

Intoxication and the orient in baudelaire and de quincey

[Environment](#), [Air](#)



In *Artificial Paradises*, Baudelaire writes this of hashish: “ Enthusiasts who would procure the magical delights of this substance at any price have continued to seek out hashish which has crossed the Mediterranean—that is, hashish made from Indian or Egyptian hemp”(15). Only hashish from the “ Orient,” i. e. most of Asia and Northern Africa, is intoxicating enough for Baudelaire, who finds freedom in the hashish-produced relaxation of physical and mental boundaries. In *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, De Quincey describes the similarly pleasurable feelings that opium created in him. Eventually, however, Baudelaire’s use of the substance goes too far and ultimately destroys him. De Quincey develops alarming nightmares of the daunting Orient and he too succumbs to the drug. The men’s accounts of their drug use both engage the concept of “ boundary” between sober and intoxicated, European and Oriental. The origin of psychoactive substances was critical to European users, especially the upper-class and educated users. Baudelaire writes that hashish “ possesses such extraordinary powers of intoxication that it has, for some years, attracted the attention of French scholars and society men. It is more or less valued, depending on its various regional origins”(36). The potency of hashish from the Orient almost seems to come from the foreignness of the land where it is grown, as if there is something innately intoxicating about the Oriental soil, water, air, or other input to the growing process, which cannot be scientifically replicated. There is no other way to explain how French society, which in Baudelaire’s eyes was at the worldwide pinnacle of scientific and cultural advancement, could have failed in all domestic attempts to grow strong hashish. Baudelaire sets up a clear contrast between Europeans and Orientals. De Quincey does the

same in his description of his nightmares about the Orient. He writes that he is “ terrified by the modes of life, by the manners, and the barrier of utter abhorrence, and want of sympathy, placed between us by feelings deeper than I can analyze. I could sooner live with lunatics, or brute animals” (81). Contrasting the Malay who comes to his cottage with the English servant girl who answers the door, De Quincey comments that “ there seemed to be an impassable gulph fixed between all communication of ideas” (62). The incredible power of these psychoactive substances is thus their ability to bridge that “ impassable gulph.” The only common language De Quincey and the Malay share is the gift of opium De Quincey offers him. It seems as though Baudelaire and De Quincey need to constantly declare the existence of a fundamental barrier between European and Oriental, because the crossing of that seemingly impassable border is a justification for the powerful and other-worldly effects of the psychoactive substances. Indeed, for Baudelaire one of the key effects of hashish intoxication is its ability to play with conventional borders. In addition to the rigid cultural and national borders, these substances can also cross the border which in sober life seems even more impenetrable, that between the external world and the internal sense of self and body. Baudelaire declares that when under the influence of hashish “ you forget your existence, until you confuse the objects of your senses with the objects of the real world”(51). He writes of becoming a tree, or a bird, or evaporating into thin air. For Baudelaire, this Romantic fantasy appears to be a positive experience. The border-transgressing power of hashish fits in well with the fascination with irrationality that characterizes the Romantic Movement of Baudelaire’s era.

There is liberation in being able to see the world in a way that is not ruled by the borders of sober experience. Hashish can allow the mind to achieve new ways of processing in an attempt to uncover new truths about experience that are unachievable through rational thought. What Baudelaire describes as liberation, however, lies alarmingly close to what De Quincey describes as tyranny and oppression. There is an infinitesimally fine line between freedom and enslavement, between intoxicating and toxic, and according to De Quincey, crossing that line is exasperatingly inevitable. The border crossed through opium use which troubles De Quincey is that between waking and dreaming. De Quincey never quite seems to wake up once he begins to have nightmares. These nightmares are filled with his anxious concept of what he imagines as the overwhelming horrors of the Orient, an amalgamation of Egyptian, Chinese, Indonesian, and Indian beasts, plants, gods, pyramids, coffins, furniture, and people. De Quincey writes that “ a sympathy seemed to arise between the waking and the dreaming states of the brain”(75). His visions “ were drawn out by the fierce chemistry of my dreams, into insufferable splendour that fretted my heart” (75). Although it horrifies him when figures like the Malay appear to haunt his dreams, more horrifying is that his dreams came to haunt his waking life. That sacred border which had from the start been so determinedly laid out by Baudelaire and De Quincey to separate European experience from the Oriental world has now been crossed by something more than just the pleasures opium. It is acceptable when the barrier is crossed by psychoactive substances. Indeed, the potent and pleasurable intoxication from hashish or opium seems to come from the substances having crossed that barrier. However, when something else that

the Europeans associate with the Orient crosses into European life, be it the plague or De Quincey's labyrinth visions, the breach of border is not just unacceptable, it is threatening and even potentially fatal. De Quincey envisions the Orient as extremely aggressive. He seems to experience the visions passively, whipped from terror to terror. Even the inanimate objects are a threat as tables and sofas turn into vicious crocodiles. In his dreams and in his waking hours, opium has rendered him, he writes, "powerless as an infant" (74). The Oriental aggression revealed in his dreams exposes something larger about the fascination with Orientalism that pervaded European society in the nineteenth century. By declaring a set notion of "the other" and erecting an impassable boundary between European society and the Oriental world, Europeans were able to project onto the Orient many of their own less than admirable traits and thus seemingly rid themselves of these flaws, because anything Oriental is, by definition, not European. In the nineteenth century, it was undoubtedly the Europeans who were the aggressors, not the Orientals. The Europeans, it seems, had no problem breaching the East-West boundary, as long as it was on their own terms. The European colonial desires were immense. In the nineteenth century there were three Anglo-Burmese Wars, two Anglo-Afghan Wars, two Opium Wars, and two Anglo-Sikh Wars, all of which involved British forces invading and vying for control in Asia. Envisioning the Oriental world as the aggressors helped to justify invasion because it could be viewed as "fighting them on their land so we don't have to fight them on ours," a rhetoric so powerful it persists through the present day. The trouble for De Quincey is that this projection of aggression onto the Orient has been so drilled into his

imagination that when he falls into his opium-induced, half-awake-half-dreaming state, the fabricated aggression seems to become a terrifying reality. The essential irony is that the only aspect of the Oriental world that has the legitimate power to ruin, enslave, and tyrannize the Europeans—the psychoactive substance—is the one aspect the Europeans are willing to eagerly accept into their home land across the otherwise impenetrable border they have erected between Europe and the Orient. Not everyone was blind to this irony. Baudelaire is cautious of reaching the point of dependence on psychoactive substances and warns of the power they could have over the Europeans. He writes, “ Never could a sane state survive with its people using hashish...If ever a government wished to corrupt its citizens, it would only have to encourage the use of hashish”(24). Yet, this caution is overwhelmed by his interest in the experimentation with identity and consciousness that can be generated by psychoactive substances. In his life, Baudelaire clearly did not take heed, as he died young, his body wracked by addiction to alcohol, opium, and hashish. De Quincey also died an opium addict. There is a chance these men were too blinded by the initial freedom and pleasure of psychoactive substances to anticipate the toxicity and enslavement of continued use, but it seems more likely that they understood the potential for danger and that was part of the appeal. At a time when the Europeans took as fact their complete supremacy over the rest of the world, some of the colonizers thus sought a method of experiencing life as the colonized. Although Baudelaire and De Quincey were quick to erect borders in order to declare their superiority over and separation from the Oriental world, they also sought to relinquish that superiority and allow themselves to

be the victim instead of the aggressor. Although this surrender of power seems to go against their societies' concept of the natural order of the world, the desire to view the other as the aggressor and the self as the victim was actually as fundamental to the Europeans as the assumption of superiority.