DE QUINCEY AND POWER

ROBERT MORRISON, *Bath Spa University*

"What I contemplated . . . was to emblazon the power of opium," Thomas De Quincey declared in the revised version of his most famous work, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1856; *Selected Writings* 450). De Quincey's fascination with power, and his desire to align himself with it, is one of the central features of his work, and evident not only in his writings on opium but in a wide variety of other areas as well. In his two celebrated definitions of the "literature of power," De Quincey concentrates on the sustained sublimity of tragedies such as Shakespeare's *King Lear* and epics such as Milton's *Paradise Lost*, yet as he makes clear elsewhere, Wordsworth is the most sublime of poets. De Quincey wrote at length of imperial power, from the perspective of a victim in his account of the childhood games of imaginary kingdoms that he played with his bullying older brother William, and from the perspective of an advocate in his commentaries on the immense reach and beneficent strength of the Roman and British empires, though on occasion he also accepted that colonialism had meted out terrible suffering. Murderers transfixed De Quincey, for while he claimed to dislike violence, he marveled at the way assassins such as John Williams of the Ratcliffe Highway took power to themselves, abandoning self-control, breaking free of the law, and acting without remorse on their desire for revenge and destruction. Opium—in common with the literature of power, and invading armies, and solitary killers—is a potent force that moves from the outside to the inside, and once within De Quincey it produced a complex series of often overlapping responses.

The Wordsworth Circle, volume 54, number 1, winter 2023.
 https://doi.org/10.1086/724936

De Quincey luxuriated in the drug's unparalleled ability to assuage all manner of mental and physical pain, to send him soaring upward into recreational euphoria, and to trigger the sublime pleasures of gothic nightmare, and while addiction soon took hold of him and brought on the cyclical horrors of withdrawal and relapse and withdrawal again, he also masochistically reveled in the loss of agency produced by his unstoppable consumption of opium. Power, as De Quincey understands it, changes the world. In the form of mind-altering words or mind-altering drugs, it vastly expands the world within. In the form of brute political invasion, or violent individual action, it destructively reorders the world without.

The "literature of power" is an idea De Quincey owed to "many years' conversation with Mr Wordsworth," and that he also found in Wordsworth's published writings such as the 1815 "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface," where Wordsworth insists that literature does not aim at "the mere communication of *knowledge*," but that its purpose is "to call forth and to communicate *power*" (*Selected Writings* 89; Wordsworth, *Prose* 3: 81–82). De Quincey produced two main definitions of the literature of power—the first in his 1823 *London Magazine* series of "Letters to a Young Man Whose Education has been Neglected," and the second twenty-five years later in his 1848 *North British Review* essay on Alexander Pope—and in both he connects literary power to an aesthetics of the sublime, as seen especially in works such as "the Iliad, the Prometheus of Aeschylus,—the Othello or King Lear,—the Hamlet or Macbeth,—and the Paradise Lost," all of which feature classic attributes of the sublime such as grandeur, vastness, might, nobility, and infinitude (*Selected Writings* 354). For De Quincey, however, *Paradise Lost* is the preeminent example of the literature of power. "What do you learn from a cookery-book?" he asks pointedly in the 1848 essay. "Something new, something that you did not know before, in every paragraph. But would you therefore put the wretched cookery-book on a higher level of estimation than the divine poem? What you owe to Milton is not any knowledge . . . what you owe—is *power*" (352–53). Elsewhere, too, De Quincey emphasizes Milton's exemplarity. He is "not an author amongst authors, not a poet amongst poets, but a power amongst powers; and the *Paradise Lost* is not a book amongst books, not a poem amongst poems, but a central force amongst forces," he writes in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in 1839. "In Milton only, first and last, is the power of the sublime revealed" (*Works* 11: 436, 438).

Yet as De Quincey formulated the distinction between the literature of knowledge and the literature of power in dialogue with Wordsworth, so Wordsworth's poetry is fundamental to his thinking on the sublime, though De Quincey does not reference it in either of his definitions of the literature of power. Indeed, his extravagant enthusiasm for Milton's sublimities notwithstanding, De Quincey makes clear on a number of occasions that he regards Wordsworth as a greater poet than Milton, and in fact as the greatest—the most sublime—English poet of all. De Quincey read both *Paradise Lost* and *Lyrical Ballads* for the first time when he was in his early teens and subsequently described his response to the latter volume as "the greatest event in the unfolding of my own mind." In the poems of *Lyrical Ballads*, he added, "I found . . . 'the ray of a new morning,' and an absolute revelation of untrodden worlds, teeming with power and beauty, as yet unsuspected amongst men" (*Selected Writings* 129). When he was seventeen, De Quincey kept a diary in which he listed his twelve favorite poets, beginning with Edmund Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton and climaxing with "William Wordsworth!!!," the only poet on the list to receive any exclamation marks, let alone three (*Works* 1: 15).

In addition to several other references to Wordsworth, the diary also contains two drafts of the letter that De Quincey sent at this time to the poet himself to express his excitement about the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, and while the circumstances clearly account for some of the flattery (a youthful enthusiast sends a letter of profuse praise to his hero in the hope of winning his friendship), De Quincey's appreciation of Wordsworth's poetry was genuine and enduring. "I may say in general, without the smallest exaggeration," De Quincey assures Wordsworth, "that the whole aggregate of pleasure I have received from some eight or nine other poets that I have been able to find since the world began . . . falls infinitely short of what those two enchanting volumes singly afforded me" (*Works* 1: 40–41). Asks Ian Balfour: "Does this not in effect say that Wordsworth is, for De Quincey, the best poet ever?" (173). Around 1810, after De Quincey had moved to the Lake District and into Wordsworth's former home at Dove Cottage, Wordsworth allowed him to read in manuscript his autobiographical masterwork, *The Prelude*, a privilege that he accorded to few outside his immediate family circle. *The Prelude*, De Quincey discovered, was a "great philosophic poem," and the Arabian Dream from Book Five as powerful as it was possible for poetry to be, for it reached "the very *ne plus ultra* of sublimity," as De Quincey put it in his 1839 *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* series on Wordsworth (*Works* 11: 80).

How can it be that "in Milton only . . . is the power of the sublime revealed" and that in Wordsworth the Arabian Dream "reaches the very *ne plus ultra* of sublimity"? For De Quincey, the contradiction is at least partially resolved by taking into account what he called "continuousness," the ability at the crux of literary power to produce sustained and elaborate expressions of thought and emotion. In prose, De Quincey disliked an "abrupt, insulated, capricious, and . . . non-sequacious" style. He criticized the "unelevated and *unrhythmical*" prose of eighteenth-century writers such as Jonathan Swift (*Works* 16: 378; 10: 246). He was similarly severe on contemporary essayists: William Hazlitt "was not eloquent, because he was discontinuous"; Charles Lamb "shrank from the continuous, from the sustained, from the elaborate"; and Robert Southey produced a "plain" style that was well suited to narrative or argumentative themes, but that could not reach the sublimities demanded by the literature of power. "Were a magnificent dedication required, moving with a stately and measured solemnity," remarked De Quincey, "Southey's is not the mind, and, by a necessary consequence, Southey's is not the style, for carrying such purposes into full and memorable effect" (16: 378, 380; 11: 139–40).

However, De Quincey lauded prose writers who fashioned an impassioned, ornate style, and he was especially admiring of seventeenth-century authors such as Jeremy Taylor and Sir Thomas Browne, "undoubtedly, the richest, the most dazzling, and, with reference to their matter, the most captivating of all rhetoricians" (*Selected Writings* 123). Their only important rival, as far as De Quincey was concerned, appeared more than a century later in Edmund Burke, who in "the prodigious elasticity of his thinking" displayed "something allied to the powers of a prophetic seer" (*Works* 16: 219). Impassioned prose—including of course the version written by De Quincey himself—stood in relation to the "humbler" prose styles as "an organ to a shepherd's pipe" (10: 246). Purveyors of a straightforward, unaffected style could narrate, define, and debate, but only rhetoricians such as Taylor, Burke, and De Quincey had within their range a "splendid declamation" full of "impassionate fervour," or a vehement "pleading . . . against some capital abuse of the earth—war, slavery, oppression in its thousand forms" (*Works* 11: 139–40).

De Quincey made a similar distinction between discontinuous and continuous poetry. Alexander Pope wrote an aphoristic, disconnected style that meant he could not produce the literature of power. "All his thinking proceeded by insulated and discontinuous jets," De Quincey complained (*Works* 16: 341). Milton, by contrast, produced in *Paradise Lost* not only

an epic, but an epic that was "continuously sublime," and this quality of continuousness is what lies behind De Quincey's assertion that only in Milton "is the power of the sublime revealed," for only Milton produced a poem that is sublime "without intermission and without collapse" (11: 438). Wordsworth was, in De Quincey's view, the finer poet, but not for sustained sublimity. *The Excursion* is "very much the longest poem" of Wordsworth, De Quincey observes, and it bears the "title of a *philosophic* poem . . . on which account it is presumed to have a higher divinity." But *The Excursion* is no match for *Paradise Lost* as an example of the literature of power. It is "*undulatory*" rather than consistent, and it crumbles "into separate segments" instead of cohering into an impassioned whole, while its "desultory or even incoherent character" interferes greatly with its "power to act upon the mind" (15: 236).

The Prelude was much more impressive, and while Wordsworth did not produce the "continuously sublime" in it either, he rose in the Arabian Dream beyond even the highest peaks of sublimity in *Paradise Lost*. What is more, Wordsworth's explorations in *The Prelude* of the growth of his creative mind clearly served De Quincey as a model for his own imaginative autobiographies, including the 1821 *Confessions* and its 1845 sequel *Suspiria de Profundis*, for in both De Quincey follows Wordsworth in fashioning a highly selective and artistically patterned account of his past that encompasses digression, anecdote, narrative, and reminiscence, but that also escalates on several occasions into impassioned accounts of childhood grief, contemporary crises, urban spectacle, and gothic nightmare. It is a structure that enabled both Wordsworth and De Quincey to produce, not Milton's continuous sublime, but shorter passages within longer and more variegated narratives that extended the limits of the literature of power. As Wordsworth attained "the very *ne plus ultra* of sublimity" in *The Prelude*, so De Quincey told Alfred Tennyson's brother-in-law Edmund Lushington that he thought *Suspiria* "the *ne plus ultra*, as regards the feelings and the power to express it, which I can ever hope to attain" (Morrison 338). De Quincey, wrote Virginia Woolf, "shifted the values of familiar things. And this he did in prose, which makes us wonder whether . . . the prose writer, the novelist, might not capture fuller and finer truths than are now his aim if he ventured into those shadowy regions where De Quincey has been before him" (4: 367).

The literature of power transformed readers as it moved from the page to their thoughts, and "suddenly startled" them "into a feeling of the infinity of the world within" (*Selected Writings* 89). Colonizers too moved from

the outside to the inside, usurping the land of others in ways that De Quincey deplored in some instances and championed in many others. As a young boy, he played games of nationhood with his tyrannical brother William, who was three or four years his senior. Each boy had an imaginary kingdom. William's was called "Tigrosylvania," Thomas's "Gombroon" (*Works* 19: 48–49). When the contests began, Thomas's primary desire was to "keep the peace," and he located his small island nation as far away from Tigrosylvania as possible. But William out-maneuvered him with the announcement that Tigrosylvania was so large that some of its "vast horns and promontories" extended almost to the very shores of Gombroon. Thomas countered that Gombroon was so impoverished that it was not worth the bother of invading. William shot back that in its central forests were diamond mines, which its inhabitants, "from their low condition of civilisation, did not value, nor had any means of working" (19: 45–46).

The complete humiliation of the Gombroonians came when William revealed that they still had tails! The news staggered Thomas. He was appalled by their "ignominious appendages" and considered abdication, but he could not abandon his "poor abject islanders," as they had "suffered so much together," and the "filaments connecting them with my heart were so aerially fine and fantastic, but for that reason so inseverable, that I abated nothing of my anxiety on their account" (19: 53). Yet at the same time Thomas embraced the degradation William heaped on him and his Gombroonian subjects, for there was in Thomas's character a strong streak of masochism, and when William threatened him with Tigrosylvanian occupation and exploitation, self-mortification served Thomas as camouflage and comfort, for it enabled him to sidestep obligations, lower expectations, and confirm his own worthlessness. "I had a perfect craze for being despised," De Quincey confessed. "I doted on it; and considered contempt a sort of luxury that I was in continual fear of losing. Why not? Wherefore should any rational person shrink from contempt, if it happen to form the tenure by which he holds his repose in life?" (19: 25).

Thomas's complicated response to William's imperial power playing might have been expected to lead him in his career as a magazinist to approach colonial issues with insight and even compassion. But that rarely happened. De Quincey found the sheer power of empires—especially the Roman and the British—exhilarating, and he almost invariably applauded the changes the invaders imposed on the invaded. In his eyes, it was a question of civilizing forces subduing and then educating savage people in order

to raise them up to the standards of human morality and dignity espoused by their conquerors. It was a position he saw as entirely justifiable and without irony. The Roman empire was "the most magnificent monument of human power which our planet has beheld," he declared, and its emperors "should be regarded as sharing in the attributes of supernatural beings," for they wielded power that was absolute, "power alike admirable for its extent, for its intensity, and for its consecration from all counter-forces which could restrain it, or endanger it" (9: 92, 11). Colonization was, in De Quincey's words, "the great engine of Roman conquest." It enabled a "prodigious . . . circle of purposes belonging to the highest state policy," including the annexation of the lands of "barbarous people" like the Vandals, the Goths, and the Franks, and the creation of a new political order in which a "great centre of civilisation" extended "round the Mediterranean in one continuous belt of great breadth" (9: 94, 98, 114).

The British Empire, De Quincey conceded, was nowhere near as impressive, for unlike the Roman it had "the great defect of being disjointed, and even insusceptible of perfect union." Nevertheless, as a prodigious growth "out of so small a stem," it had to be "admired" (9: 10), and De Quincey typically endorsed the many British attempts to remake the world in its own image. Sometimes, as Daniel Sanjiv Roberts has pointed out, De Quincey imagined that "the violence of British colonialism" could be "mitigated and tranquillized by a cultural programme of disseminating English literature," and in particular the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge, a strategy, Roberts adds, that "offers us an insight into the means by which colonialism gained legitimacy" (247–48). Wordsworth, De Quincey observes, "is peculiarly the poet for the solitary and the meditative and, throughout the countless myriads of future America and future Australia, no less than Polynesia and Southern Africa, there will be situations without end fitted by their loneliness to favour his influence for centuries to come" (11: 62). The same is true for Coleridge, whose name is "destined to move so much of reverential sympathy and so much of ennobling strife in the generations yet to come, of our England at home, of our other Englands on the St. Lawrence, on the Mississippi, on the Indus and Ganges, and on the pastoral solitudes of Austral climes!" (21: 43).

Far more often, though, De Quincey championed the vigorous imposition of the British imperial agenda, and lashed out at any nation or group that resisted it. Britain fought two "Opium Wars" with China, the first in 1839–42 and the second in 1856–60. Both conflicts concerned China's attempts to stop Britain's illegal smuggling of opium from India into China,

and both conflicts ended in defeat for China. De Quincey insisted that Britain was in the right because, whereas it had reached "the summit of civilisation," China was "incapable of a true civilisation, semi-refined in manners and mechanic arts, but incurably savage in the moral sense" (11: 562, 554). The violence of the opium wars, he maintained, would ultimately be seen as advantageous for both the Chinese and the British. "Many times must the artillery score its dreadful lessons upon their carcasses, before they will be healed of their treachery," he asserted, "or we shall be allowed to live in the diffusion of peaceful benefits" (13: 81). Ceylon—now Sri Lanka—became a British Crown colony in 1796, and despite "violent resistance" the British invaders succeeded in bringing "peace, freedom, security, and a new standard of public morality" to the island, aided by their establishment of Protestantism, which De Quincey calls "a dovelike religion" (14: 157, 174, 160). Yet he cannot conceal his racially motivated hatred of the two colonized peoples. The "Cinghalese," he announces, "are soft, inert, passive cowards," while "your Kandyan is a ferocious little bloody coward, full of mischief." Nowhere does De Quincey question the British occupation. Might is right. "The nation that *can* win the place of leader," to his way of thinking, "is the nation that ought to do so" (14: 162, 156).

India had been steadily falling under British control for more than a century when in 1857–59 it fought its First War of Independence—or what De Quincey knew as the Indian Mutiny—a widespread revolt against British rule by Indian troops (sepoys) that began in Meerut and quickly spread to Delhi, Agra, Cawnpore, and Lucknow. De Quincey was furious at the strength and audacity of the uprising. "From the foundations of the earth, no case in human action or suffering has occurred which could less need or less tolerate the aid of artificial rhetoric than that tremendous tragedy which now for three months long has been moving over the plains of Hindostan" (18: 162). The British rulers, he was certain, were not to blame: "no conquering state was ever yet so mild and beneficent in the spirit of its government." The "true originators" of the rebellion, claimed De Quincey, were the "Indian princes and rajahs" as well as the sepoys, who had launched "this most suicidal of revolts" with the same "defect of plan and coherent purpose as have ever characterized the oriental mind" (18: 164, 186, 169, 165). Britain could not tolerate—could not be expected to tolerate—rebellion in its dominions, and De Quincey clearly foresaw the ruthlessness of its response. "Unpitied myriads of sepoys will be bayonetted," he declared, "thousands will be hanged" (18: 169). Britain was owed,

not disloyalty, but gratitude. "There is no known spot of earth which has exerted upon the rest of the planet one-thousandth part of the influence which this noble island has exercised over the human race" (18: 172).

In one striking instance, however, De Quincey turned his back on his deep and enduring alliance with British imperial expansion and sided instead with its victims. John MacGregor, a Scottish-born merchant, politician, and writer, published in his *British America* (1832) an account of the persecution of the Beothuk, the original inhabitants of Newfoundland, who, MacGregor observed, were "hunted and shot like foxes, by the northern furriers and fishermen." De Quincey, reviewing the book in *Blackwood's*, called the Beothuk a "race of poor savages" and recounted some of their "ferocious outrages upon unoffending white men" (*Works* 8: 165, 164). But he also recognized that their history was part of "those innumerable records which trace the downward career of the poor perishing aboriginal tribes of the New World, in their vain conflict with white invaders," and that the Beothuk were a "once powerful nation" that for "a space of nearly three centuries" had been unable to escape "the merciless extermination of the whites," an extermination that ended only when the last known surviving Beothuk, a woman named Shanawdithit, died in 1829, just three years before De Quincey wrote the review (8: 162, 168).[1] "The details of this case," he states, "are not less stimulating to our curiosity than they are distressing, and sometimes even revolting to our humanity: they are attractive from the circumstances of mystery which still hang about the closing scenes of the tragedy, and yet, deeply repulsive from the dishonour which they attach at every step to countrymen of our own, professors of civilisation and Christian truth" (8: 162). De Quincey routinely took immense pride in British colonial power and the moral, economic, and cultural benefits he was convinced it brought. Across his career, however, he expressed profound sympathy for the outcast, the alienated, and the disgraced, and in the case of North American indigenous peoples like the Beothuk he saw clearly that imperialism had produced ruin rather than progress and moral elevation, and he condemned as disgusting "the continued violence of European encroachers" under the guise of a civilizing mission (8: 168).

The power of literature to invade our thoughts, or colonial armies to occupy other countries, runs parallel in De Quincey to his fascination with murderers, who in his finest fictions pass with inexplicable ease from outside to inside in order to engage in what W. H. Auden in "The Guilty Vicarage" (1948) calls "negative creation," for "every murderer is . . . the

rebel who claims the right to be omnipotent" (265). *Klosterheim* (1832), De Quincey's gothic romance, is set at the midway point of the Thirty Years' War (1618–48) and features a Catholic hero named Maximilian, whose rightful place as Landgrave has been usurped by a duplicitous tyrant in league with Protestant forces. Dressed as a mysterious masque, Maximilian wages a bloody campaign of abduction and murder against the citizens of Klosterheim, a campaign that is ultimately shown to be illusory (the product of special effects, secret passageways, and "victims" who go willingly) but that is most notable for the effortlessness with which Maximilian evades capture and infiltrates private spaces. As the terror mounts, worried families redouble their attempts to protect themselves: "guards were multiplied; arms were repaired in every house; alarm bells were hung." It makes no difference. "Sleep was no longer safe," De Quincey asserts; "the seclusion of a man's private hearth, the secrecy of bedrooms, was no longer a protection. Locks gave way, bars fell, doors flew open, as if by magic," before The Masque (8: 279–80).

De Quincey's tale of terror "The Avenger" (1838) is another narrative of intrusion, and features another soldier named Maximilian, who in this instance returns from the Napoleonic Wars to settle in a quiet German town. Before long, panic grips the citizenry as a series of vicious murders take place—real this time, rather than staged as in *Klosterheim*. Eventually, Maximilian himself is revealed to be the assassin. He and his family are Jewish, and when he was a boy his mother was whipped on the bare back in the noonday streets in front of a jeering mob for the crime of her "afflicted race" (9: 300). She died shortly thereafter. Maximilian swears to avenge her killing, and returns to the town as a murderously angry adult who knows that its seemingly innocent inhabitants are actually sadists and bigots. Like the Maximilian of *Klosterheim*, the Maximilian of "The Avenger" is distinguished by his ability to cross without difficulty from well-guarded exteriors into vulnerable interiors, and he proceeds to invade the homes of his mother's executioners in order in his turn to execute them. Soon the population is engulfed in "a blind misery of fear," just as the residents of Klosterheim were: "all the doors and windows, by which ingress was possible, were not only locked, but bolted and barred, a fact which excluded all possibility of invasion by means of false keys," and yet Maximilian and his allies continue to overcome every obstacle, rendering the "hearth no sanctuary," penetrating even to "a closet within a closet," exterminating entire households, and escaping with "all traces of their persons . . . vanished" (9: 266, 281, 291).

The power of the murderer to extinguish the enemy and reshape the world is also at the heart of De Quincey's true-crime writings on the notorious Ratcliffe Highway killer John Williams, who in 1811 brutally assassinated seven people in two separate home invasions in London's East End, and whose career as "the mysterious stranger" thoroughly shaped De Quincey's representation of Maximilian in both *Klosterheim* and "The Avenger" (*Selected Writings* 416). Williams struck first on 7 December when near midnight he observed a man named Timothy Marr ask the nightwatchman to assist him in closing the front shutters of his silk and lace shop at the end of a long business day. The task completed, the watchman moved on, at which point Williams approached the shop, carefully opened the door that Marr had not yet locked, and then slipped inside and locked the door behind him. Marr was his first victim. Williams bashed in his head and slashed his throat. Then, moving swiftly but efficiently, he dispatched everyone else on the premises, including Marr's wife Celia and, most ferociously, their three-month-old son, Timothy Jr. "There was, of course, no logical reason for killing a creature who could make no coherent witness," Iain Sinclair remarks in *Lud Heat* (1975); "but the murderer seems to have been pushed into a wheel of frenzy" (23).

Twelve days later Williams stole a second time from public to private space in order to slake "his wolfish thirst for blood" on another "covey of victims," this time in the household of a publican named John Williamson (*Selected Writings* 433, 420). "A man named Williams does quite accidentally murder a man named Williamson," G. K. Chesterton notes in *The Innocence of Father Brown* (1911); "it sounds like a sort of infanticide" (6). On the night in question, "a stranger, of sinister appearance" was seen flitting in and out of Williamson's pub and "stealing into the private passages of the house." At eleven the pub closed and roughly thirty minutes later—the last of the patrons departed—Williamson joined his wife Elizabeth who had been busy in the back kitchen and parlor, "when all at once, with a crash, proclaiming some hand of hideous violence, the house-door was suddenly shut and locked." Williams had again entered through an unlocked door, and while on this occasion he made no attempt to conceal that he was "now, too certainly, in this defenceless house," his second killing spree was almost as blood-soaked as his first (*Selected Writings* 426–27).

Anna Bridget Harrington, the maid, was found on the main floor, her throat slit and her skull battered. Elizabeth Williamson had suffered the same sudden and savage fate. John Williamson was discovered dead in the cellar. He seems to have been thrown down the stairs. His throat

had been cut. A lodger named John Turner, however, had managed to escape by climbing out the window of his third-floor bedroom, while—miraculously—the Williamsons' fourteen-year-old granddaughter Kitty Stillwell remained asleep the entire time and was discovered unharmed. Several men were detained in connection with the atrocities, among them Williams, who was arrested on 24 December and who was found hanged in his prison cell three days later, an apparent suicide. Many interpreted the circumstances of his death as an acknowledgement of guilt, but there were others who had serious concerns about whether or not Williams was the lone assassin. "It is virtually certain that more than one man was involved in the murder of the Marrs," P. D. James and T. A. Critchley conclude in *The Maul and The Pear Tree* (1971), their book-length study of the massacres. "Two, possibly three, men were seen hanging about the shop earlier in the evening" (219). It is not even clear that Williams was involved in the Ratcliffe Highway killings.

None of this mattered to De Quincey. He always attributed the murders exclusively to Williams ("That there *was* only one man concerned, seems to be certain"), and he heightened, distorted, or overlooked the details of both crime scenes in order to exploit his fascination with the ferocity and incomprehensibility of the violence (*Selected Writings* 438). Williams, for De Quincey, was as powerful as it is possible for a person to be. "I am miserably and shamefully deficient in that quality as regards action," De Quincey confessed in "The English Mail-Coach" (1849; *Selected Writings* 387). Not Williams. Williams rejected the lethargy, deference, values, commandments, and laws that thwart the rest of us, and he acted instead on "the tremendous power which is laid open in a moment to any man who can reconcile himself to the abjuration of all conscientious restraints, if, at the same time, thoroughly without fear," as Coleridge put it to De Quincey when they met in London in 1812 and discussed the Radcliffe Highway killings (*Selected Writings* 410). In *Suspiria de Profundis*, De Quincey declared that "if there was one thing in this world from which, more than from any other, nature had forced me to revolt, it was brutality and violence" (264). Yet De Quincey repeatedly gloried in Williams, who reigned supreme in a world that was "cut off by an immeasurable gulph from the ordinary tide and succession of human affairs," as De Quincey remarked in his 1823 *London Magazine* article "On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth" (*Selected Writings* 93–94). More than a century later, Jean Genet allies himself with De Quincey in his debut novel, *Our Lady of the Flowers* (1943), where he explores his preoccupation with the murderer, and his ability

to escape quotidian banalities by hoisting himself up into pitiless divinity. "By . . . maintaining his mind in a superhuman region, where he was a god," Genet asserts, the assassin denies "our universe and its values so that" he may "act upon it with sovereign ease" (Black 51).

For De Quincey, however, the most powerful agency of all is not a poem, or an empire, or an assassin, but opium, his drug of choice for fifty-five years, and a mind-altering substance that is more paradoxical and unrelenting than the other three forces, but which shares with them the same dramatic passage from without to within. "Like any good parasite," Jacques Derrida remarks, drugs are "at once inside and outside" the body, with "the outside feeding on the inside," as colonialists glut themselves on the host country, or Williams quenches his wolfish desire for blood by invading domestic spaces, or opium consumes De Quincey in ways that both eviscerate and inspire him (24). A toothache, he claimed, left him no choice but to take it, though after swallowing his first dose he forgot all about the pain in his mouth and face. "Oh! Heavens! what a revulsion! what an upheaving, from its lowest depths, of the inner spirit! what an apocalypse of the world within me!" (*Selected Writings* 37). This first opium high was so powerful and definitive that in some ways De Quincey was hooked from the start. Nowhere else in his writings does he attempt a similar description or refer to this moment again, and the rest of his opium career might be read as his compulsively futile attempt to replicate the peaks of this initial euphoria. It was commonly believed that—like wine—opium produced intoxication. That was not the case. Wine disperses "the intellectual energies." Opium introduces "amongst them the most exquisite order." Wine "calls up into supremacy the merely human, too often the brutal," part of our nature. Opium is celestial. When taken correctly, it raises the "moral affections" to a "state of cloudless serenity; and over all is the great light of the majestic intellect" (39). Yet at the same time and even further overhead, dark clouds shadow the sunny rapture, as the experience of the drug opens not upward but downward into an "abyss of divine enjoyment." "Nobody will laugh long who deals much with opium," De Quincey vows: "its pleasures even are of a grave and solemn complexion; and in his happiest state, the opium-eater cannot present himself in the character of *l'Allegro*: even then, he speaks and thinks as becomes *Il Penseroso*" (37).

For several years De Quincey took opium recreationally. "I am a *Hedonist*," he proclaimed in the revised *Confessions*; "and, if you *must* know why I take opium, that's the reason why" (*Works* 2: 251–52). Approximately

once every three weeks, he left the grind of study at Oxford and slipped down to London, where he treated himself to a "debauch of opium," and then enjoyed the streets, markets, opera houses, and theatres "for upwards of eight hours" under "the primary effects" of a drug that "always, and in the highest degree," worked "to excite and stimulate" his system (*Selected Writings* 42, 41). Yet opium for De Quincey was ultimately a drug of private realms, and after a while, he confessed, the throngs of people in the theaters and markets became oppressive and drove him to seek "solitude and silence," for only under these "indispensable conditions" could he enter into "those trances" that are "the crown and consummation" of what the drug "can do for human nature" (44). Most famously, in a cottage at Everton, at that time a "distinct" and "well-known village upon the heights immediately above Liverpool," De Quincey often treated himself to a dose of opium and then sat "from sun-set to sun-rise, motionless, and without wishing to move," at an "open window" staring out at the scene below him. Liverpool "represented the earth, with its sorrows and its graves left behind, yet not out of sight, nor wholly forgotten," while the "ocean, in everlasting but gentle agitation, and brooded over by a dove-like calm, might not unfitly typify the mind and the mood which then swayed it." De Quincey's grief, anger, and self-contempt did not disappear in this state, but opium transfigured them into a harmony that was at once serene and energetic: "infinite activities, infinite repose" (487, 45).

De Quincey championed the power of the drug to burnish, heal, and console. To "the guilty man," for one night it gave back "the hopes of his youth." To "the proud man," it provided "a brief oblivion" for "Wrongs unredress'd, and insults unavenged." To "poor and rich alike, for the wounds that will never heal," it dispensed "an assuaging balm" (45). Above all, "just, subtle, and mighty opium" held for De Quincey "the keys of Paradise" because it had the power to call "into sunny light the faces of long-buried beauties," a reference in which De Quincey invokes both his beloved sister Elizabeth, whose sudden death when he was just six years old shattered his world, and her surrogate in *Confessions*, fifteen-year-old Ann of Oxford Street, De Quincey's closest companion during his harrowing months of poverty and hunger in London in the winter of 1802–03. "This, amongst such troubles as most men meet with in this life, has been my heaviest affliction," De Quincey wrote in *Confessions* of losing Ann (45–46, 31).

The powers of opium, De Quincey believed, also thoroughly informed his dreaming faculty, which had been strong since childhood, but which

the drug dramatically augmented. Both versions of *Confessions* climax with a sequence of nightmares that were triggered by "opium used in unexampled excess" and that displayed its power over the "shadowy world of dreams," though De Quincey recognized that his highly stylized rendering of these nightmares meant that "the very horrors themselves, described as connected with the use of opium, do not pass the limit of pleasure" (*Selected Writings* 458, 450, 78). In perhaps the most well-known scene in all of De Quincey, the "fierce chemistry" of his dreaming mind transmutes a chance visit from a Malay into xenophobic nightmares of persecution, alterity, and self-division (60). "Over every form, and threat, and punishment, and dim sightless incarceration, brooded a sense of eternity and infinity that drove me into an oppression as of madness," De Quincey states. "Into these dreams only, it was, with one or two slight exceptions, that any circumstances of physical horror entered. All before had been moral and spiritual terrors. But here the main agents were ugly birds, or snakes, or crocodiles; especially the last" (65). In the Easter Sunday dream that immediately follows, the scene is again "an oriental one," but in this instance De Quincey offers a vision that is imbued with both deep personal sadness and the possibilities of redemption. "At a vast distance were visible, as a stain upon the horizon, the domes and cupolas of a great city—an image or faint abstraction, caught perhaps in childhood from some picture of Jerusalem," he observes. "And not a bow-shot from me, upon a stone, and shaded by Judean palms, there sat a woman; and I looked; and it was—Ann!" (67).

In *Suspiria*, De Quincey makes even greater claims for the impact of opium on his dreaming mind. As he explains in the "Introductory Notice," the "colossal pace" of industrial and urban advance in contemporary Britain demands that "counter-forces of corresponding magnitude" be put in place "that shall radiate centrifugally against this storm of life so perilously centripetal towards the vortex of the merely human," forces that reject "this too intense life of the *social* instincts" in favor of solitude, and that include not only religion and "profound philosophy" but also the power of dreaming (*Selected Writings* 255–56). "Let no man think this a trifle," De Quincey asserts. "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." The dreaming mind has been damaged by "the decay of solitude," but "physical agencies" are available that "can and do assist the faculty of dreaming almost preternaturally." One of these is intense exercise. "But

beyond all others is opium," states De Quincey, "which indeed seems to possess a *specific* power . . . not merely for exalting the colours of dream-scenery, but for deepening its shadows; and, above all, for strengthening the sense of its fearful *realities*" (256).

Part I of *Suspiria*—like *Confessions*—closes with a series of intense dream visions that are linked by the tragedy of Elizabeth's early death, and which highlight the paradoxical power of opium both to resurrect and to fracture identity. "A pall, deep as oblivion, had been thrown by life over every trace" of "past events" that had for "so long slept in the dust," De Quincey reflects in "The Palimpsest"; "and yet suddenly, at a silent command, at the signal of a blazing rocket sent up from the brain, the pall draws up, and the whole depths of the theatre are exposed. Here was the greater mystery: now this mystery is liable to no doubt; for it is repeated, and ten thousand times repeated by opium, for those who are its martyrs" (*Selected Writings* 303). In "The Apparition of the Brocken," De Quincey introduces the mysterious figure of the "Dark Interpreter," "an intruder into my dreams" who is "a mere reflex of my inner nature" but who also "sometimes swerves out of my orbit, and mixes a little with alien natures." Had De Quincey been able to complete *Suspiria*, "this dark being" would have appeared again in later sections to mark "a further stage" in his "opium experience" in which the drug and the dream invader would have mimicked one another, for just as opium is both without and within the body, so the Dark Interpreter "will not always be found sitting inside my dreams," but will at times appear "outside, and in open daylight" (312–13).

Opium demonstrated the full and unbreakable extent of its power over De Quincey when in 1813 he became "a regular and confirmed opium-eater," and in the decades that followed "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" (*Selected Writings* 49). In the perverse logic of addiction, De Quincey's best response to the sufferings of opium excess was more opium, and he soon found himself trapped between "the collision of both evils—that from the laudanum, and that from the want of laudanum" (*Works* 10: 263). "If I take no laudanum, I am in a state of semi-distraction," he explained to James Hessey, co-editor of the *London Magazine*, in 1824; but "if I take even 12 or 15 drops" there is a "return of bilious symptoms which often put me *hors d'état* for any sort of labour" (Morrison 235). The rapture of his first drug experiences had long since disappeared. "*Eccovi*—this Child has been in Hell!" declared Thomas Carlyle of De Quincey in his *Reminiscences* (1881) of

their friendship in Edinburgh in the late 1820s. "His fate,—owing to opium etc.,—was hard and sore" (303). Roughly two decades later, in a particularly low period, De Quincey acknowledged to Edmund Lushington that his life was chaos and despair, and that he was certain "laudanum was at the root of all this unimaginable hell" (*Works* 15: 103). In such circumstances, he frequently resolved to quit taking the drug—"I am quite free from opium," he assured his close friend and *Blackwood's* colleague John Wilson in 1825—a decision that inevitably brought on the nervous agonies of withdrawal and then, sooner or later, relapse (Morrison 244). De Quincey died in 1859 still addicted to the drug, having for almost half a century maneuvered round and round "my great central sun of opium" (*Selected Writings* 461).

The "chain of abject slavery" that bound De Quincey to the drug, however, did not prevent him from producing a final summation in the 1856 *Confessions*, in which he praises the diverse benefits of opium more effusively than anywhere else in his writings (453). Indeed, not only does De Quincey in the 1856 version retain the sections from the 1821 text in which he celebrates opium, but he also announces that "all passages, written at an earlier period under cloudy and uncorrected views of the evil agencies presumable in opium, stand retracted." The drug, he now contends, brings "great positive blessings" (2: 252, 246). It offers relief from "the formidable curse of *taedium vitae*." It supports "preternatural calls for exertion" that have long given him the strength to write and to cope even in the midst of dire distress. Beyond all other analgesics, it is "the mightiest for its command, and for the extent of its command, over pain" (2: 98, 246, 99). Finally, De Quincey believed, opium was "the sole known agent—not for curing *when* formed, but for intercepting whilst likely to be formed—the great English scourge of pulmonary consumption," the disease that had killed his father at the age of forty, and which he claimed seemed so plainly in his youth to be pursuing him. Without laudanum's ability to block the onset of tuberculosis, De Quincey avers, "thirty-five years ago, beyond all doubt, I should have been in my grave" (2: 98, 242).

The many paradoxes that run through *Confessions* render its two main structural categories—the pleasures and the pains of opium—deeply unstable. For as the pleasures of the drug "are of a grave and solemn complexion," and as "the very horrors themselves, described as connected with the use of opium, do not pass the limit of pleasure," so—even more strikingly—De Quincey seems to have derived masochistic pleasure from opium's pains, and to have basked in the loss of power exacted by his repeated episodes of

self-induced oblivion. Part of him could not resist acting against his own better interests, as he himself makes plain in his 1839 *Tait's* essay on Wordsworth and Southey. "Long disappointment—hope for ever baffled, (and why should it be less painful because *self*-baffled?)—vexation and self-blame, almost self-contempt . . . these feelings had impressed upon my nervous sensibilities a character of irritation—agitation—restlessness—eternal self-dissatisfaction" (*Works* 11: 110).

Drugs greatly aided him in the pursuit of his own humiliation. Under the "parching effects of opium" life is "prematurely exhausted," he stated, and "mole-hills are inevitably exaggerated by the feelings into mountains" (10: 262). De Quincey cultivated anxiety and conjured distress. Recalled his second daughter Florence: "It was an accepted fact among us that he was able when saturated with opium to persuade himself and delighted to persuade himself (the excitement of terror was a real delight to him) that he was dogged by dark and mysterious foes" (Morrison 277). Opium could make De Quincey feel like "The Man-God" Charles Baudelaire describes in *Les Paradis artificiels* (1860), his adaptation and abridgement of De Quincey's *Confessions* and *Suspiria*, where "under the influence of the poison, our man soon makes himself the center of the universe" and where, "by and by, this tempest of pride is transformed into the fairer weather of a silent, calm, refreshed beatitude" (75–76). But De Quincey also relished the extent to which the drug created an artificial hell in which he was overwhelmed, panicked, victimized, and isolated. The pains of opium fettered him from one angle, but from another they provided him with a ready and inexhaustible ruse for shirking responsibilities, avoiding agreements, and ignoring deadlines. The boy who had "a perfect craze for being despised" became the adult who was laid low by sufferings that he both endured and enjoyed.

De Quincey is commonly grouped with Hazlitt and Lamb as one of the three major British essayists of the early nineteenth century, and there is a good deal of overlap between them, from their writings on—and personal relationships with—Coleridge and Wordsworth to the period in the early 1820s when all three contributed regularly to the *London Magazine*, and sometimes in dialogue with one another. In many ways, though, De Quincey stands apart from the other two. Not only was he capable of unleashing a bellicose Toryism far removed from the opinions of Lamb and Hazlitt, but he also in *Confessions* and *Suspiria* developed a view of the essay form itself that was markedly different from theirs. Lamb and Hazlitt saw themselves as extending the periodical essay tradition initiated

by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele. De Quincey rejected that tradition as too narrow and tame. "Addison and his companions," he grumbled, "never rise to the idea of addressing the 'nation' or the 'people': it is always the 'town'" (*Works* 16: 194). Instead, as discussed above, De Quincey allied himself with Thomas Browne and Jeremy Taylor, extending an essay tradition of elaborate and sonorous prose that enabled him to capture the extremes and ambiguities of his drug experience, as well as the "visionary scenes derived from the world of dreams, where a single false note, a single word in a wrong key, ruins the whole music" (*Selected Writings* 402).

Of course De Quincey could write conversational, narrative, anecdotal essays, and even in his major opium writings he incorporated passages in what Hazlitt referred to as the "familiar" style, which he and Lamb used to such effect in many of their best-known essays,[2] and which Hazlitt defined as the ability "to write as any one would speak in common conversation, who . . . could discourse with ease, force, and perspicuity, setting aside all pedantic and oratorical flourishes" (8: 242). But De Quincey took the most pride in, and made the highest claims for, his impassioned prose, which was decidedly at odds with the ease of "common conversation," and which assimilated rather than set aside pedantry and rhetorical display. Hazlitt and Lamb wrote familiar essays that prized an elusive form of self-revelation, and which commemorated the commonplace, the casual, the out-of-the-way, and the up-to-the-minute. De Quincey produced impassioned essays that similarly offered at least the appearance of self-revelation, but which valued grandeur, abstraction, and finish over informality and lightness of touch, and which sought significance, not in the mundane, but in the mysteries of personal apocalypse, divine reverie, sublime nightmare, measureless grief, and mythical ladies of sorrow. Alfred Tennyson, who could repeat parts of *Confessions* from memory, described De Quincey's impassioned prose as "some of the finest in the English language—'not poetry . . . but as fine as any verse'" (2: 414).

Passing variously from without to within, power in De Quincey reshaped the world. In his two definitions of the literature of power he lauded Shakespeare and Milton for poetry that expands and revivifies our inner life, though on other occasions he identified Wordsworth as the sublimest of all poets. De Quincey admired the ways in which the Roman Empire brought different lands and peoples under its control, and he was even more ardent in support of the British imperial mission, especially in China and India, where he believed that the people of those countries should and eventually would be grateful for the British institutions and policies forced

upon them, though he acknowledged that the British colonialists had behaved savagely and shamefully in their persecution of the Beothuk people of Newfoundland. In both his fiction and his true-crime reporting, De Quincey regarded murderers with awe for claiming a perverted godhead that enabled them to reorder the universe by destroying the people they no longer wanted in it. Opium, above all, took possession of De Quincey, ceaselessly altering his mental and physical life, and touching off deeply contradictory responses that combined the rapturous with the abject, the hedonistic with the compulsive, and the masochistic with the consolatory, though in his last assessment of his drug experience in the 1856 *Confessions* De Quincey rewrote the miseries of his past and insisted that, for all its blights, opium had blessed and saved his life.

NOTES

Robert Morrison is British Academy Global Professor at Bath Spa University. He is the author of *The Regency Years*, which was shortlisted for the Historical Writers' Association Crown Award for the best in nonfiction historical writing, and named by *The Economist* as one of its 2019 Books of the Year. His biography of Thomas De Quincey, *The English Opium Eater*, was shortlisted for the James Tait Black Prize in 2010. He edited De Quincey's *Selected Writings* for Oxford University Press, and Jane Austen's *Persuasion* for Harvard University Press. He presented a version of this essay at the De Quincey at 200 Conference at the Wordsworth Trust in Grasmere, May 2022. He would like to thank Daniel Sanjiv Roberts, Margaret Russett, and John Strachan, whose insightful responses to the essay guided him in his revision of it.

1. The Beothuk may not have disappeared entirely. "According to Mi'kmaq oral tradition, the Beothuk are not extinct; rather, they intermarried with other Indigenous groups along the mainland after the Europeans had maintained tight control of the coastal areas. Their descendants therefore live on in other Indigenous communities. Some people have also suggested that the Beothuk intermarried with Vikings, and might therefore have descendants living in parts of present day Iceland." See *The Canadian Encyclopedia*: https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/beothuk.

2. See, e.g., Hazlitt's "The Indian Jugglers" (1821), "The Fight" (1822), "My First Acquaintance with Poets" (1823), and "On the Pleasure of Hating" (1826); and Lamb's "The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple" (1821), "Mrs Battle's Opinions on Whist" (1821), "Dream Children" (1822), and "Old China" (1823).

WORKS CITED

Auden, W. H. "The Guilty Vicarage: Notes on the Detective Story, by an Addict." *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Prose, Volume II*. Ed. Edward Mendelson. Princeton UP, 2002, pp. 261–69.

Balfour, Ian. "On the Language of the Sublime and the Sublime Nation in De Quincey: Towards a Reading of 'The English Mail-Coach.'" *Thomas De Quincey: New Theoretical*

and Critical Directions. Ed. Robert Morrison and Daniel S. Roberts. Routledge, 2008, pp. 165–86.

Baudelaire, Charles. *Artificial Paradise: On Hashish and Wine as Means of Expanding Individuality*. Trans. Ellen Fox. Herder and Herder, 1971.

Black, Joel. *The Aesthetics of Murder: A Study in Romantic Literature and Contemporary Culture*. John Hopkins UP, 1991.

Carlyle, Thomas. *Reminiscences*. Ed. Ian Campbell and Kenneth J. Fielding. Oxford UP, 1997.

Chesterton, G. K. *Father Brown: A Selection*. Ed. W. W. Robson. Oxford UP, 1995.

De Quincey, Thomas. *Selected Writings: Thomas De Quincey*. Ed. Robert Morrison. Oxford UP, 2019.

———. *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*. Gen. ed. Grevel Lindop. Pickering and Chatto, 2000–03. 21 vols.

Derrida, Jacques. "The Rhetoric of Drugs." *High Culture: Reflections on Addiction and Modernity*. Ed. Anna Alexander and Mark S. Roberts. State U of New York P, 2003, pp. 19–43.

Hazlitt, William. *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*. Ed. P. P. Howe. Dent, 1930–34. 21 vols.

James, P. D., and T. A. Critchley. *The Maul and The Pear Tree: The Ratcliffe Highway Murders 1811*. Constable, 1971.

Morrison, Robert. *The English Opium Eater: A Biography of Thomas De Quincey*. Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2009.

Roberts, Daniel Sanjiv. " 'The Opium-Eater Boasteth Himself to be a Philosopher': Bodily Subjection and Intellectual Self-Fashioning in De Quincey's 1821 'Confessions.' " *Romanticism*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2021, pp. 237–49.

Sinclair, Iain. *Lud Heat and Suicide Bridge*. Granta, 1998.

Tennyson, Hallam. *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir*. Macmillan, 1897. 2 vols.

Woolf, Virginia. *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Andrew McNeillie and Stuart N. Clarke. Hogarth P, 1986–2011. 6 vols.

Wordsworth, William. *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*. Ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser. Clarendon P, 1974. 3 vols.