic intellect (III, 384).

De Quincey's early opium experiences were more than pleasurable stupors. The order, harmony, quickening, and composure which his faculties knew while he was under the influence of opium enabled him to see the world about him, and the world within, with a greatly heightened awareness. His senses responded to stimuli with an abnormal acuteness. Referring to the contralto Grassini, and her performance at the King's Theatre, London, he writes in the *Confessions* that he sat "Shivering with expectation . . . when the time drew near for her golden epiphany; shivering I rose from my seat, incapable of rest, when that heavenly and harp-like voice sang its own victorious welcome in its prelude *threttanelo — threttanelo . . .*" (III, 389) And the impressions left upon his memory by such sensory experiences were of an unusual permanence in their every vivid detail. The appearance of the vagrant Malay at Dove Cottage in 1816 left a picture in De Quincey's mind which was to remain with him for years. Long after the Malay had gulped his three pieces of opium and disappeared from De Quincey's doorway, the recollection of the contrast between the stranger standing in the dark-walled kitchen, "his turban and loose trousers of dingy white relieved upon the dark panelling", and the fairness of the servant, young Barbara Lewthwaite, was clear in De Quincey's memory:

A more striking picture there could not be imagined than the beautiful English face of the girl, and its exquisite bloom, together with her erect and independent attitude, contrasted with the sallow and bilious skin of the Malay, venerated with mahogany tints by climate and marine air, his small, fierce, restless eyes, thin lips, slavish gestures and adorations. Half-hidden by the ferocious-looking Malay, was a little child from a neighbouring cottage, who had crept in after him, and was now in the act of reverting its head and gazing upwards at the turban and the fiery eyes beneath it, whilst with one hand he caught at the dress of the lovely girl for protection (III, 403-404).

While under the drug, moreover, De Quincey knew a greatly increased power of memory for what had hitherto been the forgotten past. In one of his note books Coleridge refers to the power of a similar "state of affection" or "bodily feeling" to raise

. . . trains of forgotten Thought . . . from their living catacombs! . . . Opium, probably by it's [*sic*] narcotic effect on the whole seminal organization, in a large Dose, or after long use, produces the same effect on the *visual & passive* memory.⁸

And De Quincey found the same power in opium. He tells that very minor episodes of his childhood which he would not have been able to recall when awake came to him in his opium dreams "like intuitions, and clothed in all their evanescent circumstances and accompanying feelings" (III, 435). As time passed, and his opium experiences ceased to be pleasurable, the recurrence of images from the past came to have a haunting effect upon him. The Malay kept appearing, leading him by association to dreadful dreams of China, India and Egypt, dreams culminating in foul horrors:

I fled from the wrath of Brama through all the forests of Asia; Vishnu hated me; Seeva lay in wait for me. I came suddenly upon Isis and Osiris: I had done a deed, they said, which the ibis and the crocodile trembled at. Thousands of years I lived and was buried in stone coffins, with mummies and sphinxes, in narrow chambers at the heart of eternal pyramids. I was kissed, with cancerous kisses, by crocodiles, and was laid, confounded with all unutterable abortions, amongst reeds and Nilotic mud (III, 442-443).

And Ann appeared again and again, sometimes in one setting, sometimes in another. He found her sitting beneath Judean palms on the outskirts of a city which might have been Jerusalem (III, 445); he walked with her, as he had done long years before, down the lamp-lit terraces of Oxford Street (III, 445-446); he saw her as the Magdalen of Lebanon (III, 450-456); and in a strangely confused dream of a great

battle, a mighty human agony, he recalled the misery which came when he realized that his parting from her in Golden Square was to be their last:

Then came . . . 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, with heart-breaking partings, and then – everlasting farewells! and, with a sign such as the caves of hell sighed when the incestuous mother uttered the abhorred name of Death, the sound was reverberated – everlasting farewells! and again, and yet again reverberated – everlasting farewells!

And I awoke in struggles, and cried aloud, “I will sleep no more!” (III, 446-447)

In his Preface to the enlarged *Confessions* of 1856, De Quincey provided a note on “The Daughter of Lebanon”, accounting for its appearance at the end of the *Confessions*:

. . . this I have printed, and have intentionally placed it at the end, as appropriately closing a record in which the case of poor Ann the Outcast formed not only the most memorable and the most suggestively pathetic incident, but also *that* which, more than any other, coloured – or (more truly I should say) shaped, moulded and remoulded, composed and decomposed – the great body of opium dreams. The search after the lost features of Ann, which I spoke of as pursued in the crowds of London, was in a more proper sense pursued through many a year in dreams. The general idea of a search and a chase reproduced itself in many shapes. The person, the rank, the age, the scenical position, all varied themselves for ever; but the same leading traits more or less faintly remained of a lost Pariah woman, and of some shadowy malice which withdrew her, or attempted to withdraw her, from restoration and from hope (III, 222).

For De Quincey the episode of Ann of Oxford Street, like the appearance of the Malay at Dove Cottage, was one of several events in his past life which kept returning to his drug-stimulated consciousness. As these events, and the people and things connected with them, came within his living memory, they took on various forms, and found different environments, but every time they appeared they made their effect once more on De Quincey's imagination and emotions. Ann as the Magdalen of Lebanon, seeking restoration to her father's house, is the embodiment of all that is essential to Ann in her character as the fallen woman seeking the righting of wrongs done her; Ann beneath the Judean palms is that woman risen above those wrongs, possessed of the peace which has come with acceptance, of solemn tranquillity where once she had known painful grief; and Ann walking with De Quincey in Oxford Street, “just as we had walked when both children, eighteen

years before" (III, 446), is the gentle child whom De Quincey had known, kind and loving but already marked by society as a common prostitute. In every case the woman is different, but at the same time the difference emphasizes some new trait of her character as a "lost Pariah".

As a result of his use of opium De Quincey's total response to external stimuli was heightened in various ways: he knew an unusually acute state of sensibility; he found long-dormant images from the past rising once again with all their former emotional connotations; and he achieved a new awareness of the capacity of the same image, when given repeated contemplation, to reveal ever new, hitherto unperceived, qualities, the image remaining the same in essence, but by entering into new associations revealing that essence under different lights, now seen through the colouring of one attribute, now through the colouring of another.

De Quincey found in his opium experiences, however, not only a heightened appreciation of the nature of the physical world, the people and things about him: he believed that he found also a new insight into his own being and into the nature of life itself. In his essay on "Coleridge and Opium-Eating" he whimsically suggests that laudanum was known in Eden:

You know the *Paradise Lost*? and you remember from the eleventh book, in its earlier part, that laudanum must already have existed in Eden — nay, that it was used medicinally by an archangel: for, after Michael had "purged with euphrasy and rue" the eyes of Adam, lest he should be unequal to the mere *sight* of the great visions about to unfold their draperies before him, next he fortifies his fleshly spirits against the *affliction* of these visions, of which visions the first was death. And how?

"He from the well of life three drops instilled." What was their operation?

"So deep the power of these ingredients pierced,
Even to the inmost seat of mental sight,
 That Adam, now enforced to close his eyes,
 Sank down, and all his spirits became entranced
 But him the gentle angel by the hand
 Soon raised"

Although the suggestion begins in whimsy, however, the subsequent comment, with its reference to the faculty of mental vision, rings with seriousness and conviction:

The second of these lines it is which betrays the presence of laudanum. It is in the faculty of mental vision, it is in the increased power of dealing with the shadowy and the dark, that the characteristic virtue of opium lies (V, 211).

De Quincey firmly believed that opium, through the strange and awful dreams which it stimulated, could bring man to some grasp of truths hidden from the normal waking vision. In "Dreaming", one of the *Suspiria*, he writes:

The machinery for dreaming planted in the human brain was not planted for nothing. That faculty, in alliance with the mystery of darkness, is the one great tube through which man communicates with the shadowy. And the dreaming organ, in connexion with the heart, the eye, and the ear, composes the magnificent apparatus which forces the infinite into the chambers of a human brain, and throws dark reflections from eternities below all life upon the mirrors of that mysterious *camera obscura* — the sleeping mind (XIII, 335).

When one speaks of communicating with the shadowy, bringing the infinite into the chambers of the human brain, and looking on reflections of eternity, one is obviously approaching the mystical level of experience. With De Quincey, however, one always faces the problem of determining to what extent his prose poems are factual records of dream experiences, and to what extent highly coloured treatments in which the original experiences have been greatly altered. One must, therefore, despite what he writes, be cautious in describing him as a *mystic*. Whether or not he ever knew a mystical experience in which he achieved perfect union with the absolute, one cannot be sure. There is, however, no question that he was in sympathy with the mystical attitude, and that he believed that in certain climactic moments of life man could know intuitively a grasp of absolute truths, truths lying beyond the capacity of the analytic understanding. From his description of his trance at Elizabeth's bedside he apparently believed that as a child he had passed into the regions of boundless time and space, and stood in the direct radiance of the throne of God. Now, in his opium dreams, he again approached such a mystical vision. From the frequency with which he refers to the mystical characteristics of these dreams, and from the general consistency of his references, one must accept that while under opium he moved in a world close to — if not the same as — that of the mystic. In an article in the *Revue de Littérature Comparée* Georges-Albert Astre speaks of De Quincey as "un mystique de la drogue".⁹ Like the mystic, De Quincey under

opium knew a strange release from the limitations of the finite, and, as he makes clear in the *Confessions*, moved to a vivid experience of infinity of both space and time:

Space swelled, and was amplified to an extent of unutterable and self-repeating infinity. This disturbed me very much less than the vast expansion of time. Sometimes I seemed to have lived for seventy or a hundred years in one night; nay, sometimes had feelings representative of a duration far beyond the limits of any human experience (III, 435).

And in the moments when De Quincey passed beyond the bounds of normal existence he saw himself and his life as part of

. . . a far vaster cycle, in which the love and the languishing, the ruin and the horror of this world are but moments — but elements in an eternal circle. The cycle stretches from an East that is forgotten to a West that is but conjectured.¹⁰

To De Quincey's awareness of the infinite whole of which our lives are but meagre parts, one can perhaps attribute his recognition and acceptance of the place of suffering in human existence. Throughout the *Confessions* and the *Suspiria de Profundis* one encounters passages which reveal his conviction that by suffering man passes to a clearer, deeper vision, and a fuller realization of his intellectual, emotional, and spiritual potentialities. De Quincey does write in the *Confessions* that he is "little capable of encountering present pain for the sake of any reversionary benefit" (III, 400); and again — knowing that, at a time when some of his books and papers had been seized for debt, letters to and from his wife were to be offered for sale — he writes in a letter:

Oh, my God! what heartrending pangs a man has to endure in this earthly pilgrimage! what bitter tears to shed! what groans to stifle! . . . Cup of life! if a man could know at his birth with what a draught thou wert filled, and if he had it in his choice, would he, would any man of profounder sensibilities, begin to drink it, and not resolutely put it aside?¹¹

As a rule, however, one does not find him speaking thus. He, like Wordsworth, was convinced that suffering — although bitter at the immediate moment — was a greatly beneficial force in the life of man. He saw that the painful moment could enrich a life: suffering was "a mightier agency in the hands of nature, as a Demiurgus creating the intellect, than most people are aware of".¹²

As the reader of the *Confessions* knows, opium brought De Quincey much suffering. After the first few years in which laudanum gave him delightful euphoristic experiences, the drug led him on to the horrors

which he describes in the third part of the *Confessions*, "The Pains of Opium". Here he tells of visions in which he knew physical, moral, and spiritual horrors, and these were not experiences which — as would have happened in life — terminated after a limited period of time: "Over every form, and threat, and punishment, and dim sightless incarceration, brooded a killing sense of eternity and infinity" (III, 443). The illusion of infinity here led him to a terrible sense of what eternal suffering could be, and with that sense a further appreciation of the capacity of the human spirit to endure. From the experience, he believed, emerged a better human being, purged of much that was weak and faulty. Opium, therefore, brought a deepened understanding of suffering, and of its value, to one who from early childhood had known something of its pain and its benefits.

In his opium dreams De Quincey knew experiences which, though illusory, were for him as real and as affecting as any he had known in life: it did not matter that he merely dreamt that he lay in Nilotic mud, feeling cancerous kisses pressed upon him; the physical horror was as great in the dream as it could have been in life, even much greater. And he knew not pain alone in these dreams: the joy of walking again with Ann; the sorrow of farewell; the grandeur of Roman pomp and pageantry; the loveliness of the ladies of Charles I's court — all these were for him vividly living as he dreamt of them. The sensibility, the suffering, the vision of his dream world left their mark on him even as they would have if he had experienced them in his waking life.

In his early opium experiences De Quincey moved to a state in which all disturbances were silenced, and his body, mind, and spirit knew serenity and bliss. In this state his faculties achieved a singular quickening, and sensory stimuli had a strangely vivid effect upon them. He was unusually acute in his response to immediate sensations; effects from the forgotten past recurred to him, bringing with them all their past connotations and associations; and he came to feel the inherent power of a single image, its capacity to reveal ever new attributes, and consequent effects, when contemplated again and again. He found a new insight into his own nature and into what lies above and beyond life as man knows it, experiencing something like a mystic's vision of the essence of things, the infinite capacities of man's spirit, and the eternal nature of life itself. And he gained ever stronger confirmation of his belief in suffering as the great purifier, strengthener, and teacher of the spirit of man.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 *The Confessions of an English Opium-Eater, The Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. David Masson (Edinburgh, 1889), Vol. III, p. 381. Later references to this edition are given in parentheses within the body of the essay.
- 2 De Quincey to James Hogg, Jr., n.d., in *De Quincey at Work*, ed. Willard Hallam Bonner (Buffalo, 1936), p. 75. Although the letter is undated, Bonner places it between letters of December 27, 1856 and January 18, 1857.
- 3 *The Posthumous Works of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. Alexander H. Japp (London, 1891-1893), Vol. 1, p.12. (Hereafter cited as *Posthumous Works*.) Italics mine.
- 4 "Reminiscences", in *De Quincey and His Friends*, ed. James Hogg (London, 1895), p.240.
- 5 *Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (London, 1895), Vol. 1, p.240.
- 6 Schneider, Elisabeth, "The 'Dream' of *Kubla Khan*", *PMLA*, Vol. 60 (September, 1945), p.790.
- 7 Kolb, Lawrence, "Pleasure and Deterioration from Narcotic Addiction", *Mental Hygiene*, Vol. 9 (1925), 723. For reference to this study by Dr. Kolb, I am indebted to the foregoing article by Elisabeth Schneider.
- 8 Note Book XXI, 102, quoted in R.C. Bald, "Coleridge and *The Ancient Mariner*: Addenda to *The Road to Xanadu*", in *Nineteenth-Century Studies*, ed. Herbert Davis, William C. De Vane, R.C. Bald (Cornell University Press, 1940), p.36.
- 9 "H. de Balzac et *L'Anglais Mangeur d'Opium*", *Revue de Littérature Comparée*, Vol. 15 (1935), p.772.
- 10 "Notes for 'Suspiria' ", *Posthumous Works*, Vol. 1, pp.26-27.
- 11 Quoted in Alexander H. Japp, *Thomas De Quincey: His Life and Writings* (London, 1890), p.435. Japp provides neither the date of the letter nor the name of De Quincey's correspondent.
- 12 "The Dark Interpreter", *Suspiria de Profundis, Posthumous Works*, Vol. 1, p.7.