THOMAS DE QUINCEY AND THE COMPULSIVE URGE TO CHRONICLE A LIFE

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to delve into the enigmatic persona of Thomas De Quincey, the acclaimed English essayist, and his relentless compulsion to document the intricacies of his own life. With a focus on De Quincey's autobiographical tendencies, the paper explores the underlying motivations and psychological intricacies that drove him to chronicle his experiences in vivid detail. Drawing from De Quincey's extensive body of autobiographical writings, including Confessions of an English Opium-Eater and Suspiria de Profundis, the article analyzes the recurring themes of introspection, memory, and self-revelation that permeate his literary works. Moreover, it examines the societal and cultural factors that shaped De Quincey's compulsion to engage in such introspective endeavours, shedding light on the connection between personal narrative and broader historical context. Through a nuanced exploration of De Quincey's compulsive urge to chronicle his life, this article offers insight into the complexities of self-representation and the enduring allure of autobiographical storytelling in the realm of literature and beyond.

Keywords: autobiography, opium, Romantic genius, addiction, chronicle.

A writer perpetually at odds with the stifling conventions of his upbringing, Thomas De Quincey was an enigmatic figure who constantly defied societal norms. Faced with the weight of societal expectations, he embarked on a relentless quest to navigate the corridors of his own psyche through the medium of autobiography, a pursuit which was not a mere literary endeavour, but rather a manifestation of an insatiable hunger to unravel the complexities of his existence and confront the demons that haunted his soul. Despite numerous attempts, De Quincey's autobiographical odyssey remained perpetually elusive, a tantalizing mirage on the horizon of his literary landscape. Each new attempt to rewrite his life story bore the imprint of his ceaseless introspection, a testament to his unyielding determination to capture the essence of his life again and again.

Born into the bustling industrial landscape of Manchester on August 15th in 1785, Thomas Penson Quincey was the second son and the fifth of eight siblings, whose father, Thomas Quincey was a prosperous linen merchant with a keen interest in literature. However, fate soon brought an unexpected turn to young Thomas' life, as his father passed away and his mother took on the heavy burden of caring for the family. Seeking to rise above their current circumstances, she added the prefix "De" to their surname as a symbol of her aspirations for a higher status and noble lineage, creating thus a mild sense of disorientation in the mind of the young boy who experienced tragedy from an early age.

De Quincey's profound sense of confusion, which tormented him his entire life, took root in the fertile soil of his consciousness from an early age. The loss and the tragedies that marked his formative years, the first of which being the loss of a sister when he was only four years old, followed by the death of his beloved sister Elizabeth, whose absence left an irrevocable void in his heart, a year before his father's death, left him with a profound sense of emptiness. Adding to his distress was a strained relationship with a brother who constantly belittled and bullied him to such an extent that, when his tormentor passed away, De Quince'y perceived the event as "an answer to a prayer" and showed no remorse or grief for his brothers

passing. Instead he experienced a sense of relief from a torment, which, despite coming to a conclusion, marked him deeply, shaping his inner struggles for years to come.

Following his family's relocation to Bath, Thomas De Quincey's academic journey took a transformative turn as he stepped into the halls of King Edwards School. Here, in the scholarly atmosphere of erudition and enlightenment, De Quincey's intellectual endeavours led to academic excellence, his linguistic mastery and the early signs of classical wisdom quickly earning him recognition as a prodigy in Greek. However, despite his academic success, De Quincey faced another tragic turn of events that left a lasting impact on his young life. Being struck by a cane intended for another student, which caused a sudden and severe injury, he was confined to his bed for weeks, cared for by his mother, who read Milton's verses to him aloud. As he recovered, his mother decided to withdraw him from King Edwards School and, instead, she hired a tutor to guide his education, fearing that going back to a school where he was considered nothing short of a genius might feed his ego in an unhealthy way.

From his early years, Thomas De Quincey felt disconnected from his affluent merchant family due to his sensitive and perceptive nature. As he entered his teenage years, a period marked by the rise of Romanticism across Europe, he stumbled upon an anonymous manuscript copy of Wordsworth's poem "We Are Seven," which left such a profound impression on his young mind that it determined him to fully identify with the poet long before he even knew his name, shaping thus his destiny in ways both profound and unforeseen.

The discovery of the second edition of the "Lyrical Ballads," signed by Wordsworth in 1800, filled De Quincey with a passionate longing to connect with his literary hero. However, despite his strong desire, he felt overwhelmed by self-doubt and insecurity, like a hesitant admirer standing on the brink of reverence, but unsure of his own worthiness: "Wordsworth had taken on such a hallowed character that any journey in his direction was, De Quincey felt, like that of a devout Mahometan to Mecca, or a Christian devotee looking with rapt adoration to St Peters at Rome" (Wilson: 77). It was not until 1803 that De Quincey mustered the courage to act on his desire to meet his idol. He finally gathered the courage to write a letter in which he introduced himself as an admirer, expressed a desire for the poet's friendship, and conveyed his profound reverence and love.

At seventeen, Thomas De Quincey embarked on a bold adventure, fleeing the confines of his provincial existence to seek refuge in Wales, and later lived incognito in London with a fifteen-year-old prostitute named Ann, whose memory lingered long after they parted ways. Ann's long lasting impression on De Quincey is attributed to her being seen as a reflection of his beloved sister Elizabeth, whose presence seems to have never stopped haunting De Quincey's consciousness, her untimely loss having caused a wound that would just not heal. Forever tormented by their memory, he scanned countless faces whenever he returned to London, hoping to rediscover Ann among them:

> "During some years I hoped that she did live; and I suppose that, in the literal and unrhetorical use of the word myriad, I must, on my different visits to London, have looked into many myriads of female faces, in the hope of meeting Ann. I should know her again amongst a thousand, and if seen but for a moment. Handsome she was not; but she had a sweet expression of countenance, and a peculiarly graceful carriage of the head. I sought her, I have said, in hope. So it was for years; but now I should fear to see her ; and her cough, which grieved me when I parted with her, is now my consolation." (De Quincey: 173-174)

During one of his wanderings in London, in 1804, a fellow student suggested opium to De Quincey as a solution for the facial neuralgia he had been suffering from for a long time. This initial encounter with the substance marked the onset of an enduring addiction that would leave an indelible imprint on both his life and his literary endeavours. Not only did it impact

his relationships with those around him, but it also spurred him to explore new frontiers in autobiographical writing, as evidenced in his *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*.

De Quincey's first encounter with the substance in which he found temporary respite from pain occurred at a time when, reconciled with his family and enrolled at Worcester College, Oxford, he nurtured grand aspirations of becoming a beacon of intellectual enlightenment, immersing himself in a diverse array of subjects, such as economics, psychology, biography, history, and German metaphysics. His voracious appetite for knowledge led him to eventually craft insightful essays on these topics, demonstrating his intellectual prowess. However, after completing his studies, he did not proceed to the final oral examination required for graduation, leaving thus the university without a degree.

Following in the footsteps of Coleridge, whom he admired possibly just as much as he admired Wordsworth, De Quincey came to be known as a Romantic genius wrecked in a mist of opium, unable to maintain a healthy relationship with his family, nor complete his major works. And yet, this addiction of his reached a crucial point, or we might say that he hit rock bottom, only when he was confronted with other bouts of unbearable psychological pain. In 1805, while he was still a student, wishing to meet his hero in person, after they had been exchanging letters for some time, he boarded a coach headed to Lake District, but panicked at the thought of meeting Wordsworth in person, and turned back. He tried approaching Wordsworth's little white cottage again a year later, but once again lost his nerve and gave up.

On November 4, 1807, De Quincey finally had the long-awaited encounter with Wordsworth near the poet's front door. Wordsworth's presence was described by De Quincey as sudden and striking, like a "flash of lightning." Upon arrival, De Quincey was guided to Wordsworth's study, which served multiple purposes including dining room, children's play area, and drawing room. Despite being only thirty-seven years old, Wordsworth appeared much older to his admirer, with his physical appearance seemingly mismatched – his short legs contrasting with a long torso, giving him a somewhat "deformed" appearance which made De Quincey liken Wordsworth's walking to that of "some sort of insect." (North: 572)

It is quite difficult to pinpoint precisely what De Quincey expected from Wordsworth, but whatever it was, it became apparent early on that his expectations surpassed reality. Admiration can sometimes evolve into disillusionment, and De Quincey, who placed much of his self-worth in his admiration of Wordsworth, was bitterly disappointed, feeling almost let down by his hero after facing his inadequacies, as if he had been confronted with his own insufficiencies. As a tenant in Wordsworth's former home, which happened about a year after the Wordsworth's had left, he passed from a feeling of gratification caused by his being the occupant of a cottage he believed was 'sacrosanct' for Wordsworth and his sister to a strong feeling of contempt as he came to realise that a poet and his creations can possess separate, sometimes contradictory identities. As Wordsworth withdrew into aloofness and silence, De Quincey uncovered the disheartening truth: the beautiful poems were the creation of a man characterized by immense egotism and a morally repugnant "meanness:"

> "...but he never looked worse than motion, at which point he took on a 'twisted', insect-like appearance, manoeuvring himself at an angle and pushing his companion off the road. Equally unappealing was his narrow chest: hanging beneath drooping shoulders, the upper half of his body also contained an 'effect of meanness'. Meanness would be De Quincey's retrospective watchword for Wordsworth; he was the man least likely to help a lady with a reticule, and his marriage had astounded everyone [...] because he seemed incapable of romantic love."(Wilson: 144)

Before reaching that point, however, De Quincey nearly became an integral part of Wordsworth's household, assuming the role of a surrogate uncle to the children and igniting a fondness in Dorothy Wordsworth, whom was believed to be harbouring romantic feelings for

her brother, some even suggesting a sexual relationship between them. These dramatic episodes were De Quincey's cup of tea, often mirroring the tumultuous events of his own upbringing. In fact, he had chosen to cast his image of Elizabeth upon the young Catherine Wordsworth, who, afflicted with a condition akin to Down syndrome, tragically succumbed to "convulsions" when she was only three years old.

Catherine's passing seemed to plunge De Quincey into such despair that he spent over two months sleeping on her grave, claiming to have seen her ghost roaming the fields nearby. The sorrow he experienced manifested physically, causing severe stomach pains which, according to De Quincey himself, were so intense that only opium could alleviate them:

> "I was attacked by a most appalling irritation of the stomach, in all respects the same as that which had caused me so much suffering in youth, and accompanied by a revival of all the old dreams. Now, then, [...] I became a regular and confirmed (no longer an intermitting) opium-eater. And here I find myself in a perplexing dilemma. Either, on the one hand, I must exhaust the reader's patience by such a detail of my malady, and of my struggles with it, as might suffice to establish the fact of my inability to wrestle any longer with irritation and constant suffering."(De Quincey, 1907: 197-198)

In 1817, De Quincey married Margaret Simpson, who had already given birth to their son. Despite his prolific writing, he published very little. As the head of a growing family, his financial situation deteriorated and remained quite dramatic until the publication of *Confessions* (1821) in the London Magazine catapulted him to fame. The primary purpose of the initial version of *Confessions* was to caution readers about the perils of opium. In order to do so, De Quincey chose to blend elements of a journalistic exposé on societal issues, narrated from an insider's perspective, with a somewhat conflicting portrayal of the subjective allure of drug dependency. The narrative commences with an autobiographical depiction of the author's addiction, delves into the euphoric and symbol-laden hallucinations induced by the drug, and depicts the ghastly nightmares that prolonged usage eventually spawned.

It's worth noting that De Quincey's Confessions, a gripping and rather romanticized tale of drug addiction, was published anonymously in an "opium-marinated" country, as Frances Wilson puts it, opium being a prevalent remedy for various ailments, from minor discomforts to severe headaches. Administered in the form of pills or as laudanum, dissolved in alcohol – a concoction favoured by De Quincey – the widespread use of opium permeated society and, despite widespread awareness of its addictive properties, English doctors continued to prescribe it, oblivious to its detrimental effects. Opium became a household remedy, administered to women for menstrual cramps and even to children for hiccups, becoming so widely used back then that De Quincey's contemporaries found opium and its mysterious effects as ordinary as we find aspirin today.

Thus, what De Quincey did with the publication of his *Confessions* was far from challenging a taboo, but rather he was deliberately turning a common practice into a questionable activity whose glamour was constantly growing. With its ancient, shamanic associations, opium served as a mystical link to visions from another realm, echoing references found in the works of Homer and Virgil, Chaucer and Shakespeare. In his essay "Coleridge and Opium-Eating," published more than 20 years later, De Quincey claimed that even John Milton's great Biblical epic "Paradise Lost" contained allusions to this substance, De Quincey attempting therefore to cement the status of opium as a recurring motif in human experience and artistic expression:

> "You know the *Paradise Lost?* and you remember from the eleventh book, in its earlier part, that laudanum already existed in Eden—nay, that it was used medicinally by an archangel; for, after Michael had "purged with euphrasy and rue" the eyes of Adam, lest he should be

unequal to the mere *sight* of the great visions about to unfold their draperies before him, next he fortifies his fleshly spirits against the *affliction* of these visions, of which visions the first was death. And how? 'He from the well of life three drops instill'd.'" (De Quincey, 2009: 165)

Returning to the intertwined lives of De Quincey and Coleridge, whose relationship was often perceived as a mirror image of shared turmoil, encapsulated in Coleridge's astute observation of their dual personas, each marked by a blend of "muddiness and lustre," (Coleridge: 476), it must be added that both of them struggled to overcome a deep sense of alienation and intense feelings of inadequacy. For both of them, opium served as a means to an end: for Coleridge, although it sparked the imaginative process, the feeling of having sinned through his recreational drug use makes him wallow in misery and horror, whereas De Quincey often seems seduced by the compelling nature of the opium experience.

As De Quincey witnessed Coleridge's worsening addiction, he was already deeply entrenched in his own opium abuse, reaching an intake of twelve thousand drops of laudanum per day. Over the next several years of his life, which were meant to be full of joy and fulfilment following the birth of his son and his union with Margaret Simpson, De Quincey's existence was overshadowed by persistent torment, characterized by dark visions and unrelenting anxieties. Somehow paralleling Coleridge's legendary interruptions from an unexpected visitor whose arrival disrupted and yet inspired the creation of "Kubla Khan," De Quincey faced his own distress tied to the impending birth of his child. This concern became entangled with the sudden appearance of a mysterious Malay figure at Dove Cottage who, after consuming a substantial portion of De Quincey's opium stash, vanished into the night, never to be seen again.

"I felt anxious, but as I never heard of any Malay being found dead, I became convinced that he was used to opium; and that I must have done him the service I designed by giving him one night of respite from the pains of wandering. This incident I have digressed to mention, because this Malay (partly from the picturesque exhibition he assisted to frame, partly from the anxiety I connected with his image for some days) fastened afterwards upon my dreams, and brought other Malays with him, worse than himself, that ran "a-muck" at me, and led me into a world of troubles." (De Quincey, 1907: 204-205)

The first part of De Quincey's life is intricate and drawn-out, filled with twists and turns. However, the latter part revolves around his reimagining of that narrative. Initially scattered throughout his journalistic writings, then consolidated into the *Confessions*, and eventually into various compelling excerpts from his autobiographical works, his literary pursuits primarily served as chronicles of his personal experiences which, though remarkable in their brilliance, were intricately tied to the substance that nearly consumed him: opium. De Quincey repeatedly asserted that opium-eating was more than the central fact of his life; it was rather the key to decipher the meaning of his dream visions (Porter: 593), providing coherence and structure to his life, particularly evident in the autobiographical narratives he crafted:

"And thus in reality the early experiences of erring childhood not only led to the secondary experiences of opium, but also determined the particular form and pressure of the chief phenomena in those secondary experiences. Here is the briefest possible abstract of the total case:—The final object of the whole record lay in the dreams. For the sake of those the entire narrative arose. But what caused the dreams? Opium used in unexampled excess. But what caused this excess in the use of opium ? Simply the early sufferings; these, and these only, through the derangements which they left behind in the animal economy. On this mode of viewing the case, moving regressively from the end to the beginning, it will be seen that there is one uninterrupted bond of unity running through the entire succession of experiences—first and last: the dreams

were an inheritance from the opium; the opium was an inheritance from the boyish follies." (De Quincey, 1907: 211)

Such ironies seem to have characterised De Quincy's entire life, but he knew how to make good use of them. His writing career began with a series of failures that nevertheless opened to him his true subject. His journey as a writer commenced with a string of setbacks that unexpectedly led him to his genuine calling. Despite his longstanding conservative beliefs, fortune smiled upon him in 1818 when he was offered the role of editor for a regional Tory newspaper, the Westmorland Gazette. During his tenure, the once-tranquil family publication transformed into a platform for discussions on opium-induced experiences, critiques of Kantian philosophy, and sensationalized reports on homicides spanning Europe.

De Quincey stepped down from his position after a year and a half, but during his time there, he pioneered the use of imaginative storytelling to present his own struggles as compelling narratives for public consumption. His writings frequently delved into the challenges he faced while crafting them, interspersing personal anecdotes into what was expected to be straightforward journalism. Each piece became a stage where the dramas of his life unfolded, punctuated by the familiar motifs of debt, procrastination, and opium, now joined by a new protagonist: the act of writing itself, which captivated readers with tales of creative turmoil and existential angst.

One of the recurring metaphors in Romantic writing that presents itself in various guises and consists of lonely and dangerous voyages into the unknown was easily internalized by De Quincey, who created his own narrative of solitary exploration and perilous odyssey into the depths of his consciousness. By merging his opium-induced visions with the act of writing itself, he embarked on a singular, heroic quest in which the boundaries between reality and imagination had been blurred in order to reach artistic transcendence.

In the initial serialization of Confessions within The London Magazine, the narrative unfolds in two distinct parts. Commencing with a deliberate notice "To the Reader," De Quincey establishes the framework of his tale. Subsequently, the "Preliminary Confessions" immerse readers in the author's formative years, focusing on the emotional and psychological aspects that could have influenced his later encounters with opium, particularly his time as a teenage runaway living on the streets of London.

The second instalment offers a nuanced exploration of his opium odyssey, recounting the initial allure and enchantment of the drug effects in "The Pleasures of Opium," which paves the way for "Introduction to the Pains of Opium," which charts the author's journey from the innocence of youth to the complexities of adulthood, culminating in "The Pains of Opium," in which De Quincey reveals the grim realities of his addiction: a relentless struggle against insomnia, haunting nightmares, surreal visions, and the relentless onslaught of physical afflictions, all stemming from his prolonged dalliance with the drug.

In the arena of literary criticism, contentious debates arose regarding whether De Quincey's writings were morally corrupting, yet the primary allure lay in his prose which may not have had the same impact, had it not been for the opium that became both its subject and its object. Within the "theatre" of his own psyche, De Quincey bore witness to a phantasmagoria of sensations, experiencing realms of "more than earthly splendours" juxtaposed with horrors of unfathomable proportions: "vast processions" of "mournful pomp," and "friezes of never-ending stories." He had the impression of having lived "for seventy or one hundred years in one night," and he had a recurring vision of an ocean "paved with innumerable faces, upturned to the heavens: faces, imploring, wrathful, despairing, surged upwards by thousands, by myriads, by generations, by centuries." (De Quincey, 1907, 234-240)

In an era in which literature either reflected reality as it was, or acted like a subjectivity-driven vessel delivering the struggles and passions of exceptional individuals, De Quincey is a special case, since he experienced subjective impressions as though they were real and wrote about them as if their reality could be conveyed, in all its wonder and horror. He witnessed with his senses what some of his contemporaries only contemplated in the abstract; opium blurred the line between actual and imagined things. And yet, despite the labyrinthine organization of his imagination, which seems to have thrived on poison, he still managed to create a vibrant narrative, which may just as well epitomize the spirit of the age in which it was produced.

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