Two

Thomas De Quincey’s Defect of the Eye

This is the doctrine of the true church on the subject of opium: of which church I acknowledge myself to be the Pope (consequently infallible).

—Thomas De Quincey, Confessions of an English Opium-Eater

The autobiographical writings and prose fantasies of Thomas De Quincey offer the clearest, if not the first, alternative to the Wordsworthian tradition. This is not to say that De Quincey sought a radical break from the influence of his predecessor; if anything, De Quincey thought of himself as a disciple and venerated the poet laureate until their gradual falling out after De Quincey’s return to Grasmere in 1810. Even then, De Quincey thought of their estrangement as more personal and temperamental than literary, so powerful was Wordsworth’s sway on De Quincey’s conscious literary opinions. Despite this acknowledged affinity, one finds in De Quincey’s writings a distinct if unconscious departure from the poetic landscapes of Wordsworth. The journeys of De Quincey, like those of Coleridge, are voyages of disorientation that sever the journeyer from both nature and God. De Quincey’s narrators make linear voyages that end in the opium-inspired, labyrinthine realm of the pariah. In Confessions of an English Opium-Eater, Suspiria de Profundis, and The English Mail Coach, De Quincey journeys away from Wordsworthian inno-

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References to Suspiria de Profundis are from De Quincey’s Writings, Vol. 1, Boston: Ticknor, Reed, and Fields (1851). References to Confessions of an English Opium-Eater and other works by De Quincey are from The Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey, Ed. David Masson, 14 Vols. London: A.C. Black, 1896.
cence into a heretical space in which he celebrates disorientation from the normal sensate, social, and divine worlds.

*Departure from the Wordsworthian Landscape*

The journey motif which provides a structure for the first section of De Quincey's *Confessions* is, in one respect, conventionally literary; the departure from Manchester, the walking tour of Wales, and the entry into London derive both from the travel literature of the preceding century (De Quincey mentions Boswell and Johnson by name) and from the contemporary use of the journey as a metaphor for the evolution of the author's mind. But in an important way, this evolution is unlike the Wordsworthian "growth of the poet's mind" in *The Prelude*. Though De Quincey, like Wordsworth, recounts his earliest recollections of childhood, those recollections focus on his determinate, linear path from being an orphan at the age of seven to his downfall in London and his hellish existence as an opium-eater. That journey is defined by a landscape colored by the imagination of the mature opium addict. Unlike the Christian journey of Wordsworth, which attempts to recover or approximate an earlier blessed state, De Quincey's journey marks a departure from what is socially acceptable and what is culturally sanctioned and known. Once the pathway is established, there is no possibility of a Wordsworthian return to a state of social integration, grace, or joy, whether real, recollected, or intimated.

The conscious literary symbolism that De Quincey employs is evident in his sense of "going forth" from the Manchester Grammar School in July of 1802. The occasion marked not only his liberation from the confines of school and familial guardianship, but also his being "launch[ed] into the world" (1896, 3:294). The seventeen-year-old De Quincey dreams ominously in his Manchester study of his past and future when a voice, seemingly audible, warns him, "'Once leave
this house, and a Rubicon is placed between thee and all possibility of return'" (1896, 3:297). In retrospect, De Quincey interprets his going forth as an irrevocable passage into another realm of life experience that his socially conditioned conscience cannot sanction. His conscious articulation decades later is, of course, colored by subsequent experience and a likely desire to replicate the innocence of childhood. Yet, asserting his own literary independence from Wordsworth, De Quincey declares that he knew that he must leave his protected situation, begin his life's journey, and enter a permanent state of exile.

During the travel sequences early in the *Confessions*, De Quincey indulges in his characteristic melodrama. Portraying his journey as both personal and allegorical, De Quincey transforms the Welsh countryside into an overtly symbolic landscape divided from the anthropomorphized London:

> All through the day, Wales and her grand mountain ranges had divided my thoughts with London. But now rose London—sole, dark, infinite—brooding over the whole capacities of my heart. More than ever I stood upon the brink of a precipice; and the local circumstances around me deepened and intensified these reflections, impressed upon them solemnity and terror, sometimes even horror. (3:346)

The resemblance between the reported experience of young De Quincey and the voyage of the Ancient Mariner is apparent in the boundary that marks the threshold of the extraordinary experience De Quincey will have in London. Like the Ancient Mariner, the young De Quincey will undergo an epistemological transformation as the "local circumstances," the domestic scenery which besieges the eye, induce the hyperesthetic and deranged sensations characteristic of heretical space:

> The unusual dimensions of the rooms, especially their towering height, brought up continually and obstinately, through natural links of associated feelings or
images, the mighty vision of London waiting for me afar off. This single feature of the rooms—their unusual altitude, and the echoing hollowness which had become the exponent of that altitude—this one terrific feature (for terrific it was in the effect), together with crowding and evanescent images of the flying feet that so often had spread gladness through these halls on the wings of youth and hope at seasons when every room rang with music: all this, rising in tumultuous vision, whilst the dead hours of night were stealing along,—all around me, household and town, sleeping,—and whilst against the windows more and more the storm outside was raving, and to all appearance endlessly growing,—threw me into the deadliest condition of nervous emotion under contradictory forces, high over which predominated horror recoiling from that unfathomable abyss in London into which I was now so wilfully precipitating myself. (3:346-47)

The "natural links of associated feelings and images" create both synesthesia and hyperesthesia, the dominant literary techniques of the passage. The vertiginous height of the room's ceiling produces auditory effects which in turn trigger a "tumultuous vision." Normal sense perception is suspended and replaced by an imaginative disorientation. Having crossed a heretical threshold, De Quincey describes the moment when the socially conditioned self is destroyed and, with it, any a priori sense of reality. Like the seascape of the Ancient Mariner, the chamber and landscape in Shrewsbury seem to vibrate animistically as the storm "raves" outside: "Wild it was beyond all description, and dark as 'the inside of a wolf's throat.'" In these surroundings and amid the violent sensate disorientation, De Quincey reemphasizes the boundary he has crossed: "Still, as I turned inwards to the echoing chambers, or outwards to the wild, wild night, I saw London expanding her visionary gates to receive me, like some dreadful mouth of Acheron" (3:347). His symbolic journey complete, De Quincey descends into the hellish abyss of London and opium addiction.
After the section treating his allegorical journey to London, De Quincey’s *Confessions* are divided into two parts, the “Pleasures” and the “Pains” of opium. When De Quincey divides his career as an opium-eater into two phases, he transforms the earlier physical journey into archetypal, mental landscapes. Moreover, this division indicates the continuing evolution of his mind and his reasoned attempt to define the personal and literary importance of his opium experiences. Now on a mental journey, De Quincey seeks, in Alethea Hayter’s words, to understand “the way in which dreams and visions are formed, how opium helps to form them and intensifies them, and how they are then recomposed and used in conscious art” (103). His opium reveries and particularly his hypnagogic visions are responsible for transmuting dreams into patterns of thought and expressions of the literary imagination, which finally become part of the landscapes of his prose “dream-fugues” (113). During this process of reconstituting dreams into symbolic landscapes, De Quincey’s mythopoeic imagination often subverts the cultural episteme by re-forming traditional archetypes to meet the demands of his personal symbology. In the *Confessions*, this is most apparent in his reconstitution of the Christian archetypes of heaven and hell as the pleasures and pains of opium. The body of images associated with these two states of mind reflects his conflicted sense of reality. De Quincey is drawn to the pleasures of opium and the accompanying sense of tranquil equilibrium associated with the Christian episteme, and at the same time he is fascinated with the pains of opium and the resulting sensate disorientation associated with the symbolist, heretical episteme.

As De Quincey recounts his early stages of addiction to the “celestial drug,” he quickly counters what he thought was a common, contemporary misconception about the use of laudanum, or opium, that opium-eating made the user sluggish, torpid, or antisocial. De Quincey argues that, at least in the
initial stages of addiction, opium stimulated the intellect and inclined him toward attending social functions, particularly the opera. He also counters the argument that opium promoted the loss of moral sensibility or self-command. Such loss of control often results from overindulgence in alcohol, he notes, but opium introduces the most exquisite harmony and order to the mental faculties (1896, 3:382–96). In his finest hours of pleasure De Quincey reports:

it seemed to me as if then first I stood at a distance aloof from the uproar of life; as if the tumult, the fever, and the strife, were suspended; a respite were granted from the secret burdens of the heart; some Sabbath of repose; some resting from human labours. Here were the hopes which blossom in the paths of life, reconciled with the peace which is in the grave; motions of the intellect as unwearied as the heavens, yet for all anxieties a halcyon calm; tranquillity that seemed no product of inertia, but as if resulting from mighty and equal antagonisms; infinite activities, infinite repose. (1896, 3:395)

During those early stages of use when De Quincey still found opium pleasurable, he experienced "halcyon" states of mind that are overtly compared to the Christian "Sabbath" or "heaven." This is particularly true during his prospect reveries, such as his vision while surveying the Irish Sea, a passage that reads much like a Wordsworthian "spot of time":

At that time I often fell into such reveries after taking opium... when I have been seated at an open window, from which I could overlook the sea at a mile below me, and could at the same time command a view of some great town standing on a different radius of my circular prospect, but at nearly the same distance—that from sunset to sunrise, all through the hours of night, I have continued motionless, as if frozen, without consciousness of myself as of an object anywise distinct from the multiform scene which I contemplated from above. (1896, 3:394–95)
The stamp of Wordsworth is clear. The speaker is "laid asleep in body" during a wedding of the "majestic intellect" with the natural world, an experience recollected later in tranquility.

But here and elsewhere in De Quincey's work, there is an important distinction between the prospect reveries of Wordsworth and his one-time disciple. Rejecting the journey through a landscape that reflects the poetic mind, De Quincey is often engaged in a visionary experience indoors, typically as he looks outdoors through a perceptual frame. This disjunction from the natural world is accompanied by a strong undertone of suppressed sorrow that is inconsistent with the Wordsworthian moment:

Obliquely to the left lay the many-languaged town of Liverpool; obliquely to the right, the multitudinous sea. The town of Liverpool represented the earth, with its sorrows and its graves left behind, yet not out of sight, nor wholly forgotten. The ocean, in everlasting but gentle agitation, yet brooded over by dove-like calm, might not unfitly typify the mind, and the mood which then swayed it. (1896, 3:395)

While this scene reminds one of Wordsworth's ascent of Mt. Snowdon at the end of The Prelude or his reflections on the "still, sad music of humanity" as he gazes down on the sylvan Wye, De Quincey's seascapes (and landscapes), viewed under the influence of the pains of opium, have a more ominous, agitating undercurrent.

Such scenes of apparent tranquility are drastically changed during the later stages of addiction. If during the pleasures of opium the sea and lake scenes evoke a Wordsworthian tranquility and harmony characteristic of the Christian episteme, during the pains of opium such scenes are broken down and replaced with disorienting visions that well from the disturbed mythopoeic consciousness of De Quincey:

The waters gradually changed their character—from translucent lakes, shining like mirrors, they became seas and oceans. And now came a tremendous change,
which, unfolding itself slowly like a scroll, through many months, promised an abiding torment. Hitherto the human face had often mixed in my dreams, but not despotically. But now that affection which I have called the tyranny of the human face began to unfold itself. My mind tossed, as it seemed, upon the billowy ocean, and weltered upon the weltering waves. (1896, 3:441)

It was the opium experience that allowed De Quincey to move beyond the cultural decorations of civilized landscapes and descend into the realm of racial consciousness. Anticipating the archetypal psychologists of our present century, De Quincey refers, in an early version of Suspiria de Profundis, to his troubling visions and dreams as the “abysses of aboriginal fear and eldest darkness” (1851, 196). Conceiving such fears in a Christian context, De Quincey likens the visions to a reliving of the fall and expulsion from paradise: “In dreams, perhaps under some secret conflict of the midnight sleeper, lighted up to the consciousness at the time, but darkened to the memory as soon as all is finished, each several child of our mysterious race completes for himself the treason of the aboriginal fall” (1896, 13:304). Though expressed in Christian terms, the thrust of De Quincey’s idea and the experience it describes is essentially psychological and involves individual, isolated participation. Though the heretical vision may take place in the company of others, communality of vision is impossible. Each may experience it, according to De Quincey, but few attempt to articulate it or embrace it as a viable mode of perception. Most return to the comfortable perceptions of the community.

**Mechanical Models of Mind**

De Quincey’s assertion that such heretical visions are “darkened to the memory” provides us with the key to the relationship between dreaming, opium, and De Quincey’s literary imagination. The epistemology that emerges from his discussion centers on the traditional romantic connection between
the senses and the imagination and yet is based equally on an original conception of the dreaming mind as outlined in *Suspiria*:

> The machinery for dreaming planted in the human brain was not planted for nothing. That faculty, in alliance with the mystery of darkness, is the one great tube through which man communicates with the shadowy. And the dreaming organ, in connection with the heart, the eye, and the ear, compose the magnificent apparatus which forces the infinite into the chambers of a human brain. (1851, 149)

It is this basic tenet of De Quincey's epistemology that led him to adopt various formal mechanisms, all clearly analogues of opium intoxication, that offer a distinct alternative to the Wordsworthian perceptual mode. Furthermore, when these analogous mechanisms are understood within the context of childhood experience, or "nursery experiences," as De Quincey calls them, we see even more clearly how De Quincey's epistemology questions cultural attitudes toward innocence and perception.

In his writing, De Quincey challenges the traditional cultural association of childhood innocence with a state of divine grace. De Quincey modifies Wordsworth's theory of a prelapsarian childhood state by investing his own nursery experiences with images of intoxication, sensations garnered from his addiction to opium. Unlike Wordsworth, who maintained that "the human mind is capable of excitement without the application of gross and violent stimulants" (Wordsworth 21), De Quincey, in *Suspiria*, rhetorically compares the freshness of perception in childhood with the hyperesthetic imagery of the opium addict's landscape: "The nursery experience had been the ally and the natural coefficient of the opium. For that reason it was that the nursery experience has been narrated. Logically, it bears the very same relation to the convulsions of the dreaming faculty as the opium" (1851, 223). In the autobiographical literature, the infant De Quincey is portrayed by the adult author as experi-
encing various kinds of disorientation during childhood which facilitate his visions. More than Coleridge’s modifying colors of imagination, De Quincey’s apparatus are dynamic, disorienting structures, lenses or mechanisms which intensify and distort infant experience so that it more closely resembles his mature, adult visions.

De Quincey’s most important experience of childhood disorientation comes in the whispering gallery of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London. For De Quincey the gallery expresses the interrelation of childhood experience, the journey of life, and sensual disorientation. It is a metaphorical involute; that is, it is an event or object surrounded by a complex of emotional associations. In the Autobiography, he writes: “I am struck with the truth, that far more of our deepest thoughts and feelings pass to us as involutes (if I may coin that word) in compound experiences incapable of being disentangled” (1896, 1:39), and later suggests that such involutes are “combinations in which the materials of future thought or feeling are carried into the mind” (1896, 1:128). Unlike Coleridge who uses the term “involution” to suggest the transformation of a universal truth into an individual one, De Quincey treats involutes as a series of discrete seminal experiences that become inextricably bound together and that recur in our associative consciousness. Thus, for De Quincey, the gallery represents both the continuity and discontinuity of life experience (Blake 639). It is an emblem of continuity because a whispered utterance travels in a circular path from one end to the other, but it becomes a metaphor of discontinuity when De Quincey, perhaps mistakenly, contends that the original utterance is grotesquely transformed. Since De Quincey suggests that the mechanism involves a hyperesthetic transformation of sensation, the whispering gallery itself becomes something like a model of mind, or conscience, and an analogue to opium intoxication:

Thou, also, Whispering Gallery! once again in those moments of conscious and wilful desolation didst to my ear utter monitory sighs. For once again I was prepar-
ing to utter an irrevocable word, to enter upon one of those fatally tortuous paths of which the windings can never be unlinked. (1896, 3:347)

A clear echo of the Shrewsbury hotel sequence, this passage establishes a determinate link between youthful experience and adult addiction. De Quincey thus found a perfect symbolist involute: the coalescence of intense personal emotion, powerful sense experience, and a solemn truth about opium-eating. This association becomes fixed in De Quincey's imagination, for he makes the same literary association when discussing the implications of his journeying forth from the Manchester Grammar School: "'Thou wilt not say that what thou doest is altogether approved in thy secret heart. Even now thy conscience speaks against it in sullen whispers; but at the other end of thy long life-gallery that same conscience will speak to thee in volleying thunders'" (1896, 3:297). As an involute, the gallery becomes an associative complex of deranged sensation, deterministic action, and guilt:

[The] sentiment of nervous recoil from any word or deed that could not be recalled had been suddenly reawakened . . . by the impressive experience of the Whispering Gallery. At the earlier end of the gallery had stood my friend, breathing in the softest whispers a solemn but not acceptable truth. At the further end, after running along the walls of the gallery, that solemn truth reached me as a deafening menace in tempestuous uproars. (1896, 3:296)

In both Manchester Grammar School and the Shrewsbury hotel sequences, De Quincey compares his emerging disorientation from society to an earlier extraordinary sense experience and, in his own mind, sees the journey of his life as fated. There is thus a clear and compelling connection between hyperesthetic sensation and the break from social convention, an estrangement that will be relived in his experience as an opium-eater.

This relationship between childhood experience and the tortured path that led to his adult addiction to opium preoccupies
De Quincey throughout his writing career. In his *Autobiography*, De Quincey struggles with his desire to celebrate the child as an autonomous self enjoying “rural seclusion” in the “silent garden” of Greenhay (1896, 1:34) and his psychological need to integrate his adult and childhood selves: “An adult sympathizes with himself in childhood because he is the same, and because (being the same) yet he is not the same. He acknowledges the deep, mysterious identity between himself, as adult and as infant, for the ground of his sympathy; and yet, he feels the differences between his two selves as the main quickeners of his sympathy” (1851, 154–55). Again, the disorienting structure of the whispering gallery comes to mind: the uttered “monitorial sighs” of childhood are and are not the same sounds that reach the adult conscience as “tempestuous uproars.” While there is a Wordsworthian sympathy between adult and child, the childhood experience is hardly recollected in tranquility. In the opening paragraph of Chapter 4 of *The Autobiography*, De Quincey further suggests how his notion of childhood and adult experiences differs from that of Wordsworth:

‘The Child,’ says Wordsworth, ‘is father of the man’; thus calling into conscious notice the fact . . . that whatsoever is seen in the maturest adult . . . must have pre-existed by way of germ in the infant. . . . But not, therefore, is it true inversely—that all which pre-exists in the child finds its development in the man. Most of what he has, the grown-up man inherits from his infant self; but it does not follow that he always enters upon the whole of his natural inheritance. (1896, 1:121)

This “quickening of sympathy” and the development of preexistent childhood qualities in the mature adult invite the adult De Quincey to portray his younger self as a precocious participant in the “horror of life [which] mixed itself . . . in earliest youth with the heavenly sweetness of life” (1851, 257). As this mixture is analogous to the pleasures and pains of opium, De Quincey applies the concept of spiritual disorientation to his early life experience and the emergence of consciousness.
De Quincey adopts the imagery of disorientation, even for his early nursery experiences, to suggest the fragmentary, discontinuous nature of his divided but potentially integrated childhood and adult selves (Blake 635). He depicts this mixture of selves through the visionary experiences of a precocious child, whose self-conscious visions, through a disorienting pictorial frame, transcend the limits of normal, adult perception. In order to achieve a comparable sense of spiritual transcendence as an adult, De Quincey induced a state of sensate derangement, via opium, in which his normal, cultural perceptions could be abandoned. Through this kind of sensual derangement, De Quincey found an idiom for describing his adult experiences, an idiom which demanded a lens of disorientation that would eventually become a mechanism for introducing similar experiences into his sympathetic nursery experiences.

Many of De Quincey's devices that induce sensate disequilibrium are visual lenses that metaphorically or actually distort the perceptual field. For example, in his *Diary*, he imagines himself "looking through a glass" and seeing a man in a "dim and shadowy perspective and (as it were) in a dream" (156). This kind of visually disorienting moment during De Quincey's adolescence and early childhood is important because it is metaphorically connected with the visionary imagination. In *Suspiria*, when he describes the death of his sister, visual disorientation plays a critical role in shaping a reality that transcends ordinary perception:

Into the woods or the desert air I gazed as if some comfort lay hid in them. I wearied the heavens with my inquest of beseeching looks. I tormented the blue depths with obstinate scrutiny, sweeping them with my eyes, and searching them for ever after one angelic face that might perhaps have permission to reveal itself for a moment. The faculty of shaping images in the distance after the yearnings of the heart, aided by a slight defect in my eyes, grew upon me at this time. And I recall at the
present moment one instance of that sort, which may show how merely shadows, or a gleam of brightness, or nothing at all, could furnish a sufficient basis for this creative faculty. (1851, 184)

The images that De Quincey shapes “after the yearnings of the heart” are happily distorted by a “defect” in his eyes. It is unclear whether De Quincey refers to his myopia, apparently rather severe, or to an inflammation of the eye which occasionally troubled him.\(^5\) Whatever its cause, in the early, unrevised “Affliction,” De Quincey embraces the defect, or what he calls in the _Confessions_ a “mechanic affection of the eye,” (1896, 3:434) as a means of engaging and exciting the imaginative, visionary faculties. His welcoming of the visual dysfunction is a willed derangement of the senses analogous to the opium experience.

The phenomenon of sense disorientation inducing the child’s visionary moment is clearly demonstrated in _Suspiria_ by the vision of grief and death De Quincey projects in church when he mourns the loss of his sister: “Raising my streaming eyes to the windows of the galleries, [I] saw, on days when the sun was shining, a spectacle as affecting as ever prophet can have beheld.” His blurred vision deepens the “purples and crimsons” through which “streamed the golden light” and intensifies the “emblazonries of heavenly illumination mingling with earthly emblazonries” (1851, 185). Because of its mechanical nature, this imaginative flight is thought by some critics to be “inadequate” as a visionary experience (De Luca 67), but the vision is intense and does explore the relation of life and death to the finite and the infinite (Bruss 98):

I saw through the wide central field of the window, where the glass was uncolored, white fleecy clouds sailing over the azure depths of the sky; were it but a fragment or a hint of such a cloud, immediately under the flash of my sorrow-haunted eye, it grew and shaped itself into a vision of beds with white lawny curtains; and in the beds lay sick children, dying children, that
were tossing with anguish, and weeping clamorously for death. (1851, 185–86)

De Quincey’s perceptive and cognitive frame is suddenly disoriented, disrupted by the “flash” of his eye which projects, through an artificial lens, the transcendent vision of anguish and death, a vision that might well have been the product of the pains of opium but one that clearly seems beyond the ken of a six-year-old.6

There are other visionary moments in the nursery experiences of De Quincey which are described through opium imagery, but none is so vividly portrayed or so explicitly associated with the drug as his trancelike vision as he stands over the corpse of his sister: “Whilst I stood, a solemn wind began to blow, the most mournful that ear ever heard. . . . It was a wind that had swept the fields of mortality for a hundred centuries” (1851, 175). This experience becomes a De Quincean involute which, exciting both auditory and visual images, prompts the visionary experience: “Instantly, when my ears caught this vast Aeolian intonation, when my eye filled with the golden fullness of life, instantly a trance fell upon me. A vault seemed to open in the zenith of the far blue sky, a shaft which ran up for ever” (1896, 176). The adult interpolation of the childhood vision appears in the expanded consciousness of a child who conceives of a “hundred centuries” and who witnesses the infinite expansion of space. These hyperesthetic distortions are identical to the intoxicating effects of opium. The young De Quincey, in effect, has an opium vision.

As if sensing this imposition of adult experience, De Quincey compares the contraction of time in his recent childish vision to the elastic expansion of time experienced under the influence of opium:

But why speak of [the vision] in connection with opium? Could a child of six years old have been under that influence? No, but simply because it so exactly reversed the operation of opium. Instead of a short interval expanding into a vast one, upon this occasion a long one
had contracted into a minute . during this wandering or suspension of my perfect mind. (1851, 177)

Despite his disclaimer, De Quincey describes both time and space in his vision as expansive: intonations are vast, the vault into the heavens runs up forever, and these hyperesthetic exaggerations seem “to go on for ever and ever.” The fact that these descriptions are part of a mental landscape that De Quincey had not yet inhabited is less important than what they tell us about De Quincey’s motivation for writing and about the fictionalizing process of his autobiographical works. The nursery and adolescent experiences are an account of his adult experiences of pleasure and pain grafted onto the events of childhood. As such, they seek to explain the origins of his addiction as grief coupled with a precocious but “constitutional determination to reverie” (1851, 147); at the same time they tend to naturalize and sanctify the adult addiction to the “celestial drug” (1896, 3:381), thereby lessening the older De Quincey’s poignant sense of guilt and social disorientation.

In De Quincey’s adult life, too, there are experiences which mimic the intoxication and disorientation induced by opium. One such example can be found in “The English Mail-Coach.” The reader’s perceptual frame is most obviously distorted by the narrator’s opium-inspired imagery: the driver’s metamorphosis into a cyclops, the narrator’s heightened sensitivity to sights and sounds, and his exaggeration of time and space just before the coach nearly collides with the lovers’ gig. But the coach is also a disorienting apparatus which compels a synesthetic view of reality. Through the coach, De Quincey celebrates the “glory of motion” and the kinesthetic sense invades virtually all the perceptive faculties: the velocity of the coach provides “grand effects for the eye between lamp-light and the darkness upon solitary roads” (1896, 13:271) and even enables the narrator to hear the sound of motion some four miles distant (1896, 13:311). De Quincey thus exploits opium intoxication for the formal purpose of disorienting the reader through synesthesia,
transferal of sense experience (hearing motion), and manipulation of narrative pace through the cognitive disorientation.

De Quincey, narrating that he sits atop the mail-coach beside the slumbering coachman who has been metamorphosed into a cyclops, is fully under the spell of opium and has "yielded to the influence of the mighty calm [so] as to sink into a profound reverie" (1896, 13:310). But the dreamlike state is broken by the first hints of impending disaster:

Suddenly I was awakened to a sullen sound, as of some motion on the distant road... Once roused, however, I could not but observe with alarm the quickened motion of our horses. Ten years' experience had made my eye learned in the valuing of motion; and I saw that we were now running thirteen miles an hour. Again the far-off sound of a wheel was heard! A whisper it was—a whisper from, perhaps, four miles off. (1896, 13:311-12)

In the near darkness and moving down the road, De Quincey experiences a sympathetic synesthesia; he does not merely hear the sound of the distant carriage, he hears its motion, faintly and reportedly from a distance of four miles. (The mail-coach is still some fifteen minutes from overtaking the unknown vehicle.) This hyperesthesia, imagined though it may be, is based on a kinesthetic sense of hearing, which has taken over in the absence of vision, which under normal circumstances would have informed those on the coach of the distance to the vehicle ahead.

Just as he distorts the visual, aural, and kinesthetic senses, De Quincey also psychologically stretches the sense of time, a distortion that has much the same effect as the linguistic disorientation created by the competing texts of "The Ancient Mariner." In De Quincey, the reading process is subverted by the competition between the story line and plotted digression.7 De Quincey narrates that as the mail-coach rapidly approaches the vehicle, he is horrified by his inability to act. To accomplish a mimetic poesis between text and psychological state, De Quincey disorients the reader by manipulating the pace of the
narrative to elasticize the sense of temporal progress. When the vehicle ahead is first described as coming into view, De Quincey begins his digression with a hyperesthetic attention to the detail of his surroundings: “Before us lay an avenue straight as an arrow, six hundred yards, perhaps, in length; and the umbrageous trees, which rose in a regular line from either side, meeting high overhead, gave to it the character of a cathedral aisle” (1896, 13:313–14). With his path and speed determined, De Quincey carefully informs the reader that only about one-and-a-half minutes travel time separates the vehicles. Unable to slow the runaway horses or sound the carriage’s horn, the “opium-shattered” narrator reports he shouted two unheard warnings. De Quincey, the master of digression, takes this particular opportunity to reflect on how his action is illuminated by the Aeneid. De Quincey thus playfully sidetracks the reader’s attention with gratuitous narration and simultaneously compels the reader to be alert to the impending collision. At the end of two long paragraphs, about two minutes of reading time, twenty fictional seconds have elapsed. De Quincey continues:

For seven seconds, it might be, of his seventy, [before a potential collision] the stranger settled his countenance stedfastly upon us, as if to search and value every element in the conflict before him. For five seconds more of his seventy he sat immovably, like one that mused on some great purpose. For five more. (1896, 13:315)

What follows is a detailed account of the precise motions of the carriage in relation to the mail-coach. All told, it takes over a page to describe the final seconds before the crisis, the description ending with an extraordinary metaphor that describes the narrow miss: “Light does not tread upon the steps of light more indivisibly than did our all-conquering arrival upon the escaping efforts of the gig” (1896, 13:316).

The mail-coach is thus a device for producing sensuous and temporal disorientations that mirror the effects of opium. An analogous “machine” of disorientation for the juvenile De Quincey who had never taken opium was the “humming-top.” As a child De Quincey was fascinated with the idea of an anti-
gravity “humming-top” that, because of its “vertiginous mo-
tion” (1896, 1:64), would allow his brother to walk on the
ceiling like a housefly. Certainly this fascination with such a
fabulous device was merely childish fancy, but the impetus for
the older De Quincey’s description of the machine is his deep-seated predilection for extraordinary perception. Like the mail-
coach, the humming-top alters the senses and induces a radical
view of the world.

The psychological and sensual disorientation described in
De Quincey’s autobiographical writings and visionary prose is
established through perceptual frames, objects and mecha-
nisms, and physical journeys whose landscapes are determined
by the psychologically and socially disorienting properties of
opium. Accordingly, De Quincey’s nursery experiences are not
recollected in tranquility but come to him in “tempestuous up-
roars.” His life journey, from its very beginning, is punctuated
by a series of critical visionary events which determine its course
and for which he will always bear a guilty conscience. Although
these events in his autobiographical writings are structurally
similar to the Wordsworthian “spots of time,” De Quincey’s
moments—as he pauses over his sister’s corpse, dreams in the
church, leaves the Manchester Grammar School, or spends a
turbulent night in the Shrewsbury hotel—are analogues of in-
toxication which deny all possibility of return to the Words-
worthian state of primal sympathy.