
Terror Recollected in Tranquility: The Oriental Gothic and the Sublime Imagination of Thomas De Quincey

Amitrajeet Mukherjee

Abstract

This paper explores Thomas De Quincey's seminal text *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, examining the artistic vision of the writer and locating the author and his text within the context of the growing British Imperial project in the early 19th century. By locating the substance of his addiction, opium, within the economic, political, and cultural discourses that were developing in Britain at the time, this paper aims to deconstruct the ambivalent relationship that De Quincey, and by extension large segments of British society, had towards an imagined construction of the Orient. By analyzing the Gothic elements of De Quincey's text, I argue that these images of the East are the signs of growing Orientalist discourse. They squarely locate Romantic tropes within the narrative of British Imperialism. In addition to exploring the fissured imagination of Asia that marks De Quincey's work, this paper also briefly analyzes the psychological aspects of De Quincey's contemplation of his addiction and presents a brief account of the role, opium played within the Romantic movement of the early 19th century. Through De Quincey's opium-induced hallucinations, I attempt to analyze a mode of reflecting and presenting the sublime which was intrinsically linked to an imagined East that revisits the intersection of discourses of art, lived experiences, and the cultural and political anxieties of the era in which the primary text was produced to create a glimpse of the larger discursive function of De Quincey's confessional memoir. This paper can thus be read as an intervention to re-engage with the links between Romantic aesthetic imaginations and the colonial enterprise of Empire building in the early 19th century.

Keywords

Romanticism, Thomas De Quincey, Orientalism, British Imperialism, Gothic, Oriental sublime

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Frances Wilson, in her biography of Thomas De Quincey, begins her exploration of the author's life and work by focusing on his fascination with the Ratcliffe Highway Murders, a sensational homicide of an entire family that riveted the attention of the London press in 1811 (3-5). Speaking on the fascination he held for understanding the "mind of the murderer", De Quincey wrote, "There must be some raging, some great storm of passion, jealousy, ambition, vengeance, hatred which will create a hell within him. And into this hell, we are to look (qtd in Wilson, 6)". Thomas De Quincey's text *On Murder*, where he makes this observation, essentially sets the tone for his interest in the cognitive functioning of consciousness and contemplating the psychological constitution of the individual. This is a good example of De Quincey's lifelong fascination with combing the depths of the macabre through his writing alongside the deep interest he held in charting the repressed contours of his consciousness.

The allure of the terrifying and baser instincts, longings, and impulses of the human psyche and his response to these feelings and events formed the cornerstone of De Quincey's imagination. De Quincey's aesthetic sensibility was shaped by his exploration of human consciousness. Terror and dread were key aspects of his understanding and portrayal of the sublime. Yet, his terror is imbued with the cultural anxieties of his times. De Quincey's Gothic landscape is infused with the imagery of an exotic, eternal, and thoroughly unnerving Orient. His imagination and his use of Gothic aesthetics can provide an illuminating window into understanding the anxieties of his times and offers a way of analyzing his art through the lens of developing orientalist discourse. This paper attempts to interrogate the tensions present within De Quincey's opium-induced visions and analyze how these anxieties play out in his imagination, to understand his cultural frame and that of his times. It will also delve into the cultural and economic space which opium, a thoroughly "oriental" commodity, inhabited in early 19th century England and frame De Quincey's consumption and contemplation of opium within the networks of colonial cultural and economic exchange which was transforming the British Empire at the time. Through this process, this article will build on the existing

work of scholars such as Elizabeth Fay, Peter J. Kitson, and M.H. Abrams to re-evaluate the circulation of signifiers of an Orientalist imagination within the aesthetics of British Romanticism and in grounding these writers and their works within the networks of material exchange which was marked the beginning of the colonial economies of European empires will attempt to revisit the complex tensions between the Romantic imagination of writers such as De Quincey, and the flourishing colonial enterprise.

The Gothic Imagination of Thomas De Quincey

In exploring the development of Thomas De Quincey's artistic vision of the sublime, biographer Frances Wilson delves into his childhood to elucidate the spaces, both psychic and physical, that he occupied and that in turn shaped his unique Gothic vision. Wilson notes the death of his sister in childhood had a profound impact on De Quincey's understanding and perception of mortality and the medical exigencies of the physical body (25). Some of these concerns are implicit in the narrative of his own experiences as an opium addict in later life. Architecture and the structure of physical spaces also seem to have left a deep impression on the young De Quincey's imagination. Wilson argues that De Quincey's sensibility of the sublime is expressed in the language of interiority. In *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, De Quincey's Gothic vision is a product of the hallucinations he experiences under the influence of opium. His visions, though capturing "monstrous space", are also deeply entwined with his impressions of the physical architecture of his surroundings. Architecture is one of the key aspects of the Gothic aesthetic. The Gothic genre essentially combines the elements of perceiving vast spaces of seemingly incomprehensible depths while also presenting a claustrophobic and constricted psychological experience.

Wilson argues that in a similarly Gothic vein, De Quincey mapped his mind as if it were a building. Having spent his life living in houses that had been previously occupied by famous literary personalities, from William Wordsworth's Dove Cottage to Edmund Burke's mansion in Bath, De Quincey imbued physical space with deep meaning (Wilson 37). The imagination and experience of physical spaces formed a key aspect of De Quincey's art. Peter Ackroyd, when commenting on De Quincey's imagining Dove Cottage in a thoroughly Gothic backdrop of raging winter storms and focusing on the solitude of the interior of the building amid this tempest, points out that no author had "so keen and horrified a sense of place as Thomas De Quincey (qtd in Wilson 5)." In this regard, critics like Canon Schmitt went on to read *Confessions* as a "Gothic autobiography". De Quincey in naming his work as a confession already locates himself within a confessional tradition at the outset. His memoir has multiple layers which elicit a sense of the sublime and imbues terror by reaching back in time for an unnameable absence, essentially disordering the very system of nostalgia in a Gothic exploration of his psyche and life (Fay 295). However, the Gothic focus of this memoir is firmly anchored in a terror of the imagined East. The issues of narrative tensions and fissures that appear in De Quincey's visions may be squarely located in his complicated response to Oriental cultures, images, and imagined spaces. Images of Asia loom large within De Quincey's descriptions of his psychic geography. This may be rooted in the

tangible substance which is the medium for these visions, opium; a key commodity being imported into Britain from Asia at the time. Given that opium itself may be a key to understanding De Quincey's experience of the sublime, it becomes pertinent to locate this commodity, and De Quincey himself, within the vast networks of global trade which were forming the backbone of the British colonial economy.

3. The Milk of Paradise

First classified as *Papavaer Somniferum* by the French botanist Karl Linnaeus in 1753 (Booth 7), the poppy and its product became a lucrative commodity in the colonial economic network. Within the Empire, the English East India Company were cultivating poppy on vast, commercial scales to trade in China, in exchange for Chinese tea. For long a key ingredient in traditional patent medicines in England, most opium imported into Britain came from the Ottoman Turkish Empire. The demand for Turkish opium steadily increased in England, with import quantities increasing from 12,000 lbs. in 1834 to a whopping 177,000 lbs. by 1839 (Berridge 438). The importance of the international market and supply chain of opium for the British Empire was rooted not only in the consumption of the drug in England but in its use for trading with the notoriously isolationist Chinese imperial state. The supply chain for opium was of equal importance in the international arena as Martin Booth documents the consternation of a certain Dr. Webster in the pages of the London periodicals of 1829 at the near-monopoly of the Ottoman Turkish Empire in the supply of opium to Britain and his subsequent vehement urging for British authorities to cultivate the product in economies of scale from within the British colonies (as indeed they did later in the 19th century in Persia) (63). Opium as a commodity was hand in glove with the British colonial enterprise.

De Quincey's opium was an essentially Oriental product widely sold by druggists in England on account of the vast colonial trading networks. De Quincey was well aware of the Oriental connection of the substance he was so heavily dependent on. By the late 18th century, opium was identified as a cultural and physical import from the Ottoman world. James Boswell when talking to Samuel Johnson about the latter's opium use for medical purposes commented on the cultural frame within which opium consumption amongst the Turks took place, comparing it to the consumption of alcohol in social settings in the Western world (qtd in Booth,44-45). Similarly, Dr. Russell's popular *History of Aleppo* identified consuming opium as a typically Turkish habit in the late 18th century (Booth 45). Thomas De Quincey in his confessional work went to some pains to distinguish the "English gentleman's" use of opium from that of the Turk, primarily drawing on racist stereotypic descriptions of Turkish men indulging in the sensory pleasures of an intoxicant like opium to excess (44). De Quincey's family too were well enmeshed within the colonial economy. His father had interests in the cotton plantations of the British Caribbean, and two of his uncles served in the English East India Company and were posted to Bengal (Wilson 22). This economic and cultural framework locates De Quincey squarely within the developing structures of the British Empire.

The Marketplace of Oriental Ideas

By the time of De Quincey's childhood, British society had been exposed to a slew of cultural signifiers which symbolized the "East". In the process of formulating this Orientalist discourse, the production of knowledge about Asia (and by extension the Oriental other), cultural objects, and narratives of Asia became a staple informing the collective imagination of Western society by the late 18th century. In the backdrop of the ongoing project of growing British imperialism, right from childhood, De Quincey was no stranger to knowledge systems and the semantic world of the Western imagination of the East. Frances Wilson notes how De Quincey certainly read early translations of *The Arabian Nights* as a child. Indeed, the 20th-century Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges suggested that the Romantic imagination began at the moment the tales of the Arabian Nights was first read in France, in the translation by Antoine Galland (Wilson 31). The explicit association of the germination of the Romantic imagination with that of the growing European involvement and engagement with their constructed vision of the Orient places Romanticism within the cultural and political context of the era of growing European imperial expansion. Thomas De Quincey's imagination was arguably marked deeply by these networks of economic and cultural exchange with the East. The image of the East thus becomes a vehicle for him to describe his fractured subjectivity and the deep-seated cultural and political anxieties which mark his encounters with the Oriental 'other'. Trapped in his addiction to opium, De Quincey's splintering sense of selfhood is reimagined through the lens of an Oriental Gothic landscape marked by the architecture of the East. Daniel O'Quinn argues that "incursions on his subjectivity are ineluctably tied to the circulation of opium within the imperial economy (263)".

Thomas De Quincey's tangible manifestation of the sublime may have been opium itself. De Quincey was keenly aware of the power of the substance and his sense of awe may be rooted in this Asian edible's ability to gain control over his subjectivity. In his study of the effects of opium on the British Romantics, M.H. Abrams stresses the Asian connection which these poets and writers associated with this product, leading to the impressions (and accompanying anxieties) of the East to be tied intrinsically to the powerful visions produced by opium itself. The narrative of exotic mystery became a tangible cultural association with opium and Abrams notes, 'These poets were allured by the mystery inherent in the golden drug of Asia' (21).' Opium destabilized De Quincey's sense of time and space. This state of temporal and mental dislocation becomes the source of both terror and endless fascination for De Quincey. It is revealing that this complex response to the phenomenon of timelessness is rooted within De Quincey's imagination of Asia and becomes an underlying unifying principle to his reception of the East (Abrams 28).

That opium and its ingestion has a long and storied history of being associated with the artistic visions of literary figures of the past is no surprise. Martin Booth notes that the hallucinations and the other sensory phenomena associated with ingesting the drug have often been associated with liberating the imagination of already talented artists. From Willkie Collins to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who were habitual users, in

the 19th-century opium was a commonly available substance for medicinal and recreational purposes without the moral associations of drug-taking as is common in the 21st century (58). Jean Cocteau famously declared that “Everything one does in life, even love, occurs in an express train racing toward death. To smoke opium is to get out of the train while it is still moving (qtd in Booth 4).” In his book *Inquiry into the Nature and Properties of Opium*, published in 1793, Dr. Samuel Crumpe had indicated the main features of addiction and the concurrent symptoms of opium withdrawal, but the aspect of moral condemnation of either medicinal or recreational use was non-existent at the time (Booth 44). Even in Antiquity, the use of opium and its effects were well known. The Roman poet Virgil referred to “poppies soaked with the sleep of Lethe” (qtd in Abrams 21), but one of the most famous addicts of the substance and a contemporary and acquaintance of De Quincey, was the Romantic poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Coleridge almost ecstatically hailed opium, describing it as, “A spot of enchantment, a green spot of fountain and flowers and trees in the very heart of a waste of sands! (qtd in Abrams 21)”. Similar images of archaic architecture, garish scenes of unnerving natural beauty, and the perception of vast spaces informed Coleridge’s imagination, infused inevitably by his opium dreams. His poem “Kubla Khan” is the most famous example of this. Yet in Coleridge’s struggles with his addiction one also perceives the conundrums that faced De Quincey himself in later life. Revealingly, before his death, reflecting on his dependence on the “golden drug of Asia”, Coleridge wrote, “After my death, I earnestly entreat that a full and unqualified narrative of my wretchedness, and its guilty cause, may be made public (qtd in Booth 57)”.

The Otherness of the East

For De Quincey, opium, in contrast to alcohol, was seen as a medium of harmony and growing serenity. Described as a “warm glow”, opium provides tranquillity for the poet figure (De Quincey 41). In a seeming perversion of Wordsworth’s famous maxim in *The Prelude*, however, De Quincey’s tranquillity is a receptacle for his deepest fears. Wilson comments that what “De Quincey describes is terror recollected in tranquillity (15)”. De Quincey’s Gothic was rooted in “endless space and boundless time (Wilson 15)”. This sense of eternity was deeply linked to the ancient cultures of Asia in his mind. Asia is inscribed as consisting of ancient and complex cultures beyond European conceptual frameworks. The image of a boundless, eternal, and timeless culture of a complexity that may be incomprehensible to the white man becomes the lynchpin of De Quincey’s visions of Asia. The idea of eternity is thus purposely conflated with the East. Asia and Eastern culture became a conceptual space of unnerving proportions where “space swelled and was amplified to an extent of unutterable and self-repeating infinity (Abrams 26)”. De Quincey declared that “A young Chinese man seems to me an antediluvian man renewed (72).” In contrast to Wordsworth’s maxim then, the very presence of opium as a key component of Thomas De Quincey’s creative vision essentially blurred the lines between the sensuous and the physically sensory and in the process, it seemingly upended Wordsworth’s tranquillity into a vehicle for the exploration of the fractures and fissures of his unconscious mind.

Elizabeth Fay argues that the horror associated with the ‘eternity’ of Asia is rooted in De Quincey’s perception of the inherent ‘unknowability’ of the Oriental other. The ancient institutions and vastly complex cultures of the Indian Orient are contrasted with ‘savage’ African counterparts (De Quincey 71) and imbued with a sense of sublimity based on their incomprehensibility to the European mind. For instance, De Quincey’s reference to the complexity of the caste system in India (72). Fay locates De Quincey’s Gothic visions of the East as a function of an epistemic destabilization which is further aggravated by the unresolved tensions of his unconscious mind brought to the fore by the effects of opium. De Quincey is thus left grappling with a seemingly incoherent and increasingly disordered system of knowledge. The epistemic certitude of the Romantic writer is challenged by the cultural experiences of the East (Fay 297). Fay goes on to locate how an imported substance, opium, creates this acute awareness of an entirely alien epistemological system that may only be understood through possibly hallucinatory visions (301). This loss of subjective control on the part of De Quincey is then reflected through his Gothic visions of his encounter with the mysterious Malay at Dove Cottage. This epistemic uncertainty strikes at the heart of the process of acculturation that English society was undergoing as it got increasingly enmeshed within the colonial economy (Fay 297). This fear of the unknown becomes a key trope of the threat of the East.

De Quincey’s encounter with the Malay is marked by incomprehension, beginning with his inability to understand the latter’s language. It is noteworthy; however, that De Quincey’s immediate response is to engage the Malay in Greek, by quoting the *Iliad* (De Quincey 56), with implicit martial undertones of conflict to the narrative. In the encounter with the Malay, De Quincey deploys the Gothic aesthetic aggressively to fuel this anxiety of the Eastern other by his portrayal of the young woman serving as his housekeeper in contrast to the Malay. “A more striking picture there could not be imagined, than the beautiful English face of the girl...contrasted with the sallow and bilious skin of the Malay (De Quincey 55).” The narrative of the untarnished, virginal English maiden juxtaposed with the threatening, exoticized, libidinous, and possibly suspect masculinity of the Eastern man is produced in a typically Gothic trope. The othering of the Malay and the cultural association of a threatening and devious Orient is made explicit.

The above analysis reveals one key aspect of De Quincey’s tendency to associate the monstrous with Asian culture. De Quincey’s Asia is placed at the junction of multiple intersecting discourses, from the sense of a vast geographic space swarming with the human life of a scale that he finds sublimeⁱ as well as an inordinately complex culture of ancient pedigree whose imagery and spaces he imagines as typically something to be dreaded and of a nature that is unnervingly incomprehensible to the European mind. De Quincey is mesmerized and yet has an ambiguous view of the cultural world of the Orient as he imagines it. The Orientalist discursive moment is caught in action when he refers to the “ancient, monumental, cruel and elaborate religions of Indostan [sic] (De Quincey 72).” His references to being hunted by various Hindu deitiesⁱⁱ and his repeated

references to the image of a crocodile imbued with powers of the apocalyptic sublime support the narrative of othering that he engages in. However, I would argue that De Quincey's ultimate relationship with the East is an ambivalent and complicated one in the final analysis. For all his fear, De Quincey admits to the irresistible pull of the 'other', belying a far more complicated reality for the otherwise easy dichotomy of Orient and Occident. Of his terrifying crocodile, De Quincey says, "I stood loathing and fascinated (De Quincey 73)." There is a dynamic of both attraction and repulsion.

Similarly, with the Malay, while the narratives of conflict and an alien other are clear, the text also confers a mode for De Quincey to identify with the Malay. Despite coming from vastly different worlds they are bound by their dependence on opium. Before this encounter, De Quincey had stated that he counted himself to have the highest tolerance to opium of any man recorded (27). Yet he is struck with consternation when his supposedly Malayan visitor can easily ingest enough opium to, as the writer claims, "kill three dragoons and their horses (De Quincey 56)". In their collective addiction to opium, De Quincey arguably sees a refracted image of himself in the Malay. This is a connection that Peter J. Kitson refers to as well when he argues that De Quincey may have imagined his self-replication (in his reference to Piranesi's prints for instance) as akin to a connection, albeit a deeply disconcerting one, with the swarming multitudes of addicts in China (Kitson 13). De Quincey himself reflected a growing ambivalence towards the role the commodity played in the growing Imperial economy as well as in British conflicts with China during the Opium Wars. Elizabeth Fay notes that De Quincey's son, Horace, was a casualty of the First Opium War (3). Additionally, in his 1822 edition of *Confessions*, De Quincey displays a keen awareness of the problematic relationship between means of intoxication as a vehicle for the ultimate subjugation of the oppressed and marginalized, both within the structure of industrial British society and the larger power relations being established between British colonialism and the East. Noting the widespread dependence of various figures such as William Wilberforce (the leader of the Clapham Saints sect) and even Prime Minister Henry Addington (De Quincey 4), in addition, De Quincey is troubled by the prevalence of opium addiction among the oppressed cotton mill workers of Manchester. The relationship of exploitation and opium as a potent intoxicant being a means to quell an otherwise agitating proletariat are made explicit. Building on Dr. John Awwiter's recognition of opium as a "poison", and reflecting on the oppressive and structural issue of the phenomenon of addiction among the working classes, De Quincey commented ominously, "That those eat now, who never ate before; and those who always ate, now eat the more (5)." De Quincey's writings reveal he was not likely to underestimate the power and the grave implications within the society of the Oriental substance he was himself so dependent on.

Interestingly, I would argue that one tangent of De Quincey's anxiety stems from the realization of the possibility of his presence as a white man as being a corrupting influence on the Oriental other. Refracted through his image maybe when he sees the potency of the Malay's addiction to opium, it is interesting to note that De Quincey's immediate reaction to the Malay's opium consumption is consternation (De Quincey 56).

After the man's departure, De Quincey actively ponders on whether it was not he who may have poisoned the Malay in their encounter. This opens the door for a much more fraught and ambivalent reading of De Quincey's preoccupations with the European mind and the realities of the semantic category and culture of the Orient. All these tensions, of a split subjectivity, of the multitude of associations inscribed within De Quincey's psychic geography in the imagery of Asia and the fact of his accessing this interiority in himself, is through the medium of a quintessentially Oriental product; opium. This may coalesce to represent, within his writing, a reflection of the larger paradigm shifts in culture, politics, and economy occurring during the historical period which found Britain poised at the cusp of its Asian Empire and struggling to come to terms with fault-lines appearing within its cultural orientation.

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¹He refers to Asia as the *officina gentium*, imagining the individual to be completely dwarfed by the vast civilizations of the region (De Quincey 72)

²Note his seemingly easy familiarity with the Hindu pantheon