WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

Confessions of an English Opium-Eater

THOMAS De QUINCEY

CONFESSIONS OF AN ENGLISH OPIUM-EATER

Thomas De Quincey

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INTRODUCTION

Confessions of an English Opium-Eater (1821) is largely autobiographical and is Thomas De Quincey's best-known work. It gives an account of the poet's early life and describes the growth and effects of his opium addiction. In the early nineteenth century opium was easy and cheap to buy from every chemist, it was widely used as a pain-killer and tranquilliser, yet its addictive properties were not understood. To that extent, De Quincey's story is completely different from the experience of drug addicts in our own time, but what is no different is the squalor, despair and desperate craving which accompany addiction. The shabbiness, filth, disorder and homelessness experienced by the author are echoed on the streets of many of the great cities of the world today.

However, the *Confessions* are not about the sordid everyday reality of addiction. The reader will learn of the author's flight at the age of sixteen from Manchester Grammar School, his subsequent wanderings on foot through Wales, and his experiences in London including his friendship with the fifteen-year-old child prostitute – Ann. The privations suffered by De Quincey in London in 1802–3 were the cause of the gastric condition from which he suffered and he began to take opium to alleviate his discomfort. The terrible scenes of low-life he witnessed, allied to his own vulnerable and dreamy nature, provided the mental backdrop for his subsequent reveries and nightmares as an opium addict. It is clear from his success at his various schools that De Quincey was highly intelligent, but he suffered from recurring anxiety states and it was also to relieve the stress of these that he turned to opium. His family found him again in the spring of 1804, and he became an undergraduate at Worcester College, Oxford in the autumn of that year. He met Coleridge on a visit to Somerset in 1807, and the blame for the subsequent rift between the two writers can substantially be laid at the door of their mutual opium addiction. In 1803 De Quincey had begun a correspondence with William Wordsworth, but it was not until 1807, when he accompanied Mrs Coleridge back to Westmorland, that he met the great poet, his sister Dorothy and their family. He was particularly fond of the Wordsworth children and the

death of Kate Wordsworth in 1812 caused him to have a form of breakdown, and may have accelerated his slide by 1813 into the daily use of opium. He made his home in the Wordsworths' old home at Dove Cottage, Grasmere when they moved out to a larger house. Far from marrying Dorothy Wordsworth as had at one time seemed likely, De Quincey began an affair with a local farmer's daughter, Margaret Simpson, a liaison which resulted in the birth of their son in 1816. They married the following year. His estrangement from the Wordsworth family and his hatred of wronged children, such as Ann from his London memories, are played out in the Easter dream in the 'Pains of Opium' section of the *Confessions*. It was his increasingly dire financial straits which forced De Quincey into journalism and, during the late summer of 1821, in rented rooms at 4 York Street, Covent Garden, with some stimulus from opium and drawing on his character, experiences and wide reading (particularly of the great writers of the first half of the seventeenth century), he finished the *Confessions* for publication in the September and October issues of the *London Magazine*. Interest in the anonymous work was intense and a great debate ensued. Inevitably the author's anonymity was to prove short-lived. His influence was profound and his recognition of the power of dreams on the developing psyche was published in the *Confessions* twenty-five years before the birth of Freud.

Thomas De Quincey was born in Manchester on 15th August 1785, the son of Thomas Quincey – a textile importer – and Elizabeth (née Penson). His sisters Jane and Elizabeth died aged three and nine respectively in 1790 and 1792, followed by his father in 1793. He and his mother moved to Bath in 1796 in which year his mother took the name De Quincey. In 1799 he attended Winkfield School in Wiltshire moving to Manchester Grammar School in 1800. Following his disappearance in 1802–3 he became reconciled with his family and attended Worcester College, Oxford as an undergraduate until 1808, when he left halfway through his degree examinations. In 1812 he briefly entered the Middle Temple. In 1818 he was appointed editor of the *Westmorland Gazette*, but was dismissed the following year. Following publication of *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* in the *London Magazine*, it was published in book form in 1822. De Quincey continued his journalistic career and moved to Edinburgh in 1830. He was prosecuted and briefly imprisoned for debt in 1831 and faced prosecution for debt many times in the next few years. The deaths occurred of his son William, aged eighteen, in 1834, his wife Margaret in 1837 and his son Lieutenant Horace De Quincey in China in 1842

at the age of twenty-two. 'Coleridge and Opium Eating' and 'Suspiria de Profundis' were published in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1845 and 'The English Mail-Coach' was published in the same journal in 1849. De Quincey took lodgings at 42 Lothian Street, Edinburgh in 1854, a revised and expanded edition of the *Confessions* appeared in 1856, and he died on 7th December 1859 at his Edinburgh lodgings.

FURTHER READING

H. S. Davies: *Thomas De Quincey* (Writers and Their Work) 1964
H. A. Eaton: *Thomas De Quincey* 1936
J. E. Jordan: *Thomas De Quincey, Literary Critic: His Method and Achievement* 1952
G. Lindop: *The Opium-Eater: A Life of Thomas De Quincey* 1981
E. Sackville-West: *A Flame in Sunlight: The Life and Work of Thomas De Quincey* 1936
V. Woolf: *The Common Reader* 2nd Series 1932 (reprinted many times)

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CONFESSIONS OF AN ENGLISH OPIUM-EATER

Original Preface in the Year 1821

I HERE PRESENT YOU, courteous reader, with the record of a remarkable period of my life; and according to my application of it, I trust that it will prove, not merely an interesting record, but, in a considerable degree, instructive. In *that* hope it is that I have drawn it up; and *that* must be my apology for breaking through those restraints of delicate reserve, which, for the most part, intercept the public exposure of our own errors and infirmities.

Guilt and misery shrink, by a natural instinct, from public notice: they court privacy and solitude; and, even in the choice of a grave, will sometimes voluntarily sequester themselves from the general population of the churchyard, as if declining to claim fellowship with the great family of man; thus, in a symbolic language universally understood, seeking (in the affecting language of Wordsworth)

> Humbly to express
> A penitential loneliness.

It is well, upon the whole, and for the interest of us all, that it should be so; nor would I willingly, in my own person, manifest a disregard of such salutary feelings. But, on the one hand, as my self-accusation does not amount to a confession of guilt, so, on the other, it is possible that, if it did, the benefit resulting to others, from the record of an experience purchased at so heavy a price of suffering and of self-conquest, might compensate, by a vast overbalance, any violence done to the feelings I have noticed, and justify a breach of the general rule. Infirmity and misery do not, of necessity, imply guilt. They approach, or recede from, the shades of that dark alliance, in proportion to the probable motives and prospects of the offender, and to the palliations, known or secret, of the offence; in proportion as the temptations to it were potent from the first, and the resistance to it, in act or in effort, was earnest to the last. For my own part, without breach of truth or modesty, I may affirm that my life has been, on the whole, the life of a philosopher: from my birth, I

was made an intellectual creature; and intellectual in the highest sense my pursuits and pleasures have been, even from my schoolboy days. If opium-eating be a sensual pleasure, and if I am bound to confess that I have indulged in it to an excess not yet *recorded* of any other man, it is no less true that I have struggled against this fascination with a fervent zeal, and have at length accomplished what I never yet heard attributed to any other man, have untwisted, almost to its final links, the chain which fettered me. Such a self-conquest may reasonably be set off in counterbalance to any kind or degree of self-indulgence. Not to insist that, in my case, the self-conquest was unquestionable, but the self-indulgence open to doubts of casuistry, according as that name shall be extended to acts aiming at the bare relief of pain, or shall be restricted to such as aim at the excitement of superfluous pleasure.

Guilt, therefore, I do not acknowledge; and, if I did, it is possible that I might still resolve on the present act of confession, in consideration of the service which I may thereby render to the whole class of opium-eaters. But who are they? Reader, I am bound to say, a very numerous class indeed. Of this I became convinced, some years ago, by computing at that time the number of those in one small class of English society (the class of men distinguished for talent and notoriety) who were known to me, directly or indirectly, as opium-eaters; such, for instance, as the eloquent and benevolent William Wilberforce; the late Dean of Carlisle, Dr Isaac Milner;* the first Lord Erskine; Mr—,† the

† See note on page 6.

* *Isaac Milner* – He was *nominally* known to the public as Dean of Carlisle, being colloquially always called *Dean* Milner; but virtually he was best known in his own circle as the head of Queens' College, Cambridge, where he usually resided. In common with his brother, Joseph of Hull, he was substantially a Wesleyan Methodist; and in that character, as regarded principles and the general direction of his sympathies, he pursued his deceased brother's History of the Christian Church down to the era of Luther. In these days, he would perhaps not be styled a Methodist, but simply a Low-Churchman. By whatever title described, it is meantime remarkable that a man confessedly so conscientious as Dean Milner could have reconciled to his moral views the holding of Church preferment so important as this deanery in combination with the headship of an important college. One or other must have been consciously neglected. Such a record, meantime, powerfully illustrates the advances made by the Church during the last generation in practical homage to self-denying religious scruples. A very lax man would not in these days allow himself to do that which thirty years ago a severe Church-Methodist (regarded by many even as a fanatic) persisted in doing, without feeling himself called on for apology. If I have not misapprehended its tenor, this case serves most vividly to illustrate the higher standard of moral responsibility which prevails in this current generation. We do injustice daily to our own age which, by

philosopher; a late under-secretary of State (viz., Mr Addington, brother to the first Lord Sidmouth, who described to me the sensation which first drove him to the use of opium in the very same words as the Dean of Carlisle – viz., 'that he felt as though rats were gnawing at the coats of his stomach'); Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and many others, hardly less celebrated. Now, if one class, comparatively so limited, could furnish so many scores of cases (and those within the instant reach of one sudden and brief inquiry), it was a natural inference that the entire population of England would furnish a number that, on first starting in such an inquiry, would have seemed incredible. The soundness of this inference, however, I doubted, until some facts became known to me, which satisfied me that it was not incorrect. I will mention two. First, three respectable London druggists, in widely remote quarters of London, from whom I happened to be purchasing small quantities of opium, assured me that the number of *amateur* opium-eaters (as I may term them) was at this time immense; and that the difficulty of distinguishing these persons, to whom habit had rendered opium necessary, from such as were purchasing it with a view to suicide, occasioned them daily trouble and disputes. This evidence respected London only. But, secondly (which will possibly surprise the reader more), some years ago, on passing through Manchester, I was

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many a sign, palpable and secret, I feel to be more emphatically than any since the period of Queen Elizabeth and Charles I, an intellectual, a moving and a self-conflicting age: and inevitably, where the intellect has been preternaturally awakened, the moral sensibility must soon be commensurately stirred. The very distinctions, psychologic or metaphysical, by which, as its hinges and articulations, our modern thinking moves, proclaim the subtler character of the questions which now occupy our thoughts. Not as pedantic only, but as suspiciously unintelligible such distinctions would, one hundred and thirty years ago, have been viewed as indictable, and perhaps (in company with Mandeville's 'Political Economy') would have been seriously presented as a nuisance to the Middlesex Quarter-Sessions. Recurring, however, to Dean Milner, and the recollections of his distinguished talents amongst the contemporary circles of the first generation in this nineteenth century, I wish to mention that these talents are most feebly measured by any of his occasional writings, all drawn from him apparently by mere pressure of casual convenience. In conversation it was that he asserted *adequately* his pre-eminent place. Wordsworth, who met him often at the late Lord Lonsdale's table, spoke of him uniformly as the chief potentate colloquially of his own generation, and as the man beyond all others (Burke being departed) who did not live upon his recollections, but met the demands of every question that engaged his sympathy by spontaneous and elastic movements of novel and original thought. As an opium-eater, Dean Milner was understood to be a strenuous

informed by several cotton manufacturers, that their work-people were rapidly getting into the practice of opium-eating; so much so, that on a Saturday afternoon the counters of the druggists were strewed with pills of one, two, or three grains, in preparation for the known demand of the evening. The immediate occasion of this practice was the lowness of wages, which at that time would not allow them to indulge in ale or spirits; and, wages rising, it may be thought that this practice would cease: but, as I do not readily believe that any man, having once tasted the divine luxuries of opium, will afterwards descend to the gross and mortal enjoyments of alcohol, I take it for granted

> That those eat now who never ate before;
> And those who always ate, now eat the more.

Indeed, the fascinating powers of opium are admitted even by those medical writers who are its greatest enemies: thus, for instance, Awsiter, apothecary to Greenwich Hospital, in his *Essay on the Effects of Opium* (published in the year 1763), when attempting to explain why Mead had not been sufficiently explicit on the properties, counter-agents, etc., of this drug, expresses himself in the following mysterious terms (perfectly intelligible, however, to those who are in the secret) – 'Perhaps he thought the subject of too delicate a nature to be made common; and, as many people might then indiscriminately use it, it

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wrestler with the physical necessity that coerced him into this habit. From several quarters I have heard that his daily *ration* was 34 grains (or about 850 drops of laudanum), divided into four portions, and administered to him at regular intervals of six hours by a confidential valet.

† Who is Mr. Dash, the philosopher? Really I have forgot. Not through any fault of my own, but on the motion of some absurd coward having a voice potential at the press, all the names were struck out behind my back in the first edition of the book, thirty-five years ago. I was not consulted; and did not discover the absurd blanks until months afterwards, when I was taunted with them very reasonably by a caustic reviewer. Nothing could have a more ludicrous effect that this appeal to shadows – to my Lord Dash, to Dean Dash, and to Mr. Secretary Dash. Very naturally it thus happened to Mr. Philosopher Dash that his burning light, alas I was extinguished irrecoverably in the general *mêlée*. Meantime, there was no excuse whatever for this absurd interference such as might have been alleged in any personality capable of causing pain to any one person concerned. All the cases except, perhaps, that of Wilberforce (about which I have at this moment some slight lingering doubts), were matters of notoriety to large circles of friends. It is due to Mr. John Taylor, the accomplished publisher of the work, that I should acquit *him* of any share in this absurdity.

would take from that necessary fear and caution which should prevent their experiencing the extensive power of this drug; *for there are many properties in it, if universally known, that would habituate the use and make it more in request with us than the Turks themselves*; the result of which knowledge,' he adds, 'must prove a general misfortune.' In the necessity of this conclusion I do not at all concur; but upon that point I shall have occasion to speak more freely in the body of the work itself. And at this point I shall say no more than that opium, as the one sole *catholic* anodyne which hitherto has been revealed to man; secondly, as the one sole anodyne which in a vast majority of cases is *irresistible*; thirdly, as by many degrees the most potent of all known counter-agents to nervous irritation, and to the formidable curse of *tædium vitæ*; fourthly, as by possibility, under an argument undeniably plausible, alleged by myself, the sole known agent – not for curing *when* formed, but for intercepting whilst likely to be formed – the great English scourge of pulmonary consumption; – I say that opium, as wearing these, or *any* of these, four beneficent characteristics – I say that any agent whatever making good such pretensions, no matter what its name, is entitled haughtily to refuse the ordinary classification and treatment which opium receives in books. I say that opium, or any agent of equal power, is entitled to assume that it was revealed to man for some higher object than that it should furnish a target for moral denunciations, ignorant where they are not hypocritical, childish where not dishonest; that it should be set up as a theatrical scarecrow for superstitious terrors, of which the *result* is oftentimes to defraud human suffering of its readiest alleviation, and of which the *purpose* is 'Ut pueris placeant et declamatio fiant'.*

In one sense, and remotely, all medicines and modes of medical treatment offer themselves as anodynes – that is, so far as they promise ultimately to relieve the suffering connected with physical maladies or infirmities. But we do not, in the special and ordinary sense, designate as 'anodynes' those remedies which obtain the relief from pain only as a secondary and distant effect following out from the *cure* of the ailment; but those only we call anodynes which obtain this relief and pursue it as the *primary* and *immediate* object. If, by giving tonics to a child suffering periodic pains in the stomach, we were ultimately to banish those pains, this would not warrant us in calling such tonics by the name of anodynes; for the neutralisation of the pains would be a circuitous process of nature, and might probably require weeks for its evolution. But a true anodyne (as, for instance, half-a-dozen drops of

* That they may win the applause of schoolboys, and furnish matter for a prize essay.

laudanum, or a dessert-spoonful of some warm carminative mixed with brandy) will often banish the misery suffered by a child in five or six minutes. Amongst the most potent of anodynes, we may rank hemlock, henbane, chloroform, and opium. But unquestionably the three first have a most narrow field of action, by comparison with opium. This, beyond all other agents made known to man, is the mightiest for its command, and for the extent of its command, over pain; and so much mightier than any other, that I should think, in a Pagan land, supposing it to have been adequately made known* through experimental acquaintance with its revolutionary magic, opium would have had altars and priests consecrated to its benign and tutelary powers. But this is not my own object in the present little work. Very many people have thoroughly misconstrued this object; and therefore I beg to say here, in closing my Original Preface, a little remodelled, that what I contemplated in these Confessions was to emblazon the power of opium – not over bodily disease and pain, but over the grander and more shadowy world of dreams.

**Adequately made known* – Precisely this, however, was impossible. No feature of ancient Pagan life has more entirely escaped notice than the extreme rarity, costliness, and circuitous accessibility of the more powerful drugs, especially of mineral drugs; and of drugs requiring elaborate preparation, or requiring much manufacturing skill. When the process of obtaining any manufactured drug was slow and intricate it could most rarely be called for. And rarely called for, why should it be produced? By looking into the history and times of Herod the Great, as reported by Josephus, the reader will gain some notion of the mystery and the suspicion surrounding all attempts at importing such drugs as could be applied to murderous purposes, consequently of the delay, the difficulty, and the peril in forming any familiar acquaintance with opium.

Prefatory Note

WHEN IT HAD BEEN settled that, in the general series of these republications, the *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* should occupy the Fifth Volume, I resolved to avail myself most carefully of the opening thus made for a revision of the entire work. By accident, a considerable part of the Confessions (all, in short, except the Dreams) had originally been written hastily; and, from various causes, had never received any strict revision, or, *virtually* so much as an ordinary verbal correction. But a great deal more was wanted than this. The main narrative should naturally have moved through a succession of secondary incidents; and with leisure for recalling these, it might have been greatly inspirited. Wanting all opportunity for such advantages, this narrative had been needlessly impoverished. And thus it had happened, that not so properly correction and retrenchment were called for, as integration of what had been left imperfect, or amplification of what, from the first, had been insufficiently expanded.

With these views, it would not have been difficult (though toilsome) to re-cast the little work in a better mould; and the result might, in all reason, count upon the approbation at least of its own former readers. Compared with its own former self, the book must certainly tend, by its very principle of change, whatever should be the *execution* of that change, to become better: and in my own opinion, after all drawbacks and allowances for the faulty exemplification of a good principle, it *is* better. This should be a matter of mere logical or inferential necessity; since, in pure addition to everything previously approved, there would now be a clear surplus of extra matter – all that might be good in the old work, and a great deal beside that was new. Meantime this improvement has been won at a price of labour and suffering that, if they could be truly stated, would seem incredible. A nervous malady, of very peculiar character, which has attacked me intermittingly for the last eleven years, came on in May last, almost concurrently with the commencement of this revision; and so obstinately has this malady

pursued its noiseless, and what I may call subterraneous, siege, since none of the symptoms are externally manifested, that, although pretty nearly dedicating myself to this one solitary labour, and not intermitting or relaxing it for a single day, I have yet spent, within a very few days, six calendar months upon the re-cast of this one small volume.

The consequences have been distressing to all concerned. The press has groaned under the chronic visitation; the compositors shudder at the sight of my handwriting, though not objectionable on the score of legibility; and I have much reason to fear that, on days when the pressure of my complaint has been heaviest, I may have so far given way to it, as to have suffered greatly in clearness of critical vision. Sometimes I may have overlooked blunders, mis-statements, or repetitions, implicit or even express. But more often I may have failed to appreciate the true effects from faulty management of style and its colourings. Sometimes, for instance, a heavy or too intricate arrangement of sentences may have defeated the tendency of what, under its natural presentation, would have been affecting; or it is possible enough that, by unseasonable levity at other times, I may have repelled the sympathy of my readers – all or some. Endless are the openings for such kinds of mistake – that is, of mistakes not fully seen *as* such. But even in a case of unequivocal mistake, seen and acknowledged, yet when it is open to remedy only through a sudden and energetic act, then or never, the press being for twenty minutes, suppose, free to receive an alteration, but beyond that time closed and sealed inexorably: such being supposed the circumstances, the humane reader will allow for the infirmity which even wilfully and consciously surrenders itself to the error, acquiescing in it deliberately, rather than face the cruel exertion of correcting it most elaborately at a moment of sickening misery, and with the prevision that the main correction must draw after it half-a-dozen others for the sake of decent consistency. I am not speaking under any present consciousness of such a case existing against myself: I believe there *is* none such. But I choose to suppose an extreme case of even conscious error, in order that venial cases of oversight may, under shelter of such an *outside* license, find toleration from a liberal critic. To fight up against the wearying siege of an abiding sickness, imposes a fiery combat. I attempt no description of this combat, knowing the unintelligibility and the repulsiveness of all attempts to communicate the Incommunicable. But the generous reader will not, for that forbearance on my part, the less readily show his indulgence, if a case should (unexpectedly to myself) arise for claiming it.

I have thus made the reader acquainted with one out of two cross