

Emerging from darkness and dreams in de quincey



De Quincey's dreams and visions as described in his work function as a different world, which exists in places of temporary darkness, and his attempts to capture them must function outside of that world, in a well-lit space of recollection and translation onto paper. This hindsight is comparable to the manner in which he acted as his own editor, revising sections as he later considered fit, and is met in the text by a dwelling on the moment of 'waking' and shifting from one state into the other. Tambling describes his 1856 revisions as 'not only trying to fix the text, as Wordsworth had tried to do, but also attempting to demonstrate a unity within its digressions': quoting De Quincey's idea of a 'veil' between current consciousness and complete memories, Tambling interprets this attempt to demonstrate unity as inherently flawed, as finding meaning or knowing yourself in half-remembered dreams is futile. As Virginia Woolf noted, however, hindsight is the only way to make sense of the past or your dreams: 'it is only by gathering up and putting together these echoes and fragments that we arrive at the true nature of our experience.'

The English Mail-coach describes the twin effects of opium and nostalgia as De Quincey travels through the darkness on a mail coach, contrasting the temporal nature of his past experiences with the unchanging nature of the crocodile:

'If, therefore, the crocodile does not change, all things else undeniably do: even the shadow of the pyramids grows less. And often the restoration in vision of Fanny and the Bath road makes me too pathetically sensible of that truth. Out of the darkness, if I happen to call back the image of Fanny, up rises suddenly from a gulf of forty years a rose in June; or, if I think for an

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instant of the rose in June, up rises the heavenly face of Fanny. One after the other, like the antiphonies in the choral service, rise Fanny and the rose in June, then back again the rose in June and Fanny. Then come both together, as in a chorus—roses and Fannies, Fannies and roses, without end, thick as blossoms in paradise. Then comes a venerable crocodile, in a royal livery of scarlet and gold, with sixteen capes; and the crocodile is driving four-in-hand from the box of the Bath mail. And suddenly we upon the mail are pulled up by a mighty dial, sculptured with the hours, that mingle with the heavens and the heavenly host. Then all at once we are arrived at Marlborough forest.'

The darkness of the night-time drive allows him to hallucinate visions of the past, offering him company and comfort. The restoration of these images, however, remind him even more sharply of the truth once he emerges from this ride in the darkness: he is 'too pathetically sensible of that truth.' The hallucinated re-introduction of time is signaled by him seeing a literal 'mighty dial' that invokes 'the heavens and the heavenly host', as though his moment of awakening reminds him of heavenly repercussions. In the opium-influenced dreaming, he forgets that the substance enabling him to see figures from his past is destructive, but once he awakes he cannot escape moral consequences. The darkness also exists as a peripheral area where his senses are confused: the visions become 'antiphonies in the choral service' and a 'chorus', whereas when he wakes he will recall and record the visions in this text, and therefore have them captured only visually in the form of words on a page.

Another temporary form of darkness that De Quincey appears to crave is seasonal, and he again craves that 'antagonism' to better understand or appreciate the light and warmth that summer will bring. In *Confessions*, he wants a winter that is fully characteristic of winter, as an extreme darkness to better contradict the summer months:

'I can put up even with rain, provided it rains cats and dogs; but something of the sort I must have, and if I have it not, I think myself in a manner ill-used; for why am I called on to pay so heavily for winter, in coals and candles, and various privations that will occur even to gentlemen, if I am not to have the article good of its kind? No, a Canadian winter for my money, or a Russian one, where every man is but a co-proprietor with the north wind in the fee-simple of his own ears. Indeed, so great an epicure am I in this matter that I cannot relish a winter night fully if it be much past St. Thomas's day, and have degenerated into disgusting tendencies to vernal appearances. No, it must be divided by a thick wall of dark nights from all return of light and sunshine.'

He appears to have a sense of shame if not punished appropriately by the weather, as seen in the very emotive description of 'disgusting' early spring. The clear separation of dark nights and the return of light must be upheld as a 'thick wall', so that there is a clear shift from winter to summer rather than prolonged 'vernal appearances'. The moment of waking must be total in De Quincey's view.

It certainly is in 'On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth', as guilt or sin creates a completely separate 'world': 'Here, as I have said, the retiring of

the human heart, and the entrance of the fiendish heart was to be expressed and made sensible. Another world has stepped in; and the murderers are taken out of the region of human things, human purposes, human desires. They are transfigured: Lady Macbeth is " unsexed;" Macbeth has forgot that he was born of woman; both are conformed to the image of devils; and the world of devils is suddenly revealed.' This supernatural world of devils is aligned with loss of strict gendered roles in society, but also the loss of connection to family and personal identity: the impact of the murder is total in its shifting from one world of morality to the other, but the characters and audience only fully realize this when they are broken from this nightmarish darkness by a knock on the door from an outside party:

' Hence it is, that, when the deed is done, when the work of darkness is perfect, then the world of darkness passes away like a pageantry in the clouds: the knocking at the gate is heard; and it makes known audibly that the reaction has commenced: the human has made its reflux upon the fiendish; the pulses of life are beginning to beat again; and the re-establishment of the goings-on of the world in which we live, first makes us profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis that had suspended them.'

Similar to Hillis Miller's interpretation of De Quincey as arguing that we can only know true rapture through knowledge of misery, and therefore knowledge arising from ' antitheses', this passage portrays the ' knocking at the gate' as an awakening to the ' awful parenthesis' they had entered, in which the stage was solely occupied by murderers. He perhaps believes an audience can only realize the strangeness of a post-murder world through the intrusion of an uninvolved party, as they need to be woken from this '
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world of darkness' for it to have any meaning. The language he uses to describe this moment of transition, 'the pulses of life are beginning to beat again', makes it a specifically bodily reawakening that could parallel his awakening from dreams in other texts.

De Quincey aligns darkness with a potential for imagined visions and dreams in *Confessions*, and explains it as a return to a childhood state and therefore an escape from current bodily reality: 'I know not whether my reader is aware that many children, perhaps most, have a power of painting, as it were upon the darkness, all sorts of phantoms.' The reference to 'painting' phantoms onto the darkness implies that the hallucinations themselves are a form of art, and portrays the person having the visions as being in control of them to some degree. The same image of painting is invoked again later: 'Both these parts of my lighter reading, having furnished me often with matter of reflection, now furnished me with matter for my dreams. Often I used to see, after painting upon the blank darkness a sort of rehearsal whilst waking, a crowd of ladies, and perhaps a festival and dances.' His imagined visions on the darkness provide him with subjects for dreams as a 'rehearsal', again implying control over what he sees and dreams. By describing these imagined visions as paintings, however, he also draws attention to the limitations of that comparison. These 'paintings' will not last as works of art, so the only method for recording them is always going to be retrospective description; the word 'perhaps' even admits that there are limitations to such a remembrance. The invocation of art within the text reminds the reader of the fact that these 'Confessions' themselves have been captured in hindsight, and of the process. The scene of painting onto

darkness or ascribing meaning onto nothing also echoes some of the criticism his actual art received from his contemporaries: his style of prose was criticised as 'word painting' that represented multiple failed attempts 'to render artistic and set forth in "passionate prose" what is essentially matter of fact.' His style could be seen to project art and beauty onto flat darkness, much like the opium did through the visions. In drawing attention to itself, it also reminds the reader that he has emerged and is recording his experiences. These moments of dreaming and darkness exhibit his search for meaning in his own past, enabled by the drug and the darkness, and his emergence allows him to employ hindsight, similar to his editing process, in translating these visions to paper.

Throughout his works, De Quincey seems interested in that moment of transition, where he can gain knowledge of his previous state through contrast with the present. Emerging from darkness into the light means the loss of 'visions' that De Quincey may have craved, as his past can exist within them, but allows for him to try and frame them or make sense of them. Still, the waking self can lose clarity of what was seen or dreamt in the darkness, as De Quincey notes in *Experiences*: 'The minutest incidents of childhood, or forgotten scenes of later years, were often revived: I could not be said to recollect them, for if I had been told of them when waking, I should not have been able to acknowledge them as parts of my past experience.' The hindsight that he records his experiences in may provide him with an insight into their meaning, but it also degenerates the experience itself by narrowing it down into words. In *Suspiria* his last image of his sister appears to be ruined by a moment of waking from a trance, too,

as he rushes away hastily when a sound brings him back to reality: the transition to waking can be destructive as well as transformative. Woolf, however, praised the 'impassioned prose' of these moments for its own merit, rather than its efficiency in capturing the total detail of a dream sequence. She described these moments of irrationality or escape as 'descriptions of states of mind' that are 'his most perfect passages': 'his confession is not that he has sinned but that he has dreamed.' Whether the hindsight these moments are recorded in is detrimental to the memory or dream or vision originally captured, it aids a prose style beautiful enough to give those moments meaning that is not dependent on the original resonance in De Quincey's own life.