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Confessions of English Opium-Eaters:
Coleridge, De Quincey, and the Literature of Addiction

Abstract:

Thomas De Quincey exploits his rivalry with Samuel Taylor Coleridge to structure many of the key features of his most famous work, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821). De Quincey's idolization of Coleridge began early and survived the anger and disappointment he felt after the collapse of their friendship and the discovery of Coleridge's intellectual duplicity. In *Confessions*, De Quincey's accounts of himself as a scholar of Greek literature, Ricardian economics, and Kantian philosophy are all galvanized by his knowledge that Coleridge too has worked in these areas. As opium addicts, De Quincey's experience of the drug overlaps with Coleridge's in a number of ways, while De Quincey differs from Coleridge – at least on the surface – in his claims about both the moral implications of drugged euphoria and the resolve needed to defeat the opium habit.

Keywords: De Quincey, Coleridge, literary rivalries, opium, addiction

Figure. 0. Thomas De Quincey as sketched by Thomas Hood, c.1821 (Houghton Library, Harvard University).

In her landmark edition of her father's *Biographia Literaria* (1847), Sara Coleridge asserts that 'of all the censors' of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas De Quincey 'is the one whose remarks are the most worthy of attention', for the 'Opium eater, as he has called himself, had

sufficient inward sympathy with the subject of his criticism to be capable in some degree of beholding his mind, as it actually existed, in all the intermingling shades of individual reality'.¹ Her comments highlight the extent to which, in looking at her father, De Quincey often saw a version of himself. His complex and intense self-identification with Coleridge began in 1799 with his reading of 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere', passed up through a personal friendship that developed after the two met in 1807, and then declined into indifference and embarrassment on Coleridge's side and bitterness and perplexity on De Quincey's, though even at his most resentful De Quincey remained a searching and sympathetic critic of Coleridge, as his daughter's remarks make clear. When in 1821 De Quincey launched himself to fame with his *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, his representations of himself as both a scholar and a laudanum addict are thoroughly shaped by his rivalry with Coleridge, and his knowledge of Coleridge's conversation, private life, and published work. De Quincey distinguishes himself from Coleridge in several shared areas of intellectual endeavour, while his attempts to draw a line between their attitudes toward and experiences of opium often serve only to highlight the similarities between them.

De Quincey was a thirteen- or fourteen-year-old student at Bath Grammar School when he first encountered the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) of Coleridge and William Wordsworth. Reading the collection was 'the greatest event in the unfolding of my own mind', De Quincey later declared, and soon he was searching 'east and west, north and south, for all known works or fragments' by the two poets. In the spring of 1803, De Quincey wrote a fan letter to Wordsworth introducing himself and suing for his friendship. But Coleridge at this time loomed equally large in his thoughts. 'I begin to think him the greatest man that has ever appeared', De Quincey confessed in his Liverpool diary. What is more, even at this early

stage, De Quincey was thinking about Coleridge as a model for literary selfhood. ‘What shall be my character?’ he wondered in the diary entry for 9 May. ‘I have been thinking this afternoon...shrouded in mystery – supernatural – like the “ancient mariner” – *awfully* sublime?’ By 1804, De Quincey knew enough of Coleridge’s plans and achievements to dedicate himself to reading ‘in the same track’ as him, ‘that track in which few of any age will ever follow us, such as German metaphysicians, Latin schoolmen, thaumaturgic Platonists, religious Mystics’. During his undergraduate career at Oxford, De Quincey built up his expertise in all of these areas, devoting himself ‘principally to the society’ of a German tutor named Schwartzburg, and directing his studies ‘almost wholly to the ancient philosophy, varied by occasional excursions into German literature and metaphysics’. De Quincey’s veneration of Coleridge was by this time, as he himself put it, ‘literally in no respect short of a religious feeling’.²

They first met in the summer of 1807. When De Quincey introduced himself, Coleridge was in ‘a deep reverie’, and there was about his ‘large and soft’ eyes a ‘peculiar appearance of haze or dreaminess’. De Quincey’s voice started Coleridge from his trance, though for a moment he ‘seemed at a loss to understand my purpose or his own situation’, and it was with ‘apparent difficulty’ that he recovered his position ‘amongst day-light realities’. In other words, Coleridge at this first meeting was in an opiated fog. The two spent the day together, and then set off about sunset on a private walk, during which De Quincey mentioned ‘accidentally that a toothache had obliged me to take a few drops of laudanum’, and Coleridge responded by revealing that ‘already he was under the full dominion of opium...and with a deep expression of horror at the hideous bondage’. It may be doubt whether Coleridge would so quickly take De Quincey into his confidence, but Coleridge could be remarkably candid

about his opium experience, and in a letter of 1814 he almost certainly has this conversation with De Quincey in mind as one of the ‘two instances’ in which he ‘warned young men, mere acquaintances who had spoken of having taken Laudanum, of the direful Consequences, by an ample exposition of it’s tremendous effects on myself’. Shortly after their first meeting, Coleridge almost certainly had De Quincey in mind when he confided to his notebook that looking out at him was like looking back at himself: ‘Two faces, each of a confused countenance...in the eyes of the one muddiness and lustre were blended, and the eyes of the other were the same’.³

For several years De Quincey and Coleridge stayed in touch – sometimes in close touch. In the autumn of 1807, De Quincey gave Coleridge a £300 gift in an attempt to alleviate at least the financial stress he was under. He recommended medical aid, walked with him through his favourite ‘Book Haunts’, and assisted him with his lecture series at the Royal Institution on ‘Poetry and the Principles of Taste’. ‘I do therefore earnestly ask of you as a proof of Friendship...to tell me exactly what you think and feel on the perusal of any thing, I may submit to you’, Coleridge wrote to De Quincey in January 1808. The following month, De Quincey attended one of Coleridge’s lectures where he witnessed firsthand the depths of Coleridge’s opium dependence. ‘His appearance was generally that of a person struggling with pain and overmastering illness’, De Quincey recollected, before painting Coleridge as his own Ancyent Marinere: ‘His lips were baked with feverish heat, and often black in colour’.⁴

The two were together again in the Lake District beginning in the autumn of 1808 when they both lived with the Wordsworths at Allan Bank. Coleridge’s daughter Sara remembered watching her ‘father and Mr De Quincey pace up and down the room in conversation’. The following year, when De Quincey took up occupancy in Dove Cottage and Coleridge

continued his stay at Allan Bank, they walked together, discussed De Quincey's proposed plans to travel in Spain, and socialized with friends and neighbours. Coleridge stopped regularly at Dove Cottage to borrow books from De Quincey's voluminous library, taking away as many as five hundred volumes at a time, while De Quincey assisted Coleridge with his metaphysical newspaper, *The Friend*, recruiting subscribers, supplying information for articles, and – with Alexander Blair and John Wilson – composing 'The Letter of Mathetes'.⁵

When Coleridge left the Lakes and moved to London, De Quincey often paid him visits, during which they discussed everything from 'what constitutes the so-called *appropriation* of the benefits of Christ's death' to the Ratcliffe Highway murders of December 1811. Following the sudden death of Wordsworth's three-year-old daughter Catherine in June 1812, a grief-stricken De Quincey told Dorothy Wordsworth that his heart grew 'heavier and heavier every day', and that he had 'twice...passed the evening with Mr Coleridge'. Opium remained a topic of conversation. 'Coleridge had often spoken to me of the dying away from him of all hope', De Quincey recalled years later; 'not meaning, as I rightly understood him, the hope that forms itself as a distant look out into the future, but of the gladsome vital feelings that are born of the blood, and make the goings-on of life pleasurable'. At some point in 1813-14, when Coleridge was living at Ashley in Wiltshire, De Quincey travelled out to visit him. It was the last time they saw each other. In their final conversation they discussed a famous passage in the Book of Job. It is 'not to be doubted', Wordsworth wrote, that De Quincey was 'honoured' by Coleridge's 'confidence'.⁶

Yet there were tensions in the relationship almost from the beginning. De Quincey claimed that, though 'never once estranged by any the slightest shadow of a quarrel', he and Coleridge had not become 'confidential friends' because of 'original differences in our

dispositions and habits'. It seems more likely, though, that it was their many similarities that drove them apart. Both wanted the companionship and respect of the Wordsworths, and it is clear that sometimes within the family circle De Quincey stepped on Coleridge's toes. In the spring of 1809, De Quincey was in London to steer Wordsworth's *Convention of Cintra* pamphlet through the press, and when he became involved in a running dispute with the publisher over printing errors, Coleridge took Wordsworth's side against De Quincey, damning him in what amounted to a ironic self-portrait: 'I...saw too much of his turn of mind, anxious yet dilatory, confused from over-accuracy, & at once systematic and labyrinthine, not fully to understand how great a plague he might easily be to a London Printer'. Coleridge may not have recognized himself in his castigation of De Quincey, but he soon acknowledged that their lives ran parallel in other ways. 'He is as great a *To-morrower* to the full as your poor Husband', he told his wife Sara in April 1810.⁷

De Quincey, for his part, came to wish that Coleridge would learn to listen as well as he could talk, but Coleridge will not 'consent to believe that any man of his own age (at least of his own country) can teach *him* anything'. In September 1816, Henry Crabb Robinson reported that De Quincey 'admires Coleridge, but speaks severely of him', and that was before De Quincey read *Biographia Literaria* (1817), where to his 'astonishment' he discovered that Chapter Twelve contained a long '*verbatim* translation from Schelling, with no attempt in a single instance to appropriate the paper, by developing the arguments or by diversifying the illustrations!' Frustrated and confounded, De Quincey in response may have helped John Wilson to write the scathing review of *Biographia* in the first number of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* for October 1817. Shortly thereafter, Coleridge joined De Quincey on the staff of the magazine, becoming 'in a literary sense, our brother – for he also

was amongst the contributors to *Blackwood*, as De Quincey later put it. In the summer of 1821, his finances by now in ruins, De Quincey wrote to Coleridge to ask for repayment of the £300 gift – or loan as he was now forced to insist – of 1807. Coleridge’s long and cringing reply made it clear that he did not have a shilling, and that his circumstances were as imperilled as De Quincey’s own. ‘I feel that I am lingering on the brink – and what to say, my dear Sir! I know not!’⁸

Two months later, in the September 1821 issue of the *London Magazine*, De Quincey published the first instalment of *Confessions*, which is, as its subtitle announces, ‘an extract from the life of a scholar’, and which features Coleridge – sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly – as De Quincey’s most potent rival. Both De Quincey and Coleridge excelled from an early age as classicists. ‘At thirteen, I wrote Greek with ease’, De Quincey asserts; ‘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’. This ability, he adds, ‘I have not since met with in any scholar of my times’, an assessment that of course includes – and to some extent is aimed at – Coleridge, whose own achievements as a classicist, De Quincey liked emphasizing, were overrated. Coleridge’s Greek Sapphic ode on the slave trade won the Browne Prize when he was a Cambridge undergraduate, but De Quincey was decidedly unimpressed: ‘The ode was clever enough for a boy; but to such skill in Greek as could have enabled him to compose with critical accuracy, Coleridge never made pretensions’. Elsewhere, De Quincey remarks that while Coleridge ‘displayed sometimes a brilliance of conjectural sagacity’, he never became ‘an accurate Grecian’.⁹

Reading poetry aloud – especially the poetry of Milton and Wordsworth – is another ‘accomplishment of mine’, De Quincey states in *Confessions*, and he delights in this

accomplishment not only because it is ‘so rare’, but because he once again sees himself as in direct competition with Coleridge, and as very much his superior. De Quincey does not name Coleridge in the passage, but he certainly has him in mind, for a month after the second instalment of *Confessions* appeared in October 1821 he spoke to Richard Woodhouse on ‘the Subject of reading Poetry’ and was quick to find fault with Coleridge, who ‘lengthens the vowels & reads so monotonously, slowly & abstractedly that you can scarce make out what he says’. In the 1856 version of *Confessions*, De Quincey revises the passage to make his intentions clear: whereas he was an accomplished reader of ‘Wordsworth’s Poems’, ‘Coleridge’ recited poetry ‘as if crying, or at least wailing lugubriously’.¹⁰

Political economy played a significant role in De Quincey’s intellectual life and was yet another area in which he believed he had bested Coleridge, whose contempt for the discipline (‘the most horrible perversion of humanity and moral justice’) sets him decisively apart from De Quincey, and whose attacks on it may have energized De Quincey’s somewhat unexpected celebrations of it in *Confessions*. De Quincey signals both his admiration for political economy and his desire to provoke Coleridge early in the text when he describes himself, Coleridge, and the economist David Ricardo as the only three thinkers in England in ‘possession of a superb intellect in its *analytic* functions’. Later, in the ‘Pains of Opium’ section, it is Ricardo’s *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* (1817) that rouses De Quincey to ‘a pleasure and an activity which I had not known for years’. Convinced that Ricardo had missed ‘some important truths’, De Quincey draws up his *Prolegomena to all future Systems of Political Economy*, and while plans for its publication soon collapsed, he went on to write at length on Ricardian economics, initially in the *London Magazine* and then in *The Logic of Political Economy* (1844), a volume which reveals that ‘De Quincey

thoroughly understands his master’, as John Stuart Mill put it in his review. Coleridge, on the other hand, had very little understanding of economics, De Quincey maintained, Malthusian, Ricardian, or otherwise. ‘Nature and his own multifarious studies’ had qualified him ‘for thinking justly’ on the subject, but he was ‘shut out from the possibility of knowledge by presumption, and the habit of despising all the analytic studies of his own day’. More wryly, De Quincey observed that ‘Political economy was not Coleridge’s forte’.¹¹

Figure 0. Manuscript page from the 1821 *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, in which De Quincey identifies ‘the conditions which he deems indispensable to the sustaining of any claim to the title of philosopher’ (The Wordsworth Trust, Grasmere).

Philosophy – especially Kantian and post-Kantian metaphysics – deeply engaged Coleridge and De Quincey, but in this instance it is clear that De Quincey regarded Coleridge as his better, for Coleridge in *Confessions* is a ‘philosopher’ while De Quincey can only claim more modestly that he has lived ‘on the whole, the life of a philosopher’, and that he ‘boasteth himself to be a philosopher’. De Quincey and Coleridge, together with Ricardo, possess an intellect superb ‘in its *analytic* functions’. But that is not enough to be a philosopher, who to this first ability must add a second, ‘a constitution of the *moral* faculties, as shall give him an inner eye and power of intuition for the vision and the mysteries of our human nature’, a ‘constitution of faculties, in short, which...our English poets have possessed in the highest degree’. The second requirement excludes Ricardo, whose achievement was collecting ‘tentative discussions into a science of regular proportions’, and applies to De Quincey but

not in the 'highest degree', for Coleridge alone was an English poet, and thus of the three the most eminently qualified for 'the title of philosopher'.¹²

In *Confessions*, De Quincey represents himself in 1812 as labouring on the same philosophical materials as Coleridge: 'I have been chiefly studying German metaphysics, in the writings of Kant, Fichte, Schelling' (the last name perhaps a hint that De Quincey in following Coleridge has detected his dishonesty in *Biographia*). Four years later, after a severe downward spiral into opium abuse, De Quincey recovered sufficiently to 'read Kant again; and again I understood him, or fancied that I did'. Woodhouse reported that it was difficult for De Quincey 'to judge of the exact extent of Coleridge's acquaintance with Kant's system' because 'Coleridge had mixed up his own fancies & mysticalities so much with the Kantian Philosophy'. But De Quincey did not doubt the extent of Coleridge's metaphysical understanding, nor was his estimate of it diminished by his knowledge of Coleridge's reliance on Schelling. Coleridge was 'the profoundest of philosophers!' De Quincey exclaimed in 1834, 'and one destined to sound the intellectual depths, and the depths below depths, beyond any other of the children of men'.¹³

The scholarly and philosophical links between De Quincey and Coleridge are striking and substantial, but there is of course still another and deeper bond between them: they were both English opium-eaters. Unlike De Quincey, Coleridge did not publish a popular narrative detailing his drug use and abuse, but he did discuss it privately with dozens of people, including as we have seen De Quincey. Coleridge was probably given laudanum as a child for various pains, and he took it again in the winter of 1790 when he spent several weeks in the Christ's Hospital sanatorium seriously ill with rheumatic fever. He first recorded his use of the drug in November 1791. By this time a student at Cambridge, he explained in a letter to

his brother George that rheumatic ailments had struck him down again: ‘Opium never used to have any disagreeable effects on me – but it has upon many’. Coleridge mentions more sustained use of the drug in March 1796, when he was taking ‘Laudanum almost every night’ to relieve mental anguish, and eight months later – and again for a ‘complaint...originating in *mental* causes’ – he was consuming ‘25 drops of Laudanum every five hours’. It is evident, however, that Coleridge resorted to the drug in these early years not simply for pain relief. Opium stimulated him creatively. ‘I wrote you on Saturday night under the immediate inspiration of Laudanum’, he averred to Thomas Poole in November 1796. The drug also brought him mental and physical bliss. His desire, as expressed to John Thelwall in October 1797, ‘to float about along an infinite ocean cradled in the flower of the Lotos’ suggests an indulgence in laudanum. Less than five months later, Coleridge was explicit about the pleasures of opium. A severe toothache had driven him to it, but the drug did more than just ease pain: ‘Laudanum gave me repose, not sleep’, he reported in another letter to his brother George: ‘but YOU, I believe, know how divine that repose is – what a spot of enchantment, a green spot of fountains, & flowers & trees, in the very heart of a waste of Sands!’¹⁴

Eventually, however, opium pulled Coleridge under, and after a period of medical and recreational use, he sank down into addiction. Accounts vary.¹⁵ He may have been dependent on the drug as early as 1795-96, but Coleridge’s own version is that he held out until 1800-01 when, after being almost bed-ridden for months with swollen knee joints, he discovered in a medical journal a case similar to his own in which the patient had effected a cure by the internal and external use of laudanum. For Coleridge, the results of the treatment were at first ‘like a miracle!’, but the drug soon rebounded upon him in fiercer agonies, locking into place an unbreakable cycle of need, consumption, temperance, and more need. Opium, he now

began to realize, was causing the agonies he thought it was assuaging, and he found himself wedged between the collision of two sicknesses – that brought on by opium, and that brought on by the want of opium. He was seized by hideous nightmares, which were not shadows but substantial ‘foot-thick’ miseries, as he explained to Robert Southey in a letter of September 1803. He rewrote part of his own drug history by denying that he had ever taken laudanum for pleasure. ‘My sole sensuality was *not* to be in pain!’ he protested in December 1804. His desire for laudanum, Coleridge promised Joseph Cottle a decade later, was a direct response to ‘*Terror & Cowardice of PAIN & sudden Death, not (so help me God!) by any temptation of Pleasure*’.¹⁶

De Quincey’s account of his descent into addiction in *Confessions* is remarkably similar to Coleridge’s record of his own opium experience, and in ways that not only go beyond the parallels that inevitably result when two users share an extensive experience of the same drug, but that also suggest that De Quincey based his opium career in part on what he knew of Coleridge’s, or had been told by him in one of their face-to-face exchanges. Both were involved with the drug as undergraduates: as Coleridge was a nineteen-year-old Cambridge student when he wrote to his brother of his opium use, so De Quincey in *Confessions* was a nineteen-year-old Oxford student when he first swallowed laudanum in the autumn of 1804. Rheumatic pain, in both instances, drove them to opium: Coleridge was ‘nailed to my bed with a fit of the Rheumatism’ that included ‘a disagreeable *tearing* pain in my head’, while De Quincey, after ‘being suddenly seized with tooth-ache’, plunged his head into ‘a bason of cold water’ before bed, and then awoke ‘the next morning, as I need hardly say...with excruciating rheumatic pains of the head and face’. After a number of years of consumption, the drug still brought both luxuriant pleasure, which Coleridge characterized as ‘divine...repose’ and which

De Quincey in *Confessions* declared makes the opium-eater feel that the ‘diviner part of his nature is paramount’. Both claimed use of the drug for approximately ten years – Coleridge for the 1790s, De Quincey from 1804 until 1813 – before addiction entrammelled them. Then, for the second time, pain played a decisive role, in this instance turning them from occasional or recreational users into *habitués*. Both were twenty-eight years old when they surrendered to the drug. In Coleridge’s account, it was the excruciating physical pain of swollen joints and in De Quincey’s the mental anguish that overwhelmed him following the death of Catherine Wordsworth. Once addicted, both were plagued by nightmares: Coleridge had a disturbing dream of Dorothy Wordsworth as ‘altered in every feature...fat, thick-limbed’; De Quincey had nightmares in which ‘the sea appeared paved with innumerable faces, upturned to the heavens: faces, imploring, wrathful, despairing’.¹⁷

Coleridge’s notebooks and letters also contain ideas that are so similar to De Quincey’s in *Confessions* as to suggest that the two discussed the matter. In an 1803 notebook entry, for example, Coleridge writes, ‘How imperishable Thoughts seem to be! – For what is Forgetfulness?...Renew the state of affection or bodily Feeling...and instantly the trains of forgotten Thought rise from their living catacombs!’ De Quincey repeats this idea in *Confessions* when he asserts that there is ‘no such thing as *forgetting* possible to the mind’. For Coleridge, ‘Opium...in a large Dose, or after long use, produces the same effect on the *visual, & passive* memory’. For De Quincey, lucid opium dreams revive the ‘minutest incidents of childhood, or forgotten scenes of later years’. Similarly, both Coleridge and De Quincey were concerned, somewhat hypocritically, with the widespread use of opium among the working classes, and their comments on the issue again parallel one another so closely as to indicate that they spoke about it. In an 1808 letter to the newspaperman T. G. Street,

Coleridge observes that ‘Throughout Lancashire & Yorkshire it is the common Dram of the lower orders of People – in the small Town of Thorpe the Druggist informed me, that he commonly sold on market days two or three Pound of Opium, & a Gallon of Laudanum – all among the labouring Classes’. De Quincey echoes these views when he reports in *Confessions* that the ‘work-people’ in ‘Manchester...were rapidly getting into the practice of opium-eating; so much so, that on a Saturday afternoon the counters of the druggists were strewed with pills of one, two, or three grains, in preparation for the known demand of the evening’.¹⁸

De Quincey highlights the importance of his conversations with Coleridge to the shape and tenor of *Confessions* by introducing one of them directly into the text. ‘Many years ago’, he recalls, ‘when I was looking over Piranesi’s *Antiquities of Rome*, Mr Coleridge, who was standing by, described to me a set of plates by that artist, called his *Dreams*, and which record the scenery of his own visions during the delirium of a fever’. The plates in question, not in fact Piranesi’s *Dreams* but his *Carceri d’Invenzione (Imaginary Prisons, 1745)*, depict ancient Roman ruins transformed into surreal dungeons filled with mysterious instruments of torture. De Quincey did not actually see them. Like so much else in *Confessions*, his knowledge of them is constructed by and filtered through Coleridge, for he derives his description of the plates ‘only from memory of Mr Coleridge’s account’. None of their power, however, seems to have been lost in the telling, for Coleridge referred to the plates in his notebooks as ‘the Delirium of Architectural Genius’, and in describing them to De Quincey he brought vividly before him ‘vast Gothic halls’, ‘wheels, cables, pulleys, levers, catapults’, ‘engines and machinery’, and various iterations of Piranesi himself as he laboured profitlessly upward on a staircase that came to a sudden termination, only to reappear on a second staircase that loomed above the first one, and so on. Coleridge’s depictions of Piranesi’s prisons deeply

unnerved De Quincey, and triggered the terrifying powers ‘of endless growth and self-reproduction’ that besieged him in his ‘architectural dreams’.¹⁹

Coleridge’s published writings too are clearly legible in *Confessions*. In the 1809 ‘Prospectus of *The Friend*’, he acknowledges his ‘constitutional Indolence’, ‘the Number of my unrealized Schemes’, and ‘the Mass of my miscellaneous Fragments’, details De Quincey builds upon in his presentation of himself as derailed by ‘intellectual torpor’, ‘fragmentary efforts’, and materials for scholarly endeavour ‘uselessly accumulated’. Coleridge confesses in the 1816 ‘Preface’ to *Christabel: Kubla Khan, a Vision; The Pains of Sleep* that his ‘poetic powers have been, till very lately, in a state of suspended animation’, while in the introduction to ‘Kubla Khan’ he mentions a ‘slight indisposition’ that he remedied with an ‘anodyne’. De Quincey in *Confessions* takes the *Christabel* volume as a template, elaborating on his own experiences with the same anodyne, and aligning the visionary qualities of ‘Kubla Khan’ with ‘The Pleasures of Opium’ and the horrors of ‘The Pains of Sleep’ with ‘The Pains of Opium’. In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge presents, in the words of his subtitle, *Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*. Before being forced to seek ‘a refuge from bodily pain and mismanaged sensibility in abstruse researches’, he enjoys ‘a long and blessed interval, during which my natural faculties were allowed to expand’.²⁰ He celebrates the poetry of Wordsworth. He resides for a time in the Lake District. He castigates reviewers like William Hazlitt. He embraces the German metaphysics of Kant while scorning the Scottish Common-Sense philosophy of Dugald Stewart. De Quincey in *Confessions* follows suit in each of these areas.

Yet despite numerous similarities, there are key topics in the drug experience of Coleridge and De Quincey that at least appear to differentiate them. One of them is their

attitude toward their laudanum habit. Coleridge felt guilty about it. In his eyes, it was a moral failing, and a deeply religious issue rooted in mortification, sin, expiation, and the fall. His letters detail his humiliation and misery, almost to the point of luxuriating in them. He has betrayed his family and friends: 'I have in this one dirty business of Laudanum an hundred times deceived, tricked, nay, actually & consciously LIED'. He has incriminated himself: 'before God I dare not lift up my eyelids, & only do not despair of his Mercy because to despair would be adding crime to crime'. He hates what he has become: '*all* these vices are so opposite to my nature, that but for this *free-agency-annihilating* Poison, I verily believe that I should have suffered myself to have been cut to pieces rather than have committed any one of them'.²¹

At the close of *Confessions*, De Quincey appears to ally himself with Coleridge when he issues a warning about opium abuse of the kind that Coleridge may have urged on him when they first discussed the drug in 1807. 'The moral of the narrative is addressed to the opium-eater', De Quincey writes. 'If he is taught to fear and tremble, enough has been effected'. Yet elsewhere in the text De Quincey espouses opinions about the drug that are far more relaxed and enthusiastic: 'Guilt, therefore, I do not acknowledge'. Indeed, he declares in *Confessions*, and perhaps with Coleridge specifically in mind, 'Let no man expect to frighten me by a few hard words into embarking any part of it upon desperate adventures of morality'. While Coleridge worried over the many ways in which his laudanum habituation had exacerbated his failures as a Christian, De Quincey composed 'the doctrine of the true church on the subject of opium', a piece of bravado which celebrates the drug and which reads like a riposte to Coleridge's anxiety and self-laceration. In the passage, De Quincey elevates himself to the founder of a new kind of religion that seems to eschew Christianity altogether. What is more,

as he describes himself as ‘the only member’ of the true church of opium, he also clearly excludes Coleridge, on the grounds no doubt that while Coleridge wrote and spoke repeatedly of the horrors of his addiction, De Quincey, the depths of his own suffering notwithstanding, retained his faith in the powers of the drug. ‘Not the opium-eater, but the opium, is the true hero of the tale’, he famously proclaims.²²

Following *Confessions*, however, De Quincey returned to Coleridge’s relationship with opium on several occasions to insist that Coleridge had once been a devotee of its pleasure domes, and that, while regularly issuing protests to the contrary, he enjoyed laudanum in terms that were not only analogous to De Quincey’s own pleasure-seeking, but that brought him much closer to full membership in the true church of opium than De Quincey had allowed in *Confessions*. In one of De Quincey’s retellings, Coleridge liked opium right from the start. ‘I believe it to be notorious’, De Quincey contended, ‘that he first began the use of opium, not as a relief from any bodily pains or nervous irritations...but as a source of luxurious sensations’. In another instance, De Quincey conceded that Coleridge’s use of the drug ‘began in rheumatic pains’, but he maintained that it ended in ‘voluptuousness’. On yet another occasion, De Quincey argued that ‘undeniably’ Coleridge’s ‘vassalage’ to opium ‘must have been created wilfully and consciously by his own craving after genial stimulation; a thing which I do not blame, but Coleridge *did*’. In the 1856 *Confessions*, De Quincey articulated his moral position on opium with particular exuberance: ‘Gentlemen, I am a *Hedonist*; and, if you *must* know why I take opium, that’s the reason why’. His many comments on Coleridge and opium published in the years subsequent to the 1821 *Confessions* suggest that, though Coleridge often gave vent to his guilt and grief, hedonism also played a crucial role in his response to the drug.²³

Another apparent difference in their opium experience involves intake levels. With Coleridge unmistakably in view, De Quincey writes in *Confessions* that there is ‘one celebrated man of the present day, who, if all be true which is reported of him, has greatly exceeded me in quantity’. De Quincey based this claim on information he had received from ‘a Surgeon in the North, a neighbour of Coleridge’s, who supplied Coleridge with laudanum; & who, upon a calculation made as to the quantity consumed by Coleridge, found it to amount to 80,000 drops per day’. It is generally accepted, however, that at the height of his addiction in 1814, Coleridge took as many as twenty thousand drops per day, still an enormous amount, but only one quarter of what De Quincey thought he was consuming. In *Confessions*, De Quincey records his own intake levels as reaching as much as ‘eight thousand drops of laudanum’ per day, meaning that he thought Coleridge’s daily ration ‘greatly exceeded’ his own because it was ten times higher. More probably, though, Coleridge at his peak consumed roughly two-and-a-half times more laudanum than De Quincey at his peak as of 1821, and in the 1856 *Confessions* De Quincey revised his daily ingestion levels upward to as much as ‘twelve thousand drops of laudanum’, bringing him even closer to Coleridge’s twenty thousand drops per day at his worst.²⁴ It may have slightly rankled De Quincey to admit that his rival could consume vastly more opium than he could, but it also enabled him to suggest that Coleridge was less in control and more in the grip of the drug than he was. However, as far as it is possible to tell, De Quincey’s ingestion levels were much closer to Coleridge’s than he realized, or at least than he was prepared to acknowledge, however perversely proud he might have felt of portraying himself as Coleridge’s equal or better in terms of how much laudanum he could drink in a day.

In the same passage, De Quincey makes yet another attempt to draw a firm distinction between his opium career and Coleridge's. Perhaps emboldened by his lower ingestion levels, De Quincey states that he has 'accomplished what I never yet heard attributed to any other man', including of course Coleridge, for he has freed himself from the bondage of opium by untwisting, 'almost to its final links, the accursed chain which fettered me'. Coleridge, De Quincey was keen to point out, could make no such claim. 'He strove in vain, for many years, to wean himself from his captivity to opium', De Quincey remarked in 1834, but he failed in 'unthreading the fatal links that have been wound about the machinery of health'. In the revised *Confessions* De Quincey added that 'Coleridge was under a permanent craze of having nearly accomplished his own liberation from opium', but he remained a 'slave...to this potent drug not less abject than Caliban to Prospero'.²⁵

The same, it need hardly be said, also applies to De Quincey, regardless of his boasts in the 1821 *Confessions*. In the book version of the text, published in 1822, he acknowledges in the Appendix that shortly after he completed the 1821 version, he became 'sensible that the effort which remained' to untwist the final few links of the 'accursed chain' 'would cost me far more energy than I had anticipated', and within months he had accepted defeat and returned unresistingly to opium. The educationalist and legal reformer Matthew Davenport Hill reported in 1828 that De Quincey had for 'the tenth time renounced opium', but if he had in fact stopped taking the drug he soon returned to it. In the sequel to *Confessions*, *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845), De Quincey explained that at the end of *Confessions* he had instructed the reader 'to believe...that I had mastered the tyranny of opium', but by the time of *Suspiria* he had, at least by his own calculation, fought three major battles with the drug, all of which ended in failure. He removed his remarks about breaking the chain of addiction in the 1856

Confessions, where he now asserted that he had on four separate occasions broken free of opium only to be ensnared by it again.²⁶ De Quincey preens himself in the 1821 text on being the only person he has ever heard of who managed to defeat the drug. But again he mirrors Coleridge. Both tried many times to quit laudanum. Both always relapsed.

De Quincey's complex fascination with Coleridge is at the crux of the 1821 *Confessions*. Spellbound from the time he was a schoolboy, his personal relationship with Coleridge lapsed after only seven years, and thereafter, in his many published references to him, De Quincey expressed, by turns, gratitude, disillusionment, anger, and admiration. In *Confessions*, Coleridge shadows and shapes De Quincey even as De Quincey tries sometimes successfully to detach himself from him. Coleridge is a creative force whose writings and conversations inspire De Quincey's thoughts on dreams, desire, and literary character. As an intellectual rival, De Quincey uses Coleridge's works as a benchmark against which to measure his own scholarly achievements, often to his own advantage. Above all, though De Quincey endeavoured in *Confessions* to establish central differences, their drug-taking careers are strikingly similar, for when De Quincey wrote about Coleridge he was almost invariably at some level writing about himself.

Endnotes

- ¹ Sara Coleridge, 'Biographical Supplement' in Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. Sara Coleridge (2 vols, London, 1847), ii. 408-09.
- ² *Works*, x. 287-88; i. 44-45, 26; x. 293; James Hogg, *De Quincey and his Friends* (London, 1895), 108 (hereafter, Hogg); *Works*, x. 239.
- ³ *Works*, x. 295, 303, 294; *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. L. Griggs (6 vols, Oxford, 1956-71), iii. 476 (hereafter, Coleridge, *Letters*); *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, Merton Christensen, and A. J. Harding (5 vols in 10, London, 1957-2002), ii. 3166 (hereafter, Coleridge, *Notebooks*).
- ⁴ Robert Morrison, *The English Opium Eater: A Biography of Thomas De Quincey* (London, 2009), 122-23, 131 (hereafter, Morrison); Coleridge, *Letters*, iii. 49; *Works*, x. 320.
- ⁵ *Memoir and Letters of Sara Coleridge*, ed. Edith Coleridge (2 vols, London, 1873), i. 19; *Works*, x. 355; Coleridge, *Letters*, iii. 247-49; *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Middle Years, Part I*, ed. Mary Moorman (Oxford, 1969), 379; *Works*, x. 321; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Friend*, ed. Barbara Rooke (2 vols, Princeton, 1969), ii. 425, i. 87, i. 377, ii. 222-29 (hereafter, Coleridge, *Friend*).
- ⁶ Hogg, 232; *Works*, xx. 40-41; *De Quincey to Wordsworth*, ed. John Jordan (Berkeley, 1963), 269; A. H. Japp, *Thomas De Quincey: His Life and Writings* (London, 1890), 244; *Works*, x. 335; Hogg, 157-58; *De Quincey to Wordsworth*, 337.
- ⁷ *Works*, xxi. 48; Morrison, 138; Coleridge, *Letters*, iii. 205, 286.
- ⁸ *Works*, iii. 46; *Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and their Writers*, ed. Edith Morley (3 vols, London, 1938), i. 195; *Works*, x. 292; Robert Morrison, 'Camaraderie and Conflict: De Quincey and Wilson on Enemy Lines' in *Romanticism and Blackwood's Magazine: 'An*

Unprecedented Phenomenon’, ed. Robert Morrison and Daniel Sanjiv Roberts (Houndmills, 2013), 60-61; *Works*, xv. 105; Coleridge, *Letters*, v. 164, 162.

⁹ *Works*, ii. 9, 14; x. 307; xv. 118.

¹⁰ *Works*, ii. 63; Robert Morrison (ed.), ‘Richard Woodhouse’s *Cause Book*: the Opium-Eater, the Magazine Wars, and the London Literary Scene in 1821’ in *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 9.3 (Fall 1998), 8 (hereafter, Woodhouse); *Works*, ii. 253.

¹¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Table Talk*, ed. Carl Woodring (2 vols, Princeton, 1990), i. 352; *Works*, ii. 12, 64-65; Morrison, 332; *Works*, xiv. 66; xi. 136; xv. 110.

¹² *Works*, ii. 11, 10, 12-13, 64, 12.

¹³ *Works*, ii. 52, 56; Woodhouse, 8; *Works*, x. 298.

¹⁴ Coleridge, *Letters*, i. 18, 188, 248-50, 251, 350, 394.

¹⁵ Molly Lefebure, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Bondage of Opium* (New York, 1974), 64-65; cf. Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions* (London, 1989), 296-98; and Coleridge, *Letters*, ii. 731.

¹⁶ Coleridge, *Letters*, iii. 476; ii. 982; Coleridge, *Notebooks*, ii. 2368; Coleridge, *Letters*, iii. 477.

¹⁷ Coleridge, *Letters*, i. 18; *Works*, ii. 42; Coleridge, *Letters*, i. 394; *Works*, ii. 45; Coleridge, *Notebooks*, i. 1250; *Works*, ii. 70.

¹⁸ Coleridge, *Notebooks*, i. 1575; *Works*, ii. 67; Coleridge, *Letters*, iii. 125-26; *Works*, ii. 11.

¹⁹ *Works*, ii. 68-9; Coleridge, *Notebooks*, v. 5992.

²⁰ Coleridge, *Friend*, ii. 16; *Works*, ii. 65, 63; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poetical Works*, ed. J. C. C. Mays (6 vols, Princeton, 2001), ii. 625, 674; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (2 vols, Princeton, 1983), i. 17. See Robert

Morrison, 'De Quincey and the Opium-Eater's Other Selves' in *Romanticism*, 5.1 (1999), 87-103.

²¹ Coleridge, *Letters*, iii. 490, 476.

²² *Works*, ii. 75, 10, 55, 45, 74.

²³ *Works*, x. 318; xv. 124; ii. 108, 251-52.

²⁴ *Works*, ii. 10; Woodhouse, 14; Alethea Hayter, *Opium and the Romantic Imagination* (London, 1968), 194; Martin Booth, *Opium: A History* (New York, 1998) 44; Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Darker Reflections* (London, 1998), 355; *Works*, ii. 56, 245.

²⁵ *Works*, ii. 10; x. 304-05; ii. 244-45, 107.

²⁶ *Works*, ii. 82; Rosamond Davenport-Hill and Florence Davenport-Hill, *The Recorder of Birmingham: A Memoir of Matthew Davenport Hill* (London, 1878), 85; *Works*, xv. 131-32; ii. 109.