

# Dreaming of the Self: Thomas De Quincey and the Development of the Confessional Mode

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## Introduction

In the original preface to *The Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, Thomas De Quincey makes the claim that his mode of confessional writing is unprecedented and original. In his own words, *Confessions* contains ‘an impassioned prose ranging under no precedents that I am aware of in any literature’ (De Quincey 1985, p.3) While such a claim may seem self-aggrandising and unjustifiable, a closer analysis of De Quincey's work proves that he played an important role in the development of confessional writing. By examining *The Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* in more depth, I intend to explore the manner in which De Quincey refashioned the confessional mode with his emphasis on dreams and opium visions. In addition to this, I also hope to illustrate how he anticipated the modernist form of ‘aesthetic autobiographies’ (Nalbathian 1997, p.1) that was to come to prominence in the first half of twentieth century.

While undoubtedly constructed from autobiographical materials, De Quincey's *Confessions* is an autobiography that holds unique. Despite its artistic use of detail and flourishes of poetic montage, the distinction between fact and fiction is often permeable throughout the work. In order to claim the absolute originality of *Confessions*, it seems De Quincey deliberately avoided previous models of the confessional mode. For De Quincey, the confession was no longer an account of sins or lived experience, as was the case

for St Augustine of Hippo's *Confessiones*. Instead, it became a 'record of human passion' (De Quincey 1985, p.2) in which the narrative attempts to depict human nature in a far broader manner; with the moral high ground being abandoned in favour of 'breaking through that delicate and honourable reserve, which, for the most part, restrains us from the public exposure of our own errors and infirmities' (De Quincey 1985, p.1). De Quincey did not claim that his confessions were based on moral truthfulness, but that his 'way of writing is rather to think out aloud, and follow my own humours' (De Quincey 1985, p. 62). Thus, the reader of *Confessions* is presented with, rather than a reliable account of lived experiences, an attempted insight into the psyche of the writer through an impassioned prose that aims to delve deeper into the realms of his imagination.

### **Confessional Poetry**

This concept becomes problematic in considering the work as autobiographical due to the fact that De Quincey's imaginative prose often verges on the poetic. Moreover, the fact that opium visions and dreams form a large part of the work makes De Quincey even more vulnerable to criticism that would suggest *Confessions* cannot be taken as an autobiographical account of his life. In an essay titled *Thomas De Quincey and the Failure of Autobiography*, Curtis Perry comments on De Quincey's emphasis on dreams:

If these visions are a symptom of the author's drug-addled mind, are we not asked to wonder about the overarching structures that order De Quincey's narrations of his own life? [...] If the narrator's mind is possessed by some extra-conscious agent (opium or an unconscious), then one can never trust the constructions of his voice: it is always possible that they are merely the projections of an agency beyond the author's conscious control. (Perry 1983, p. 1)

However, what Perry fails to take into account is that De Quincey was acutely aware that his projections may, at times, be beyond ‘conscious control’ yet De Quincey also maintained their validity in describing his psyche. Thus, the ‘constructions’ of voice that Perry dismisses can in fact be trusted and furthermore aid the reader in fully understanding the text. In effect, if De Quincey was to stay true to the belief that the confessional mode should be a record of ‘human passion’, whereby passion represents the varying facets of the mind in all its forms, then it is natural that he should include dreams and opium visions in his exploration of the self. This naturally brings about larger questions relating to the mind, body, and consciousness. How does one accurately depict, in autobiographical form, the act of thinking and feeling without also consciously acting? For G. S. Rosseau, it is in fact material culture that problematises the disparities between mind, body and consciousness in that we view them within the established parameters of received metaphors:

We may applaud the transcendence—in philosophy, in criticism, and elsewhere—of crude mechanical models of the operations of thinking and feeling, willing and acting. This is not, however, to imply that the interplay of consciousness and society, of nerves and human nature, has somehow lost its meaning or relevance. Far from it, for it is important, now more than ever, to be able to think decisively about the ramifications of mind and body, their respective resonances, and their intersections, because the practical implications are so critical. For ours is a material culture that is rapidly replacing the received metaphors that help us understand—or, arguably, mystify—the workings of minds and bodies. (Rosseau 1991, p.13)

This mystification of mind and body is perhaps what has led to De Quincey being viewed as a mytho-poetic, drug-addled poet rather than a major contributor and thinker behind the development of the

confessional mode. Near the beginning of the text, De Quincey emphasises his ability to dream ‘interestingly’ and thus establishes the faculty of dreaming as an extension of his philosophical investigation, and therefore his mind:

If a man “whose talk is of Oxen.” should become an Opium-eater, the probability is, that (if he is not too dull to dream at all) – he will dream about oxen: whereas, in the case before him, the reader will find that the Opium-eater boasteth himself to be a philosopher; and accordingly, that the phantasmagoria of *his* dreams (waking or sleeping, day-dreams or night-dreams) is suitable to one who in that character, *Humani nihil a se alienum putat*. (De Quincey 1985, p. 5)

Thus, De Quincey seems to consider dreaming as a way of discovering hidden truths within himself that would normally be repressed by self-resistance in the realm of consciousness. In his view that the dream is ‘the one great tube through which man communicates with the shadowy’ (De Quincey 1985, p. 88), De Quincey can be seen to anticipate Freud in his belief that dream analysis could lead to an understanding of the mind's unconscious processes. While this might seem like a removal of the conscious mind from one’s body, it can also be an extension of both in that the process of dreaming might enable one to build up a more vivid picture of the self. Furthermore, in comprehending De Quincey's relevance to modern philosophy, one may even draw parallels between his view of the dream process with that of Zizek's:

When we awaken into reality after a dream, we usually say to ourselves “it was just a dream”, thereby blinding ourselves to the fact that on our everyday, waking reality we are nothing but a consciousness of this dream. It was only in the dream that we approached the fantasy – framework which determines our activity, our mode of acting in reality itself. (Zizek 1989, p.324)

It is precisely this ‘fantasy framework’ that De Quincey attempts to discern in *Confessions*. He uses the dream as a self-exploratory instrument which aids the confessional mode in its search for truth. In other words, he explores the realm of the unconscious in order to help explain his outer self, that is, the self that acts in reality itself. However, the problem with an autobiography that focuses so heavily on dreams is that it will always be subject to criticism surrounding validity of experience and authenticity of knowledge. Moreover, due to De Quincey's reliance on opium to act as an agency for his dreams, his visions might easily be viewed as an escape from truthful experience and may even be considered as anti-confessions. This is where the ambiguity of De Quincey's autobiography lies. Should autobiography – in formal terms – represent truthful experience as opposed to projected thought and reverie, which are a product of fiction and poetry? For De Quincey, the definition of autobiography was indeed very blurry. De Quincey believed human passions were at work ‘well beyond the immediate environment’ (De Quincey 1985, p. 1) and he felt it necessary to offer us glimpses into such passions and thoughts;. This explains his idiosyncratic refashioning of the confessional mode. Whereas St. Augustine of Hippo praised God for giving him clarity of memory, De Quincey celebrated opium for its ability to retrieve thoughts from the ‘bosom of darkness’ and remained intent on exploring the self through ‘the fantastic imagery of the brain’ (De Quincey 1985, p. 49). By including the faculty of dreaming in his autobiographical work, De Quincey does not so much absolve himself with fantasy but allows for a broader analysis of the self. Thus, his visions are used to aesthetically enhance the confessional mode due to their ability to provide a multi-faceted view of the subject.

## Controlled Passions

While the inclusion of De Quincey's dreams and opium visions stemmed from his will to 'breathe a record of human passion' (De Quincey, 1985, p. 14) in all its forms, one must question whether the impassioned prose is somewhat contradicted by his controlled, theatrical display of the self throughout the work. In other words, there is a slight contradiction between De Quincey's theory and practice. If *Confessions* was solely concerned with human passion, there would be no need for the obsessive detail that De Quincey goes into when it comes to the matter of subjectivity. De Quincey frequently makes it clear that he wants his portrayal of the self to be 'useful and instructive' (De Quincey 1985, p. 1) and the contrived nature of *Confessions* as a whole seem hard to reconcile with the idea of them merely being a passionate account of self-expression. In his constant awareness of the 'courteous reader' (De Quincey 1985, p.1), De Quincey seems intent on seducing the reader into indulging themselves in his prose; which is paradoxically against the concept of passionately narrating the self without an audience in mind. If we take the idea that 'the roots of philosophical speculative investigation are in the social reality of the world of commodities' (Zizek 1989, p.321), then we can perhaps begin to bridge the gap between the contradictory nature of De Quincey's apparently impassioned prose and his awareness of the reader. De Quincey's refashioning of the confessional genre was most probably affected by the literary market to which he was catering to and thus his depiction of the self was, to some extent, moderated by outside influences. One cannot fail to recognise the typically Romantic formulas at play in *Confessions* and it seems De Quincey may have rendered his representation of the self with some of the characteristics of poets such as Wordsworth and

Coleridge. Most notably, De Quincey did this at a time when their forays into subjectivity was becoming a commodity for the public. The impassioned depth and complexity of Romantic poetry is recreated by De Quincey in the confessional mode and while he undoubtedly attempts to scrutinise his own subjectivity in all its depth and darkness, he does so with one eye towards being legitimised by the literary market of the period. This is even evident in De Quincey's opium visions, which despite his claims for originality and philosophical enquiry, are often filled with allusions to the poets. In one vision De Quincey states:

The sea appeared paved with innumerable faces, upturned to the heavens: faces, imploring, wrathful, despairing, surged upwards by thousands, by myriads, by generations, by centuries: - my agitation was infinite, - my mind tossed - and surged with the ocean. (De Quincey 1985,p. 72)

In his description of the darker aspects of the imagination, De Quincey employs imagery of the 'wrathful' sea. This is reminiscent of Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* in which the poet describes the unconscious with a strikingly similar metaphor throughout the poem: 'I looked upon the rotting sea/ And drew my eyes away' (Coleridge 1992, p. 8). According to Alina Clej:

De Quincey was in many ways a replica of Coleridge [...] what De Quincey seems to have most closely imitated was Coleridge's style of life, the "mysterious", doomed nature of the Ancient Mariner, whose curse is to proclaim his failure. Opium visions were De Quincey's best way of achieving this "dark sublimity". (Clej 1995, p. 260)

Thus, it seems that De Quincey's impassioned prose and opium visions were somewhat fabricated in their compliance with the Romantic conventions of the period, particularly in his allusions to Coleridge. With this in mind, De Quincey's *Confessions* become even

more ambiguous in that it is hard to distinguish the actual events of his life from the rhetorical devices he used to translate them into literature. However, this draws our attention to the uniqueness of the work when considering it as an autobiography. Far from being a spontaneous account of human experiences, *Confessions* is an intricately thought-out piece of writing which De Quincey conceived with a set of aesthetic principles in mind. Furthermore, the aesthetics that De Quincey applied to the genre had not been explored prior to the publication of *Confessions*. Despite his use of certain Romantic tropes, the claim that the work was written ‘under no precedents’ can still be validated.

### **Dreaming The Self**

In his awareness of the literary market and allusions to poets of the period, it is evident that De Quincey's portrayal of himself appears to have been tweaked and tailor-made by him to fit his own specific requirements. Yet this method of constructing the self does not take away from the work being heralded as an autobiographical account of his life. Rather than explicitly depicting an interior self, De Quincey effectively created *the image* of an interior self and, in doing so, treated subjectivity in a manner that anticipated the tropes of modern autobiography. In her essay *Aesthetic Autobiography*, Suzanne Nalbathian views nineteenth-century autobiographies as being in ‘striking contrast’ (Nalbathian 1997, p.1) to the modernist autobiographies of the twentieth century which were more prone to transforming ‘lived data into fictionalised discourse’ (Nalbathian 1997, p.1). However, when placing *Confessions* in the context of what she defines the ‘Aesthetic Autobiographies’ of the twentieth century, it becomes evident that it was highly anticipative of the format.

According to Nalbathian:



An autobiographical style developed in this period of modernism which went well beyond the circumstantial identification of the author in the work [...] what I call the aesthetic autobiographies emerging in the early twentieth century reclothe facts in poetic relations, in a re-presentation of the person, not of the personality. (Nalbathian 1997, p.45)

Not only did De Quincey ‘re clothe facts in poetic relations’ through his poetic allusions and opium visions which were ‘clothed in all their evanescent circumstances’ (De Quincey 1985, p.69), but he also consciously took part in the “re-presentation” of himself. De Quincey seems to have been aware that human identity, when represented within the constraints of language, was based on artifice and previous modes of writing. Therefore, the subject is nothing more than his words and his actual being lives outside of language. Consequently, the self presented within his autobiographical work is one which only truly exists within the work and it is only within the work that it can retain its authenticity. In a particularly telling passage he acknowledges this process in *Confessions*:

I feel assured, that there is no such thing as forgetting possible to mind; a thousand accidents may, and will interpose a veil between our present consciousness and the secret inscriptions on the mind; accidents of the same sort will also rend away this veil; but alike, whether veiled or unveiled, the inscription remains for ever; (De Quincey 1985, p. 69).

The self that De Quincey presents us with in *Confessions* is the one inscription that ‘remains for ever’, however, De Quincey concedes that it may be ‘veiled or unveiled’, that is, he does not claim its authenticity or its relation to his ‘present consciousness’. This is where De Quincey's relevance to modernity lies; he is acutely aware of the inauthentic nature of depicting the self through written discourse. While he undoubtedly incorporated some of the tropes of

Romanticism into his work, De Quincey stands apart from his contemporaries not only by his refashioning of the confessional mode, but also in his quest for originality and awareness that the subject is unable to escape his own words. According to Clej:

De Quincey may not have been the first to be afflicted by the abiding but often suppressed anxiety of modernism, but he may well have been the first to display it in every aspect of his life and work. In De Quincey, this anxiety becomes a form of subjectivity. (Clej 1995, p. 256)

Having signalled De Quincey's relevance to modernity, it is useful to examine the commonality his work shares with the 'Aesthetic Autobiographies' of the twentieth century in more depth in order to firmly establish his role in the development of confessional writing. Namely, De Quincey's treatment of time anticipated modern forms of autobiography. De Quincey recited events 'either in their chronological order, or any other that may give them more effect as pictures to the reader' (De Quincey 1985 p. 69). He transformed chronological time accordingly in order to yield insights through the intervention of subjective time. This was a technique that came to the fore in autobiographical novels of the twentieth century, particularly in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*:

Proust's notion of involuntary memory transports the narrator over large blocks of time, bringing the past to the present moment of narration [...] often processes of tunneling and telescoping are used with respect to the representation of the past and the breakdown of time barriers. (Nalbathian 1997, p. 59)

Where Proust used the concept of 'involuntary memory' to disturb chronological time and fragment his narrative, De Quincey's opium visions can be seen to have a similar effect as they allow his confessional narrative to flow in unpredictable ways and provide a wider insight into the self which is depicted. Moreover, De Quincey's

opium visions, when viewed as an overtly aesthetic device, fit within the framework of what Nalbathian deems as the ‘mythopoetic factor in the transformation of autobiography into fiction’ (Nalbathian 1997, p. 55)

De Quincey's frequently occurring opium visions can be seen to render his life's memories with ‘new artistic perspectives’ whilst also functioning as a device distancing from actual events which, in turn, heighten the self-referential factor of the confessional mode. Rather than simply narrating from experience in chronological order, De Quincey's use of opium visions allow for the reader to gain added insights into the aesthetic self. For example, in one vision, De Quincey comes upon ‘female forms, and the features that were worth all the world to me’ (De Quincey 1985, p. 94) which, with its non-specific description, could either refer to his sister or Ann the prostitute. As the vision continues he describes a feeling of loss:

clasped hands, and heart-breaking partings, and then –  
 everlasting farewells! [...] the sound was reverberated –  
 everlasting farewells! And again, and yet again  
 reverberated – everlasting farewells! (De Quincey 1985,  
 p. 77)

The multiple reverberations of ‘everlasting farewells’ alert us to the idea that De Quincey is not merely affected by one single event, but that his mind is plagued by both the loss of Ann and the death of his sister. Thus, the function of the dream is a ‘mythopoetic’ one in that it takes the artistic portrayal of De Quincey's thoughts to give the reader a clearer insight into the entities which come together to constitute the self presented within the whole work. With this in mind, I would that many parallels can be drawn between De Quincey's approach to the confessional mode and the modernist form of ‘aesthetic autobiographies’ that Nalbathian describes.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, while Thomas De Quincey's claim that *The Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* was unprecedented and original may have seemed moot upon its publication, it is evident that it remains a highly important text when considering the development of confessional genre. As Frederick Shilstone states: 'The implications of De Quincey's insights extend, at the very least, to the whole mode of nineteenth and twentieth century autobiography' (Shilstone 1983, p. 31). Through his use of the dream as a self-exploratory instrument and aesthetic device, De Quincey not only illustrated his understanding of the mind's unconscious processes but also attempted to combat some of the problems that arise upon narrating the self. In his artistic rendering of life materials, he was highly anticipative of the trajectory which autobiographies were to take in the twentieth century and can be considered to play an important role in developing modernist forms of subjectivity. In his own words, De Quincey's work is not only an 'interesting record' but continues to prove 'useful and instructive' (De Quincey 1985, p. 1) for scholars concerned with the art of autobiography.

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