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Thomas De Quincey's "On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts": Black Humour and the French Decadents

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ABSTRACT

Thomas De Quincey (1785–1859) has always maintained a minor but steady following in French literary circles, due primarily to his initial reception by the Decadents in the late nineteenth century, when his work was translated, commented, and imitated by literary tastemakers like Charles Baudelaire and Théophile Gautier. The present doctoral dissertation examines a specific text of De Quincey’s – “On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts,” first published in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* in 1827, with sequels in 1839 and 1854 – in relation to Decadent ideas on aesthetics, nature, and transgression. The dissertation also considers the black humour of De Quincey’s essay, which was selected by André Breton for inclusion in his 1940 study, the *Anthologie de l’humour noir*, where it appears alongside similar texts from a number of French Decadent authors. What is the nature of black humour, and how does it relate to De Quincey’s ideas on pleasure and violence as explored in the “On Murder” series?

Keywords: black humour, aesthetic theory, French Decadent authors

RESUMO

Thomas De Quincey (1785–1859) sempre manteve uma boa reputação nos círculos literários franceses devido principalmente à sua recepção inicial pelos Decadentistas no final do século XIX, quando seu trabalho foi traduzido, comentado e imitado por autores influentes desta vanguarda, como Charles Baudelaire e Théophile Gautier. O presente estudo examina um texto específico do autor (o ensaio humorístico “Do Assassinato Considerado como uma das Belas Artes,” publicado pela primeira vez na revista literária *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* em 1827, com continuações em 1839 e 1854) em relação a ideias Decadentistas sobre estética, natureza e transgressão. O humor negro também é investigado no ensaio, que foi selecionado por André Breton para inclusão em seu estudo de 1940, a *Antologia do Humor Negro*, onde ele aparece junto a textos de autores franceses Decadentistas. Como funciona o humor negro e como ele se relaciona às ideias de De Quincey sobre prazer e violência, conforme ilustradas pela série “Do Assassinato”?

Palavras-chave: humor negro, estética, autores franceses Decadentistas

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A NOTE ON THE TEXT

All citations of De Quincey's texts refer to *The Works of Thomas De Quincey* by general editor Grevel Lindop (21 vols, Pickering & Chatto, 2000-2003), unless stated otherwise. They are cited by volume and page number (e.g. "VI:263"). Other in-text citations (e.g. "Baudelaire 56") refer to the author's work as listed in the Works Cited section at the end of each chapter.

**THOMAS DE QUINCEY’S “ON MURDER
CONSIDERED AS ONE OF THE FINE ARTS”:
BLACK HUMOUR AND THE FRENCH DECADENTS**

INTRODUCTION

The idea for the present study first came from finding Thomas De Quincey (1785–1859) included in the *Anthologie de l’humour noir*, André Breton’s 1940 study of black humour. The anthology is something of a literary curio, and equally curious is the unexpected inclusion of De Quincey among the ranks of much more famous – and predominantly French – writers. For although he was once a familiar name among British reading audiences, De Quincey’s reputation entered into rapid decline around the end of the nineteenth century. As Virginia Woolf once remarked, anyone found reading De Quincey in the twentieth century was “a *rara avis* indeed” (154), and she herself only read him through the influence of her father, a Victorian critic. The slow slide of De Quincey’s work into obscurity was caused by a number of factors – including the nature and sometimes the

quality of the work itself –,¹ but chief among these was the fact that De Quincey was frequently overshadowed by his close friends William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Even today, he is often studied solely in relation to these two more famous writers, and his work continues to suffer from a related critical bias, namely, “our modern tendency to see poetry as the main expression of British Romanticism” (Cafarelli 152), a label with its own inherent difficulties and ambiguities, and into which the prose-writing, city-dwelling De Quincey could not always be made to fit.² For all these reasons, it seemed almost certain that De Quincey would be “consigned to the limbo of minor writers” and eventually forgotten (Roberts 264). However, the recent re-edition of his collected *Works* by general editor Grevel Lindop (2000-2003) appears to have gone some way toward reversing that trend,³ as have two newly published biographies.⁴

Among the French, by contrast, De Quincey has always maintained a minor but steady following. In the nineteenth century, he exerted considerable influence on a select group of French

¹ De Quincey’s work is almost entirely journalistic: miscellaneous articles scattered across a number of periodicals, on subjects determined more often by happenstance and commercial need than by any sustained, intentional line of inquiry. Furthermore, as De Quincey himself was first to admit, this work was often produced under less than ideal conditions. He wrote, to put it mildly, under pressure: sometimes literally in the shadow of his creditors, or of the bailiff, and always under the weight of a debilitating addiction to opium. Add to these pressures a family of nine to feed at home, and one may easily understand why De Quincey’s articles were often received as hasty, desperate hack-work. He describes writing the *Autobiographic Sketches*, for example, “in a coffee room of a mail coach inn; with a sheriff’s officer lurking near, in hurry too extreme to allow of reading them over even once” (Jordan 350). These working conditions frequently resulted in a very uneven final product, with inadequate, misremembered, or fabricated scholarly references. Often, to save time, De Quincey simply plagiarised, as has been shown at length by Albert Goldman (1965).

² On this topic see the recent work of scholars like Simon P. Hull and Daniel Sanjiv Roberts, who have attempted to re-evaluate the work of periodical writers like De Quincey – as well as others like Charles Lamb and William Hazlitt – in terms of their “romantic metropolitanism.”

³ This new edition was certainly needed, since until then the only serious collected *Works* available had been that of David Masson (A. & C. Black, 1889-1890). The Masson edition, now almost 130 years old, was the academic gold-standard for many years, but there were several key texts of De Quincey’s which were overlooked or unlocated by the editor (for more on this topic see Rzepka 2005). It should be noted that for an author such as De Quincey, the bulk of whose œuvre consists of articles in periodicals, this type of publication is of particular importance.

⁴ Frances Wilson’s *Guilty Thing* was published just two years ago, by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, and is aimed at general audiences, indicating a renewed interest in De Quincey’s life and work. Robert Morrison’s excellent *The English Opium Eater* (2009) is aimed at more academic readers and specialists of De Quincey. Previous to these works, the only substantive biographies of De Quincey had been H.A. Page’s *De Quincey: his Life and Writings* (1877), Edward Sackville-West’s *A Flame in Sunlight* (1936), Horace Eaton’s *Thomas De Quincey: a biography* (also 1936), and Grevel Lindop’s *The Opium-Eater* (1981).

writers: writers of the fin-de-siècle Decadence, an aesthetic movement centered on the values of transgression, artificiality, and excess, and which included such authors as Paul Bourget, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Théophile Gautier, and of course Charles Baudelaire. De Quincey was at least as influential on these figures as was his better-known American counterpart (and occasional imitator), Edgar Allan Poe. In the twentieth century, his name surfaces periodically in the writings of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and other major French theorists. His initially surprising appearance in the *Anthologie de l'humour noir*, therefore, is much more understandable when one considers the reputation he has always maintained within French literary circles. The *Anthologie* also reminds us of another fact about De Quincey, too often forgotten: that he was not solely the author of the *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*. The *Confessions*, published in 1821, catapulted De Quincey to fame at the age of thirty-six. For the rest of his life, he would be remembered chiefly for this first major work, and his byline in the periodicals was often merely “the Opium-Eater.” Today, the *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* remains the primary work for which De Quincey is known, and is typically cited as the first example of what has since been termed the literature of addiction. But in the *Anthologie de l'humour noir* it is not the *Confessions* we find, but another, shorter piece: 1827’s “On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts,” an essay which, I would argue, is just as important as the *Confessions* in understanding De Quincey’s reception in France and his reputation among the Decadents.

The Decadents cultivated a sensibility of refinement, over-indulgence, and consequent languor. Bourget defined it as a sensibility of ennui, “ce *tædium vitæ*...le ver secret des existences comblées” (9). In order to break through this sense of boredom and numbness, the literature of the Decadence becomes a search for newer, stronger, and stranger sensations, “taking delight in the perverse and the artificial,” often the criminal and the violent (Swart 163). One oft-cited source of

this gradual desensitization is nineteenth-century print culture: the dizzying proliferation of periodicals and, in particular, the new phenomenon of crime reporting. This idea is not unique to the Decadents, however, and as early as 1800 we find Wordsworth complaining of the “degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation” that has come to characterise modern life – and especially life in the city, where the glut of periodicals has caused “a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies” (449). Unlike Wordsworth, however, De Quincey was an enthusiastic consumer and producer of outrageous stimulation. He was a journalist, not a poet, and wrote a great deal of the sort of gory, sensationalist reporting to which Wordsworth is here referring; as well as a small number of pseudo-gothic texts, tales of violence and murder inflected by the recent fad of the Newgate novel but with a high-brow, scholarly twist (Roberts & Morrison 14). Taken overall, De Quincey’s body of work reveals a long-held fascination with violence, of which “On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts” is the most fully-developed expression. The essay stands out from De Quincey’s other texts, and indeed from most other nineteenth-century tales of murder, in its reliance on aesthetic theory and its genteel, academic approach to the spectacle of violence. And it is precisely this tendency of De Quincey’s – his willingness to intellectualise and aestheticise violence, whether ironically or not – that connects him to the later Decadents, and that challenges our prevailing image of De Quincey as a quintessentially Romantic author.

Unfortunately, a survey of De Quinceyan scholarship yields only a handful of studies on his reception by the Decadents, studies which focus almost exclusively on a single idea: the influence of the *Confessions* on Decadent depictions of creativity and drug-use and its attendant literary gestures (the work was translated and adapted by Baudelaire in 1860 for *Les Paradis artificiels*). However, De Quincey’s *Confessions* is much more Romantic than Decadent in nature,

beginning of course with the project's overt calling-back to Rousseau. Beyond its descriptions of drug-use, in fact, the *Confessions* hardly seems a Decadent text at all. Most importantly to our discussion here, it contains very little humour, and from Breton's study we are made to understand that there is some subtle affinity between black humour and the Decadent sensibility. In the *Anthologie de l'humour noir* De Quincey is in fact surrounded by Decadent writers: Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Huysmans, Baudelaire – many of the main figures are present. Furthermore, as Mireille Rosello has pointed out, a good many of the texts selected by Breton are centered, like De Quincey's, on murder and violence (9-10). In sum, there appears to be an unstated connection between violence, black humour, and Decadence – and if it is to be elucidated then “On Murder” would seem a more natural starting-point than the *Confessions*.

Regrettably, the reception of “On Murder” is much more difficult to trace than that of De Quincey's more famous text, which was quickly translated and widely read in France just a few years after its success across the Channel. The earliest mention of the *Confessions* in French literary circles occurs in 1827, in an anonymous *compte-rendu* and brief translation in the journal *La Pandore*. This is followed by a much fuller translation by tastemaker Alfred de Musset, published under the pen-name A.D.M. in 1828. From that point forward the *Confessions* truly takes off, appearing implicitly or explicitly in the works of Hugo (“La Légende de la nonne,” 1828), Balzac (“L'Opium,” 1830), Gautier (“La Pipe d'opium,” 1838; “Le Club des Hachichins,” 1846), Villiers de l'Isle-Adam (“Claire Lenoir,” 1867), Edmond de Goncourt (*La Faustin*, 1881), Huysmans (*À Rebours*, 1884) – and of course Bourget, whose trips to the Lake District and travelogues for the *Nouvelle revue* were motivated primarily by his interest in the English opium-eater's work. In all these texts, the identity of the “mangeur d'opium” is strongly linked to De Quincey's autobiography in the *Confessions*. And yet, as I have said, it is “On Murder” that would

seem the more clearly Decadent work – the one most closely aligned with the sensibilities of the authors above, and particularly of Baudelaire. It is “On Murder” – and not the *Confessions* – that prefigures the core Decadent philosophy of *l’art pour l’art*,⁵ and is therefore frustrating that so little historical evidence should be available to trace the essay’s dissemination in Decadent circles. George Clapton, a scholar of Baudelaire who has closely documented his reading of De Quincey, argues that there are two major topoi that link De Quincey’s “On Murder” to the philosophy of Baudelaire. These are sadism and aestheticism⁶ – both of which are absent from the *Confessions*. Unfortunately, neither Clapton nor – to my knowledge – any other scholar has yet been able to provide concrete textual evidence of Baudelaire’s having read the essay “On Murder” prior to writing *Les Paradis artificiels* in 1860.

The question remains: when and among whom was “On Murder” first disseminated in France? Its first official translation, by André Fontainas, appeared only in 1901, but the essay was almost certainly read earlier. Foucault alludes – albeit vaguely – to a version from 1849,⁷ and we also know that De Quincey’s *Selections Grave and Gay* – the first re-edition in Europe of “On Murder” – would have been in circulation in France from around 1854 onward. Prior to this, the essay could easily have been consulted in its original form in any number of *cabinets de lecture* stocking foreign periodicals. Nevertheless, in the absence of more specific evidence, the present

⁵ G.K. Chesterton makes a similar observation in relation to the Aestheticists, the inheritors of the Decadents in England, writing that “if anyone still smarting from the pinpricks of Wilde or Whistler, wants to convict them of plagiarism in their ‘art for art’ epigrams – he will find most of what they said said better in ‘Murder as One of the Fine Arts’” (25).

⁶ He sees the theme of aestheticism as the more important of the two, writing: “C’est cette distinction entre la morale et l’esthétique qui serait, si l’on réussissait à prouver que Baudelaire avait lu cet essai, beaucoup plus important pour l’œuvre de Baudelaire que cette question du sadisme dont on pourrait trouver facilement les traces ailleurs, par exemple dans le roman de terreur” (Clapton 16, emphasis added).

⁷ “[Pierre François Lacenaire] inaugurerait le jeu théorique d’un illégalisme de privilégiés; ou plutôt elle marquait le moment où les illégalismes politiques et économiques que pratique de fait la bourgeoisie allaient se doubler de la représentation théorique et esthétique: la ‘Métaphysique du crime’ comme on disait à propos de Lacenaire. ‘L’Assassinat considéré comme un des Beaux-Arts’ fut publié en 1849” (Foucault 290).

study must limit itself to a thematic as opposed to a historical genealogy of “On Murder” as proto-Decadent text.

The study aims to demonstrate two things: first, how the essay “On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts” constitutes a very representative example of black humour (as opposed to satire, its usual classification); and second, how the essay’s use of black humour – its mixing of violence, levity, and affected sophistication – makes it an important though often forgotten intertext to the French Decadent movement. The study will, I believe, go some way toward filling certain gaps in De Quinceyan scholarship as it stands today. In the first place, although De Quincey is often cited as a gifted and highly original humorist, there have thus far been almost no in-depth studies of his comic style. In fact, beyond a handful of mentions of romantic irony,⁸ only a single such study exists: Jean-Jacques Mayoux’s “De Quincey: Humor and the Drugs” from the 1972 collection *Veins of Humor*. Secondly, as has been mentioned, although a small number of critics (usually French) have sought to trace the influence of De Quincey on Decadent aesthetic bearings,⁹ these studies are few in number and limited in length. The exception to this is Julian North’s full-length study, *Thomas De Quincey and the Early History of Aestheticism and Decadence* (1990).

⁸ See John E. Jordan’s “Grazing the Brink: De Quincey’s Ironies” (1985) and A.S. Plumtree’s “The Artist as Murderer: De Quincey’s Essay ‘On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts’” (1985).

⁹ See early articles from the major French journals like the *Mercur de France* and the *Revue des deux mondes*: Comte G. de Contade’s “La Jeanne d’Arc de Thomas De Quincey” (1893), Paul Peltier’s “Musset et Baudelaire à propos des *Confessions d’un mangeur d’opium*” (1918), Randolph Hughes’s “Vers la contrée du rêve: Balzac, Gautier et Baudelaire, disciples de De Quincey” (1939), and Jules Castier’s brief response to this piece, “À propos de Quincey et ses disciples” (1939). More recent studies include Éric Dayre’s “Baudelaire, traducteur de Thomas De Quincey” (1999), and Nicole Ward Jouve’s chapter “Baudelaire and Translation” in *Baudelaire: a fire to conquer darkness* (1980). George Clapton provides the only full-length analysis of the relationship between the opium-eater and his translator, in the book *Baudelaire et De Quincey* (1931). However, as their titles suggest, these works are more concerned with the influence of De Quincey on specific authors (almost always Baudelaire), as opposed to the Decadent movement as a whole. In fact, in discussing Baudelaire, Gautier, and others, these critics seldom refer to them as Decadent at all. (This reflects a broader critical trend: although these authors referred to *themselves* as Decadents, and early scholars followed suit, in subsequent scholarship it became more fashionable to refer to Baudelaire and others as “Classical” as opposed to Decadent – Carter 142.) For an analysis of De Quincey and the Decadent movement itself, one must turn to works like Jean Pierrot’s *L’Imaginaire décadent* (1977), which provides a short but useful section entitled “Quincey” (47-52).

North's later work, *De Quincey Reviewed: Thomas De Quincey's Critical Reception* (1997), provides a more general overview of De Quinceyan reception and scholarship, and may be consulted by any readers seeking to learn more about the different lines of study¹⁰ that have been used to approach the author's work.

As to the present study, in its first half it deals primarily with the aforementioned question of humour. **Chapter one** provides a brief overview of "On Murder" and its 1839 and 1854 sequels, their reception by De Quincey's contemporaries, and some of the more relevant critical interpretations that have been advanced thus far, especially as they pertain to the essay's so-called satirical content. **Chapter two** then attempts to show how this common classification of "On Murder" as satire is perhaps misguided. It looks at the theories of critics like John Whale (1985), Joel Black (1991), and Frederick Burwick (1996 & 2001), who have each suggested that De Quincey may be slyly critiquing the voyeurism of English reading audiences, or that "On Murder" may constitute a satire of Kant's aesthetic theory. However, for reasons that shall become clear, this reading of "On Murder" as hidden attack is unlikely, and the essay's humour is best described as parodic rather than satiric in aim. More specifically, the essay may be shown to follow loosely the format of the mock-encomium, an old parodic form employed in Greek and Latin instruction. Close reading of "On Murder" alongside a Latin declamation written by De Quincey during his time at Oxford reveals the essay to be not a moral indictment, but a sort of self-imposed exercise: an extended *jeu d'esprit* and a show of rhetorical *bravura* for its own sake. This is further borne

¹⁰ After addiction, the most common line of research involves De Quincey's contribution to the tradition of autobiography and his engagement with the authors of other famous Confessions, such as St. Augustine and Rousseau, ultimately providing what we would now call a more "psychological" account of identity construction. The major works in this line are Baxter's *De Quincey's Art of Autobiography*, Schneider's *Original Ambivalence: autobiography and violence in Thomas De Quincey*, and Whale's *Thomas De Quincey's Reluctant Autobiography*. Another very common line of research is, as mentioned, his relationship to Wordsworth and Coleridge. For more on this topic see Jordan's *De Quincey to Wordsworth*, Devlin's *De Quincey, Wordsworth, and the Art of Prose*, Russett's *De Quincey's Romanticism*, and Roberts's *Revisionary Gleam: De Quincey, Coleridge, and the High Romantic Argument*.

out by De Quincey's later critical writings, which evince a theory of rhetoric as intellectual play, as opposed to the more common Victorian view of rhetoric as a tool of civic engagement and critique. In this aspect also De Quincey anticipates the later turn towards Aestheticism, Decadence, and the separation of art from morality. (A modified version of this chapter appears in a forthcoming issue of *Studies in Romanticism*.) After this look at the formal aspects of De Quincey's humour, **chapter three** then examines the more difficult question of its motivation. As proposed above, "On Murder" is driven by black humour, which, like Decadence, is predicated on the belief that one may rise above one's lower, instinctual nature, and turn violence into a purely intellectual and aesthetic experience – *an occasion for pleasure*, as Freud says (162). Freud's (and later, Breton's) account of black humour is in this sense very similar to a principle laid forth by De Quincey in 1823. In "On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*," a piece of literary criticism also deeply concerned with murder, De Quincey theorises that in order to enjoy violence aesthetically, both the writer and the reader must transcend the animal instincts that would otherwise cause them to recoil from violence.

The second, longer half of the present study considers in more detail those aspects of "On Murder" that are specifically Decadent. To this end, **chapter four** examines the theme of boredom in "On Murder" and the idea of violence as a form of entertainment. Boredom (and especially the sort of boredom that results from overstimulation) was an important Decadent theme, as has already been mentioned. In 1886, the editor of a new publication called *Le Décadent* proclaimed: "La société moderne est blasée." Modern man had learned, seen, and felt everything, and therefore: "Il est insensible. Il faut lui faire sentir les choses...par des constructions hétéroclites qui les lui rendent plus frappantes. C'est la mission du Décadisme" (Baju 1). These "constructions hétéroclites" included the mixture of beauty and violence, or violence and humour. As Baudelaire

would later write, in 1867, a mixture of the beautiful with the violent or the grotesque was one of the few remaining ways to reach over-stimulated or jaded ears. He calls them “oreilles blasées,” using the same term as Bajou.¹¹ In De Quincey’s writings on murder, violence is depicted as the last resort of the connoisseur having exhausted other, tamer forms of artistic enjoyment. Like the Decadent aesthete, he requires “a fresh titillation of his jaded senses” (Carter 29), whatever the means. In sum, chapter four asks the question: to what extent is violence presented as a reaction to hyper-stimulation in “On Murder,” and how does this relate to the question of modern boredom as posited by the Decadents, as well as by Wordsworth’s allusion to “degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation”? **Chapter five** examines a second Decadent theme also present in “On Murder,” and equally important to both Freud’s and Breton’s conceptions of black humour: that of superiority and intellectualism. Breton in fact defines black humour as a superior revolt of the mind (10). In “On Murder,” the superiority of the connoisseur is conveyed first and foremost by the essay’s style, the black humour that is replete with offhand, irreverent scholarly allusion. As one reviewer noted in 1852, De Quincey’s style made him something of an acquired taste: “the comedy in which he indulges,” he explains, “is certainly not known and read of all men. It is perhaps *caviare* to the general” (Nathaniel 142). This is, of course, an authorial strategy, common to De Quincey’s work as a whole but especially effective in “On Murder,” where this hyper-refined comedic style strengthens the connection that is established between violence and sophistication, and plays to the conceit De Quincey is building of the murder-aesthete as a superior figure. In this sense, De Quincey’s protagonist in “On Murder” very clearly prefigures the Decadent hero, and **chapter six** examines the relation of this character to a favourite archetype of Decadent fiction and fashion: that of the dandy. As shall be seen, De Quincey’s narrator and protagonist enact all the key tenets

¹¹ “Le mélange du grotesque et du tragique est agréable à l’esprit comme les discordances aux oreilles blasées” (“Fusées XII” in *Œuvres complètes*, II:661).

of dandyism as described by Barbey d'Aurevilly and Baudelaire, and singled out for particular emphasis are the murder-artist's rejection of the nature-cult and his embrace of artificiality. Finally, **chapter seven** considers the figure of the murder-artist in relation to a second Decadent archetype, that of the *poète maudit* – an artist who, like De Quincey's protagonist, pursues his art at his own peril and from the fringes of a mostly indifferent or hostile bourgeois spectatorship. De Quincey's murder-artist is a shifting combination of these typically Decadent figures – sometimes problematically or inconsistently so, as shall be seen – but the emphasis on art and violence remains a constant. This would become part of a larger trend, in the nineteenth century, of what Foucault identifies in *Surveiller et punir* as the aestheticization of crime and the rise of the criminal-as-artist (290). This is a change he traces back to Baudelaire, Gautier, and, eventually, De Quincey, as the present study similarly intends to do. By tracing more closely the trajectory of De Quincey's reception among the Decadents, I hope to challenge prevailing notions of him as a minor figure of English Romanticism, a footnote to Wordsworth and Coleridge. De Quincey – in France if not in England – was read more widely than is typically recognised, and may live on in ways and places not previously explored.

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CHAPTER ONE: THE ESSAYS

1. INTRODUCTION

“On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts” was first published in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* in February of 1827. At the time, De Quincey was best known for 1821’s “Confessions of an English Opium-Eater: Being an Extract from the Life of a Scholar,” published serially in the *London Magazine*, a bitter rival of *Blackwood’s*. De Quincey’s back-and-forth relationship with the two publishers was complicated to say the least, and was marked by at least one violent incident.¹ The choice of *Blackwood’s* for “On Murder” must have been an easy one, however, given the nature and style of the essay. The prevailing tone of *Blackwood’s* was one of high-brow but playful sophistication, combining “an air of exclusiveness and authority” with “a relaxed, personal, and intimate ethos” (Allen 23). The fiction and especially the criticism published in the magazine were at once coolly intellectual and raucously comic in style, and “On Murder” is a very representative example of this mode. Additionally, the “Noctes Ambrosianæ” series, one of *Blackwood’s* more experimental endeavours, had already touched on the idea of murder-connoisseurship some years earlier. Robert Morrison cites the “Noctes” installment of April 1824, by John Wilson, as a possible source, given that it speaks both of fires and of crime as possible

¹ In 1820, De Quincey finally moved to Edinburgh in order to devote himself full-time to his articles for *Blackwood’s*. The same year, the *London Magazine* was founded “as a direct challenger to *Blackwood’s*” (Morrison 201). The rivalry between the two literary publications was intense, with slander, libel, and personal attacks published on both sides. The situation soon came to a head, and De Quincey, “in an extraordinary outburst of indignation and juvenile savagery,” actively fuelled the talk of violence that began to emerge (201). Eventually, a duel was arranged between two members of the warring magazines, and in February 1821, John Scott (the editor of the *London*) was killed. “De Quincey’s reaction to the tragedy,” recounts Morrison, “was very different from what might have been expected. After championing the *Blackwood’s* cause for several months, he now changed sides and ‘sincerely regretted’ Scott’s loss” (202). He published the “Confessions of an English Opium-Eater” in the *London* later that same year, in September 1821.

aesthetic subjects.² However, I would add that there is also an earlier “Noctes” installment, from the May 1823 edition, in which contributor Gibson Lockhart makes light of the same subject. The piece opens with one character explaining how he has come to town solely in order to watch a very promising hanging soon to take place. “You like to see such things?” asks another. “You take pleasure in them?” “Pleasure here, pleasure there, I cannot hide away from a hangin’ – I tell you plainly that I think it’s worth [all] the Tragedy Plays that ever were acted” (592). Another character chimes in that he has seen over a hundred different hangings, “besides plenty of shootings – and all manner of outlandish doings – guillotine – sword – axe” (592). What follows is a lively critical discussion of good and bad public executions, and the merits of one form over another (“a beheading for my siller,” opines one speaker). Clearly, the idea of violence as spectacle – and of the critics at *Blackwood’s* discussing that spectacle as they would any new play or book on offer – was not entirely new in 1827. On the contrary, it appears to have been a sort of running joke at the magazine, into which “On Murder” inserts itself as one more, fuller iteration.

2. “ON MURDER CONSIDERED AS ONE OF THE FINE ARTS” (1827)

Like many *Blackwood’s* pieces, “On Murder” blurs the line between fiction and non-fiction³ by presenting itself as a found text: a concerned citizen has written in to denounce a new secret society, along the lines of the Hell-Fire Club, which calls itself the Society of Connoisseurs in

² “. . . perhaps his most important source was Wilson, who in his April 1824 instalment of the *Noctes* mapped in several of the specific features of ‘On Murder.’ Like De Quincey, Wilson evaluates disasters aesthetically: ‘I call this a very passable fire . . . I fear the blockheads will be throwing water upon [it], and destroying the effect.’ He is preoccupied with criminality: ‘a set of amusing articles might . . . be occasionally compiled from the recorded trials of our best British murderers.’ He blends brutality and intellectualism . . . [and] he even mentions John Williams” (Morrison 254).

³ In “*Blackwood’s* and the Bounds of the Short Story,” Tim Killick notes the tendency of the magazine to feature fiction pieces “which cross the boundaries of fiction and non-fiction, or which problematize the conventions of the genre” (164).

Murder. “They profess to be curious in homicide,” he writes, “amateurs and dilettanti in the various modes of bloodshed; and, in short, Murder-Fanciers. Every fresh atrocity of that class, which the police annals of Europe bring up, they meet and criticise as they would a picture, statue, or other work of art” (VI:112). He then offers the editor of *Blackwood’s* a document which has fallen into his hands: a lecture from one of the society’s monthly meetings.

The lecture begins by defending the principle of murder connoisseurship on which the club is founded, requiring an explanation of the term “aesthetics,” a term not yet common at the time. (The essay’s being the first instance of the word “aesthetic” in the English language is a myth long circulated in De Quinceyan scholarship, but is not entirely true.)⁴ “Everything in this world has two handles,” begins the lecturer. “Murder, for instance, may be laid hold of by its moral handle, (as it generally is in the pulpit, and at the Old Bailey;) and *that*, I confess, is its weak side; or it may also be treated aesthetically, as the Germans call it, that is, in relation to good taste” (VI:114). He gives the further examples of “an entertaining fire,” “a perfect thief,” and “a beautiful ulcer” to illustrate his point. The fire is the most important example, and receives the most attention. It is also the most relevant: fires *were* in fact a sort of spectacle at the time, not unlike public executions, and De Quincey himself quite enjoyed them. In a letter to Wordsworth from 1809, he recounts a particularly large conflagration and its “very sublime effect.”⁵ In “On Murder,” the narrator grants

⁴ Joel Black, for example, says in 1991 that “On Murder” uses the word *aesthetics* “for the first time in the English language” (2), as do many other De Quincey specialists. This many have originated with Hugh Sykes Davies’s study from 1964, *Thomas De Quincey (Writers and their Work)*, which makes the same claim (Davies 24). However, a handful of previous instances do exist – including one from De Quincey himself, in the essay “Letters to a Young Man Whose Education has been Neglected” (*London Magazine* 1823). Earlier than this, Coleridge employs the term *aesthetic* and expounds on its meaning in a *Blackwood’s* article from 1821. He writes in a footnote: “I wish I could find a more familiar word than aesthetic, for works of taste and criticism. It is, however, in all respects better, and of more reputable origin, than belletristic” (“Letter III – To Mr. Blackwood” 254).

⁵ The letter to Wordsworth is dated February 25th 1809, and is reproduced in John E. Jordan’s *De Quincey to Wordsworth*. It describes the fire that destroyed the Drury Lane Theatre earlier that day. De Quincey writes: “I went round to the Drury-lane side: here there was a very fine spectacle: – that, which on the other side . . . had seemed a tower from the effect of shading, – on this side had changed its whole shape and appearance: it was now the pinnacle of a temple . . . supported by all kinds of fantastic imagery formed by the wreaths of smoke that might be interpreted

that from the usual perspective, fires, ulcers, and thieves are all forms of imperfection, “but to be imperfect being their essence, the very greatness of their imperfection becomes their perfection” – in other words, the worse the better (VI:115).

We are then given a brief history of the art, from “the naked air of the savage school,” on through the Greeks and the Romans. He judges the murders of Antiquity to be of little consequence, however, saying that “Greece, even in the age of Pericles, produced no murder of the slightest merit; and Rome had too little originality of genius in any of the arts to succeed, where her model failed her” (VI:117). From there it is on to “the Jewish school,” to the dark ages, to Shakespeare, Milton, and others; and finally to the nineteenth century, which the lecturer sees as a new golden age of murder. Throughout the lecture, real and literary murders are mixed indiscriminately, along with others of De Quincey’s own invention.

The lecture then moves on to the different types or genres of murder, the most important of which is “the assassination of philosophers.” He explains:

For, gentlemen, it is a fact, that every philosopher of eminence for the last two centuries has either been murdered, or, at the very least, been very near it; insomuch, that if a man calls himself a philosopher, and never had his life attempted, rest assured there is nothing in him; and against Locke’s philosophy in particular, I think it an unanswerable objection, (if we needed any) that, although he carried his throat about with him in this world for seventy-two years, no man ever condescended to cut it. (VI:118)

But even Locke does not get the worst of it, and many other figures (Descartes, Spinoza, Hobbes, Leibnitz, Kant), though apparently good enough as philosophers “to have had their lives attempted,” do not escape unscathed from De Quincey’s wit. He spends this large section of the essay giving very irreverent accounts – sometimes loosely based on real events – of times when

into animals &c . . . A great multitude of people was gathered on all sides of the Theatre . . . they were all silent beyond what I thought possible in so large a crowd” (Jordan 101-102).

these philosophers were nearly murdered. Often, the stories bear some thematic relation to the philosophers' theories, or else borrow ironically from their vocabulary. This has caused at least one critic to suggest – though not wholly convincingly – that this section may be a satire of the philosophers' work.⁶ Not all humour is satire, however, and when considered in the context of the essay as a whole, as well as of De Quincey's two later essays (which contain almost no philosophers or intellectuals of any kind), this seems an unlikely explanation for the section. It is perhaps best understood simply as a platform or pretext for the sort of scholarly banter on which De Quincey built his reputation as a humourist, and which the readers of *Blackwood's* had come to expect. It bears noting, furthermore, that De Quincey's use of the terminology is superficial and brief – providing quick punchlines in a rapid-fire series of jokes, rather than any sustained examination of the theories in question. This is a point addressed by V.A. De Luca also,⁷ who argues that the text lacks “any systematic parallel” to its philosophical sources, of the type that would suggest an intentional, targeted satire.

Following this section on the murder of philosophers, several shorter, seemingly haphazard sections discuss a handful of nineteenth-century crimes, including one murder of a German baker that is recounted in the style of a boxing match. There is also a discussion of “the principles of murder.” Although this section is much shorter and less developed than the title and introduction

⁶ Matthew Schneider argues in *Original Ambivalence: Autobiography and Violence in Thomas De Quincey* that this middle section constitutes a critique of the philosophers in question, and that these figures may therefore be the real satiric target of “On Murder.” Yet Schneider only demonstrates how this is true in the case of a single philosopher, Hobbes. A second, different theory of Schneider's seems more likely, when he suggests that the *form* of the essay (a disjointed series of anecdotes in lieu of proof) mocks the tendency of some theorists to provide less than coherent arguments of their views. “De Quincey's primary satiric target in this section,” writes Schneider, “is of course aesthetic theorists who support their arguments with exhaustive citation of often irrelevant philosophic anecdotes” (28).

⁷ De Luca finds many of the scholarly references in the text to be no more than lazy misappropriations. He singles out the phrase “creating the taste by which one is to be enjoyed,” a cliché of recent coinage. “Other boldly brazen misappropriations of common aesthetic dicta crop up elsewhere in the essay,” he continues, “so that the piece takes on the appearance of a parody of aesthetic theorizing. The appearance is misleading, however, for what ‘On Murder as One of the Fine Arts’ scrupulously avoids throughout is any systematic parallel of the burlesqued model such as gives true parody its identifying form” (44).

of the essay would suggest (a common feature of De Quincey's texts is to announce one subject but discuss another) – there is at least some laying out of the qualities of a “good” murder. Always the snob, the lecturer says that “as to old women, and the mob of newspaper readers, they are pleased with anything, provided it is bloody enough. But the mind of sensibility requires something more. *First*, then, let us speak of the kind of person who is adapted to the purpose of the murderer; *secondly*, of the place where; and *thirdly*, of the time when, and other little circumstances” (VI:131). This tripartite division seems at least loosely based on the Aristotelian unities as described in the *Poetics*. What follows is a brief poetics of murder, as it were, and the essay concludes shortly thereafter.

“On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts” was well received upon publication, and would be the subject of more formal critical attention in 1854. This was the year of De Quincey's *Selections Grave and Gay*, a re-edition in book form of his various fictional, economic, and historical articles. Reviews of the *Selections Grave and Gay* do not always mention the essay “On Murder,” but when they do, the comments tend generally to be positive. With the exception of the *British Quarterly*⁸ and the *London Quarterly* (which refers to the essay as “that horrid bit of by-play” and compares De Quincey unfavourably with Poe⁹), most reviewers look kindly upon the series. The *National Quarterly* goes as far as to deem it “one of the best specimens of humorous

⁸ *The British Quarterly Review* writes that: “On ‘On Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts’ we have left ourselves no space to speak in detail, and are happy to be so effectually excused from so doing. It is long since we read it; but its horrors are still fresh, and are, even to this day, sometimes tyrannous. It is simply horrible in its power; and for long after we read it, every night brought a renewal of the most real shuddering, the palsyng dread... *Ach!* it is foul, foul as the pavement of hell. Let no man who has either a memory or an imagination make himself the victim of its prostituted might” (“Article I – Review of *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*” 22).

⁹ “We pass over the rest of the productions of De Quincey, not feeling inclined to linger even over that horrid bit of by-play, the *Essay on Murder considered as a Fine Art*, and its *Postscript*, bearing the date 1854, – in which our author shows himself as morbidly addicted to the horribly mysterious as a man of similar analytical propensity, but vastly superior constructive genius, the late Edgar Poe, of America” (“Article VIII – Thomas De Quincey” 212).

and witty trifling in the language.”¹⁰ Similarly, *Fraser’s Magazine* praises De Quincey’s “subtlety of perception [and] originality of view,”¹¹ and the *New Monthly* “his pensive humour, now dry, now unctuous.”¹² The *Gentleman’s Magazine* says that the essay “runs over, in a manner, with a ripe and laughter-moving humour from first page to last”;¹³ and the *Eclectic Review* calls it “as perfect a piece of pure cynicism as any in our language; not savage...but playful.”¹⁴

3. “A SECOND PAPER ON MURDER CONSIDERED AS ONE OF THE FINE ARTS” (1839)

At the time of its first publication, in 1827, the success of “On Murder” led De Quincey to attempt a rapid sequel. This sequel does not appear to have been accepted, however. (Today, the rejected manuscript may be found at the National Library of Scotland.)¹⁵ It would take until 1839 – a full twelve years later – for the second essay to be published. “A Second Paper on Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts” appeared in *Blackwood’s* in November 1839. This year marked the return of De Quincey to *Blackwood’s* after a long period of writing primarily for *Tait’s*, during which

¹⁰ “. . . one of the best specimens of humorous and witty trifling in the language. Indeed, we know not a single like piece which exhibits so much fun and merriment, without anything low or vulgar, which handles so triflingly a grave subject without offending good taste” (“Article IV – *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*” 88).

¹¹ (61). The reviewer also notes De Quincey’s “quick sensibility, vivid imagination, and graphic acuteness of style” (H.W.S. 68).

¹² “. . . his pensive humour, now dry, now unctuous, alternating and commingling the grave and gay; his forays of wit, his quaint flourishes of fancy” (“De Quincey’s ‘Miscellanies’” 338-339).

¹³ “Mr. De Quincey’s genius appears to be distinguished chiefly by his rich and strange humour; his great analytic power, and subtlety of understanding manifesting genius of a separate, special kind, such as would be sufficient of itself for the foundation of an ordinary writer’s fame. There is the lecture on ‘Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts,’ which runs over, in a manner, with a ripe and laughter-moving humour from the first page to the last” (“Thomas De Quincey,” *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, 111).

¹⁴ “De Quincey is a master of cynicism. Abundant evidence of this might be cited from these volumes, but the chief example lies in the famous ‘Essay on Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts.’ It is as perfect a piece of pure cynicism as any in our language; not savage, like some of Swift’s or Carlyle’s pieces, but playful and full of humour” (“Thomas De Quincey,” *The Eclectic Review*, 115).

¹⁵ On this subject see Richard Byrns’s “Some Unpublished Works of De Quincey” (1956). Byrns brings De Quincey scholars’ attention to a little-known manuscript beginning “To the Editor of *Blackwood’s Magazine*,” composed sometime in 1828. The manuscript contains certain similarities to the 1839 essay, “indicating that De Quincey may have had the manuscript in mind when he composed the later work” (Byrns 995). It may be found at the National Library of Scotland (manuscript 4789, folios 33-36) and is also reproduced in the Lindop *Works* (VI:294-301).

time he published his infamous biographies of Wordsworth and Coleridge. The “Second Paper on Murder” is a shorter, weaker effort than the original. V.A. De Luca calls it “pervasively uninspired in its attempt to recreate the former *jeu d’esprit*” (46), and nineteenth-century reviewers seldom mention it at all, discussing only the first “On Murder” and the final “Postscript.”

The second paper takes the form of a letter to *Blackwood’s* in which the narrator – the same “*dilettante* in murder” and lecturer as before – reacts to the publication of the first article. “[A]ll my neighbours,” he complains to the editor, “came to hear of that little aesthetic essay which you had published; and, unfortunately, hearing at the very same time of a Club that I was connected with, and a Dinner at which I presided...they got up the most barbarous calumnies against me” (XI:398). The letter is an attempt, firstly, to clear the narrator’s name; and, secondly, to give a fuller and fairer account of the Club and its proceedings. He maintains that he himself has never committed a single murder (“It’s a well-known thing amongst all my friends”) – though this impressive abstinence, we soon learn, is less a moral decision than the result of a very exacting standard of taste. “I am a very particular man in everything relating to murder,” he explains, “and perhaps I carry my delicacy too far. [...] A golden mean is certainly what every man should aim at. But...I find it difficult to maintain that steady equatorial line between the two poles of too much murder on the one hand, and too little on the other” (XI:399).

This reticence is also attributed to a certain “milkiness of heart,” which he illustrates with a lengthy story involving his nephew. The young man, despite a total absence of taste, is nonetheless eager to associate himself with the Club – “which has twice blackballed him, though every indulgence was shown to him as my relative,” says the narrator. “You know yourself that he’ll disgrace us,” the anxious Club members complain. “He would fall upon some great big man, some huge farmer returning drunk from a fair. There would be plenty of blood, and *that* he would

expect us to take in lieu of taste, finish, scenical grouping...so that the whole *coup d'œil* would remind you rather of [the work] of some hideous Ogre or Cyclops, than of the delicate operator of the 19th century.” The narrator resolves to speak with his nephew, and to attempt as gently as possible to dissuade him from a career to which he is unsuited. “Believe me,” he consoles the boy, “it is not necessary to a man’s respectability that he should commit a murder. [...] We cannot all be brilliant men in this life” (XI:400). A second story is meant to illustrate the same understanding and softness of heart, when the narrator takes into his service a new servant, also interested in murder. “He had the reputation of having dabbled a little in our art; some say not without merit” (XI:400). The narrator takes him under his wing and offers advice from the voice of experience, recommending good judgement and moderation above all.

“But now about the Dinner and the Club,” the narrator says, veering abruptly to his next subject. The third and longest section of the letter – if it can in fact be said to have sections, seeming as it does to jump from one anecdote to the next, like the first “On Murder” essay – tells the story of Toad-in-the-hole and the Club Dinners. Toad-in-the-hole is a misanthrope and a hermit. As a connoisseur he is a purist and highly exacting – even more so than the narrator himself – and dismisses the vast majority of modern murders. He complains bitterly of “a great degeneration in murder” and makes “constant disparagements of all modern murders as vicious abortions” (XI:401). This changes dramatically, however, when the killer John Williams appears. (John Williams is the same real-life murderer mentioned in both “At the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*” – where he is wildly out of place¹⁶ – as well as 1827’s “On Murder.” He will also

¹⁶ “On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*” (1823) is a piece of literary criticism, and has no justifiable reason for discussing a real-life serial killer, beyond De Quincey’s obvious fascination with the case. In the middle of a critical analysis of Shakespeare’s play, De Quincey enters into a decidedly bizarre aside on the Williams murders on the Ratcliffe highway in 1811. He uses the same artistic terms as the “On Murder” essays, referring to Williams’s “*début* on the stage of Ratcliffe Highway,” and saying that the murders “have had an ill effect, by making the connoisseur in murder very fastidious in his taste, and dissatisfied with anything that has been done since” (III:151). The Williams

reappear as the primary focus of the later “Postscript,” as shall be seen.) Toad-in-the-hole is impressed and overwhelmed by Williams’s crime, “a *ne plus ultra* in art” (XI:402). It even cures him of his bitterness, and he returns – happy and congenial – back to the fold of the Society of Connoisseurs in Murder. He once again attends the club dinners, including the dinner that took place, some years later, in celebration of the Thugs of India. The dinner is recounted, as well as its toasts, the most important of which are to The Old Man of the Mountains (whose trained killers give us the word “assassin” via the Arabic *hashish*), to the Jewish Sicarii, and to the infamous Burke and Hare.

The piece then breaks off with very little in the way of a conclusion, and without further reference to the framing-device introduced at the beginning of the essay, i.e. the letter to the editor of *Blackwood’s*. When De Quincey revises the essay for volume four of the *Selections Grave and Gay* (“Miscellanies”), the letter as framing-device is mostly abandoned. Comparison of the two versions shows few other structural changes, however, with only short phrases and individual expressions having been altered. Comparison of the original and book-form versions of the first “On Murder” essay likewise reveals very few changes or additions. This is in stark contrast to De Quincey’s usual habit of expanding at length on his original texts: the book-form version of the *Confessions*, for example, has the piece nearly tripling in length. As regards the first two essays on murder, however, De Quincey seems to have been mostly satisfied with the texts in their original form. The real change introduced by the *Selections* re-edition is the appearance of the “Postscript,” an entirely new essay on murder written especially for the collected works. It

aside makes at least *some* sense in the context of the “On Murder” essays, or at least of the *Blackwood’s* in-joking about murder-connoisseurship, but “On the Knocking” was published four years before “On Murder” – and in the *London*, of all places, a publication very different from *Blackwood’s* in tone.

accompanies “On Murder” and the “Second Paper” in volume four of the *Selections Grave and Gay*.

4. “POSTSCRIPT” (1854)

De Quincey’s third and final essay is so different from the previous two that it hardly seems a part of the same series at all. Written twenty-seven years after the original “On Murder,” and fifteen years after the “Second Paper,” the “Postscript” is separate from its antecedents both in time and in tone. Whereas the first two are chiefly comic pieces, the “Postscript” is a sort of gruesome true-crime thriller. The 1827 and 1839 essays, as has been seen, are a hodgepodge of short, highly eclectic anecdotes, connected (albeit loosely) by the thread of the lecturer’s speech or letter. All anecdotes bear at least some relation to the central conceit of murder as art and of murder connoisseurship. The “Postscript,” by contrast, focuses on a single event: the Williams murders mentioned but never fully explored by the previous essays (including “On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*”). The “Postscript” also drops the conceit of the Society of Connoisseurs in Murder. It is as though De Quincey has finally settled down to the business of discussing his *true* subject of interest – and, in so doing, is no longer able to maintain the same flighty, easy manner of the earlier pieces. A.S. Plumtree is of the same opinion, observing how in the goriest parts of the tale, “De Quincey is obliged to abandon the ironic method, exposing some of the more equivocal grounds for his obsession” (54). The “Postscript” is also considerably longer than the first two papers (even combined, they come to only about three-quarters of its length) and focuses single-mindedly on the brutal, grisly murder of the Marr family and baby.

De Quincey's reviewers also noticed this very glaring difference between the first and final installments of what the author nevertheless presents as a coherent series. After its discussion of "On Murder," the *National Quarterly* says only: "We shall not enlarge upon the third paper of this series: it is not humorous, it is terrible; it is of fearful, wonderful power – too powerful, in fact, to be enjoyed save by a person of strong nerve" (87). The *Eclectic Review* was similarly impressed by the raw, daunting power of the final "Postscript." After praising the humour and variety of the first essay, it says that the last, by contrast, "is an illustration of the power De Quincey possessed in sustaining and slowly pursuing a [single] subject, until it reached a terrible climax." The reviewer is overwhelmed and fascinated by the violence of the piece, and says that "anything more horribly interesting cannot be imagined, than his description of Williams, and the murder of the Marrs; it has a magnetic force of attraction...it grips the heart with a fearful spasm of horror, and freezes the blood with a petrifying terror" (115). The "Postscript" is in fact a very gripping, intense account of murder – a real murder, it bears repeating, in which seven people died, most of them bludgeoned to death.

On December 7th, 1811, John Williams¹⁷ entered the house of the Marr family and killed the draper Timothy Marr, his wife Celia, their apprentice James Gowan, and, most shockingly of all, the couple's three-month-old infant. All were clubbed to death, and the neighbours who later entered the house were met with a horrifically bloody crime-scene, in the midst of which lay a chisel and maul, the murder weapons that would eventually lead to Williams's arrest. A servant girl, Margaret, had stepped out only minutes before, and thus escaped the violence – although when she returned, she came very near to being murdered as well. De Quincey's "Postscript"

¹⁷ Williams is generally thought to be the perpetrator of both the Marrs and the Williamsons murders; and although this fact is sometimes called into question (see James's and Critchley's *The Ratcliffe Highway Murders of 1811*), for the police and for De Quincey there was little doubt on this point.

focuses mainly on this first murder as well as the near-death experience of Margaret, and, to a lesser extent, on the second Williams killing. This occurred just twelve days after the first, and raised the level of public concern to a state of near-hysteria. On December 19th, John and Elizabeth Williamson, as well as their maid-servant, Bridget Harrington, were all murdered – also by bludgeoning – just a half-mile away from the Marrs’s. Although murder was becoming increasingly common in the rapidly-urbanized outskirts of London, these particular murders had an outsized effect on the public consciousness. “For decades,” writes historian P.D. James, “legends of the brutalities continued to circulate,” and the Williams murders would not be eclipsed until the appearance, in 1888, of Jack the Ripper (xvii). On De Quincey they appear to have had an even greater effect. Although he was not yet a writer at the time, the twenty-six-year-old De Quincey retained for decades the impression made on him by Williams’s crimes. Mentions of Williams surface again and again in his writings over the course of his career, eventually taking their final, fullest form in the “Postscript.”¹⁸

The “Postscript” begins with an address to the reader – not in the voice of the Society lecturer, but in De Quincey’s own as author. He takes a defensive stance, attempting to protect himself and the “On Murder” series from a certain type of critic, “readers of so saturnine and gloomy a class, that they cannot enter with genial sympathy into any gaiety whatever” – readers who complain that “the extravagance . . . went too far” (XX:37-38). This is little more than an authorial strategy, however. De Quincey is manufacturing a sense of controversy around essays that were in fact unanimously well-received. The very rare complaints from reviewers and critics never find fault with the subject matter itself. All seem pleased enough with the premise of the

¹⁸ Even this, however, does not appear to have exhausted De Quincey’s interest in the subject, and he also planned many other texts on murder that were never completed, including “The Confessions of a Murderer” and “A New Paper on Murder as a Fine Art,” the latter of which was to include the story of “a zealous criminologist who dedicates his career to revealing the perpetrator of a murder that he himself has committed” (Burwick 79).

essays: none take offense at the idea of murder as art, although many express their exasperation with De Quincey's long-windedness and sometimes repetitive jokes. Equally misleading is the comparison De Quincey draws between himself and "Dean Swift," claiming sanctuary on the same satirical grounds as "A Modest Proposal." The series can hardly be considered satire, however – the "Postscript" least of all, since it contains not a single joke but takes the Ratcliffe murders intensely seriously. Matthew Schneider also finds the comparison to "A Modest Proposal" rather strange, especially since Swift had a clear goal and "moral purpose" in mind for his critique (35), whereas the nature of De Quincey's purpose in the "Postscript" is anyone's guess.¹⁹ It should be noted here that the original "On Murder," as it first appeared in print in 1827, also contained a reference to Swift. The article was preceded by the following "Note of the Editor," a sort of moral disclaimer: "We cannot suppose the lecturer to be in earnest, any more than Erasmus in his Praise of Folly, or Dean Swift in his proposal for eating children. However, either on his view or on ours, it is equally fit that the lecture should be made public" (VI:1130). This disclaimer was not written by De Quincey, however, who was in fact very annoyed by the intrusion, "feeling that this apology threatened the carefully judged tone of his paper" (Lindop 284).

In the "Postscript," after the opening address to the reader (whether genuine or not), De Quincey enters into a lengthy, detailed account of the Williams murders. Initial descriptions of the killer portray him in the same artistic terms to which the reader has become accustomed. De Quincey describes the gentility and refinement of his manners and clothes ("of the very finest cloth, and richly lined"), commenting also that artists like Titian, Rubens, and Van Dyck similarly "made it a rule never to practise [their] art but in full dress" (XX:43). But such descriptions of the

¹⁹ Matthew Schneider sees the introduction to the "Postscript" (and particularly the comparison to Swift, "which complicates more than it clarifies"), as a typical example of the ambivalence and ultimate ambiguity that define De Quincey's body of work (34).

killer as refined *artiste* are undercut by the many animalistic descriptions and metaphors which begin gradually to emerge, references to Williams's "natural tiger character" (XX:42) and "wolfish thirst for blood" (XX:63). De Quincey also goes against the wisdom of "On Murder" and "On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*" when he chooses to focus on the perspective of the victims, rather than on that of the murderer. The most important moments of the story are recounted from Margaret's point of view. Her return to the Marr house, her knocking at the door, and lingering at the threshold, are some of the most suspenseful moments of the tale. And although some critics have observed how this scene serves to connect the "Postscript" to earlier writings,²⁰ most obviously to "On the Knocking," the overall effect of the scene is quite different from that created in the earlier texts. It is one of oppressive foreboding; and, later, of terror and disgust. Although the first paper advises against excessive bloodshed as over-obvious and even slightly low-brow – fit only for uncultured mainstream audiences – De Quincey's description of the Marr murder-scene could scarcely be gorier. Besides imagining graphically the cutting of the victims' throats in the shop ("the very confined situation behind the counter would render it impossible . . . to expose the throat broadly; the horrid scene would proceed by partial and interrupted cuts; deep groans would arise" XX:52), he paints an equally horrible tableau of the final murder scene, "the carnage of the night stretched out on the floor, and the narrow premises so floated with gore, that it was hardly possible to escape the pollution of blood in picking out a path to the front door" (XX:51). We are here very far from the gala dinners and genteel society of the earlier "On Murder" and "A Second Paper." As A.S. Plumtree has remarked, "if the conflict between the reality and aesthetics of murder reached a precarious balance in the irony of the first two papers, the 'Postscript' leaves us

²⁰ In *Murder and Art*, Margo Ann Sullivan discusses the door-knocker as a symbol of death in De Quincey's work (104); and Robert Lance Snyder's "De Quincey's Liminal Interspaces" likewise explores how the author "uses the iconography of doors and thresholds to explore the dynamics of transgressive violence" (102).

with a sense of nausea like that induced by the Marquis de Sade's repetitive scenes of torture" (60). In short, nothing could be further from the detached and playful intellectualism of the previous two essays.

5. CONCLUSION AND SOURCES

It is this excess of emotion and the intense, genuine involvement of De Quincey with the story that disqualify the "Postscript" as Decadent text, regardless of its violence. Nor is it an example of black humour, lacking as it does any trace of the comic conceits explored in the earlier essays. In the present study, therefore, reference is made primarily to the first "On Murder" essay, with only occasional reference to the "Postscript" – or to the "Second Paper," whose own limitations have also been shown. This circumscription of scope to the 1827 essay will, hopefully, allow for a more focussed approach to the subject of study; although limited reference to the "Postscript" (in chapters four and seven, especially) may prove relevant also. In the following chapter, however, it is only the first "On Murder" that is in question, since the chapter proposes to examine certain formal elements of parody that are specific to the original essay and not to its sequels.

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CHAPTER TWO: “ON MURDER” AS MOCK-ENCOMIUM

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the thornier problems of “On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts” is its liberal mixing of real and fictitious violence. Several of the murders thrown in among its more fanciful tales were in fact very real, very recent events. In the essay, De Quincey mixes examples from the Bible and Antiquity with murders having taken place in Britain only a short while ago, cases that his magazine readers would no doubt remember vividly and to which he refers by name. In spite of the potential sting of its subject matter, however, “On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts” was warmly received upon publication, and has remained one of his most popular pieces ever since. This is perhaps for the very simple reason that it is genuinely funny. Even for contemporary readers, its comedy is something more than the proverbial sum of tragedy and time. And yet this essential feature of the “On Murder” series – its unlikely humour – is rarely explored in discussions of the work. If it is mentioned at all, this often consists of no more than an offhand allusion to the “satirical” nature of the work, though just what is being satirized remains unclear. Most often, the word *satirical* is being used merely as a synonym for *humorous*, with only a handful of critics having undertaken seriously the task of approaching “On Murder” as satire and of identifying its object.

The fullest and perhaps the most convincing of these theories is that of Joel Black, who suggests in *The Aesthetics of Murder* (1991) that De Quincey’s essay may be read as a coded attack on Kant’s third Critique. According to Black, the essay “constitutes a sustained satiric critique of a philosophical tradition epitomized by Kant that consistently assumed a coherent, nonproblematic

relation between ethics and aesthetics, and . . . between the experiential forms of the beautiful and the sublime” (15). This is a view taken up by Frederick Burwick as well, in 1996 and again in 2001, with Burwick amending certain points of Black’s proposal and adding a further possible target of De Quincey’s attack: his nineteenth-century magazine readership, an audience perhaps overeager to consume violence as spectacle. This is a possibility that had been sporadically touched upon by other commentators as well, most notably John C. Whale in 1981. Whale also identifies the essay as a critique of the reading public, and more specifically of the “supposedly elite coterie” of *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* (40).

These theories of “On Murder” as satire are remarkably few in number, however, especially in proportion to the essay’s popularity and critical readership. Also problematic is the fact that such interpretations of the essay as coded attack began to emerge only a century after the essay’s first publication. None of De Quincey’s contemporaries appear to have taken this view of the work, nor do his early reviewers hint at any sort of ongoing controversy or critique. In other words, if the essay does constitute an attack, then it is a very subtle one indeed. Such doubts are compounded when one considers De Quincey’s general attitude towards his alleged targets and his treatment of them elsewhere in his work. As regards the theories of Kant, by far his favourite philosopher, and a figure to whom his own literary reputation was indissociably tied, it is difficult to accept that De Quincey may have been attacking the third Critique. Although he does express elsewhere certain reservations about the German philosopher’s work, these are usually related to Kant’s style of writing and exposition, and much less frequently to any sustained examination of its content.¹ If

¹ Most scholars agree that De Quincey’s engagement with Kant and other German theorists is superficial at best. René Wellek, a scholar both of De Quincey and of Kant, says in *Immanuel Kant in England* that De Quincey engages with the philosopher’s arguments “without any clear comprehension of their interconnection” (179). What little theoretical knowledge is present is “skin-deep” and “seems to have been gathered haphazardly” (180), perhaps from second-hand sources. For more on this topic, see William Dunn in *De Quincey’s Relation to German Literature and Philosophy*

anything, based on De Quincey's copious writings on Kant as well as his own leanings as a literary critic, we might reasonably expect him to welcome Kant's more formal, systematic approach to aesthetic theory, an area De Quincey considered important. "On Murder" takes the idea of aesthetics very seriously (the absurdity in the essay is never the absurdity of aesthetics itself) – so much so, in fact, that we may well accept Black's proposal that the piece contains traces of Kant's work, though perhaps more in terms of inspiration or homage than as attack. Finally, regarding the possibility of the essay's being a critique of the overly violent content of magazine articles of the time, or an indictment of the British public's habit of consuming violence as spectacle, this too seems unlikely in view of De Quincey's own habits as a reader and writer. De Quincey was fascinated by murder generally and by certain murders specifically, in particular the Ratcliffe serial murders of 1811. He even purchased a plaster cast of the head of their perpetrator, John Williams – the same Williams that gives his name to the fictional "Williams' Lecture." Murder as a philosophical problem, the history of murder, and even some very graphic descriptions of violence may be found throughout De Quincey's work in the most varied of forms: in works of literary criticism, in histories and biographies, as well as in the assize reporting done under his tenure at the *Westmorland Gazette*. When De Quincey assumed his very brief editorship of this publication, in 1818, the *Gazette* became more violent in its content, with more and more articles focussed on gory crimes, sometimes to the exclusion of important news.² In sum, De Quincey both wrote and read some of the most violent crime fiction and non-fiction of the nineteenth century, of which

(1900) and Walter Durand in "De Quincey and Carlyle in their Relation to the Germans" (1907), both of whom express similar reservations.

² In *Original Ambivalence: Autobiography and Violence in Thomas De Quincey*, Matthew Schneider writes that "under De Quincey's editorship the *Gazette* became an early nineteenth-century forerunner of today's supermarket tabloids. Customary Tory editorials and general and local news were first supplemented and later almost supplanted by assize reports, crime stories, and anecdotes of the fantastic and grotesque to such an extent that, as Horace Eaton remarked, it 'necessitated frequent apologies for the omission of really important news and communication'" (4).

“On Murder” is an example, such that to read the text as a moral indictment is possible only if one removes it completely from the context of De Quincey’s other work.

And yet the impulse to read “On Murder” as satire is in a certain sense understandable. It stems, I would suggest, from two factors. The first concerns the essay’s humour and the particular style of that humour: with few exceptions, De Quincey’s narrative voice and descriptions in the essay are usually of a very dry, intellectual nature. They display the sort of pointed wit we associate more readily with satire and attack than with other, more benign comedic forms. Secondly and most importantly, a great deal of the essay’s situational or underlying comedy rests on the form-content tension of the language of the essay as opposed to its actual subject matter. “On Murder” is presented as an academic speech given to a society of highly cultivated connoisseurs or aesthetes, and expressed in accordingly erudite language, despite the brutality of its content. This high-low tension is then reversed at several key points in the essay, with De Quincey entering into long descriptions of the lives and theories of prominent men (philosophers, scholars, and biblical figures), but approaching his hallowed subjects in a manner that is comically over-familiar, irreverent, and often punctuated with slang.

This sort of form-content mismatch, the mixing of high and low, as well as the open modelling of more established texts and formats (in this case, the aesthetic treatise and the academic address), are some of the traditional hallmarks of satire. But they are also hallmarks of parody and of the burlesque – two forms which, I would argue, are perhaps more helpful ways of considering “On Murder.” One parodic form in particular, that of the mock-encomium, allows us to account for the essay’s humour in a way that does not rely on a specific target of attack. The mock-encomium was a literary exercise that borrowed the form of the ode in order to praise a surprising or undeserving object. One of its related subgenres was the mock *ars poetica* – and is “On Murder”

not precisely an *ars poetica* of crime, detailing as it does the exact conditions and correct execution of the perfect killing? Still other details reveal “On Murder” to be a fairly standard example of the mock-encomium, and the form is also adopted elsewhere in the author’s work, most notably in certain passages of the *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, as shall be seen. The mock-encomium would have been well-known to De Quincey, an accomplished classicist, since it was often used as the sort of *progymnasmata* exercise common in Latin and Greek instruction at the time. In fact, “On Murder” may actually have been inspired by one such exercise written by De Quincey sometime between 1803 and 1808, during his studies at Oxford. The manuscript was saved by De Quincey’s professor, Dr. Goodenough of Chirstchurch, and though the original and holograph have since been lost, a typescript remains in the De Quincey Collection of the Manchester City Library. It was first reproduced in James Hogg’s *De Quincey and his Friends* in 1895. The exercise, a short essay in Latin, is an examination of the idea of beauty versus goodness – or rather, the primacy of beauty over goodness. Most relevantly to the “On Murder” essay, the young De Quincey argues that certain criminal or evil acts may be more beautiful and therefore greater than acts that are merely “good,” and that while common wisdom would dictate that “what is great is necessarily beautiful,” in fact the opposite is true, and what is beautiful is necessarily great.

2. SATIRE AND PARODY

The distinction is often a fine one, but in the case of “On Murder” it is an important distinction to make. We may agree with Black and Burwick on their assessments of the essay as being an imitation or exaggeration of certain forms and persons in De Quincey’s reality. The essay does in fact ape the form of an aesthetic treatise, perhaps even the third Critique specifically, and it does

paint an exaggerated picture of the reading public as consumers and connoisseurs of violence, as noted by Whale. However, and this is the distinction I wish to emphasise, it does not follow from this resemblance that De Quincey is actually attacking them, i.e. that the essay is satire. Besides its traditional connection to comedy and to truth (the most famous definition of satire is Horace's injunction to "tell the truth laughing"), the form is also indissociably linked to critique. This critique may be gentle or harsh, Horatian or Juvenalian in spirit, but the ideas of attacking and correcting are nevertheless always present. The author has identified a fault and is working to change it. Thus Dryden states that "the true end of satire is the amendment of vices by correction" (I:123), and Swift that the satirist is always motivated by "a public spirit, prompting men of genius and virtue to mend the world as far as they are able" (295).

Another definition is that put forth by Northrop Frye in "The Nature of Satire," which also appears in the *Anatomy of Criticism*. According to Frye, "two things are essential to satire. One is wit or humour . . . the other is an object of attack." He then adds as a corollary that, "in order to attack anything, satirist and audience must agree on its undesirability" (224). In the case of "On Murder" we are therefore prompted to ask: would De Quincey's intended audience really have agreed with him on the undesirability of Kant's aesthetics? Or, more to the point: would such an attack have been at all intelligible to them, assuming it were present? The word "aesthetics" barely existed at the time, and De Quincey's essay provides what is actually one of its first recorded instances in the English language. As for his readers' being familiar enough with Kant's writings to pick up on the very slight resemblance of "On Murder" to *The Critique of Judgement*, and to deduce from that resemblance the workings of a theoretical argument against it, this too seems singularly unlikely, if not altogether absurd.

Rather than as an attack, therefore, a more plausible way to account for this resemblance (as well as for the form-content tension that pervades De Quincey's essay generally) is simply as parody – a form that, as Linda Hutcheon has noted, “is not always at the expense of the parodied text” (6). Nor is familiarity with the specific source-text a requisite for reader understanding. De Quincey's readers may easily grasp that the essay is imitating the tone of intellectual discourse without needing to have read *The Critique of Judgement* specifically. Another reason to look at “On Murder” as parody is its distinct resemblance to a specific parodic form popular in England until the end of the eighteenth century, that of the mock-encomium.

3. “ON MURDER” AS MOCK-ENCOMIUM

The mock-encomium may be defined as the praise of unlikely or unworthy subjects, following as closely as possible the formal rules of the traditional encomium or ode. According to Grafton et al.,

this genre extols cowardly figures such as Thersites (from the opening of the *Iliad*), vicious actions such as lying, or trivial things – the gout, pots, pebbles, even Nothing itself. The earliest examples appear in the works of Greek rhetoricians, notably Isocrates' ironic praise of Helen. Influential Latin examples include the pseudo-Virgilian *Culex* (Mosquito, or Gnat), the pseudo-Ovidian *Nux* (Nut), and, from the 2nd century CE, Marcus Cornelius Fronto's *Praise of Smoke and Dust*, Lucian's *Praise of a Fly*, and pseudo-Lucian's *Trapopodagra* (a tragedy on the gout) . . . Erasmus wrote the masterpiece of the genre, *Moriæ Encomium* (*Praise of Folly*, 1509), a wide-ranging satire on the manners and morals of early modern Europe. (219-220)

As the passage indicates, the form was sometimes associated with critique, as in the case of Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*, but most mock-encomia were simply forms of textual play, extravagant demonstrations of the encomiast's rhetorical ability. Henry Knight Miller calls such mock-encomia “sheer *jeux d'esprit*, rhetorical setpieces, born of the desire to demonstrate the ingenuity

and skill of their authors” (168). They were, in short, feats of *bravura* for their own sake. This *bravura* could be achieved by the praise of trivialities such as the nut or the gnat as mentioned above, but the most skillful encomia were typically those that managed to praise much more counter-intuitive subjects, and to make false but convincing arguments in their favour. As Arthur Pease explains, the truly ambitious encomiast looked “rather to the more paradoxical forms of this type than to the mere glorification of the trivial and the minute” (31). This meant the praise of unambiguously blameworthy subjects, “the unpopular or the despised” (30), and even the criminal, into which category we may easily class De Quincey’s “On Murder.”

Still more points of similarity exist between De Quincey’s 1827 essay and the tradition of the mock-encomium. Joel Black and Frederick Burwick both point to the sublime as an important undercurrent in the essay (and discussions of the sublime and of the different forms thereof are in fact present throughout De Quincey’s body of work). It is therefore interesting to note that a number of mock-encomia were partly inspired by a text of Longinus’s entitled *Peri Hypsous* or *On the Sublime* (Miller 166-167). Longinus’s text is among the first examples of the aesthetic treatise, a precursor to the *ars poetica* or more generalised “art of” format which was to become such a standard literary fixture, as indeed it remains today. In fact, as Miller explains, the mock *ars poetica* constituted its own small sub-genre closely related to that of the mock-encomium, and enjoyed a slight increase in popularity in England during the eighteenth century. Some examples from this period include Bramston’s *Art of Politics* as well as other humorous guides to the arts of punning, angling, and lying (Miller 167, note 130).

De Quincey’s essay could very well have been titled “The Art of Murder,” and follows many of the same basic steps as the mock *ars poetica*, laying out the proper method and ideal conditions for violence. “*First*, then,” outlines the narrator, “let us speak of the kind of person who

is adapted to the purpose of the murderer; *secondly*, of the place where; *thirdly*, of the time when” (VI:131). It details the proper *dispositio* to be followed – “composition . . . grouping, light and shade” (VI:113) – as well as the proper choice of subject. Moral rather than immoral victims are preferred, as are victims with children. “Public characters” and other famous figures will not do; nor will the sick. “It is absolutely barbarous,” he insists, “to murder a sick person, who is usually unable to bear it” (VI:132). “As to the time, the place, and the tools,” however, he claims to have less time to explain (VI:132), though we are given to understand that the personal approach is best. “The legitimate style,” namely knifework, is preferred (“Fie on these dealers in poison . . . can they not keep to the old honest way of cutting throats, without introducing such abominable innovations from Italy?” VI:126-127) – but knifework, we are told, is not synonymous with blood. On the contrary, blood is deemed “gaudy” and lower-class, and something that “the enlightened connoisseur . . . more refined in his taste” should seek to avoid as much as possible (VI:132). In passages like these, “On Murder” strongly recalls the *ars poetica* subgenre of the mock-encomium.

In England, the mock-encomium reached its highest point of popularity in the eighteenth century, but then fell into disuse (Grafton et al. 220). By the beginning of the nineteenth century, only a handful of authors still employed it. Notable among these was Charles Lamb, who wrote “The Praise of Chimney Sweepers” in 1822 and “The Ass” in 1825, partly in reference to a text called *The Nobleness of the Ass: a worke rare, learned, and excellent* from 1595. (It bears noting that De Quincey was a close friend of the Lambs’s and a great admirer of Charles’s work, in particular of his humour).³ Nevertheless, by this time the overall trend was away from the mock-encomium. Miller attributes its decline to the loss of the reading public’s familiarity with rhetoric,

³ In “The Final Memorials of Charles Lamb,” De Quincey praises Lamb’s “pensiveness chequered by gleams of the fanciful, and the humour that is touched with cross-lights of pathos” (XVI:367).

since “the parody of the rules of orthodox panegyric fails of effect when the rhetorical context is lost; and the neglect of such studies in the modern era is notorious” (172). De Quincey was of the same opinion, complaining in 1828 that “the age of Rhetoric, like that of Chivalry, is gone” (VI:163). The phrase is from his essay “The Elements of Rhetoric,” a review of Richard Whately’s recently published book, soon to become the standard work of rhetorical theory of the nineteenth century. In the article, De Quincey criticises Whately’s utilitarian view of the art and especially his assertion that style must be subservient to function, namely the function of persuasion (VI:184). De Quincey sees this as a sign of the times, however, and not particular to Whately. He laments the modern degradation of rhetoric to a mere *ars utens* – “rhetoric as a practical art” (VI:161). This is attributed to the “vulgarity” and professionalisation of nineteenth-century political life, among other modern vices. In such conditions, he complains, true beauty cannot long survive, and “the rhetorician’s art, in its glory and power, has silently faded away before the stern tendencies of the age” (VI:163).

As his review of Whately makes clear, De Quincey could be conservative to the point of snobbery where rhetoric was concerned. He made frequent contributions to *Blackwood’s*, *Tait’s*, and the *Edinburgh Saturday Post* on the subjects of Greek and Roman history and literature, and was considered something of an unofficial authority on ancient languages and rhetoric. During his time at Oxford, he gained considerable attention for his mastery of Greek – both written and spoken – and this remained something of a pet vanity of De Quincey’s for all his life. It is therefore easy to see “On Murder” as, firstly, a harkening back to more traditional literary forms; and, secondly, as a chance for De Quincey to display his considerable abilities both as a rhetor and a logician. A widely-repeated anecdote from his younger years (first put into circulation by De Quincey himself in the *Confessions*) has his professor pointing him out to a visitor and saying: “That boy could

harangue an Athenian mob better than you or I could address an English one” (II:14). This was because De Quincey made a habit of improving his Greek and Latin daily with short language-exercises: translating news clippings, for example, or writing out a short piece of his own. This meant that his schoolwork was always of the highest quality. Proof of this can be seen in one such exercise left over from his time at Worcester College, a declamation or theme to be written on the following phrase: “Non id, quod magnum est, pulchrum est; sed id quod pulchrum magnum.” The phrase is of uncertain origin but can be found in a number of anthologies of Latin sayings,⁴ and is frequently translated thus: “Not that which is great is fine, but that which is fine is great.” The variants *praiseworthy* and *laudable* are also sometimes used. However, in other contexts, the Latin *pulchrum* is almost always rendered as *beautiful*, and this appears to be the sense De Quincey chooses for his response, as shall be seen. Considered in this light, the essay becomes a sort of treatise on ethics and aesthetics, with the latter ultimately triumphing over the former, in a way that strongly recalls the central premise of “On Murder.”

4. AN EARLY RHETORICAL EXERCISE

What follows is the original Latin exercise written by De Quincey, as well as the English translation by Richard Garnett. Both the exercise and the translation first appeared in James Hogg’s *De Quincey and his Friends* (1895, pp. 104-106), and may also be found in the Lindop collected *Works* (I:77-79). The phrase which appears in bold was not written by De Quincey but rather provided by the *grammaticus* or rhetoric professor as a starting-point for the students’ theme. As

⁴ See for example *A Dictionary of Quotations from Various Authors in Ancient and Modern Languages* (1831, page 262), *The Dictionary of Latin Quotations, Proverbs, Maxims and Mottos* (1856, page 279), *The Macmillan Book of Proverbs, Maxims and Famous Phrases* (1948, page 139), and *The Routledge Dictionary of Latin Quotations* (2005, page 76).

of the Oxford Revisions of 1636, all undergraduate students were required to take classes in rhetoric (Clarke 61), and as of the Hart Hall statutes of 1747, they were also required to write at least one declamation or theme per week (71). This was a common writing exercise, for which the professor provided a specific question or subject, often in the form of a quotation, and had pupils demonstrate their proficiency in logic (by providing convincing arguments for their view) as well as rhetoric (with compelling writing-style and adequate *inventio*, *dispositio*, etc).

‘A thing is not fine because it is great, but is great because it is fine. (Or, less literally, Merit, not magnitude, is the measure of greatness.)’

The desire to overcome the greatest obstacles which impede adventurous undertakings, and the resolution of overcoming them by one’s own unaided efforts, are the property of nothing less than greatness; for the timid weakness of an inferior mind recoils from whatsoever is arduous. But the greatest obstacles commonly arise in the execution of nefarious designs; whence not unfrequently in deeds of the greatest turpitude a deadly splendour has shone forth from the mind striking terror into the nations, and sometimes an elevated soul has exulted with a lurid smile in the commission of some peculiarly atrocious action: insomuch that the eyes of posterity are yet held spellbound by the dazzling crimes of some illustrious robbers. A great action, therefore, is not necessarily a fine action.

But whatsoever is fine is necessarily also great; for true Virtue has her birth in that innate force of the mind whereby she is incited to aim at something yet higher, and therefore is great in her origin: but also chiefly consists in the rigid restraint of unbridled impulse (which is the greatest of all dominion), and is therefore great in herself; but attains her end in rendering her votaries akin to some more exalted Nature, and therefore proves her greatness by the effects which she produces.

Although, therefore, the mass of men, not being themselves partakers of greatness, have often misconstrued the definition of true glory, and hence have misnamed many most celebrated actions – yet there are some wicked deeds that may truly be termed great; but there are no manifestly fine actions that are not at the same time great also.

‘Non id, quod magnum est, pulchrum est; sed quod pulchrum, magnum.’

Velle maxima obstacula, quæ ansibus obstant, superare et per seipsum jurare esse superaturum – non est nisi magni; refugit enim ab omni arduo minoris animi timida imbecillitas: at plerumque in consiliis nefariis maxima oriuntur obstacula; unde non raro, in factis maxime facinorosis animi emicuit lethalis splendor populis incutiens terrorem; et aliquando summa anima in facinore maximo luride subridens exultavit:

hinc illustrium aliquot prædonum fulgente scelere oculi posteriorum adhuc perstringuntur. Non est ergo necesse magnum esse pulchrum.

Sed patet omne pulchrum esse necessario magnum: vera enim virtus ortum habet ex ingenita vi mentis qua ad altius quiddam affectandum incitatur, ideoque magna est in origine; – posita est autem maxima ex parte in rigida effrænati impetus disciplina (quæ est maximum imperium) et est ideo magna in seipsa; finem vero assequitur in cultores suos naturæ alicui sublimiori affines efficiendo, et magnam ergo se præstat in effectum.

Quamvis igitur plerique, cum non sint ipsi magni veræ magnitudinis fines sæpe prave dijudicârunt et hinc gestis multis notissimis falsum nomen impresserint, - sunt tamen aliquot nefanda facta quæ revera sunt magna, nulla vero evidenter pulchra quæ non simul magna. (Hogg 104-106)

There are several ideas in this short text that subtly announce the theme of “On Murder” – beginning of course with the initial quotation, which, though not selected by De Quincey, inspires a compelling response on his part. Although Garnett chooses to render the quotation’s *pulchrum* as *fine*, apparently in the sense of *meritorious*, the English *beautiful* is a closer and more frequent translation of the word, as has been said. We should therefore understand the initial quotation to mean something more along the lines of the following: “It is not the case that that which is great is therefore beautiful, but rather that that which is beautiful is therefore great.” This change from *fine* to the closer *beautiful* is crucial, because De Quincey then applies the given quotation to *acts*, and there is a considerable difference between the idea of a “fine act” and that of a “beautiful act.” It is the latter that interests De Quincey, and in his response he is not so much contrasting fineness with greatness, as opposing greatness to beauty, with the latter emerging as superior. According to De Quincey’s reasoning in the essay, beauty is rarer than greatness, since all beautiful acts are great, but not all great acts are beautiful. In other words, beauty is more difficult a condition to fulfill than is greatness. It is a *sufficient condition* of greatness, whereas greatness is at most a *necessary condition* of beauty, among further conditions not specified. As proof of this fact, De Quincey offers the example of great acts that would not be considered beautiful. There are, he explains, certain crimes, nefarious designs or *consiliis nefariis* which may strike terror and awe

into the hearts of men, yet are not *pulchrum* or beautiful in the traditional, agreeable sense. We may see in this passage an early example of the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime which was to appear elsewhere in De Quincey's work – including, if we are to believe Joel Black and others, in “On Murder.”

In contrasting beauty and greatness in this way, De Quincey's essay also ends up contrasting beauty and goodness, since the examples provided tend to draw a line between the admirability of an act and its moral or ethical content. Aesthetics is presented as separate from ethics, as will also be the case in the 1827 essay. The spirit of this early piece is not identical to that of “On Murder,” however, due mainly to the reliance on “Virtue” and “Nature” as ultimate measures of merit in paragraph two (although De Quincey's use of these words is uncharacteristically vague and, one senses, perfunctory). The question remains: can crime be beautiful? This particular essay does not say. Although the initial example implicitly opposes *nefandum* to *pulchrum* by presenting the case of a crime that is not beautiful, the text does not say that *nefandum* and *pulchrum* are mutually exclusive. There may well be crimes that achieve the condition of beauty as well as greatness, though it will remain for “On Murder” to show how.

More than anything else, however, it is the description in paragraph one which most recognizably prefigures the particular sensibility, if not the actual arguments, of “On Murder.” Firstly, there is the idea of great crimes as being the work of superior natures, as opposed to the “inferior minds” that will instinctively shrink from such acts. Also as in “On Murder,” De Quincey notes the way that some crimes may be so vile that their very vileness becomes their perfection. They are “ideals after their kind,” to borrow the expression used in the later essay. Thus “deeds of the *greatest* turpitude” and “*peculiarly* atrocious action[s]” are able to transcend the category of usual crimes and therefore also of the usual responses that such crimes will elicit. Instead of

causing aversion, these almost heroic acts emit “a deadly splendour” and a sort of terrible yet fascinating appeal, “insomuch that the eyes of posterity are yet held spellbound by the dazzling crimes of some illustrious [criminals].” The specific crime in question is robbery (he speaks of *prædonum* – pirates or thieves), but De Quincey’s statement may easily be extended to murder as well, an act more terrible in its *nefas* and therefore of potentially higher-order greatness.

5. DE QUINCEY AND RHETORIC

This willingness to explore counter-intuitive or even untenable positions would become a hallmark of De Quincey’s writing in later life, as would his separation between the moral and aesthetic functions of a text. This distinction marks his literary criticism also, as may be seen in his reading of Lessing’s *Laocoon*. Lessing’s now famous 1766 treatise (which De Quincey was first to translate, and helped popularize in England) is an obvious intertext to “On Murder,” dealing as it does with the possibility of an aesthetics of violence.⁵ In an article on Lessing that accompanies his translation of the *Laocoon*, De Quincey engages critically with the author’s assessment of a text of Virgil’s. In a passage of the *Georgics*, Virgil waxes poetic on the decidedly un-poetic subject of a cow. Here Lessing assumes that Virgil’s purpose must be “didactic” rather than aesthetic in nature, since, as De Quincey paraphrases, “if his purpose had been beauty, why lavish his power upon so poor an occasion?” (“Lessing – Postscript on Didactic Poetry” VI:70) De Quincey believes Lessing to be in error, however, arguing that the idea of purely didactic poetry amounts to a contradiction in terms. He also argues that Virgil may have many sound rhetorical

⁵ Some critics have seen Lessing’s treatise as one in a series of German texts that provided the conditions of emergence for the Decadent movement. For more on this subject, see R.F. Egan’s “The Genesis of the Theory of ‘Art for Art’s Sake’ in Germany and in England” (1921).

reasons for lavishing his poetic powers on so low a subject – reasons that relate directly to De Quincey’s own “On Murder.” The first reason is simple: “He may have described the cow – 1. As a *difficult* and intractable subject by way of *bravura*, or passage of execution” (VI:71, emphasis in original). In other words, Virgil has chosen the cow precisely *because* of its unsuitability to poetic treatment, which unsuitability affords the poet an opportunity to display his skill. De Quincey then offers a further possible reason for the choice of subject: he may have chosen it “as an *ideal*: the cow is an ideal cow in her class . . . *maximum perfectionis* (as the old metaphysicians called it)” (VI:71). This is identical to the proposal in “On Murder” that such evils as fires, ulcers, or crimes may achieve the condition of beauty if they are “ideals after their kind” (VI:115). “On Murder” is in fact predicated on this notion of the aesthetic ideal. “However objectionable *per se*,” he explains in the essay, “relatively to others of their class, both a thief and an ulcer may have infinite degrees of merit. They are both imperfections, it is true; but to be imperfect being their essence, the very greatness of their imperfection becomes their perfection” (VI:115). The same argument is made in both essays – which were published, it should be noted, just under a month apart. The piece on Lessing appeared in *Blackwood’s* January 1827 edition, and “On Murder” in the following February issue.

The notion that counter-intuitive subjects may in fact constitute the best subjects for rhetorical treatment was one to which De Quincey frequently returned, both in his criticism and in his own creative work. As concerns the specific form of the mock-encomium, and the opportunity it affords to turn conventional wisdom on its head (as well as to display De Quincey’s considerable rhetorical skill, erudition, and the humour for which he was frequently praised), shorter examples of the style are to be found throughout his writings, including in pieces of a supposedly more serious nature. Consider his best-known text, the *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*.

Although unlikely to be classified as humour, like most of De Quincey's texts the *Confessions* is punctuated with short flashes of wit and comical anecdotes from history and from the author's life. The parodic style of the mock-encomium is also a frequent back-channel of humour into the text, beginning with what is perhaps its most famous and most oft-quoted passage. Early in the *Confessions*, De Quincey provides what can only be called a mock *ode to opium* – a grand, exultatory speech with distinctly religious undertones:

Oh! just, subtle, and mighty opium! that to the hearts of poor and rich alike, for the wounds that will never heal, and for 'the pangs that tempt the spirit to rebel,' bringest an assuaging balm; eloquent opium! that with thy potent rhetoric stealest away the purposes of wrath; and to the guilty man, for one night givest back the hopes of his youth, and hands washed pure of blood . . . (II:51)

The passage is clearly parodic in nature, though not necessarily critical, either toward opium or toward the religious odes it recalls. It is a miniature mock-encomium of a profane subject praised in sacred style. For Alina Clej, the famous passage “contains an undeniable element of parody,” specifically of Augustine's laudatory prayer in book one of his own *Confessions* (Clej 95). Still others have identified Raleigh's *History of the World* as a possible source (Hayter 105). Raleigh's ode to death in book five begins with an invocation strikingly similar to De Quincey's: “O eloquent, just, and mighty Death! whom none could advise, thou hast persuaded; what none hath dared, thou hast done . . .” and so forth (VII:900). However, as has already been mentioned, when it comes to parody it is not strictly necessary to identify the specific text under imitation. De Quincey's passage is immediately recognisable as being in the mock-heroic style, quite regardless of the reader's familiarity with Augustine or Raleigh's odes.

De Quincey's *Confessions* contains yet another mock-encomiastic passage, a more obviously comical ode to the English winter. De Quincey claims that while summer is the season most typically associated with happiness, this honour should instead go to the winter months:

This is a most important point in the science of happiness. And I am surprised to see people overlook it, and think it a matter of congratulation that winter is going . . . On the contrary, I put up a petition annually, for as much snow, hail, frost, or storm, of one kind or other, as the skies can possibly afford us . . . And it is evident, that most of these delicacies, like ice-cream, require a very low temperature of the atmosphere to produce them . . . I am not “*particular*,” as people say, whether it be snow, or black frost, or wind so strong, that (as Mr. --- says) “you may lean your back against it like a post.” I can put up even with rain, provided it rains cats and dogs: and, if I have it not, I think myself in a manner ill-used . . . 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 . . . (II:59)

What appears above has been cut considerably for length, but the fragment provides a good idea of the sort of scientific, gastronomical, and aesthetic pseudo-arguments that De Quincey is able to tack together in favour of a comically backward view. Returning to the later “On Murder,” it also bears noting how his self-positioning in the passage as an inverted “epicure” or reverse-hedonist, luxuriating in unpleasantness rather than comfort, closely resembles the persona of the murder-connoisseur as described in “On Murder.”

What explains this frequent return to mock-encomia and the lively defense of untenable positions? Firstly, as mentioned, they are an integral part of the inventiveness and wit that De Quincey injects into almost all of his texts, from the personal to the academic. Even his essays on political economy are frequently peppered with the sort of comic relief displayed in the passages above. And beyond their comic appeal, such rhetorical exercises also afford De Quincey the chance to display his skills as a casuist – a term with negative connotations today, but which De Quincey himself used in a positive sense to mean someone with especially fine reasoning skills and a solid grasp of formal logic. De Quincey enjoyed the particular challenge of defending untenable positions. In an essay from 1841 entitled “On Style IV” – one of a series of essays on the subject of writing and rhetoric – he expounds a particularly De Quinceyan theory according to which the truth and objectivity of an idea are inversely related to the skill required to expound it. In other

words, the more obviously true an idea, the easier it is to explain and defend. Scientific writing, therefore, or any writing on what he calls “objective” topics, requires the least amount of rhetorical ability on the part of the author. Such things are “self-explained and self-sustained” (XII:73). On the other end of the spectrum, however, an author may engage in the sort of “exercise of the mind” which, because it does not rest on “ponderable facts and external realities,” and may even contradict them, must draw all its strength from the quality of the argumentation and the fineness of the writing. Thus, “all subjective branches of study favour the cultivation of style” (XII:73). This of course includes the sort of imaginary exercise attempted in an essay like “On Murder,” especially since it may directly contradict or invert a number of patent truths.

This makes “On Murder” an essentially perfect rhetorical exercise. As a mock-encomium, it is precisely the sort most favoured by rhetorical schools – and particularly by the sophists – as ideally suited to perfecting the skills of the student and displaying the skills of the master, since far more difficult than the praise of trivialities is what Grafton et al. call “the paradoxical argument” or “the defense of outrageous propositions” (220). As Arthur Pease explains, this way of proceeding may at first seem counter-intuitive, “yet what better training, from the sophistic standpoint, than this exercise of defending the indefensible or salvaging the universally rejected?” He continues: “The opportunity thus afforded for self-display on the part of the clever sophist himself . . . is evident, for the more violent the *tour de force* the greater, in case of success, the resultant *éclat*” (31). Of course, this type of exercise often opened the sophists to precisely the charge against which they were always most vulnerable, namely, the charge of immorality and lack of regard for the truth. “[M]aking the worse appear the better,” Pease explains, was “the most frequent ground of reproach of the sophists from as early as the fifth century” (31).

Miller makes the same observation in his own study of the mock-encomium, writing that “aside from the triviality of many of its themes, the principal charge that can be brought against the form is...a moral one. The paradoxical encomium carries to its logical conclusion the implication of sophistic rhetoric that truth *qua* truth is not the end of rhetoric” (172). As concerns De Quincey and “On Murder,” we are therefore prompted to ask: is he open to a similar charge? In short, is he a sophist? I would argue that he is, and deliberately so. “Truth *qua* truth” is in no way a part of De Quincey’s rhetorical project, which is much more accurately described as “style *qua* style” or style for its own sake. This amorality of rhetoric was sometimes criticised in reviews of his work, with one reviewer from 1863 stating that “no man could have written about Rhetoric as Mr. De Quincey has written, who had any proper sense of moral obligation.”⁶ In “On Murder” most of all, De Quincey displays a purely Decadent aesthetic and a total disregard for any moral or practical ends of the text, a tendency which I have already argued to be an essential feature of his work, as well as the principal way (besides his exploration of opium) by which he may be said to have prefigured the French Decadents. Upon his death in 1859, Baudelaire was offended to read in the *Athenæum*’s obituary that De Quincey had “never at any time been of much service to his fellow men.”⁷ Baudelaire replied, incensed: “Que le *mangeur d’opium* n’ait jamais rendu à *l’humanité de services positifs*, que nous importe? Si son livre est beau, nous lui devons de la gratitude” (245).

⁶ (“Article I: Review of The Works of Thomas De Quincey” 27). The reviewer continues: “if Mr. De Quincey regarded rhetoric as the dishonest thing he contrives, it was not worth his attention unless with a view to expose it. So far, however, from exposing it, he lets drop not a single word that would lead one to suppose he attached *any moral significance* to anything belonging to it” (28, emphasis added).

⁷ The decidedly unflattering obituary begins: “Death has brought a close to the sad and almost profitless career of ‘the English Opium-Eater,’ removing from the world an intellect that remained active to the last, but had never at any time been of much service to his fellow-men, and giving rest to a frame that had paid the penalty of indulgence in prolonged and acute suffering” (814). The obituary goes on to call him an “egoist” who “lacked creative energy” (“Thomas De Quincey [obituary]” 815).

Rhetoric scholar Lois Agnew, in her excellent study of De Quincey's rhetorical style, points to a disregard for objective truths and a deep-seated aversion to nineteenth-century bourgeois practicality as some of the defining features of his writing. In *Thomas De Quincey, British Rhetoric's Romantic Turn* (2012), she argues that De Quincey's theory of rhetoric is centered not on the traditional touchstones of truth, clearness, and civic engagement, but rather on the leisurely exploration of new and interesting intellectual possibilities, often via more circuitous and ornamental paths than are strictly necessary. For De Quincey, "rhetoric's pursuit is the pleasurable investigation of possibility, which necessarily sets aside the search for certain truth. At the heart of [this] . . . is the conviction that a playful artifice plays an important role in the full exploration of humanity's creative intellectual potential" (10). This is in direct opposition not only to Whately's more orthodox views of the proper means and ends of rhetoric as a social tool, but also to the general ethos of Victorian England, in which the values of usefulness and productivity were important touchstones. De Quincey's view of his era is one in which "the restrictive drive for efficiency found in industrial society" has eroded the idea of writing as an artisanal product and an aesthetic end in itself. Purer notions of rhetoric as the pursuit of beauty or intellectual novelty "[have] been lost due to the practical demands of a society oriented toward the immediate resolution of business matters and the scientific quest for certainty" (Agnew 47). The result of this in De Quincey's work is an obstinate impracticality and an open espousal of style over content.

"Style" and even "style over content" would soon become bywords for De Quincey's work among reviewers, for better or worse.⁸ Beginning with David Masson in 1853, with Leslie Stephen years later, and later still with Stephen's daughter, Virginia Woolf, it became almost a critical

⁸ North 28 and 66. In *De Quincey Reviewed*, Julian North explains how De Quincey's style, often referred to as "impassioned prose," was seen as the primary interest of his texts, the content of which was sometimes disparaged as unrigorous, confused, or without interest.

commonplace to speak of De Quincey's texts as the sort of work in which matter was superseded by manner – texts written in language so richly ornate that “it deserves a commendation sometimes bestowed by ladies upon rich garments, that it is capable of standing up by itself” (Stephen 242). Such reviews were typically negative overall, the implication being that the works were all style and no substance. However, this was not always the case, and certain later discussions of De Quincey's style-over-content prose hint at the approaching vogue of literary aestheticism. Agnew makes brief note of this as well, observing how De Quincey's insistence “that the proper cultivation of style must include a detachment from practical concerns [is] a point that anticipates the focus on disinterestedness advocated later in the nineteenth century by theorists such as Matthew Arnold and Walter Pater” (84). This quality of aesthetic detachment and non-utility, as well as a willingness to consider the beauty of a work as separate from any moral context or consequences it may have, is observable throughout De Quincey's work and in “On Murder” most strongly of all.

6. CONCLUSION AND SOURCES

This is the final and perhaps the most convincing reason why the essay is so unlikely a candidate for satire. Satirical critique is ultimately constructive: as a literary form it is among the most socially engaged. Its humour serves a corrective end, whereas the humour of “On Murder” is something more anarchic in bent and certainly unconcerned with any ultimate utility (moral, practical, or other). In this respect, “On Murder” is much closer to the Decadent ethos of art for art's sake than to the Victorian ethos of rhetoric as a social tool. It also reflects what has been called the parasitism of Decadence, its reliance on parody and pastiche as creative starting-points. De Quincey's work was rarely entirely original: as he himself explained, he was a labourer of the

mint, not the mine, generally preferring to rework and refashion the prime materials of others. The parody mounted in “On Murder” is in this sense typical of De Quincey’s work as a whole. Perhaps ironically, therefore, the essay would itself be lampooned some years later by Edgar Allan Poe in the essays “Diddling Considered as One of the Exact Sciences” and “How to Write a *Blackwood* Article.”

In sum, as I hope the present chapter has made clear, although “On Murder” may initially appear satirical in nature, and is often qualified as such, it is in fact better described as parody, and more specifically as an example of the mock-encomium. But if the humour of “On Murder” cannot be called satirical, is there then perhaps some better way of describing it, beyond the purely formal label of parody? The parodic designation explains how the humour is achieved, but not its motivation. For this we must turn instead to Freud’s and Breton’s theories of black humour and the rebellion it mounts against the realities of death and the body. Here as well, in De Quincey’s exultation of the intellect over instinct, and of sophistication over animality, he anticipates some of the most important tenets of Decadent aesthetic theory.

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CHAPTER THREE: BLACK HUMOUR

1. INTRODUCTION

The comedy of “On Murder” stems from many devices and modes. These range from the playfully physical to the highly erudite and dry – however, the latter mode is by far the more common of the two, and even De Quincey’s physical jokes remain firmly tied to an air of intellectual sophistication. There is the bodily humour that pokes fun at the fatness of Coleridge and the skinniness of Kant and Hobbes, the latter of whom is described as so mummy-like in appearance that he is in a sense protected from any would-be murderers, since “his own gaunt scarecrow of a person . . . would have frightened them out of their wits” (VI:123). Even these jokes, however, are closer to “wit” than to “humour” *strictu sensu* (an important distinction at the time¹). They are not the rollicking bodily humour of an author like Rabelais, but remain much drier and intellectual in tone. Furthermore, the bodies being mocked are not just any bodies, but those of the great philosophers and intellectuals of history. (This irreverence of De Quincey’s was sometimes a sticking-point in his reception by reviewers.)² In short, they remain in keeping with the overall persona of the narrative voice: that of the fashionable gentleman-scholar. Other comic devices

¹ In *The Triumph of Wit: a study of Victorian comic theory*, Robert B. Martin notes the distinction that began to emerge in the eighteenth century between “humour” (more expansive and universally forgiving) as opposed to “wit” (more pointed, intellectual, and cynical in tone). He also notes the gradual shift in fashion towards the latter – a trend with which De Quincey is clearly in line. For more on the topic of nineteenth-century theories of humour, see also Stuart Tave’s *The Amiable Humorist* (1960).

² The same *British Quarterly* reviewer as mentioned in the previous chapter says that despite his many qualities “we cannot pass in silence over De Quincey’s habitual insolence and coarseness whenever he has occasion to refer to Socrates and Plato” (“Article I: Review of *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*” 26). He expresses distaste but “no surprise” at “hearing of the ‘jaw’ – we are really ashamed to write it – of Demosthenes and Cicero” (27). Leslie Stephen expresses the same distaste at seeing the historical Josephus referred to as “Mr. Joe,” and Cicero as “Kikero” (in a passage which alludes the philosopher’s genitals, no less). “What delicate humour!” Stephen exclaims. “Do we not all explode with laughter? [. . .] I have seen this stuff described as ‘scholarlike badinage’” (255). “Scholarlike badinage” is precisely the tone De Quincey is aiming for, of course, but in cases like these, it appears to have backfired.

deployed in the essay include sarcasm and especially understatement, as when the narrator warns the less experienced of his audience-members that “awkward disturbances will arise, people will not submit to having their throats cut quietly...and, whilst the portrait-painter often has to complain of too much torpor in his subject, the artist, in our line, is generally embarrassed by too much animation” (VI:127). As has been mentioned in the previous chapter, much of the underlying comedy of the essay rests on contrast – namely, the contrast between the violence of murder and the gentility of the academic speech – and contrast is also at the root of the devices mentioned above. However, when it comes to black humour, something beyond this general principle is at work.

Essentially, black humour may be defined as the reappropriation of tragic or frightening situations as fodder for jokes. Although contrast is involved (namely that between subject and tone, or the inappropriateness of making light of serious matters), at its core is a different and more specific principle. Freud defines it as a principle of self-preservation: in black humour, the ego turns a threatening situation into something benign, and even “an occasion for pleasure,” as shall be seen. André Breton elaborates on this principle and broadens it to include a wider range of situations than foreseen by Freud. Instead of violence to the speaker, black humour may deal with violence in all its forms. It may thus make light of violence or potential violence done to others. De Quincey’s essay is clearly an example of Breton’s black humour, since for it to fit Freud’s notion of *Galgenhumor*, it would need to be “On Suicide.” However, as shall be seen, De Quincey’s views on suicide and self-violence, as expressed in other essays, fit squarely within Freud’s views. They also tie in to the idea of a heroic denial of animal nature and its constraints. This is an important aspect of “On Murder” as well as of the earlier essay “On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*.” Finally, it is an important aspect of Decadent thought, which proposes a similar

suppression of animal instinct (in particular the instinct of self-preservation) in favour of exploring the aesthetic and hedonistic possibilities of violence “as an occasion for pleasure.” After Decadence, in the twentieth century, this idea would resurface in France in theories of violence, power, and sexuality. In Georges Bataille’s *Les Larmes d’Éros*, for example (which he dedicates to Breton),³ Bataille leans heavily on Decadent thought when he says that man may distinguish himself from beast by transcending animal instinct (“l’instinct aveugle des organes”), in favour of an aesthetics or erotics of violence.⁴

2. FREUD’S *GALGENHUMOR*

Freud’s two most important texts on humour are *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (*Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten*, 1905) and “Humour” (“Der Humor,” 1928). Whereas the first work deals with humour more generally, the 1928 essay is more specific and focusses briefly on the idea of *Galgenhumor*, or gallows humour. According to Freud, this variety of humor constitutes a sort of rebellion of the ego against reality. The subject, often in dire straits, chooses to put himself above his circumstances and to make light of his difficulties. Freud gives the example of a man being led to the gallows on a Monday, and who jokes: “Well, the week is starting off nicely” (161). Freud says that the sheer nerve required to make such a joke “has something of grandeur and elevation” and explains how

the grandeur in it clearly lies in the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego’s invulnerability. The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the

³ This is not in the printed edition but in a personal dedication, of which Bataille wrote many during his friendship with Breton (Aribit 16).

⁴ “L’homme, que la conscience de la mort oppose à l’animal, s’en éloigne aussi dans la mesure où l’erotisme, chez lui, substitue un jeu volontaire, un calcul, celui du plaisir, à l’instinct aveugle des organes” (Bataille 71).

traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure. (“On Humour” 162)

In other words, the ego adopts a position of complete superiority and detachment from an otherwise threatening situation, and thereby “spares [itself] the affects to which the situation would naturally give rise” (162). This lack of emotion and the “victory of the pleasure principle” confer on *Galgenhumor* “a dignity which is wholly lacking” in other comic forms (163). Baudelaire would later make a similar observation on the detachment of humour and especially self-directed humour. In “L’Essence du rire” he notes how only a superior man – “un philosophe” – is capable of laughing at himself, for his is an intellect “[ayant] acquis, par habitude, la force de se dédoubler rapidement et d’assister comme spectateur disintéressé aux phénomènes de son moi” (370).

Superiority, detachment, and the transcendence of the baser emotions are the same elements identified by De Quincey in 1823 as essential to the successful description of murder in art. In “On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*,” De Quincey’s best-known piece of literary criticism,⁵ he proposes that the condition *sine qua non* of enjoying murder as an art-form is the ability to rise above one’s instinct of self-preservation, the animal reflex that causes one to recoil from violence. (In Burke’s account of the sublime – as opposed to the merely beautiful – self-preservation also comes into play.)⁶ De Quincey’s essay looks at the murder of Duncan in *Macbeth* and how it is exploited by Shakespeare for artistic effect. Firstly and most importantly, De Quincey explains, it is important that any murder in a work of art not inspire an excess of empathy with the

⁵ Although he is seldom remembered for this scholarship today, De Quincey was a frequent and highly original critic of Shakespeare. He in fact wrote the entry on Shakespeare for the seventh, eighth, and ninth editions of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and many critical commonplaces now associated with Shakespeare’s plays (such as the focus on plays-within-plays) were originally described by De Quincey (Burwick 105). For more on this topic, see also John E. Jordan in “De Quincey’s Dramaturgic Criticism” (1951).

⁶ Paul Crowther explains that “Burke . . . holds that the sublime is essentially a passion of modified terror or pain and pertains, thereby, to the instinct for self-preservation” (11). Sublime spectacle – like that of a murder or public execution – allows for a safe, modulated experience of the stronger emotions, “weak or moderated states of pain or terror which . . . cause a healthy invigoration” (8). In De Quincey’s framework, by contrast, these feelings are to be transcended completely.

victim, since this would excite emotions (especially fear) tied to the baser aspects of human nature. Such instinctual, animal emotions are anathema to the proper appreciation of art, which should be first and foremost an intellectual exercise. He explains:

Murder, in ordinary cases, where the sympathy is wholly directed to the case of the murdered person, is an incident of coarse and vulgar horror; and for this reason, that it flings the interest exclusively upon *the natural but ignoble instinct by which we cleave to life*; an instinct which, as being indispensable to the primal law of self-preservation, is the same in kind (though different in degree) amongst all living creatures: this instinct, therefore, because *it annihilates all distinctions, and degrades the greatest of men to the level of 'the poor beetle that we tread on'*, exhibits human nature in its most abject and humiliating attitude. Such an attitude would little suit the purposes of the poet. (III:151, emphasis added)

De Quincey's solution, as put into practice in the later "On Murder," is to direct attention away from the victim and to focus instead on the figures of the murderer and the murder-connoisseur: superior beings for whom violence and death are not threats but "occasions for pleasure," as Freud says. This is what allows them – and by extension, the reader – to take pleasure and even to laugh at what would normally cause alarm. This is also what makes the murder-connoisseur the non-animal *par excellence*, a point to which we return in chapter six.

An obvious objection presents itself here: whereas Freud speaks of a threat to the speaker, in De Quincey's work neither the speaker nor the audience are themselves in danger. The dignity of gallows humour lies in making light of a threat to *oneself*, but in "On Murder" the jokes are nearly always at the expense of a third-party victim. Nevertheless, when we examine De Quincey's writings on self-violence (in particular, the 1823 article "On Suicide"), the same themes of dignity, superiority, and the refusal of abasement begin to emerge. The central question of animal instinct and human intellect, as presented in "On the Knocking at the Gate," is likewise of central importance.

3. SELF-VIOLENCE AND SUICIDE

In this brief article, published four years prior to “On Murder,” De Quincey considers the question of suicide and whether it should in fact be considered a crime, as some have suggested. He argues that, far from being a criminal act, in some situations “self-homicide” may be necessary and even noble, especially when it becomes a means to avoid debasement. He offers the cases of certain Christian martyrs, as well as historical women who chose death over sexual dishonour. As in the later “On Murder,” De Quincey argues in “On Suicide” that this particular act of violence will always be the work of a higher nature. Lesser, coarser men and women – “mean and ignoble creatures,” he says – will be incapable of suicide, since only “noble ones” will be sufficiently sensitive to dishonor to wish for their own death, and sufficiently courageous to attempt it (III:165). The superior subject will intentionally take his own life “rather than suffer his own nature to be dishonoured” (III:165). Echoing “On Murder” – as well as a number of later Decadent writers – De Quincey also argues that this form of violence distinguishes man from beast. “A doubt has been raised,” he writes, referring to certain apocryphal tales in the press, “whether brute animals ever commit suicide: to me it is obvious that they do not” (III:166). He debunks the commonly circulated story of a ram that supposedly leaped off a cliff, emphasising once again that only human individuals, and “noble” ones at that, will be capable of acting suicidally. This is because suicide is the strongest vitiation of animal instinct. Even more so than murder, suicide represses and *redirects* the animal instinct for life. It “depraves” it, in the strict sense of the word. As Gautier would later explain in his famous preface to *Les Fleurs du mal*, this sort of redirection is the mark of man’s superiority to beast. Like De Quincey, he believes that “la *dépravation*, c’est-à-dire l’écart du type normal, est impossible à la bête, fatalement conduite par l’instinct immuable” (Gautier 27).

De Quincey concludes his article on suicide with the tale of one particular case, “the most affecting I have ever seen recorded,” committed by a young man of artistic sensibilities who wished to lead a life “of literary leisure” (III:167). His family intended for him to be a tradesman and attempted, against his wishes, to place him in an apprenticeship. “This he looked upon as an indignity, to which he was determined in no case to submit” (III:167). Thus, “he walked over to the mountainous district of Keswick . . . looked about him in order to select his ground . . . made a pillow of sods – laid himself down with his face looking up to the sky – and in that posture was found dead” (III:167). The fact that De Quincey considers this story to be “the most affecting of any suicide” he can recall may seem surprising, especially in light of the examples he himself has just provided regarding the deaths of Christian martyrs and abducted women. It is less surprising, however, when one considers the central elements on which the story hinges: the superiority of art over trade, the avoidance of “indignity” at all costs, and especially the central figure of the young aesthete. De Quincey describes him as walking deliberately and even “cooly” into the mountains, and appraising – as would an artist – the ideal location to die. This is what distinguishes the young man from a merely goethean suicide: the focus on art.

De Quincey’s vision of suicide in the article is more modern than it is Romantic. It is not merely a reaction against a *mal du siècle* boredom. It is a revolt against the condition of modernity within the limited choices available to the individual within that framework. Walter Benjamin, in an analysis of Baudelaire’s work in the post-Romantic age, describes this type of suicide as highly modern. It is in fact the “sign” of modernity and its most characteristic passion (*la passion particulière de la vie moderne*). A suicide like the one described above – the suicide of an individual who chooses death as the only alternative to entering an economically-driven,

creatively-stifling system – is a form of revolt. It is a revolt against “the Resistance that modernity offers to the natural productive élan” (Benjamin 45). He continues:

Modernity must stand under the sign of suicide, an act which seals a heroic will that makes no concessions to a mentality inimical toward this will. Such a suicide is not resignation but heroic passion. It is the achievement of modernity in the realm of the passions . . . Someone like Baudelaire could very well have viewed suicide as the only heroic act still available to the *multitudes malades* of the cities in reactionary times. (45-46)

In other words, for Baudelaire, this type of suicide is the refusal of the *multitudes malades* to accept degradation – or “indignity,” to use De Quincey’s word. It is the last act of the “heroic will” and the last possible assertion of that will.⁷ Considered in this light, Benjamin’s description is not far removed from De Quincey’s views in “On Suicide,” nor from Freud’s description of self-violence (in the sense of making jokes against oneself) as the assertion of the ego in the direst circumstances, and the ego’s refusal to let itself be degraded by those circumstances. Therefore, although the above texts from Freud, De Quincey, and Benjamin all deal with violence or possible violence to *oneself* (as opposed to others), their focus on dignity, superiority, and revolt make them important intertexts to “On Murder.” As has already been mentioned, however, in the most technical sense “On Murder” cannot be considered *Galgenhumor*. It is *black humour*, as defined by André Breton in 1940.

4. BRETON’S *HUMOUR NOIR*

⁷ Interestingly, this description of suicide is not far removed from Baudelaire’s description of dandyism, which he calls “le dernier éclat d’héroïsme dans les décadences” (“La Dandy” 234). Both dandyism and suicide are described by Baudelaire as a question of self-determination and self-actualisation.

Breton's 1940 anthology marks the first academic use and delineation of the term "black humour." (Its first actual use is by Joris-Karl Huysmans, *chef de file* of the Decadents, in 1885.)⁸ The book opens with an introduction, entitled "Paratonnerre," or "lightning-rod," which begins by defining the new concept. The surrealist Breton draws mainly from Freud's essay "On Humour." He quotes the same passage as reproduced here regarding "the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability," its self-positioning above a debasing or threatening reality, and its transformation of that reality into "an occasion for pleasure." The main lines of the definition set forth in the *Anthologie's* introduction are thus very similar to Freud's; though Breton then goes on to declare that black humor is "a superior revolt of the mind" (10), and builds on the idea of superiority to a greater extent than does Freud.

Superiority and revolt become important points of focus in the *Anthologie de l'humour noir* and its introductory essay, "Paratonnerre." Quoting from Armand Petit-Jean, Breton tells us that "il n'est rien . . . qu'un humour intelligent ne puisse résoudre en éclats de rire, pas même le néant."⁹ Man's humour and his intelligence go hand in hand, and many of our greatest thinkers were humourists of a kind, such that "nous avons . . . le sens d'une hiérarchie dont la possession intégrale de l'humour assurerait à l'homme le plus haut degré" (8). Like Freud, Breton believes in the ability of the ego – or rather, of the *esprit* or intelligence – to rise above circumstance, but for Breton this circumstance has less to do with immediate danger than with the human condition in

⁸ In an 1885 issue of the literary magazine *Hommes d'aujourd'hui*, Huysmans conducts an interview with himself (under the pseudonym A. Meunier), and describes one of his texts as possessing "une pincée d'humour noir" (Bonnet 8). This is generally recognised as the true first instance of the term.

⁹ (Breton 9). The quote is taken by Breton from Petit-Jean's *Imagination et réalisation*: "Il n'est rien, a-t-on dit, qu'un humour intelligent ne puisse résoudre en éclats de rire, pas même le néant . . . , le rire, en tant que l'une des plus fastueuses prodigalités de l'homme, et jusque la débauche, est au bord du néant, nous donne le néant en nantissement."

the broadest sense. As Breton scholar Christophe Graulle explains, black humour has its origin in the revolt of man against his lot:

[l'humour noir] procède d'une inadaptation radicale, celle de l'homme à ses conditions d'existence, la révolte de l'humour noir prend en effet la forme d'une revanche sur les contraintes de la réalité qui cherche à nier tout ce qui impose des limites à la liberté de l'individu. Il n'est pas jusqu'à la plus dramatique des circonstances, celle de la mort, que le dynamisme de cette pensée ne tende à s'approprier, à la faveur d'un jeu jubilatoire et neutralisateur. (Graulle 10)

This is a much more generalised revolt than that described by Freud – it is not solely the revolt of the prisoner who jokes on his way to the gallows. In Breton's view, we are all on our way to the gallows, and black humour is not a response to specific dangers but rather to man's mortal condition, "the constraints of reality," and anything else "that imposes limits to the freedom of the individual," as Graulle paraphrases. The end-point of this type of revolt – as seen in the texts assembled by Breton, arranged chronologically from authors like Swift and Sade to Jarry and Gide – is a radical, individualist freedom. "En point limite de cette trajectoire intellectuelle," Graulle explains, "la seconde moitié du dix-neuvième siècle voit l'émergence de la figure nietzschéenne du surhomme" (40). Nietzsche is in fact one of the authors given pride of place in the *Anthologie*, and we will see in later chapters how he constitutes a mid-point between the beginnings of crime-literature in the nineteenth century (as exemplified by De Quincey) and the twentieth-century problematisation of power and crime put forth by authors like Gide, Genet, and especially Foucault.¹⁰

Besides the idea of superiority and the radical freedom it claims by right, another element emphasised by Breton in the *Anthologie de l'humour noir* is that of coolness or detachment.

¹⁰ Joel Black also sees a continuity between the work of De Quincey and the later Nietzsche. In *The Aesthetics of Murder* he observes that De Quincey's writings on murder "anticipated philosophy's ultimate reformulation of the arts as an extramoral discourse by Nietzsche and his successors later in the nineteenth century" (78).

“L’humour noir est borné par trop de choses,” he says in the introduction, “telles que la bêtise, l’ironie sceptique, la plaisanterie sans gravité...(l’énumération serait longue) mais il est par excellence l’ennemi mortel de la sentimentalité” (Breton 13-14). One wonders if Breton, in this passage, is perhaps thinking of Henri Bergson. Bergson’s *Le Rire: essai sur la signification du comique* (1900) was and remains the most important French-language humour-study of the twentieth century, and would almost certainly have been known to Breton in 1940. In *Le Rire*, Bergson, like Breton, calls humour the enemy of sentimentality, writing that “il semble que le comique ne puisse produire son ébranlement qu’à la condition de tomber sur une surface d’âme bien calme . . . L’indifférence est son milieu naturel. *Le rire n’a pas de plus grand ennemi que l’émotion*” (Bergson 17, emphasis added). He compares laughter to a temporary emotional freezing, “quelque chose comme une anesthésie momentanée du cœur. Il s’adresse à l’intelligence pure” (17). Again, humour and intelligence are shown to go hand in hand, and the depiction of this higher-level intelligence is set against that of emotion and sentimentality. Humour is to emotion what intelligence is to instinct, or man to beast. This is an idea expressed by Baudelaire also, in “L’Essence du comique,” which states that “le rire est l’expression de supériorité, non plus de l’homme sur l’homme, mais de l’homme sur la nature” (375).

In other words, the separation between intelligence and emotion corresponds to a parallel separation between human and animal faculties, for Breton and Baudelaire as much as for De Quincey, whose murderer is not a beast but a dandy. There is nothing of the animal left in him: even his desire to kill is no longer an instinct – not a blind, animal bloodlust – but a conscious artistic decision. As Ellen Moers explains in her study *The Dandy*, “to the dandy the self is not an animal, but a gentleman. Instinctual reactions, passions and enthusiasms are animal, and thus abominable” (18). De Quincey’s dandy has successfully transcended “the natural but ignoble

instincts by which we cleave to life” (“On the Knocking” III:151), including all the instinctive emotions and sensations – pity, anger, hunger, fear – that typically bind violence to life, especially in the animal world. The murderer-dandy does not kill in response to hunger or need, and De Quincey’s narrator is in fact adamant that any murder committed on these grounds be immediately disqualified as art.¹¹ In other words, De Quincey’s murderer-dandy is interested in violence *for its own sake*, and never as a means to an end. Like art, murder must be a question of pleasure rather than sustenance or utility.

In Breton’s *Anthologie de l’humour noir*, many infamous dandies are featured, from Baudelaire to the eccentric Alfred Jarry. He also emphasises the dandy-like features of other, later personalities, such as Jacques Vaché, whom we rarely think of as dandy writers. As Christophe Graulle explains, dandyism is a running theme in Breton’s choice of authors for the *Anthologie*. These authors, and particularly those selected from the nineteenth century, display “[un] refus des interdits les plus élémentaires ou une aptitude personnelle à la provocation” that is the direct result of their “esthétique dandy particulièrement raffinée” (Graulle 14). In Breton’s introduction to the selection from Baudelaire, dandyism is the first and strongest feature singled out. “L’humour chez Baudelaire,” the chapter begins, “fait partie intégrante de sa conception du dandysme” (Breton 73). He also singles out the narcissism and “intelligence subtile” (73) that characterise Baudelaire’s particular brand of black humour. Dandy humour is in fact an important theme in Baudelaire’s œuvre, and it rests on many of the same qualities – superiority, revolt, coolness – we have already

¹¹ This is part of what makes the third essay such a problematic and contradictory addition to the “On Murder” series. In “Chambers of Horror: De Quincey’s ‘Post-Script’ to ‘On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts,’” Gregory Dart very rightly points out that although De Quincey has insisted numerous times that murder should be kept separate from any financial concerns, the “Post-Script” contradicts this precept at almost every turn. “[D]espite being billed as the absolute *beau idéal* of the artist-assassin, Williams’s relationship to the murders he commits is more complicated than De Quincey’s second essay ‘On Murder’ might have led us to expect. He is, as we have already seen, a ‘solitary artist,’ but he is also one who relies upon murder ‘for bread, for clothes, for promotion in life’; like De Quincey himself therefore he hovers uneasily between the status of amateur and professional” (Dart 193).

identified as central to De Quincey's "On Murder," as well as to Decadent thought. Baudelaire's conception of dandyism will be discussed at greater length in chapter six. For now, suffice it to say that his section "Le Dandy" in *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* could very well serve as a description of De Quincey's gentleman-murderer. The same disdain of utility is displayed ("[la] repugnante *utilité*" 232); as well as an equal disdain of money. Like De Quincey's murder-artist, Baudelaire's dandy "n'aspire pas à l'argent comme à une chose essentielle . . . il abandonne cette passion aux mortels vulgaires" (232). The coolness of the dandy, "sa froideur," is also essential. Baudelaire closes the essay with this idea, saying that "le caractère de beauté du dandy consiste surtout dans l'air froid qui vient de l'inébranlable résolution de ne pas être ému" (235).

These are the main links Breton draws between Baudelaire's writing, persona, and the idea of black humour. On De Quincey, unfortunately, Breton has considerably less to say. His introduction to "On Murder" is brief and consists mainly of biographical details and extended quotations about De Quincey, almost all of which are taken from Baudelaire. It is obvious that Breton knows De Quincey only *via* Baudelaire, and has formed his opinion through the lens of comments made in texts like *Les Paradis artificiels*. Like Baudelaire, therefore, Breton attributes De Quincey's black humour primarily to biographical sources ("Peu d'existences furent aussi pathétiques que la sienne, peu d'histoires aussi cruelles" 42), as well as to his tendency towards iconoclasm and contrary views ("il ne fut jamais de plus grand contempteur des réputations établies" 43). In this last comment, one imagines that Breton is referring to De Quincey's controversial articles on Coleridge and Wordsworth¹² – but, again, this remains a matter of

¹² De Quincey's reputation as "a destroyer of icons" (Wilson 284) dates to this time. In 1834, following the death of Coleridge, De Quincey published a series of articles in *Tait's* magazine in which he took advantage of his former friendship with Coleridge and Wordsworth in order to create a highly revealing and decidedly un-flattering portrait of the two figures. The plagiarism and marital problems of Coleridge, as well as the physical infirmities of Wordsworth (about whom he writes in 1839, as a continuation of the same series), all came to light. Although the articles also

speculation for the reader, given the very cursory nature of Breton's introduction. The real takeaway from Breton's text, I would argue, is not what Breton says about "On Murder," but rather the fact of the essay's having been included at all. That Breton chooses to position De Quincey and "On Murder" among much more widely read authors proves the extent to which De Quincey's reputation still survived in France in 1940 – well before the revival of De Quinceyan studies in the anglophone literary community. Whereas De Quincey had all but disappeared from the literary scene in England after the end of the nineteenth century, he was kept alive in France through the study of authors like Baudelaire, as well as Huysmans and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, both of whom appear in the *Anthologie* alongside the English author.

5. CONCLUSION AND SOURCES

De Quincey's inclusion in the *Anthologie de l'humour noir* is proof not only of his continued survival within French letters during a period when he had been mostly forgotten in England, but also of the strong association, among French readers, of De Quincey and the Decadent sensibility. For Breton, De Quincey is not solely the author of the *Confessions*, that hyper-emotional, decidedly un-Decadent text. He is also a black humourist. As has been shown, "On Murder" is an almost perfect specimen of black humour. It enacts in the most literal sense the principles laid forth originally by Freud, and later by Breton. Like Freud's *Galgenhumor*, "On Murder" refuses to be cowed by violence, turning it instead into an inoffensive – and even pleasurable – aesthetic tool. And like Breton's *humour noir*, it favours the intellectual over the emotional or instinctual, emphasising the superiority of man over animal. Although we often think and speak of the

contained some very incisive literary criticism, they were judged by most readers to be "woundingly indiscreet" and caused a major scandal (Morrison 304).

perpetrators of violence as “beastly” or “bloodthirsty,” De Quincey offers his own, highly original portrait of the murderer as dandy, i.e. the non-animal and professed enemy of the natural. Finally, also as described by Breton, “On Murder” enacts a revolt – “a superior revolt of the mind” – against death, the body,¹³ and the limitations they impose. Ultimately, this imagined revolt extends to any form of limitation to the individual will, and results in the sort of radical, all-encompassing *revendication* of individual freedom and power that characterises the later work of authors like Nietzsche and, later still, Bataille and Genet.

¹³ Charles Rzepka also identifies this rejection of the body as a distinct tendency in De Quincey’s work. In *Sacramental Commodities*, he writes that “Far from conceiving himself as a man *of* the world, De Quincey seeks to place himself *above* the world . . . as part of an attempt, generally, to raise himself above concerns for the body as a socially maintained object that requires . . . the labor of others for its material sustenance” (98).

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CHAPTER FOUR: BOREDOM AND VIOLENCE IN THE METROPOLIS

1. INTRODUCTION

In its obsession with freedom and absolute power – the sort of power that lets even indiscriminate violence go unchecked – the fiction of the Decadence tends to focus on a specific cast of characters. A.E. Carter notes that “among its *dramatis personae* we find dukes, princes, countesses, baronesses” (29) – and to this list we may also add the worst of the Roman emperors: Elagabalus, Caligula, and Nero, all of them favourite subjects of the Decadents. De Quincey’s murder-artist and murder-connoisseur, with their aristocratic fastidiousness and haughty disdain of money, are of this category also. Their recourse to violence as entertainment, furthermore, positions them closely alongside the aforementioned emperors, as De Quincey will demonstrate in the essay “The Caesars.” This cast of characters is subject to a particular ailment, however: a nervous condition called alternately ennui, *blasement*, or spleen. De Quincey calls it “*tædium vitæ*,” a boredom with life. Carter notes that the quality of this boredom and the response it provokes are part of what differentiate the Decadent hero from his Romantic antecedents. “In such characters Romantic revolt has lost all justification,” he explains. The Decadent hero is “resigned, indifferent, blasé; seeking not supreme emotion, but a new sensation; demanding not an ideal, but a fresh titillation of his jaded senses” (Carter 29).

Decadent art, therefore, is a continuous search for the new, however outlandish. Jean Des Esseintes, the hero of *À Rebours*, rejects the tedium of normal life and cloisters himself in a mansion in the countryside. He turns the mansion into a sort of greenhouse for his most exotic and

exquisite works of art: the paintings of Moreau, the poetry of the Latin Decadents, and, very tellingly, the works of De Quincey (Huysmans 108). His is the figure of the Decadent connoisseur. In the Decadent artist, the quest for novelty takes the form of adopting new and controversial subjects for artistic treatment. If all traditional subjects have been exhausted, the argument goes, then the artist must turn to those not yet explored – including, if need be, the subjects of violence, urban squalor, and ugliness itself. This was, famously, an element of Baudelaire’s legal defense of *Les Fleurs du mal*, as suggested to him by Sainte-Beuve. If previous poets had exhausted the subjects of nature, the hearth, and other wholesome clichés, what choice was left to him? “Que restait-il? Ce que Baudelaire a pris. Il y a été comme forcé.”¹ Baudelaire’s characters often find themselves in precisely the same impasse, and their search for new and titillating sensations leads several narrators of *Les Fleurs du mal* to turn to violence and sadism as forms of entertainment. Like the murder-artists and murder-connoisseurs of De Quincey’s fiction, violence becomes no more than a diversion, a *délassement* intended to stave off their growing sense of boredom. Unfortunately, these attempts at stimulation are rarely effective, and may serve only to deepen the torpor they were intended to relieve. As Jean Pierrot explains in *L’Imaginaire décadent*, “dans cette recherche forcenée des sensations nouvelles, les possibilités des sens s’épuisent vite, et cette quête désespérée de la nouveauté fait rapidement de l’artiste un malade, à la sensibilité exacerbée, qui sombre dans le spleen” (67). An important Decadent theme, he explains, is the vicious cycle that may form between boredom, stimulation, and exacerbated boredom.

¹ In a note entitled “Petits moyens de défense tels que je les conçois,” Sainte-Beuve wrote: “Tout était pris dans le domaine de la poésie. Lamartine avait pris les *cieux*, Victor Hugo avait pris la *terre* et plus que la *terre*. Laprade avait pris les *forêts*. Musset avait pris la *passion* et l’*orgie éblouissante*. D’autres avaient pris le *foyer*, la *vie rurale*, etc. Théophile Gautier avait pris l’Espagne et ses hautes couleurs. Que restait-il? Ce que Baudelaire a pris. Il y a été comme forcé.” Cited by André Guyaux in *Baudelaire: un demi-siècle de lectures des Fleurs du mal*, page 213.

In De Quincey's work, this cycle is often approached in terms of the metaphor of drug habituation, an ailment with which he was well acquainted. Wordsworth had already discussed the cycle of boredom and stimulation in 1800, but De Quincey's treatment of the subject is different from his mentor's – not only in this reliance on the metaphor of opium, as mentioned, but for other imagery and themes (like those of the modern cityscape, urban violence, and the Roman emperors) that place him firmly within a Decadent rather than a Romantic framework. Even the topos of *flânerie* makes an appearance, and De Quincey's idle wanderings through London have a lot to do with Baudelaire's later, more famous excursions. Most importantly, however, it is De Quincey's comparison of the violence of London to that of its ancient counterpart, Rome, that reveals a decidedly Decadent take on the problem of violence, boredom, and entertainment. His essay series "The Caesars" examines the problem of violence as public entertainment through its description of the circus and its deadening effects on an already jaded populace. It also looks at the emperors Nero and Caligula as murder artists and connoisseurs, borrowing the vocabulary of the earlier "On Murder" and providing the same type of scholarly black humour that made the first essay series so successful.

2. DE QUINCEY AND THE PROBLEM OF HABITUATION

Like many heavy users of opium, including the later Baudelaire,² De Quincey was quick to discover the problem of drug resistance. At the height of his addiction, he was consuming roughly 300 drops of laudanum a day (Morrison 271) – but, to his great frustration, could never again

² Roger Williams describes Baudelaire's difficulty, toward the end of his life, of obtaining prescriptions of sufficient strength for the management of his various ailments, in particular of his migraines. "Because [his] physician was unaware that Baudelaire had taken opium over a period of time, the prescribed doses were ineffective, and Baudelaire doubled and even quadrupled them" (25).

achieve the positive effects brought on by his early experiences with the drug. He had become, he realized, thoroughly desensitized. In his writings on power and violence, De Quincey would have frequent recourse to the metaphor of desensitization in discussing the “deadening effects” of over-exposure to stimulus. In the *Confessions*, for example, in a sidenote on men and warfare, De Quincey notes that “many men, of the highest rank and wealth, have in our own day, as well as throughout history, been amongst the foremost in courting danger in battle [because] long familiarity with power has to them deadened its effect and its attractions” (II:32). Some explanation may be required here. The passage is part of a larger argument concerning men’s fear of death or lack thereof, and their corresponding willingness to put themselves at risk. The richer the man, De Quincey argues, the more he has to lose, and the more averse he will therefore become to any risk of life or limb. One very interesting exception to this, he adds in a footnote, is the case of men who are *so* rich that the opposite effect begins to occur. Such men are often wholly deadened to the pleasures of life and of power. They no longer care if they live or die, and battle becomes for them little more than a game, an example of violence “as an occasion for pleasure.”

In the “On Murder” series, this argument resurfaces in more explicit form. Particularly in the “Postscript,” which enters into greater detail on the personality and motivations of the murder-artist, De Quincey returns to the ideas of power, boredom, and desensitization to explain the impulse that drives an *être d’exception* like Williams to crime. Such a being is incapable of leading a normal life, explains De Quincey, and, when he turns to murder as an alternative, becomes increasingly dependent on the rush of adrenaline that murder provides. “Such a man,” he says, “even more than the Alpine chamois hunter, comes to crave the dangers and the hairbreadth escapes of his trade, as a condiment for seasoning the insipid monotonies of daily life” (XX:55). The case of the murder-connoisseur, as opposed to the murder-artist, is the same in kind if not in

degree. He too is subject to boredom, and may require progressively more extravagant displays in order to hold his jaded attention. Thus De Quincey describes the oldest and most experienced of the Society's members as the most difficult to please, a coterie of "old bed-ridden connoisseurs, who had got into a peevish way of sneering and complaining 'that there was nothing doing'" (VI:130). The worst of these is the member called Toad-in-the-hole, who becomes the main character of the "Second Essay." The narrator describes Toad-in-the-hole as having become so jaded that he eventually retreats from society altogether, such that "it was generally understood that he had resigned himself to melancholy [and] the prevailing notion was – that Toad-in-the-hole had hanged himself" (XI:401). It takes nothing less than the *éclat* of the Williams murders to rouse him from his torpor and cause his return to the Society of Connoisseurs in Murder, where he celebrates his renewed faith in the art with one of the biggest dinners in the Society's history.

3. SATIETY AND THE CITY

The topic of desensitization was a frequent one in De Quincey's milieu. Wordsworth, his companion at Grasmere, had famously addressed the problem of overindulgence and satiety in the 1800 preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, where it was framed as a problem of modern living, and more specifically of life in the modern metropolis:

For a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and, unfitting it for all voluntary exertion, to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor. The most effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place, and the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies.³

³ (Wordsworth 449). For a discussion of the same passage in relation to De Quincey's views on societal violence and especially revolutionary violence, see Alina Clej, page 188.

In short, Wordsworth blames the hectic, crowded nature of life in the city, as well as the relatively recent phenomenon of daily reporting (and perhaps crime reporting), for inducing a sort of blunted stupefaction on the part of the populace. This news-addled population becomes both *more* dependent on artificial stimulus (like De Quincey, Wordsworth speaks of “craving”), yet progressively less sensitive to its effects. Its sensibilities are “blunted” and the mind reduced “to a state of almost savage torpor.” We are meant to understand, it seems, that by retiring to the Lake District, Wordsworth has spared himself the worst of these effects, as would his protégés Coleridge and, as of 1807, a young De Quincey.⁴ De Quincey became an essential part of the literary community at Grasmere, moving definitively to Dove Cottage in 1809, and some of his writings occasionally express the sort of anti-urban sentiment that was in vogue among so many of his peers. Consider for example the article on “The Elements of Rhetoric,” examined previously in chapter two. De Quincey accounts for the slow disappearance of the rhetorical arts in terms very similar to Wordsworth’s famous preface. He depicts modern life as teeming with easy, mindless pleasures that distract the mind from more demanding intellectual pursuits. “So multiplied are the modes of enjoyment in modern times,” he writes, “that the choice is absolutely distracted; and in a boundless theatre of pleasures, to be had at little or no cost of intellectual activity, it would be marvellous indeed, if any considerable audience could be found [for rhetoric]” (VI:163).

The modern city as “a boundless theatre of pleasures” – and its inhabitants as the distracted, dissipated reflection of that space – would gain considerable traction among the Decadents. For

⁴ Although De Quincey only met Wordsworth when he was twenty-two, he had been an ardent admirer and even an occasional correspondent of the poet’s since 1803, when he was just eighteen. The young De Quincey sent Wordsworth a fan letter, which Wordsworth very kindly answered, and De Quincey resolved to travel to the Lake District in order to meet him. He did travel there, in 1805 and again in 1806, but on both occasions was obliged to turn back without meeting him, due to an attack of shyness. He met Coleridge in 1807 and only then was he absorbed into the company of Wordsworth and the literary circle at Grasmere, where he lived for many years – including at Dove Cottage, the former residence of the Wordsworths.

writers like Hippolyte Taine and Georges Rodenbach, modern man was a microcosm of the new cityscape. Taine makes this explicit in the 1868 essay “L’École des beaux-arts et les beaux-arts en France.” In a manner very similar to De Quincey’s in “The Elements of Rhetoric,” Taine complains of a dying-out of purer art forms that is directly attributed to the distractions of city life. Modern man, he argues, has begun to resemble the cluttered, overlit streets he inhabits. “Artificiels et agités . . . c’est bien ainsi que nous sommes. Les rues sont trop pleines, les visages trop affairés. Au soir, le boulevard fourmillant et lumineux . . . partout le luxe, le plaisir et l’esprit outrés aboutissent à la sensation excessive et apprêtée. La machine nerveuse est à la fois surmenée et insatiable.”⁵ Like Wordsworth, he sees modern man as both *surmené* (overworked or overstimulated) and *insatiable*. Bourget, in his famous reading of Baudelaire as decadent author, makes a similarly-worded diagnosis, when he refers to “la sinistre incapacité de procurer un entier frisson de plaisir *au système nerveux trop surmené*” (13, emphasis added). These passages evince a new post-industrial metaphor of the brain as machine (“la machine nerveuse”), one that can be overworked and break down. In *Notes sur le pessimisme*, Georges Rodenbach likewise speaks of “le cerveau moderne, si surmené.”⁶ The metaphor reveals a conflicted interest in the rapid mechanization of nineteenth-century life, a fascination with new machines that is shot through with a vein of wariness and fear. If man is a machine, then he is subject to the same unruly forces – De Quincey calls them centrifugal forces – that may cause any machine or system to spin out of control.

⁵ (379). Taine later comments on the buildings themselves, as well as modern Parisian living quarters: “Nos appartements sont ridicules, nos mœurs artificielles et nos théâtres étouffants. Nous vivons claquemurés au troisième étage, et nous trouvons, au sortir de nos cages, la boue des rues, l’odeur du gaz, l’air étouffé des salons et des bureaux” (389).

⁶ “Jamais le cerveau humain n’a été plus compliqué, aussi sensibilisé, aussi fouillé par toutes les curiosités de la sensation. L’abus du cerveau est la grande maladie. Et le cerveau moderne, si surmené, en arrive . . . à raffiner sur de subtils ennuis.” Cited by Pierre Maes in *Georges Rodenbach*, page 137.

As V.A. De Luca observes, “De Quincey’s pride in human technology exist[s] side by side with an anxiety about human systems and their close alliance with the powers of chaos” (96). His attitude toward machines and industry – like his attitude toward the modern city – is interested but uneasy. The London of the “Postscript” is a menacing and chaotic landscape; and the neighbourhood of Ratcliffe Highway, where the Marr and Williamson murders take place, is depicted as a location still in flux, whose rapid development from rural outskirt to busy commercial hub makes it a particularly unstable place, full of unknown characters who may be only passing through. In the essay, De Quincey feels it necessary to explain the particular *genius loci* of the neighbourhood before his story can begin:

. . . first of all, one word as to the local scene of the murders. Ratcliffe Highway is a public thoroughfare in a most chaotic quarter of eastern or nautical London; and at this time (viz., in 1812), when no adequate police existed . . . it was a most dangerous quarter. Every third man at the least might be set down as a foreigner. Lascars, Chinese, Moors, Negroes, were met at every step. And apart from the manifold ruffianism, shrouded impenetrably under the mixed hats and turbans of men whose past was untraceable to any European eye, it is well known that the [commercial] navy . . . is the sure receptacle of all the murderers and ruffians whose crimes have given them a motive for withdrawing themselves for a season from the public eye. (“Postscript” XX:41)

For the Tory De Quincey, the essential anonymity of both sailors and foreigners is a large part of what makes the neighborhood so chaotic. The bustling and transitory nature of a commercial port is another factor, and De Quincey was equally critical of the city of Manchester – that hyper-Victorian centre of industry – for just the same reason. Passages like the one above make his move to the peaceful enclave of Grasmere, populated only by a handful of well-acquainted neighbours, seem like a matter of course. And yet De Quincey’s attitudes toward city life were more ambiguous than his early choice of residence and company might suggest. Though he sometimes affected an abhorrence of the bustle and anonymity of the metropolis, they nevertheless held certain pleasures

for him which, acquired at an early age in London during a period of teenage homelessness, became a confirmed habit in adulthood, and a comfort in old age.

4. DE QUINCEY, THE EARLY FLÂNEUR

De Quincey was a prodigious walker (or, as he called it, “peripatetic”), regularly covering eleven or twelve miles in a day. Even in his sixties, he thought nothing of the seven-mile trip to the office of his editor, James Hogg, though it took him over three hours each way. The habit began in 1802, when he was seventeen. De Quincey had run away from his boarding school and was living in London more or less as a squatter, in a derelict house on Greek Street. The owner of the house, a man by the name of Brunell, allowed him to sleep there, but De Quincey made himself as scarce as possible during the daytime hours. With no money to speak of, this invariably meant wandering the streets of London, killing time and, often, making friends with other marginal members of London society, especially prostitutes. “Being myself at that time of necessity a peripatetic,” he recounts in the *Confessions*, “I naturally fell in more frequently with those female peripatetics who are technically called Street-walkers” (II:25). In adulthood he continued to take long city walks, now under the influence of opium, which had the effect of increasing the length and randomness of his wanderings (“Some of these rambles led me to great distances [and] . . . such knotty problems of alleys, such enigmatical entries, and such sphynx’s riddles of streets without thoroughfares”), as well as intensifying his interest in the teeming mass of humanity around him. He would have flashbacks of this in later years, “when the human face tyrannized over my dreams, and the perplexities of my steps in London came back and haunted my sleep” (II:50). The crowds attracted the *flâneur* and swallowed him completely – an experience which, like the opium-trip, he found alternately ecstatic and terrifying.

In his descriptions of the joys and terrors of *flânerie* De Quincey partly anticipated Baudelaire, who loved to wander through Paris, and for whom the sheer quantity of passing anonymous faces provided its own immersive thrill, “un bain de multitude.”⁷ Here again, however, De Quincey is unfairly eclipsed by his doppelganger Poe, whose short-story “The Man of the Crowd” – translated by Baudelaire as “L’Homme des foules” in 1857 – is a more obvious and more frequently cited predecessor. Even Walter Benjamin neglects De Quincey’s role in the emergence of the Baudelairian *flâneur*, a term whose success and widespread use owe much to the German critic’s work. “The flâneur is the creation of Paris,” he says decisively in 1929 (Benjamin 263). (Benjamin was, it should be noted, something of a *flâneur* himself, wandering the streets of Marseille under the influence of hashish rather than opium.) But other scholars of Baudelaire, like Robert Vivier and George Clapton, have given greater attention to the influence of De Quincey in this respect, closely tracing the resemblance between the peripatetic excursions of the *Confessions*, their translation by Baudelaire, and Baudelaire’s own descriptions of his wanderings through Paris. Vivier finds the “flâneries d’observateur” of each to be strikingly similar (211), and Clapton singles out “Le Rêve parisien” as a recognizably De Quinceyan dreamscape (65). He sees in it De Quincey’s famous Piranesi vision: a vast, dizzying maze of intertwining columns, archways, and staircases.⁸

The maze was a symbol of potent and lifelong importance to De Quincey, dating from age eleven at least, when he lived in Bath and played in the giant maze at Sydney Gardens (Lindop 23). As an adult, it shaped the themes and especially the stylistics of his writing, and several critics

⁷ “Il n’est pas donné à chacun de prendre un bain de multitude: jouir de la foule est un art” (“Les Foules” 31). This is of course a play on the more common expression “un bain de nature.”

⁸ One may also argue, however, that De Quincey’s focus on mazes and labyrinths is both more idiosyncratic and more obsessive than is Baudelaire’s; constituting a point of departure rather than of similarity between the two peripatetic authors.

have noted the resemblance between passages like the Piranesi vision and the overall structure of De Quincey's texts, whose meandering, byzantine asides have scared off more than one disoriented reader. Deeanne Westbrook compares De Quincey's digressive narrative voice to a *flânerie* through mental space, exploring new alleys and avenues as they emerge (63).⁹ And as early as 1913, G.K. Chesterton saw his opium-addled wanderings through London as the interpretive key to his prose style, as well as his strongest link to the Decadents. (The labyrinth was of course a common theme among them, especially in their depictions of the cityscapes of Paris and Bruges.¹⁰) According to Chesterton, De Quincey's addiction may have held him back in many ways, "but he could hardly have revealed those wonderful vistas and perspectives of prose, which permit one to call him the first and most powerful of the decadents: those sentences that lengthen out like nightmare corridors, or rise higher and higher like impossible eastern pagodas" (25). Clearly, although his connection to Wordsworth and the Lake poets has caused some modern critics to overstate his dislike of the metropolis, for De Quincey it most certainly held its charms. Its size, its anonymous faces, its mazes – and even, as shall be seen, its violence – are part of a new aesthetics of modernity which De Quincey played an important part in bringing about.

5. ANCIENT CITIES AND CIRCENSIAN VIOLENCE

Critic Daniel Sanjiv Roberts provides what is perhaps the best account of De Quincey's complex relationship to the modern metropolis. In "The Janus-face of Romantic Modernity: Thomas De

⁹ This is of course a common theme in De Quinceyan criticism, dating back to J. Hillis Miller's landmark essay in *The Disappearance of God*, in which he compares the author to the Wandering Jew and argues that "[De Quincey's] work is the exact image of the space of wandering – sky, desert or, most exactly, enormous city" (28).

¹⁰ Pierrot, for example, writes that "un thème urbain jouira à l'époque d'une faveur particulière, celui de la ville des ruelles labyrinthiques et des canaux, de la ville morte et angoissante, où se retrouve la dominante souvent macabre de l'imagination décadente" (211).

Quincey's Metropolitan Imagination," he explains how the young De Quincey may have overstated his love of nature in order to better fit in with the famous poet and his circle. In an early fan letter to Wordsworth, he assures the author of the *Lyrical Ballads* that he has spent his life entirely "in contemplation . . . and worship of nature" – a rather dubious statement from a young man having spent most of his life in the city.¹¹ Roberts goes on to discuss the different facets of what he calls De Quincey's "Romantic metropolitanism"; and, most relevantly to our discussion here, his understanding of modern London in its relation to the capitals of other, older empires:

De Quincey's references to cities such as Rome, Jerusalem, Babylon, Hekatómpylos, and Memphis in the *Confessions* are reminders of their past glory as well as of their decline or extinction. Facing the evidence of such historical and mythical parallels, De Quincey was inclined to conclude that modern London was probably not the greatest of cities, indeed probably not by a long chalk. That honour . . . was reserved for Rome of Trajan's time, which he reckoned to hold a population between four and six millions in comparison with the mere two millions of 1853 London. (303-304)

Yet even Rome would, of course, fall – not in spite of its size but in large part because of it. As Roberts points out, De Quincey views these former centers of empire partly as cautionary tales, examples of the pride that comes before a fall. De Quincey focuses on their "decline or extinction" just as much as their glory. This would later become a key current in Decadent writing also; in fact, most scholars point to the publication of Désiré Nisard's *Études de mœurs et de critique sur les poètes latins de la décadence* (1834) as the starting-point of the movement, as well as the origin of the label "Décadence" to describe it. The Decadent movement is the obverse of nineteenth-century optimism and faith in historical progress. "Nous vivons dans un siècle orgueilleux," Baudelaire warned in 1855, "qui se croit au-dessus des mésaventures de la Grèce et de Rome" (222). Like De Quincey, he fully embraced modernity and city-life, but harboured a nagging doubt

¹¹ (Roberts 301). Julian North is similarly skeptical of De Quincey's "effusive protestations" in the letter, seeing in them "a mark of De Quincey's skill and foresight in creating the right impression, rather than a genuine responsiveness to nature" (247).

regarding the sustainability of imperial growth. Great centers of empire are often content to rest on their laurels, and their might becomes their weakness. Baudelaire says that “elles s’endorment sur une richesse acquise. Souvent il arrive que c’est le principe même qui a fait leur force . . . qui amène leur décadence” (221-222).

Besides this wariness of the vulnerabilities of empire, a second aspect of De Quincey’s metropolitan imagination ties him firmly to the concerns of the Decadents. As Roberts also highlights in his study, De Quincey was deeply interested in the Roman circus and what it revealed about the difference between Greek and Roman culture. Rome’s was a culture of excess, and its entertainments quickly reached a frenzied, violent pitch. According to Roberts, for De Quincey “the degeneration of Rome from the heights of classical civilization represented by the Greek antecedents of its theatre to the depths of barbarism represented by its amphitheatre is attributed in Brunonian terms to the over-stimulating effects of its entertainments” (304). In other words, the surest sign of Rome’s “degradation” and decline was the transition from drama as the main form of public entertainment (as it was for the Greeks) to the spectacle of circensian violence. De Quincey had most likely read John Brown’s *Elementa Medicinae* (1780), and was therefore familiar with the Brunonian theory of excitability. As Barry Milligan explains in “Brunonianism, Radicalism and ‘The Pleasures of Opium,’” much of De Quincey’s understanding of medicine was likely influenced by Brown’s work, according to which “sthenic disorders” could arise “when too much stimulation depleted the body’s finite resources of excitability” (51). In other words, sthenic disorders constituted a problem of over-stimulation and consequent de-sensitization. Although Roberts does not elaborate on the connection between circensian violence and “the over-stimulating effects” De Quincey perceived it to have for the Romans, I believe it warrants further

exploration. It holds the key, I would argue, to understanding De Quincey's notion of violence as the result of jaded sophistication, especially in texts like "On Murder."

De Quincey discusses the Roman circus most fully in "The Caesars," an essay series published in *Blackwood's* from October 1832 to August 1834. In De Quincey's depiction of Roman culture, three corrosive forces are to blame for the city's decline. The first of these is an excess of cosmopolitanism. De Quincey speculates that "Probably in the time of Nero, not one man in six was of pure Roman descent," an observation which recalls his description of the Ratcliffe highway neighbourhood at the time of the Williams murders.¹² A second factor of Rome's decline is the growing ineffectuality of the public religion. And the third and final cause, according to De Quincey, is the circus:

3. A third cause, which from the first had exercised a most baleful influence upon the arts and upon literature in Rome, had by this time matured its disastrous tendencies towards the extinction of the moral sensibilities. This was the circus, and the whole machinery, form and substance, of the Circensian shows. Why had tragedy no existence as a part of the Roman literature? . . . The amphitheatre extinguished the theatre. How was it possible that the fine and intellectual griefs of the drama should win their way to hearts seared and rendered callous by the continual exhibition of scenes the most hideous..? (IX:60)

Note the emphasis on numbness as the result of a long desensitization: "the extinction of the moral sensibilities" does not occur from one day to the next, but is the consequence of a gradual process. After years of progressively more violent forms of entertainment, the sensibilities of the Roman spectators are "seared and rendered callous." Like De Quincey with his opium, the Romans require more and more stimulus in order to experience the same sensation, or indeed any sensation at all.

¹² (IX:58) ". . . the citizens of Rome were at this time a new race, brought together from every quarter of the world, but especially from Asia. . . [S]laves had been emancipated in such great multitudes, and afterwards invested with all the rights of citizens, that, in a single generation, Rome became almost transmuted into a baser metal . . . hence the taint of Asiatic luxury and depravity, which was so conspicuous to all the Romans of the old republican severity" (IX:57-58). This very Montesquian portrayal of the so-called Asian temperament is also observable in the *Confessions*.

This is most visible in the transition from animal violence in the amphitheatre to the fighting and killing of human combatants. De Quincey says of the early, animal-only events that “even such spectacles must have hardened the heart, and blunted the more delicate sensibilities; but these would soon cease to stimulate the pampered and exhausted sense” (IX:60). From animals to humans, therefore, “the transition must have been almost inevitable” (IX:61).

De Quincey’s description of the circus is not unique in this regard, and many historians have described the decadence of the Romans in terms of satiety and extravagance. To name but one, there is Marmontel’s 1787 “Essai sur le goût,” in which he describes – among other problems of taste – the change in sensibility that occurred in the transition from Greek to Roman and late-Roman culture. Marmontel describes “la décadence du goût” among the later Romans as a gradual numbing, the result of a vicious cycle from boredom, to increased stimulation, to more boredom, and so forth. Unlike the Greeks, who watched plays only rarely and for special events, the Romans indulged almost constantly in all manner of entertainment. This too frequent stimulation is “la grande cause de la corruption du *goût*. Un exercice contiuel de notre sensibilité . . . a deux effets contraires: d’abord, il aiguise nos *goûts*, mais bientôt il les use, et finit par les émousser. L’âme se lasse de ses plaisirs” (436). Marmontel argues that increased stimulation will, at first, be beneficial to the senses and make one a finer connoisseur; but, in the long run, it will harden the sensibilities into an almost impenetrable boredom. The result of this for the Romans was the circus, but Marmontel sees a similar extreme on the horizon for the French:

si l’on demande du nouveau et du plus tragique, d’où le tirer, si ce n’est du milieu des tortures et des supplices? Et lorsque l’habitude nous aura refroidis sur les spectacles de Tancredè, de Mahomet et de Sémiramis, que nous restera-t-il, que les dernières atrocités du crime, et les horreurs de l’échafaud? On commence en effet à les risquer au théâtre; et si notre sensibilité y répugne encore, ce n’est pas pour longtemps: l’habitude l’y endurcira . . . (438-439)

Of course, Marmontel would turn out to be right – particularly about “l’échafaud.” Though he hardly knew it in 1787, the public executions of *la terreur* were not many years away. It is this sort of uncontrolled, revolutionary violence that is the counterpoint to circensian spectacle, which is the controlled expression of absolute authority. De Quincey had an almost comical abhorrence of anything revolutionary (to call something “Jacobinical” is both his worst and his most frequent term of abuse), and this too receives mention in “The Caesars,” as when De Quincey notes “the effect of revolutionary times, to relax all modes of moral obligation, and to unsettle the moral sense” (IX:57).

To return to the question of boredom, however, Marmontel’s essay shows that the idea of the Romans’ decadence as being at least in part the result of overindulgence and dissipation (and of that tendency as being directly observable in their choice of public entertainment) was not unique to De Quincey. Similar ideas are also expressed in Montesquieu’s *Grandeur et décadence des Romains* (1734) and Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776).¹³ Where the De Quincey departs from the standard clichés is in his manner of discussing the Roman emperors. The portrayal in “The Caesars” of Caligula and Nero is a purely De Quinceyan romp: gossipy and confidential, digressively erudite, and willing to explore even the most unsavoury episodes in light of their comic appeal. Though it contains very little beyond the most commonly circulated anecdotes about the two emperors (Nero’s assassination of his mother; Caligula’s cruelty at the circus and at home), De Quincey reworks this material into something scholarly, humorous, and decidedly “on brand” for the literary persona he has been curating since 1827 at least. What is

¹³ Gibbon writes of the Roman spectators at the circus that “every circumstance of the place as well as the ceremony, combined to kindle their devotion, and to extinguish their humanity” (I:542); and Montesquieu that by Constantine’s time “les soldats vécutent et s’amollirent dans le cirque et dans les théâtres” (161).

more, several passages concerning the two emperors are framed in the same artistic terms as “On Murder,” and even repurpose some of the same jokes.

6. CALIGULA, NERO, AND THE ART OF MURDER

For the life of Caligula, which begins “Chapter III” of the series, De Quincey revisits his earlier argument concerning the perils of overstimulation and numbness. Just as Rome as a whole was brought to decadence and dissipation following a period of plenty, De Quincey describes the same process on an individual scale in the emperor Caligula, whose infamous cruelties are explained in terms of the boredom that follows from an excess of power and indulgence. Caligula’s wanton acts of violence – killing slaves, citizens, and even his own dinner-guests on a whim – are a form of entertainment, a game. As the game grows tiresome, it requires more and more innovations in order to hold the emperor’s interest. “Jaded and exhausted as the sense of pleasure had become in Caligula,” writes De Quincey, “it could be roused . . . by nothing short of these murderous luxuries” (IX:45). He continues:

Hence, it seems, that he was continually tampering and dallying with the thought of murder; and like the old Parisian jeweller Cardillac, in Louis XIV’s time, who was stung with a perpetual lust for murdering the possessors of fine diamonds – not so much for the value of the prize . . . as from an unconquerable desire of precipitating himself into the difficulties and hazards of the murder, – Caligula never failed to experience (and sometimes even to acknowledge) a secret temptation to any murder which seemed either more than usually abominable, or more than usually difficult. (IX:45-46)

Like the *virtuosos* of “On Murder,” Caligula values a murder for its distinctiveness and the difficulty of its execution, seeking *bravura* rather than pecuniary gain. Here De Quincey draws the same firm line between the categories of *amateur* and *professional* as will be stressed in the 1854 “Postscript.”

Another De Quinceyan flourish to “The Caesars”’s account of Caligula is the emphasis on the emperor’s banquets as a favoured locale for violence. De Quincey groups these anecdotes together into a single passage, whose effect is to suggest murder as a garnish or condiment to other delicacies. He recounts all manner of violent episodes at Caligula’s dinners, and says that “his daily banquets would soon become insipid without them. Hence he required a daily supply of executions in his own halls and banqueting rooms; nor was a dinner held to be complete without such a dessert” (IX:45). As dinner entertainment he seeks out “artists [with] dexterity and strength enough to do what Lucan somewhere calls *ensem rotare*, that is, to cut off a human head with one whirl of the sword.” Like the animals at the amphitheatre, however, “even this became insipid . . . As a pleasant variety, therefore, the tormentors were introduced with . . . [new] instruments of torture” (IX:45). In the passage, Caligula changes roles from *amateur* to *connoisseur* of the work of others. The emphasis is on taste, and murder becomes a “dessert” without which the banquets would be “insipid.” Such scenes of violence become “an indispensable condiment to the jaded palate of the connoisseur” (IX:45). The word *condiment* is of crucial importance here. Although the most recent edition of De Quincey’s works prints the phrase as “an indispensable condition” (perhaps an oversight), the original *Blackwood’s* text does in fact use the more vivid “condiment.”¹⁴ This detail connects the passage on Caligula to the later “Postscript,” in which De Quincey comments that artists like Williams come to crave murder “as a condiment for seasoning the insipid monotonies of daily life” (XX:55). For Caligula as for Williams, however, the condiment appears rather to irritate than to satisfy the senses.

De Quincey’s description of the emperor takes the question of taste in its most literal form and imagines what would happen to a palate so early accustomed to every indulgence. His answer,

¹⁴ “The Caesars – Chapter III. Caligula, Claudius, and Nero.” *Blackwood’s* 33 (January 1833): 43-60, here page 44.

like Marmontel's, is that the taste of such a palate would be blunted rather than sharpened,¹⁵ eventually becoming insensible to all but the very strongest flavours and most novel eccentricities. "The result of these horrid indulgences," De Quincey explains, "was exactly what we might suppose, that even such scenes ceased to irritate the languid appetite, and yet that without them life was not endurable" (IX:45). This would become a leitmotiv in Decadent writing also, as in *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, when Gautier's narrator complains of having fallen into the same state of blunted torpor, "ce degré de blasement, de n'être chatouillé que par le bizarre et le difficile." Like Caligula, he has become a thoroughly jaded connoisseur, someone

[qui] ne puisse toucher sans vomir qu'aux plats d'une saveur extrême et n'aime plus que les viandes faisandées, les fromages jaspés de bleu . . . [et qui] cherche à réveiller son palais endormi par les milles flèches des épices ou des vins irritants... Tout ce que je peux faire n'a pas le moindre attrait pour moi. – Tibère, Caligula, Néron, grands Romains de l'empire, ô vous que l'on a si mal compris . . . je souffre de votre mal et je vous plains de tout ce qui me reste de pitié! (142-143)

There is something unwholesome about the old, gamey meat and blue-streaked cheese of Gautier's description, something of corruption and decay. Their stronger flavour,¹⁶ like that of the spices and "vins irritants," is enjoyed not for its own sake but as the last resort of an insensible palate, "un palais endormi." As in similar texts of the time, Gautier connects this decadence of taste to the decadence of Tiberius, Caligula, and Nero. Nero is also covered in "The Caesars," of course, where he appears immediately after the description of Caligula's banquets. In this section, the connection between art and murder is made even more explicit, and in words that directly echo the earlier "On Murder" essay. Nero, he writes, "was but a variety of the same species. He also was an amateur,

¹⁵ In the same text, "Essai sur le goût," Marmontel writes that "Nul art d'assaisonner les mets, ne peut surmonter les dégoûts d'une longue satiété; et ni les sels les plus stimulants, ni les liqueurs les plus brûlantes, ne réveillent plus les langueurs d'un sens blasé à force de jouir. C'est ainsi que l'intempérance des plaisirs de l'esprit nous les rendra tous insipides; et l'art même aura beau s'épuiser en recherches et en raffinemens pour ranimer le *goût*" (439).

¹⁶ There is certainly further work to be done on the metaphor of strong, unwholesome tastes as deployed by the Decadents or in reference to Decadent literature; as when Zola writes in 1865 that he enjoys the work of the Goncourts because "Mon goût . . . est dépravé. J'aime les ragoûts littéraires fortement épicés, les œuvres de décadence" (67).

and an enthusiastic amateur of murder” (IX:46). Like Caligula and the jeweler Cardillac, he values difficulty and *bravura*, and De Quincey stresses “the amorous delight with which he pursued any murder which happened to be seasoned highly to his taste by enormous atrocity, and by almost unconquerable difficulty” (IX:46). It is the fastidiousness and refinement of the connoisseur that lead Nero to his most infamous act of violence: the murder of his mother, Agrippina. This is because “no other crime had the same attractions and unnatural horror about it” (IX:46). What follows is a lively and highly comical account – very much in the style of “On Murder” – of Nero’s several failed attempts at assassination. These range from an improbable, cartoonish contraption rigged to drop a weight on her while she slept, to an elaborate boat-sinking scheme gone awry. Nero had built a special ship that could be made to sink on demand, but even this was not successful:

The ship, it seems, had done its office; the mechanism had played admirably; but who can provide for every thing? The old lady, it turned out, could swim like a duck; and the whole result had been to refresh her with a little sea-bathing . . . Could any man’s temper be expected to stand such continued sieges? Money, and trouble, and infinite contrivance, wasted upon one old woman, who absolutely would not, upon any terms, be murdered! Provoking it certainly was . . . And, unquestionably, if people will not be murdered quietly and in a civil way, they must expect that such forbearance is not to continue for ever; and obviously have themselves only to blame for any harshness or violence which they may have rendered necessary. (IX:48)

The passage, as noted earlier, bears a strong and probably intentional resemblance to the narrative banter of “On Murder,” whose protagonist also complains of the inconvenience incurred when inconsiderate victims “will not submit to having their throats cut quietly” (“On Murder” VI:127). Curiously, however, De Quincey’s tone at other junctures of “The Caesars” is one of genuine horror and moral condemnation, and, overall, the sense one gets from reading “The Caesars” is that De Quincey has set out to write a serious historical survey, but that he cannot resist elaborating on certain anecdotes, exploiting to the fullest their potential for black humour. In short, the comedy

gets away from him. This is part weakness and part strategy of De Quincey's. Albert Goldman has observed how he often exploits this brand of "anecdote" in service of his image as a gentleman-scholar. He notes the same passage of "The Caesars" (the murder of Agrippina) as precisely the sort of comic interlude that characterises De Quincey's work in this mode. Though he begins seriously enough, with just the bare facts as gathered from his sources (mainly Suetonius), in this passage and others "it becomes clear that as he proceeds in his work, the incidents begin to assume in his mind a farcical vividness, so that by the end of the anecdote he is playing the scene for laughs" (60). This is the case in "On Murder" also, which has the advantage over "The Caesars" of being less seriously bound to historical fact, and in which De Quincey may indulge his propensities more freely. As shall be seen in the following chapter, what Goldman calls De Quincey's habit of "anecdote" is just one in a series of textual strategies (along with digressiveness and a liberal helping of slang) that position the author as a learned but irreverent *littérateur*.

7. CONCLUSION AND SOURCES

This sort of literary posturing can make it difficult to gauge De Quincey's real position on the aesthetics and morality of violence. When is the author in earnest, and when in jest? At what point, if any, can he be taken at his word? A text like the first "On Murder" makes the distinction easy, but in this respect it remains the exception. Other texts, like "The Caesars," present an unevenness of tone that poses not only a generic problem (just what sort of text is it?) but an ethical one also. The "Postscript" is the other side of this coin. In his survey of the Roman emperors, De Quincey undertakes to write a serious historical study, but cannot prevent himself from lapsing into farce.

On the other hand, the “Postscript,” which presents itself as a successor to the comic essays “On Murder” and “A Second Paper,” and which does in fact begin in the same light-hearted style, soon devolves into horror – quickly becoming the most suspenseful, gruesome, and deadly serious of all De Quincey’s texts, including even *The Avenger*. In short, De Quincey’s union of humour and horror is not always homogeneous or controlled. There is a difference between the erratic lurching between moods (the passage from jokes, to terror, to moral condemnation that occurs in texts like “The Caesars” and the “Postscript”) as opposed to the deliberate, evenly textured humour of a piece like “On Murder.” The latter maintains an aloof and knowing tone throughout, and the cartoonish violence it depicts is of a kind to provoke laughter rather than fear. It is, like all black humour, an appeal to the intellect over more visceral responses.

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CHAPTER FIVE: “SCHOLARLIKE BADINAGE” AND DE QUINCEY’S COMIC STRATEGIES

1. INTRODUCTION

As mentioned in previous chapters, the ideas of *superiority* and *intellectualism* are essential tenets of black humour, as suggested by Breton’s definition of the mode as “une révolte supérieure de l’esprit.” In De Quincey’s journalistic writing, the former is sustained by the latter. De Quincey’s claims to superiority were slim: not only was his social standing something of a gray area,¹ but his profession as magazinist likewise placed him well below poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge. Poetry, as the least lucrative of genres in nineteenth-century publishing, was considered the most prestigious; as opposed to the more money-driven business of journalism, seen as the near-bottom of the echelon and only a small step above writing for the theatre (Bourdieu 167). Perhaps by way of compensation, therefore, De Quincey was careful to position himself as a *gentleman-scholar*, a figure who had neither the claims of birth nor the prestige of poetry to recommend him, but who might nonetheless occupy a small niche of respectability in the literary milieu. By highlighting his academic qualifications, De Quincey distanced himself as much as possible from the image of hack journalist. “On Murder” is an example of this high-brow journalistic style – as well as a form of revenge, some have suggested, on the sort of authors who were not required to write for money. In the essay, De Quincey’s treatment of such august figures as Plato, Cicero, and his contemporary,

¹ This was a constant source of discomfort to De Quincey, who was born merely Thomas Quincey, the son of a cotton merchant. For this reason, we often find him explaining and justifying his somewhat awkward place in the social order. In the *Confessions* De Quincey cites his education as his definitive *lettres de noblesse*, saying: “as a scholar and a man of learned education, and in that sense a gentleman, I may presume to class myself as an unworthy member of that indefinite body called *gentlemen*” (II:52-53).

Coleridge, is surprisingly cavalier. To call it merely irreverent would be an understatement, and many have called it insulting.² According to Robert Lance Snyder, De Quincey's essay betrays a certain bitterness with regard to these more prestigious writers. He sees the text as an expression of De Quincey's "resentment at having to eke out an often exigent living as a literary journalist" (105). The central murder of the essay, according to this common interpretation, is in fact the character assassination³ of the series of historical, philosophical, and literary authorities deposed one by one by De Quincey's wit. Gregory Dart provides a similar reading, and sees in De Quincey's mocking treatment of these figures "the revenge of the anonymous periodical journalist upon the independent man of letters" (192). Ironically, of course, these character assassinations were done for money,⁴ making De Quincey a vulgar *professional* as opposed to his own preferred category of *amateur*, one who practises his art as an end in itself.

A second function of De Quincey's mocking but learned brand of wit – what Leslie Stephen calls his "scholarlike badinage," not praisingly – had to do with De Quincey's literary persona. As a writer De Quincey was known for three things: his use of opium, of course; his reputation as a polyhistor (to which we will return); and, finally, his humour. And it is partly this humour that set him apart from his closest rival, Coleridge. In chapter four, it was said that Poe might be seen as a sort of doppelganger of De Quincey in France; his true doppelganger, however, was always Coleridge. The two had very similar literary personae: both were protégés of Wordsworth and

² The Victorian Leslie Stephen, for example, could not abide the sort of humour that relied on the ridicule of sacred figures. "I have seen this stuff described as 'scholarlike badinage,'" he writes, but dismisses the whole as disrespectful "foolery" and a blemish on De Quincey's otherwise distinguished prose (255).

³ The term is a popular one in discussions of the essay. George Grinnell writes that, contrary to what the essay's title might suggest, "murder is not the point here at all, except perhaps in the mode of character assassination" (138), and Matthew Schneider singles out the treatment of Hobbes as especially brutal, "a thoroughgoing character assassination" (29). Similarly, De Quincey's biographer Frances Wilson sees much of De Quincey's career as an exercise "in the fine art of character assassinations" (342), including what Albert Goldman has called the "contemporary character assassinations" of Wordsworth and Coleridge in the infamous *Tait's* biographies (54).

⁴ Dart notes "the economic necessity behind his gentle assassinations," especially in the inflammatory *Tait's* pieces (192).

members of the Grasmere circle, and both were indissociably linked, in the public mind, to opium. Robert Morrison has studied this relationship at some length, and in “Opium-Eaters and Magazine Wars” he suggests that De Quincey’s alter ego ‘the Opium-Eater’ was modelled directly on Coleridge’s personal brand. “He created himself in Coleridge’s image,” explains Morrison, “and for a time the two writers became virtually interchangeable, shadowing one another in a bizarre dance between *Blackwood’s* and . . . the *London*. De Quincey, however, is decidedly the more successful magazinist.”⁵ In other words, though he might never claim the same literary standing as the poet Coleridge, and might be doomed forever to the status of lowly magazinist, he could at least claim to be a relatively *good* magazinist.⁶ “*Spartam nactus es, hanc exorna,*” he quotes in “On Murder”: if it is your lot to be a Spartan, then you must strive to be a credit to Sparta (VI:116).

The following chapter examines how De Quincey made the best of his situation as magazinist by curating a brand of witty, erudite writing that served, firstly, to elevate him from the status of hack-journalist to that of leisurely gentleman-scholar (at least in appearance); and, secondly, to reinforce his personal brand and distinguish him from otherwise similar magazine-writers like Coleridge and Lamb. It examines some of the most frequent comic strategies deployed in pieces like “On Murder,” such as digression, anecdotage, and slang; and it also looks at the origin of these devices in the work of De Quincey’s favourite author, the humourist and humour-theorist Jean Paul. This closer reading of “On Murder” and its humour means that focus will be

⁵ (Morrison 27). For more on the same subject, see also Morrison’s “De Quincey and the Opium-Eater’s Other Selves,” in which he explains how the author was able to create “one of the most marketable and influential fictive constructs of the Romantic era, and . . . was both exploiter and victim of its popularity” (87). David Higgins also explores “the competition between the two opium-eaters within Romantic print culture” (239), as well as De Quincey’s relationship to another colleague and occasional rival, Charles Lamb (“Imagining the Exotic: De Quincey and Lamb in the *London Magazine*” 2011).

⁶ David Stewart expresses a similar view of the case. In “Commerce, Genius, and De Quincey’s Literary Identity” he writes that: “De Quincey assumes a distinction that begins to emerge in the Romantic period between writing defined by its independence from the marketplace as literature and writing defined by its implication in the marketplace as trash. He represents his relationship with the periodical press as an unfortunate necessity” (776).

directed temporarily away from Decadence and Decadent authors, but the central conflict in question – namely, the tension between art and commerce, or the *amateur* and the hack *professional* – is of obvious relevance to the ethos of art for art’s sake. When Anatole Baju, the editor of *Le Décadent*, dramatically inveighs against “ces scribes industriels qui sont pour l’art la plus épouvantable des calamités” (1), he is referring to precisely the sort of writer that De Quincey hopes not to have become.

2. THE HACK-JOURNALIST AND THE GENTLEMAN-SCHOLAR

Fortunately for De Quincey, his name was generally associated with more upscale, literary-minded publications like the *London* and especially *Blackwood’s*. The latter was quickly becoming a byword for “cruel but entertaining criticism” (Lindop 238) as well as “biographical invective” and *ad hominem* attacks in its literary reviews (Russett 107). “On Murder’s” flippancy with regard to canonical authors was therefore wholly in line with the journal’s house style. John Whale also notes that *Blackwood’s* often affected a somewhat disingenuous posture, similar to De Quincey’s own, of being unconcerned with money and indifferent to its readers as customers. “It attacks the public yet is dependent on it,” explains Whale. Like De Quincey himself, “the magazine is situated in a split between art and economics: it must sell and to do so it must claim aloofness from monetary concerns” (49). In other words, these various forms of affected superiority – superiority to literary authors, to the marketplace, and to *Blackwood’s* customers – were merely a strategy geared toward the financial success of the magazine as an “elite” and therefore costly publication.

In Jon Klancher’s classic study, *The Making of English Reading Audiences*, he singles out *Blackwood’s* for its “aristocratic ethos” and especially its price-tag (52). The magazine cost

considerably more than comparable publications like the *Hive* and the *Mirror of Literature*, such that “even if the workingmen had joined together to buy a copy at these prices – even if they had been faintly interested in what *Blackwood’s* had to insinuate about them – such reading matter would have cost a member of the ‘lower orders’ an unthinkable full day’s pay” (50). And yet this did not mean that *Blackwood’s* catered solely to the noble classes. Klancher draws our attention to an important shift in periodical print culture of the time: whereas eighteenth-century publications “mapped their audiences by targeting specific ranks,” their successors in the following century tended to divide by ideology (50). Thus “nineteenth-century periodicals often deliberately smudged social differences among their readers. [...] The intended audience must be defined by its ethos, its framework of intellectual capacity, ideological stance, economic ability, and cultural dispositions” (50). Readers of *Blackwood’s* were most likely Tories, and obviously interested in literature and literary criticism, but within those limits any number of differences might exist, and Klancher refers to this readership as “a purer, more free-floating intelligentsia” than might be found at other publications (39). The audience was open to any number of topics and textual experimentations, as pieces like “On Murder” and the “Noctes Ambrosianæ” series show.

In short, most accounts of *Blackwood’s* agree in classing it as an upscale and intellectually sophisticated publication – one in which no author need be ashamed to publish. And yet De Quincey did not publish solely in *Blackwood’s*. As money required, he might be found at any number of different magazines, including even the left-leaning, more democratically-minded *Tait’s*. For all his posturing, he was in almost constant need of money, and not in a position to dictate either where or on what topics he might write. De Quincey could not limit himself to the sort of literary experimentation of a piece like “On Murder,” but must also write non-fiction on current events and subjects of topical interest to his employers’ audiences. Non-fiction was the

bread and butter of the periodic press, and, consequently, the bulk of De Quincey's output, as his collected *Works* well show.

In this non-fiction work, De Quincey adopted an approach that would quickly become his calling-card: he stepped into the role of the gentleman-scholar, one who wrote in a lively, erudite style for the benefit of a general audience that was cultured and intellectually curious, but less informed than himself on the topic at hand. To do him justice, it should be said that this was not altogether an act – in the real world, De Quincey *was* in fact admired for his erudition. “Upon almost every subject,” writes one acquaintance, “he had not only that general information which is easily picked up in literary society or from books, but that minute and accurate acquaintance with the details that can be acquired only from personal investigation” (Woodhouse 74). His conversation was notable for “the variety and extent of his acquisitions in the different branches of knowledge” (75), and this came across in his writing as well. In essays with titles like “The Logic of Political Economy,” “A Brief Appraisal of Greek Literature,” and “Historico-Critical Inquiry into the Origins of the Rosicrucians and Free-Masons,” De Quincey put his extensive erudition to use, adding the flourishes of style and tone of *noblesse oblige* condescension⁷ that gave his writing its characteristic air of authority. As Albert Goldman explains, the reading public was increasingly populated by newly-educated classes⁸ who were interested in filling in any gaps in their cultural knowledge, and by positioning himself in this way, “De Quincey must have realized that he could capitalize on his scholarly manner, his refined and exquisite tastes, his

⁷ It is important to note that De Quincey often presented his articles as a sort of *gift* to his readers – as opposed to what they really were, i.e. a commodity they had bought and paid for. This is the main focus Charles Rzepka's 1995 study, *Sacramental Commodities: Gift, Text and the Sublime in Thomas De Quincey*.

⁸ A large part of this group was composed of women, who were not educated at the universities and therefore constituted a very different group of readers from the assumed audience of a magazine like *Blackwood's*. And yet they too were eager for the sort of content that might increase their general knowledge, and De Quincey readily catered to this market as well. For more on this topic see Julian North's “Wooing the Reader: De Quincey, Wordsworth, and Women in *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*.”

extensive reading in out-of-the-way books, and his extreme sophistication of attitude” in catering to this particular market (161). The persona of the gentleman-scholar was just as useful to him, in this respect, as that of the opium-eater. In fact, the two personae had always been related, since the full title of his first and most famous work was the “Confessions of an English Opium-Eater: Being an Extract from the Life of a Scholar.”

The magazinist scholar (as opposed to the independent scholar or the professor) is by definition a liminal creature. As Margaret Russett has noted, “his disproportion of cultural capital and circulating capital gives rise to a cluster of anxieties about prestige, continuity, and the legibility of identity” (95). De Quincey’s class anxiety made the problem of “legibility of identity” particularly distressing, and this was exacerbated by the fact that so much of periodical writing at the time was anonymous.⁹ Magazines like *Blackwood’s* and the *London* were a new type of publication in which the roles of writer, editor, and publisher were often so irretrievably mixed that they produced what Klancher calls “an essentially authorless text” (51). And yet, more experienced readers could develop a sense of the magazine’s different writers over time, based on each writer’s particular voice. The idea of voice, therefore – or “style,” as it began to be called –, assumed ever greater importance as a way for the anonymous periodical writer to distinguish himself and gain a new level of recognition and legitimacy. As Klancher explains, “the importance style itself assumes in the nineteenth century owes partly to this impersonality of the public text. Style becomes a sign, a marker” (51). In the case of De Quincey, as we have noted, this personal style was often tied to his brand of scholarly and irreverent humour.

⁹ According to Russett, the interchangeability and anonymity of periodical writers contributed to the idea of this sort of work as a form of creative “prostitution.” She writes that “the identification of writing and prostitution...became increasingly commonplace during the nineteenth century. Writers for periodicals, especially, were ‘prostituted’ by the double indignity of producing anonymous work” (98).

Humour is, after all, one of the most personal modes of writing. Jean-Jacques Mayoux, perhaps the only reader of De Quincey to have focussed on his humour specifically (albeit briefly), observes that “the ‘serious’ writer withdraws and conceals his idiosyncrasies...[whereas] the humorist thrusts himself to the fore, drawing attention to himself by various antics, a sort of verbal clowning” (113). De Quincey’s humour is thus an expression of his personality and individuality. It is also, I would add, an expression of superiority. Humour has frequently been linked to the idea of superiority. It is often described as a talent or gift, the mark of a superior intellect, as when George Meredith writes that humour cannot be learned but “must be a natal gift in the Comic poet,”¹⁰ and Freud that it is “a rare and precious gift” (166). There is also the humourist and humour-theorist Jean Paul, who makes the following observation in his *Vorschule der Aesthetik*:

Each of us may say without vanity that he is intelligent or rational, that he has imagination, feeling, or taste; but no one may say that he has wit. Similarly, he can claim to have strength, health, and nimbleness, but not beauty. Each for the same two reasons: First, wit and beauty confer superiority . . . secondly, wit and beauty are *social* powers and triumphs. (120)

What is meant in the passage is that the *nature* of the superiority implied by wit is such that to claim it in oneself would be unseemly. As a personal quality, wit is of a higher order even than intelligence. It implies “a poetic spirit and a free and philosophically cultivated one as well, one which presents a higher world view” (110). This section on humour in the *Vorschule* exerted considerable influence on De Quincey and other members of the Grasmere circle. (In fact, Coleridge was later caught plagiarising Jean Paul’s treatise almost word for word in 1818’s “On the Distinctions of the Witty, the Droll, the Odd, and the Humorous.”)¹¹ De Quincey, for his part,

¹⁰ This is from Meredith’s *On the Idea of Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit*, one of the few works of humour theory produced by the Victorians. In the work, Meredith emphasises the need of a certain superiority of intellect on the part of the audience as well, writing that for the more advanced forms of humour “a society of cultivated men and women is required, wherein ideas are current and the perceptions quick.” This is in opposition to “the semi-barbarism of merely giddy communities” (8).

¹¹ René Wellek calls the lecture series “a patchwork of quotations from Jean Paul’s *Vorschule*” (II:153).

could hardly find praise enough to do justice to “the Proteus, the Ariel, the Mercury, the monster John Paul” (III:23). In a piece from 1821, he extols Jean Paul’s theoretical writing (the *Vorschule* in particular receives near-hysterical praise¹²) as well as his humour, which is in fact the main focus of the essay. De Quincey sees Jean Paul’s humour as the best and most distinctive quality of his work. He considers him equal or better, in this respect, to any of the great humorists of the canon, maintaining that “I cannot but consider John Paul Richter as by far the most eminent artist in that way since the time of Shakespeare. What! you will say, greater than Sterne? I answer yes...[he] leaves Sterne at an infinite distance in the rear” (III:22). He then enters into a discussion of the particular nature of this humour – a discussion which, whatever it says about Jean Paul, says a great deal more about De Quincey himself.

3. DE QUINCEY, HUMOUR, AND JEAN PAUL

“What then is it that I claim?” asks De Quincey, after declaring the originality of Jean Paul’s humour and wit. In sum, “the characteristic distinction of Paul Richter . . . is the two-headed power which he possesses over the pathetic and the humorous” (III:20). I say “in sum” because De Quincey’s description of this power is characteristically wordy¹³ (a trait examined in the following section), but the combination of humour and pathos does in fact constitute the core of his argument. Elsewhere, he refers to “the interpenetration of the humorous and the pathetic” (III:21), as well as

¹² “. . . on this poor earth of ours I am acquainted with no book of such unintermitting and brilliant wit as his *Vorschule der Aesthetik*; it glitters like the stars on a frosty night; or like the stars on Count —’s coat; or ἀνήριθμον γέλασμα the multitudinous laughing of the ocean under the glancing lights of sunbeams; or like a *feu-de-joie* of fireworks: in fact, John Paul’s works are the galaxy of the German literary firmament” (III:25). He also says that the book “is absolutely so charged with quicksilver that I expect to see it leap off the table,” or else to spontaneously combust (III:23).

¹³ The passage actually reads: “The characteristic distinction of Paul Richter amongst German authors, I will venture to add amongst modern authors generally, is the two-headed power which he possesses over the pathetic and the humorous; or, rather, let me say at once, what I have often felt to be true, and could (I think) at a fitting opportunity prove to be so, this power is not two-headed, but a one-headed Janus with two faces: the pathetic and the humorous are but different phases of the same orb” (III:20-21).

to “the possibility of blending, or fusing, as it were, the elements of pathos and of humour and composing out of their union a third metal *sui generis* (as Corinthian brass, you know, is said to have been the product of all other metals, from the confluence of melted statues, etc., at the burning of Corinth)” (III:22). Corinth aside, there is a clear pattern to De Quincey’s descriptions of the special quality of Jean Paul’s humour – a sort of *mixing* or synthesis with pathos. Consider also the following passage, which goes on to provide two examples of what is meant:

. . . there *is* a humour which is in alliance with pathos. How else could we have borne the jests of Sir Thomas More after his condemnation, which, *as* jests, would have been unseasonable from any body else: but being felt in him to have a root in his character, they take the dignity of humorous traits; and do, in fact, deepen the pathos. So again, mere naïveté, or archness, when it is felt to flow out of the cheerfulness of resignation, becomes humorous, and at the same time becomes pathetic: as, for instance, Lady Jane Grey’s remark on the scaffold – “I have but a little neck,” etc. (III:21)

What De Quincey is describing, a century before Freud, is something very close to gallows humour. The examples of More’s and Lady Grey’s executions are not taken from Jean Paul’s work because they could not be – Jean Paul does not actually discuss this mode. Though the *Vorschule* touches often on the idea of combining light and dark, or humour and pathos, this is always imagined as an *alternation* between the two. Thus Jean Paul provides examples from the medieval mysteries and especially from Shakespeare that alternate between tragic and comic scenes (92). He stresses the importance of balance between pathos and humour, and the need for characters like the jester or *bouffon* to release accumulated tension. In short, what Jean Paul is describing is comic relief; whereas De Quincey seems more focussed on *Galgenhumor*. The combination of humour and pathos described by De Quincey in the examples of Sir Thomas Moore and Lady Jane Gray is not a case of alternation but of simultaneity. Overall, he seems much more interested in the fusion or “interpenetration” of humour and pathos, the way they might “melt indiscernibly into each other” (III:21), as opposed to their alternation. In short, although De Quincey identifies this

combination as the “characteristic distinction” of Jean Paul, his discussion of it reveals less about the German author’s style than about his own.

We should not, therefore, look to Jean Paul and the *Vorschule* for the origins of De Quincey’s *Galgenhumor*. But there is nevertheless an undeniable continuity between the German author and his professed acolyte, as others have noted.¹⁴ Romantic irony is one such resemblance, and John E. Jordan sees the unresolved tension of the “On Murder” series as “typical of Romantic irony – a deliberate, joyous exploitation of incongruity left finally ambiguous” (203).¹⁵ Julian North identifies a further point of resemblance between De Quincey and Jean Paul, citing the latter’s novel *Titan* and the character Roquairol as a possible source of inspiration for De Quincey’s murder-artist (66). But the most obvious similarity between the humour of Jean Paul and that of De Quincey is without doubt their comic digressions. Both are hopelessly discursive. His contemporary, Hegel, writes that “Jean Paul is a beloved humorist among the Germans. Compared with other humorists he is, however, recognizable for his Baroque manner” (Fleming 13). Hegel himself was not known for his clarity, it is true, but this reputation of Jean Paul as an author unusually difficult to follow¹⁶ appears to have been universal among his countrymen. In De Quincey’s *Relation to German Literature and Philosophy*, William Dunn sees these whimsical, Baroque digressions as a major point of similarity in their work, writing:

In many respects this criticism of Jean Paul is equally true of De Quincey. His own mind springs from thought to thought with marvellous rapidity . . . Every allusion calls up a host of facts, poetic ideas, of humorous suggestions. This was a matter of

¹⁴ See especially Frederick Burwick in “The Dream-Visions of Jean Paul and Thomas De Quincey” (1968).

¹⁵ Of course, not everyone will agree with this assessment. Frederick Burwick, for example, argues in *Knowledge and Power* that the English and German iterations of romantic irony very different, and that De Quincey, far from seeking to imitate his Continental models, “found the disruptions of German romantic irony repugnant,” a view he shared with Sir Walter Scott (53-54).

¹⁶ De Quincey refers to this reputation of Jean Paul, adding as an aside: “By the way, I must observe, that it is this fiery, meteoric, scintillating, coruscating power of John Paul, which is the true foundation of his frequent obscurity. You will find he is reputed as the most difficult of German authors . . . [and] it has often been said to me, as an Englishman, ‘What! can *you* read John Paul?’” (III:24).

pride to De Quincey; but it is often nothing more than a leaping from point to point: often he seems the slave of allusion; and it leads him sometimes into mere pedantry or heavy wit. (86-86)

As both Hegel's and Dunn's comments make clear, the authors' digressiveness could be something of an acquired taste; and De Quincey's, especially, was frequently criticized as pedantic. The byzantine asides, the interminable footnotes on etymology, the snobbishly untranslated passages of Latin, Greek, and even Hebrew – all these features contributed to the difficulty of De Quincey's texts, but therefore also to their cachet. If you could read and enjoy De Quincey, the reasoning went, then you might count yourself a true connoisseur.

4. DIGRESSION AS STRATEGY

In *Suspiria de Profundis* De Quincey likens this way of proceeding to taking the scenic route, longer but with accordingly greater rewards. One reviewer from 1854 states that readers worthy of De Quincey – connoisseurs, in short – will not see this as a difficulty. Duller readers, on the other hand, will be baffled and frustrated. And just who are these readers? “Dull, dense, matter-of-fact people,” answers the reviewer, “people who recognise no line of beauty that is not straight . . . people who know no Latin beyond *Cui bono* (which they are quoting in season, out of season) . . . stolid, stupid souls of this order” (“De Quincey's ‘Miscellanies’” 339). One gets a sense of who was – and who was not – reading De Quincey at the time. The journal in which this review appeared, *The New Monthly Magazine and Humorist*, had also written on De Quincey two years earlier. In “The Humour of Thomas De Quincey,” contributor Sir Nathaniel devotes a full article to this aspect of De Quincey's writing. The piece provides a very good idea of how De Quincey's brand of scholarly humour was perceived in the literary milieu, and is worth quoting in full:

. . . the comedy in which he indulges is certainly not known and read of all men. It is perhaps *caviare* to the general. Many who are in a roar at . . . Dickens, travel through page after page of De Quincey's elaborate mirth without one contraction of their facial muscles . . . gravely, grimly perusing a *jeu d'esprit* throughout its sportive convolutions; sounding on their dim and perilous way among jokes that *de jure* should be lights on their path but *de facto* are stumbling-blocks and pitfalls. . . His humor, then, is not for all comers. It is not patent for the use and delight of all tastes and degrees of men amongst us. For some it is too subtle and tangential and allusive; for others too complex, intricate, parenthetical; for others too ponderous, too "high and dry," too pedantic; for others too unlicensed in its verbiage, too eccentric in its orbit . . . (142-143)

Like the later *New Monthly* review, the review from 1852 casts De Quincey's detractors as philistines: short-sighted and short-legged readers incapable of keeping up. But this is not altogether fair, and many very cultured readers, readers who profess to like De Quincey's work overall, point to this digressive pedantry as its one unfortunate flaw.

One of these is the philosopher John Stuart Mill, who writes that De Quincey's explanations of political economy are uncommonly good, and that he can be quite clear when he wants to be. "In bringing an abstract thought home to an unpractised comprehension," writes Mill, "he is very successful, and would be more so if he had not a strange delight in drawing illustrations from subjects ten times more abstruse than what they are designed to illustrate." His interjections of "miscellaneous knowledge . . . are continually starting up and crossing the path of his dissertation in the most unexpected and surprising manner," possibly due to "a certain air of self-consciousness, if not self-complacency, which considerably alloys the pleasure arising from his liveliness" (Mill 321). Even Virginia Woolf, who adored De Quincey and was much more generous in her opinion of him than was her father (the previously mentioned Leslie Stephen), is nonetheless forced to admit that his "fatal verbosity" is a blot on his prose. "He could not tell the simplest story," she writes, "without qualifying and illustrating and introducing additional information until the point that was to be cleared up has long since become extinct in the dim mists

of the distance” (4-5). In other words, the digressions dominate the text, wreathing themselves around the thin, straight line of the initial argument, until this line is overtaken entirely, and eventually obscured from view. De Quincey called this the *caduceus* manner of writing, in reference to the symbol of Mercury (today better known as the symbol of medicine) consisting of a pole encircled by two intertwining snakes. For the title page of *Les Paradis artificiels* (the original Poulet-Malassis edition, from 1860), Baudelaire chooses to make this symbol a focal point.¹⁷ A caduceus flanked by two lush cornucopias appears in bright red ink just below the author’s name. Its explanation appears further on in the book, when Baudelaire expresses his regret at having to leave out so much of the author’s florid commentary. “J’abrégèrai sans doute beaucoup,” he apologizes, “[car] De Quincey est essentiellement digressif; l’expression *humorist* peut lui être appliquée plus convenablement qu’à tout autre; il compare, en un endroit, sa pensée à un thyrses, simple bâton qui tire toute sa physionomie et tout son charme du feuillage compliqué qui l’enveloppe.”¹⁸ Unlike Woolf and Mill, however, Baudelaire does not criticize this tendency to digress. He has made a choice, as De Quincey’s translator, to remove or abridge a portion of the digressions, but he continues to see them as an essential part of the charm and especially the humour of De Quincey’s writing.

This higher tolerance of divagation is consistent, if not with Baudelaire’s own writing (which tends to be briefer and more direct), then at least with the ethos of his milieu. To return

¹⁷ For a very interesting discussion of the appropriation by Baudelaire of De Quincey’s caduceus symbol, see “Au Cœur de l’esthétique baudelairienne: ‘thyrses et caducée’” by Marie-Christine Clemente and Stamos Metzidakis, as well as the earlier “De Quincey, Baudelaire and ‘Le Cygne’” by John E. Gale.

¹⁸ (116-117). Here the symbol of the caduceus and the thyrses (or flower-pole) are conflated somewhat, but this is the case in De Quincey’s original as well, which reads: “I tell my critic that the whole course of this narrative resembles, and was meant to resemble, a *caduceus* wreathed about with meandering ornaments, or the shaft of a tree’s stem hung round and surmounted with some vagrant parasitical plant.” The stated subject of the work is merely “the dry withered pole, which shoots all the rings of the flowering plants, and seems to do so by some dexterity of its own; whereas, in fact, the plant and its tendrils have curled round the sullen cylinder by mere luxuriance of *theirs* . . . Not the flowers are for the pole, but the pole is for the flowers” (XV:135).

briefly to the subject of Decadence and Decadent writing, it is worth noting that unrestrained digression – what Bourget calls “déchaînement” – was seen as an important aspect of the decentered, unregulated Decadent text. In a short piece entitled “Théorie de la decadence,” Bourget associates the decadence and breakdown of empires with a corresponding breakdown of language, explaining how, in decadent societies,

les organismes qui composent l’organisme total cessent . . . de subordonner leur énergie à l’énergie totale, et l’anarchie qui s’établit constitue la décadence de l’ensemble . . . Une même loi gouverne le développement et la décadence de cet autre organisme qui est le langage. Un style de décadence est celui où l’unité du livre se décompose pour laisser la place à l’indépendance de la page, où la page se décompose pour laisser place à l’indépendance de la phrase, et la phrase pour laisser place à l’indépendance du mot. (14)

One would think the passage had been written in 1981 as opposed to 1881, the year of Bourget’s *Essais de psychologie contemporaine*, in which the essay appears. Bourget’s description of the anarchy of the text, as individual words cease to contribute to an organized whole, is striking. What he depicts is a sort of *atomization* – an explosive release of the text’s words as words. This is precisely what happens in De Quincey’s writing also, where particular words are constantly arresting the progress of the text. De Quincey’s use of an out-of-the-way term frequently leads to a long, daydreaming reflection on the *justesse*, or the sonority, or the etymology of the word in question. Even in a short text like “On Murder,” examples abound. Words like *assassin* (derived from the drug hashish used by early killers-for-hire), *liberal* (“liberal in the true classic sense,” he specifies, “not in the slang sense of modern politicians and education-mongers”), *murder* (a word strangely nonexistent in Latin) . . . stop De Quincey in his tracks. They inspire commentary, explanation, and whimsical reflections which – taken together – account for a disproportionately large part of the text.

In “De Quincey: Humour and the Drugs,” Jean-Jacques Mayoux establishes two traits as essential to De Quincey’s humour. The first is what others have called his digressiveness (“rambling variations are the very substance of De Quinceyan humour,” writes Mayoux). The second is his use of words as stepping-stones for what becomes, in essence, an exercise in psychological free-association. A word leads to a thought, which leads somewhere else, and so forth. Also as in free-association, this wandering of the mind is not held back or inhibited in any way, and Mayoux writes that in De Quincey’s humour, “the imagination . . . seems perpetually ready to answer any new call, and to start in a new direction. A word will do, not always with a clear justification . . . Words are amusing. They have, if one agrees to let them go, a life of their own, which it is a pleasure to watch developing, until one is simply carried along and away with them” (124). The text is thus continually forestalled, never reaching its stated goal – which, the reader soon realises, was never more than a pretext for the surrounding commentary. “Not the flowers are for the pole, but the pole is for the flowers,” says De Quincey of his method (XV:135). This is partly the case in “On Murder” as well, which V.A. De Luca calls “an exercise in elusiveness” (45). Though we do get a description of *some* murders, the most important murders in question (those of John Williams, the absent star of the text) are continually put off in favour of preparatory remarks and digressive scholarly commentary, as well as the sort of word-association described above. What is provided instead, after a great deal of introductory rigmarole, is a series of examples of the murders of philosophers. Philosophers are always murdered, we are told. But this too turns out to be a sleight-of-hand since, as Julian North very correctly points out, De Quincey never actually delivers on this claim. “As it turns out, of course, not one of the philosophers cited was murdered,” and what is actually presented is a series of bizarre but entertaining anecdotes from the philosophers’ lives as opposed to their deaths (North 59).

5. COMIC ANECDOTAGE

This was of course a common strategy in his work, as texts like “On Murder” and “The Caesars” well show. According to Albert Goldman, “the retelling of gossipy anecdotes was one of De Quincey’s surest and most characteristic literary resources” (54). This served him especially well when he was tasked with re-visiting already well-trodden areas of Greek and Roman history, areas in which he was unlikely to find many novelties to offer his readers. His response, in these cases, might be to find a new “angle” of approach to the subject in question, as in the article “The Casuistry of Roman Meals,” which the *New Monthly* praised as “one of those compounds of rare scholarship and lively gossip in which the author is perhaps without a fellow” (“De Quincey’s Miscellanies” 342). Yet even when he was limited to revisiting the most threadbare and universally-known events, he nonetheless had a talent for reworking the material into something lively and new. Thus the same magazine writes in 1852 that “no one can better develop the utmost possibilities of . . . an anecdote run to seed” (“The Humour of Thomas De Quincey” 145). “Not that his stores of anecdotage are confined to second-hand and worn-out materials,” the reviewer is quick to add, “. . . but he is at no loss what to do with a thoroughly passé story, and can turn it to account though it be as old as the hills” (145). And just what was it that made these old anecdotes so fresh again? How was De Quincey able to “turn them to account,” as the reviewer says? In short, it was usually his slangy, anachronistic irreverence that brought the episodes to life. The same reviewer notes his “contemptuous ridicule of standard celebrities” but insists that the attacks are never unjust. They are simply more than usually piquant. “[I]t is partly the reality, and partly the raillery of his challenge,” he explains, “which give an idiosyncratic or *differential* piquancy to this exhibition of his humour” (“The Humour of Thomas De Quincey” 146).

This opinion was not limited to the *New Monthly Magazine and Humorist*, nor to De Quincey's readers in England. On the continent, the French were also struck with his tone of scholarly irreverence, and the Decadent writer Teodor de Wyzewa, after remarking upon "l'universalité d'érudition" of De Quincey's writing, adds that "jamais un écrivain n'a su tant de choses si diverses avec une si singulière expression de dédain pour toutes choses" (71). In "On Murder" this expression of disdain – perhaps better described as boldness or cheek – is most visible in his treatment of the great philosophers. De Quincey makes light of the "priggism" of Cicero (VI:117), as well as his cowardice. He imagines how Cicero would have panicked if the Catiline conspiracy had turned out differently: "Lord! how he would have howled with panic, if he had heard Cethegus [his would-be murderer] under his bed. It would have been truly diverting to have listened to him; and satisfied I am, that he would have preferred the *utile* of creeping into a closet, or even into a *cloaca*, to the *honestum* of facing the bold artist" (VI:117). In this short passage, not only are Cicero's categories of the *utile* and the *honestum* turned against him; but he is further submitted to the indignity of appearing, in the reader's eye, cowering inside a *cloaca* or toilet. Other philosophers are depicted in similarly undignified attitudes. A skinny and decrepit Hobbes, "old as the hills," is depicted naked in a tub (VI:123); and an equally infirm Spinoza is stuffed with chicken by his murderer before being smothered to death in his bed, "the poor man being already half suffocated by his infernal dinner" (VI:121).

Nor is "On Murder's" iconoclasm confined to the intellectuals of history. De Quincey pokes slightly gentler fun at some contemporary figures as well, most notably Coleridge, who is described as a reasonably Christian man but altogether "too fat to be a person of active virtue" (VI:114). The jab is a friendly one, but De Quincey could be harsher in other texts. As his acquaintance Richard Woodhouse noted, his profession and early social circles meant that "he had

an immense fund of literary anecdotes respecting the living writers” (74); and though Woodhouse himself does not say as much, this sometimes meant spilling secrets or embarrassing stories about them. De Quincey would never do so in conversation, of course: in his everyday life he was as kind, mild-mannered, and gentlemanly as could be, as many of his contemporaries noted. In his writing, however, he might occasionally rely on this type of anecdote to supply the *piquancy* mentioned before, and this was sometimes held against him by more high-minded reviewers. Even after his death, the obituarist from the *Athenæum* refused to forgive De Quincey for the indiscretions committed against his literary acquaintances and friends. The obituary accuses him of having exploited his relationships with famous figures and says that De Quincey “was guilty of betraying confidences that, as a man of honour, he ought to have held sacred” (814). These betrayals were all the worse for having been financially-motivated: they were perpetrated almost solely in view of selling more papers. For De Quincey this must have been a painful trade-off, as well as an unwelcome reminder that, whatever well-mannered poses he might affect in his writing, he was often much closer to the status of hack than that of gentleman-scholar.

6. COMIC SLANG

Another aspect of De Quincey’s humour that cut both ways was his use of slang. On the one hand, because it was usually varsity slang, it contributed to his aura of casual sophistication. On the other hand, however, it caused a minority of reviewers (especially in the mid- to late-Victorian period, when his work was being gradually republished) to dismiss him as unserious – or worse, as merely vulgar. We have already mentioned the misgivings of Leslie Stephen, who writes that the sudden jar of slang in De Quincey’s writing is a disturbing jolt to the senses. “The shock is almost as great,” he complains, “as if an organist performing a solemn tune should suddenly introduce an

imitation of the mewling of a cat” (255). This may be the case in some of De Quincey’s more serious texts, but in “On Murder” the effect is not at all what Stephen describes. Consider the following passage on the near-murder of Descartes, in which De Quincey’s slang is a fitting and natural-sounding addition. Descartes has chartered a boat with a foreign crew, who begin openly to plot his death and the divvying up of his money, not knowing that Descartes can understand them perfectly. The philosopher is forced to listen in impassive silence as he decides how to act. Here De Quincey’s narrator interjects:

Excuse my laughing, gentlemen, but the fact is, I always *do* laugh when I think of this case – two things about it seem so droll. One, is, the horrid panic or “funk,” (as the men of Eton call it,) in which Des Cartes must have found himself upon hearing this regular drama sketched for his own death–funeral–succession and administration to his effects. But another thing, which seems to me still more funny about this affair is, that if these Friezland hounds had been “game,” we should have no Cartesian philosophy; and how we could have done without *that*, considering the worlds of books it has produced, I leave to any respectable trunk-maker to declare. (VI:119)

The passage sympathises with Descartes but is not without its final jab (trunks of the time were often lined with the pages of unused books). The two slang terms that appear – “to be in a funk” and “to be game” – do not distract from the anecdote but add to it. They are chosen by De Quincey for their *justesse* and appropriateness to the situation. Here as elsewhere in the essay, De Quincey borrows from all vocabularies and registers according to his needs. In speaking of Cicero he naturally uses Latin; and, just as naturally, he employs the gambling term “turn-up” when speaking of boxing (VI:124). At other junctures in the essay he borrows from technical, scientific, and religious lexicons as required. In short, De Quincey does not discriminate between registers but uses every linguistic resource at his disposal to make his texts as vivid and as specific as possible. His writing is similar, in this respect, to Gautier’s definition of “le style décadent.” Gautier describes the style as a potpourri of vocabularies, “[un] style ingénieux, compliqué, savant . . .

reculant toujours les bornes de la langue, empruntant à tous les vocabulaires techniques, prenant des couleurs à toutes les palettes, des notes à tous les claviers” (17). In this type of writing, it was common to find scholarship, classical quotations, and urban slang mixed indiscriminately together. In fact, Decadent scholar A.E. Carter uses just these terms to describe the author of *À Rebours*, writing that “Huysmans wrote slang, combining it with learned, foreign or classical words, whenever he wanted a ‘decadent’ effect” (135). This combination is of precisely the same nature as gives “On Murder” its distinctive, slightly atonal pitch. Leslie Stephen found it jarring, but in this respect he was in the minority. Alexander H. Japp, for example, has high praise for De Quincey’s “grave whimsicalities [and] his slang, which is so gentlemanly even in its excesses” (II:241). It was “gentlemanly,” as Japp puts it, because it was always apropos of the situation. It was never used for its own sake, but always furnished some specific shade of meaning, or a strong mental image, that could not be conveyed otherwise.

Just as importantly, this slang was usually varsity slang, as has been mentioned. Thus the *New Monthly* argues that although some readers may find De Quincey’s writing “too colloquial and *slangy* in its neological solecisms,” the slang itself is of irreproachable pedigree. “Racy as it often is, there is a twang of Alma Mater about it, a soupçon of cap-and-gown scholarship” (“The Humour of Thomas De Quincey” 143). The reviewer adds that, when wielded by an amateur-etymologist like De Quincey, slang may be a useful and enlightening resource: “Slang is frequently highly instructive to anyone with a turn for philology; and hence, in part, its attractions to so close an investigator of language, and so accurate a dissector of syllables, as the Opium-eater” (146). This was De Quincey’s own view of the matter as well.¹⁹ *He* could use slang because he did so

¹⁹ In an article titled “On the Present State of the English Language” (1850), De Quincey writes that there are cases when slang can contribute to clarity, and situations “in which the necessities of social intercourse, and not unfrequently the necessities of philosophic speculation, are provisionally supplied by *slang*, and the phraseology that is born and bred in the streets. The market-place and the highway, the *forum* and the *trivium*, are rich seed-plots for the sowing

consciously, deliberately, and with a deep understanding of the word's origin and usage. But if he caught a fellow author using the same slang-terms in a manner he deemed inappropriate or incorrect, he could be scathing in his reproof.²⁰ In short, slang became a further way for De Quincey to assert his superiority. Rather than degrading his texts, it elevated them and reaffirmed his position as an intellectual authority and gentleman-scholar.

7. CONCLUSION AND SOURCES

Comic slang, anecdotage, and digression were thus the cornerstones of De Quincey's leisurely academic style. Over the years, however, some critics have argued that this question of style in De Quincey's work is in fact "a false issue" (Goldman 67), since many of his distinctive traits were simply the result of poor working conditions, a lack of access to appropriate research materials, and a need to "pad" his writing to fill additional sheets. Still others have argued that what seems like De Quincey's willingness to oblige a new reading class by popularizing and disseminating scholarly knowledge was simply a mask for his deep-rooted disdain of "the intellectual shortcomings of the new reading public," as well as a real fear, on De Quincey's part, of the dangers of over-educating the poor and the possibility of a "middle-class insurgency" or revolution (Duffy "His *Canaille* of an Audience" 16). Whatever its real motivations, however, the fact remains that De Quincey's gentleman-scholar persona was highly successful. It never made him a

and the reaping of many indispensable ideas. That a phrase belongs to the slang dictionary is certainly no absolute recommendation: sometimes such a phrase may be simply disgusting from its vulgarity, without adding anything to the meaning or to the rhetorical force. How shocking to hear an official dignitary saying (as but yesterday *was* heard), 'What *on earth* could the clause mean?' Yet neither is it any safe ground of absolute excommunication even from the sanctities of literature that a phrase is entirely a growth of the street" (XVII:57).

²⁰ In one book review, for example, De Quincey writes: "we must take the liberty of telling [the author] that his own expressions of 'overhaul,' for *investigate*, and 'attackable,' are in the lowest style of colloquial slang. The expression of a 'duty' being 'due,' which is somewhere to be found in his book, is even worse" ("*Life of Richard Bentley* by J.H. Monk" VII:159).

rich man, of course, and in a letter to his close friend, John Wilson, De Quincey complains bitterly of having to endure “the wretched business of hack author, with all its horrible degradations” (quoted Lindop 277). De Quincey himself, and those close to him, knew that he wrote for money. From the outside, however, the pose was effective. It was so effective, in fact, that it soon began to be imitated, and across the Atlantic, magazine-writers like Poe began to mimic his authorial mannerisms. In “Poe’s De Quincey” Robert Morrison writes that the American author followed De Quincey’s lead in “cultivating notoriety and eccentricity, and employing the format to produce highly marketable blends of badinage, sensationalism, and erudition.” He began to write pieces very similar to the *Opium-Eater*’s, replete with “personal anecdotes, Latin tags, recondite references, and repeated claims of vast learning” (426), although this writing would eventually go on to gain greater recognition than De Quincey’s.

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CHAPTER SIX: CONTRE NATURE – THE DANDY

1. INTRODUCTION

The refinement of De Quincey's narrative voice is matched by the refinement of his protagonist: a murderer who is not a bloodthirsty brute but a calm and deliberate artist. Some have called him a dandy,¹ a comparison suggested by De Quincey's insistence on the murderer's clothes. This was a departure from earlier portrayals, as has been noted by Gregory Dart, who writes that "in most contemporary accounts of the murders, Williams was described as a fierce, uncouth young man... But in De Quincey the killer is a tiger-dandy, ferocious but fastidious, who stalks his victims in the costume of an old master" (188). This is in reference to De Quincey's remark that, just as the old masters Titian, Rubens, and Van Dyck "made it a rule never to practise their art but in full dress," so too did Williams insist on donning the proper attire for his own artistic trade. In De Quincey's telling, Williams "always assumed black silk stockings and pumps; nor would he on any account have degraded his position as an artist by wearing a morning gown" ("Postscript" XX:44). But there is more to the dandy than just his clothes. In the most famous account of this nineteenth-century archetype, *Du Dandysme et de G. Brummel* (1845), Decadent author Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly explains what is meant by the label "dandy," as well as the dandy's motivation. Like other Decadent figures, his outlandishness is often the result of boredom: "Le Dandysme est le produit d'une société qui s'ennuie," he explains (94). Barbey d'Aurevilly also emphasizes the Englishness of the dandy, as well as his humour, which was considered a typically English trait.

¹ Albert Goldman, for example, calls Williams "De Quincey's most awesome character, a weird and dandified villain" (146).

“Essayez,” he challenges the reader, “de trouver des corrélatifs au *wit*, à l’*humour*, au *fun*, qui constituent l’esprit anglais dans son originale triplicité” (100-101). This too was an important aspect of the dandy pose.

But although the dandy may have begun as a typically English figure, he was quickly assimilated into French Decadent culture. In *Decadence and the Making of Modernism*, David Weir traces the appropriation of this character to the period of the Restoration, writing that “dandyism found its place in France around 1815 with the return of the Bourbons and with French anglophilia after the victory of Wellington” (62). Its consecration in Decadent circles owed much to Barbey d’Aurevilly’s book, as well to Baudelaire’s later essay “Le Dandy,” published in 1863 as part of *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*. In fact, through the influence of Baudelaire the two ideas became virtually synonymous, and soon “for many young artists ‘decadent’ was only another word for Baudelaire’s dandy” (Swart 166). In the essay, Baudelaire describes the defining traits and philosophy of the dandy: his elegance, of course, but also his idleness, his impassivity, and his aristocratic disdain of money. His rejection of nature in favour of artifice is another important trait, and one that ties him to Baudelaire’s personal philosophy and broader Decadent aesthetic. Baudelaire even briefly imagines the possibility of a dandy-criminal, although he stresses that the crimes committed could never be vulgar or petty. “Un dandy ne peut jamais être un homme vulgaire,” writes Baudelaire. “S’il commettait un crime, il ne serait pas déchu peut-être; mais si ce crime naissait d’une source triviale, le déshonneur serait irréparable” (233). These essential qualities of the dandy define De Quincey’s protagonist as well, as the following chapter aims to show. Well beyond his interest in clothes, it is the murder-artist’s rejection of emotion in favour of coolness, instinct in favour of intellect, and nature in favour of artificiality, that make De

Quincey's protagonist such an original character and such a convincing precursor of the Decadent dandy.

2. THE DANDY'S SANG-FROID

Baudelaire's and Barbey d'Aurevilly's accounts of the dandy place a similar emphasis on coolness. For them, the dandy is a figure who provokes without being provoked. He is unfazed, and Baudelaire writes that part of what drives him is "le plaisir d'étonner et la satisfaction orgueilleuse de ne jamais être étonné" (233). Barbey d'Aurevilly likewise focusses on the emotion of *étonnement*, writing of his subject, Georges Brummell, that "comme tous les Dandys, il aimait encore mieux étonner que plaire" (94). This is an expression of aloofness and, ultimately, of social power. Those without power must seek to please; whereas the powerful may seek to displease and even to shock merely as a form of entertainment to themselves. Thus Baudelaire speaks of "cette attitude hautaine de caste provoquante" (234); and in the *Fusées* of "le plaisir aristocratique de déplaire," which is similar to that of the dandy (X:69). Barbey d'Aurevilly also sees the power of the dandy as connected to his aloofness, writing of Brummell that "il justifiait le mot de Machiavel: 'Le monde appartient aux esprits froids'" (59). *Froideur* is the idea with which Baudelaire closes his own essay, stating in his conclusion that: "Le caractère de beauté du dandy consiste surtout dans l'air froid qui vient de l'inébranlable résolution de ne pas être ému" (235). For both authors, it is very clear that the dandy's imperviousness to emotion is an important part of his bearing, his exceptionalism, and his power over others.

We have already seen in some detail how the importance of coolness or sang-froid applies to De Quincey's murderer. In chapter three, especially, we considered the coolness described by

Breton as a requirement for black humour in relation to De Quincey's similar rule for the depiction of murder in art. In the *Anthologie de l'humour noir* Breton writes that black humour, in its aestheticization of violence and human misery, is necessarily "l'ennemi mortel de la sentimentalité" (14), since to address these subjects in earnest would preclude the possibility of laughter. In "On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*," De Quincey establishes a similar principle. According to him, emotion is anathema to the aestheticization of violence, and this is particularly true of *instinctive* or lower emotions like fear ("the natural but ignoble instinct by which we cleave to life" III:151). In De Quincey's depictions of murder, therefore, as well as in his portrayal of the murder-artist and connoisseur, reactive animal instincts are suppressed in favour of a cool, dandy-like refinement. Texts like "On the Knocking" and especially "On Murder" appeal to the intellect over emotion. Furthermore, in the latter text's depiction of the murderer Williams, De Quincey is at pains to stress that he is driven by artistry rather than bloodlust. He emphasises the murderer's "polished hatred of brutality," as well as his "insinuating and snaky refinement" (XX:44). The snake is an apt comparison, since Williams exhibits a level of sang-froid that verges on the reptilian – and even, in one passage, on the vegetal. "In his veins circulated not red life-blood," reads the description, "such as could kindle into the blush of shame, of wrath, of pity – but a green sap that welled from no human heart" (XX:42). In passages like these the murderer transcends the animal realm entirely.

This resembles what Jean Pierrot has called the Decadents' denial of human nature and their quest to "refuser autant que possible les lois biologiques de l'espèce" (19). Fellow Decadent scholar A.E. Carter provides a similar assessment, pointing to a deep-rooted link between the Decadent hero's self-possession or sang-froid, his intellectualism, and his repudiation of nature. Like De Quincey, Decadent theorists stressed the primacy of *intention* over *instinct* in art, and "this

insistence on will as opposed to emotion led to a new type of sensibility: the dandy . . . with his self-mastery, intellectualism, ennui, satiety, and his perverse obsessions” (Carter 25). The dandy’s sang-froid is the smooth, glassy surface on which his other qualities are built as on a foundation. It is his strength of will and lack of emotion that allow for his other defining traits, namely, his intellectualism and consequent rejection of nature in favour of a self-conscious, studied artificiality.

3. REJECTING THE NATURE-CULT

The dandy may in this sense be understood as the reverse of the noble savage. Like De Quincey’s murderer, he is a creature of the city, in all its hectic depravity. He is not the child of Rousseau but of Sade, one of the earliest critics of Rousseau’s naturism. Again according to A.E. Carter, “attacks on Rousseau’s nature-cult occur several times in De Sade’s novels; and each attack shows (such was the force of Rousseau’s doctrine) that Nature had become so identified with the normal that a renunciation of it led to the abnormal – in De Sade’s case, to sexual perversions” (5). The Marquis’s characters turn to violence and perversity as unnatural and even anti-natural expressions of freedom.² Compare this to De Quincey’s description of the murder-artist’s driving motivation in the “Postscript,” his “craving for bloodshed as a mode of unnatural luxury” (XX:55). Violence, perversity, and the refusal of nature are essential Decadent themes (hence the common translation of *À Rebours* as *Against Nature*), and Sade is usually understood to be their point of origin.

² Their violence is also, some have suggested, an expression of aristocratic freedom at a time when the absolute power of the nobility was increasingly questioned. For more on this interpretation, see in particular Simone de Beauvoir’s *Faut-il brûler Sade?* (1972), which considers sadism as an expression of nostalgia for a feudal past.

In his classic study, *The Romantic Agony*, Mario Praz devotes a full chapter to the Marquis and his influence on late-Romantic and Decadent thought. He stresses the importance of Sade's theory of perversity as a rejection of the nature-cult, and says that, especially after the popularization of Baudelaire's writings, "the Romantics, profiting from the theories of the divine Marquis . . . gave a psychological turn to the refinements of perversity" (106). Julian North also highlights the importance of Sade in this shift, and points to a possible influence on De Quincey as well: "De Quincey, like Baudelaire after him,³ pours scorn on the notion of the noble savage and implies . . . that Wordsworth and Rousseau have paid too much heed to this idea" (254). According to this interpretation, De Quincey's rejection of the nature-cult is a part of his emancipation from Wordsworth and the Lake District sensibility. Nowhere is this clearer than in his portrayal of Williams in the "On Murder" series: if one were to imagine a reversal or negative-image of the figure of the noble savage, one could hardly do better than De Quincey's refined, city-dwelling, and wantonly cruel dandy.

4. THE CULT OF ARTIFICIALITY

For the murder-artist as for the dandy, the rejection of the nature-cult is followed by an equal and opposite enthusiasm for artificiality. In *Les Décadents*, Séverine Jouve describes the movement's revolt against the perceived inadequacies of nature, "sa monotonie, son inachèvement, sa vulgarité et son absence de desseins" (32). This monotony and lack of direction are replaced by an elaborate, even fussy aestheticism on the part of the dandy, and on the part of the murder-artist as well. From

³ Baudelaire's rejection of the noble savage and the nature-cult is an important and well-studied aspect of his aesthetics. On this subject see for example F.W. Leakey's *Baudelaire and Nature* (1969). Leakey quotes Baudelaire in a letter from 1856 to Toussenel, in which he asks: "Qu'est-ce que c'est que l'homme *naturellement* bon? Où l'a-t-on connu? L'homme *naturellement* bon serait un *monstre*" (150). He also says, in the "Salon de 1846," that "la première affaire d'un artiste est de substituer l'homme à la nature et de protester contre elle" (103).

Schlegel De Quincey had learned that “for man the artificial *is* natural” (Agnew 10), and his most famous character reflects this view. De Quincey describes him as the most discriminating and dainty of artists, “fastidiously finical in his exactions – a sort of martinet in the scenical grouping and draping of the circumstances in his murders” (XX:64). This is because, for the true artist and connoisseur, nothing is left either to nature or to chance. Any murder seen as *too* casual or unaffected (too natural, in short) is deemed part of “the savage school” – no better than Cain bludgeoning Abel with a rock, or the cyclops Polyphemus hitting his victims over the head “without science, premeditation, or anything but a mutton bone” (VI:116). There is a difference, De Quincey suggests, between simplicity and savagery, or artlessness and lack of artistry. This is a distinction sometimes present in his criticism as well. In discussing the writing of Swift, for example, De Quincey argues that while Swift is frequently praised for his naturalness of style, this is in fact no more than an unconscious vice on his part – a lack of ability and linguistic artistry. Swift’s unaffected “simplicity,” as his readers perceive it, is in fact better described as “vernacularity,” and Swift sticks to his plain language not by choice but by sheer lack of range. The passage, from a book review in *Tait’s*, begins thus:

Now . . . you, commonplace reader, that (as an old tradition) believe Swift’s style to be a model of excellence, hereafter I shall say a word to you, drawn from deeper principles. At present I content myself with these three propositions; which overthrow if you can: – 1. That the merit, which justly you ascribe to Swift, is *vernacularity*; and nothing better or finer⁴ . . . This merit, however, is exhibited, – not, as you fancy, in a graceful artlessness, but in a coarse inartificiality. To be artless, and to be inartificial, are very different things . . . as different as being simple and being homely. (XVI:192)

⁴ This variant (“and nothing better or finer”) does not appear in the original article for *Tait’s* (vol. XIV, September 1847, here page 579), nor in the current Lindop *Works*. Perhaps De Quincey’s editor found the comment unnecessarily harsh, though it is no harsher than De Quincey’s usual remarks in reviews of this type. It does appear in subsequent book-form editions of the essay, for example in the *Selections Grave and Gay* (vol. VIII) and the Masson *Collected Writings* (vol. XI).

Art requires artifice, De Quincey argues, and there is nothing praiseworthy in simplicity *per se*, especially when – as De Quincey suspects – the writer may be merely incapable of more complex forms of expression.

Continuing this idea, the second principle states that so long as Swift confines himself (as he generally does) to the most commonplace and prosaic of subjects, then his plain, vernacular prose-style may continue to pass as a sensible adaptation of manner to matter. “But grand impassioned subjects,” explains De Quincey, “insist upon a different treatment; and *there* it is that the true difficulties of style commence, *and there it is that your worshipful Master Jonathan would have broke down irrecoverably*⁵” (XVI:192). This leads De Quincey to his third point, which is:

3 . . . That nearly all the blockheads with whom I have at any time had the pleasure of conversing upon the subject of style (and pardon me for saying that men of the most sense are apt, upon two subjects – viz. poetry and style – to talk *most* like blockheads) have invariably regarded Swift’s style not as if *relatively* good (i.e. given a proper subject), but as *absolutely* good – good unconditionally, no matter what the subject. Now, my friend, suppose the case that the Dean had been required to write a pendant for Sir Walter Raleigh’s immortal apostrophe to Death . . . or to Jeremy Taylor’s inaugural sections of his “Holy Living and Dying,” do you know what would have happened? Are you aware what sort of ridiculous figure your poor bald Jonathan would have cut?

One may question the fairness of attacking purely hypothetical texts of Swift’s, works existing only in De Quincey’s mock-horrified imagination, but his general point remains worth considering. Swift aside, De Quincey’s argument is that certain subjects – “grand impassioned subjects,” as he describes them – demand an equal grandeur of rhetoric, something more refined and presumably more elaborate than the merely natural or vernacular style. His choice of a first example, Raleigh’s ode to Death, is in this sense very telling, since it demonstrates precisely the sort of elaborate, even overblown rhetorical style at which De Quincey himself also excelled, and

⁵ The phrase in italics is also absent from the *Tait*’s version, most likely for the same reason.

which he later termed his “impassioned prose.” (Raleigh’s ode to Death is even, as shown in chapter two, the basis for one of De Quincey’s most famous passages, the ode to opium in the *Confessions*.) For those who know the author’s work, the passage takes on a distinctly self-congratulatory tone, and its subtext is obvious: language, in De Quincey’s hands, is a precise and sophisticated tool, whereas Swift wields his own simple vernacular in much the same way as De Quincey describes Cain wielding his simple rock, or Polyphemus his mutton bone. Simplicity, in and of itself, is no virtue in De Quincey’s eyes; and the natural – if it is merely savage – is not an artistic ideal toward which to strive. His own preferences lie much more in the way of the artificial, the ornamental, and the baroque. As an artist De Quincey resembles his imagined protagonist: the cruel but refined dandy.

5. THE DANDY AND EARLY DRUG CULTURE

This tension between the natural and the artificial gave rise to a specific dandy affectation that owed a great deal to De Quincey’s work. Although I do not wish to linger long on the subject of opium, given its limited presence in “On Murder,” I would be remiss to neglect such an important and well-recognised contribution of De Quincey to dandy culture – especially since, as I hope to show, it holds particular relevance to the problem of nature and the natural. In a text from 1989 entitled “Rhétorique de la drogue,” Jacques Derrida acknowledges De Quincey’s place in the history of recreational drug-use and the discourse surrounding it, which he sees as linked to modernity’s “crise de la naturalité” (258). The boundaries of the natural and the artificial have become unclear, argues Derrida, and this is reflected in our inability, when discussing drug-use, to reach a consensus as to what constitutes natural and unnatural behaviours, or natural and toxic

substances. Derrida also points to the construct of “addiction” as a highly unnatural (i.e. social) construct, one which may be dated to the publication of De Quincey’s *Confessions* (250).

That the *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* should have become such a fixture in Decadent circles is hardly surprising, since, as Julian North explains, “drugs are perhaps the most extreme method by which the decadents pit imagination against nature” (229). De Quincey’s dream-visions in the *Confessions* represented the possibility of replacing the outside world with a world of one’s own imagining. By offering “an escape from nature through art” (North 230), they extended the Decadent project of rejecting the natural in favour of the artificial. As Jean Pierrot explains, this was often articulated by Decadent theorists in terms of a triumph of *idealism* over *naturism*, although the label “idealist” was frequently misunderstood by the wider public as something more positive and more spiritually-minded than what the Decadents originally intended (84). Their understanding of the word had more to do with the primacy of the inner, creative life over outside reality, “l’affirmation de la toute-puissance du désir . . . [et] la primauté de l’univers intérieur sur le monde extérieur” (Pierrot 97). Drugs were in this sense an extension of the dandy’s dress and other affectations: they were the manifestation of his creative vision. Opium (and later, hashish) therefore quickly became recognisable hallmarks of the standard dandy aesthetic. Drugs and a copy of the *Confessions* were seen as essential dandy accessories, *de rigueur* for any Decadent man about town. Séverine Jouve describes the trendiness of drug-use and drug-discussions in these circles, where “il est de bon ton de lire . . . De Quincey, de parler hallucinations ou d’écrire un essai sur les vices et les vertus des plantes magiques” (45). As her description suggests, drugs were not only taken but *theorised*, and constituted an important part of the dandy’s textual life and self-awareness.

When Bourget writes his preface to the *Memoranda* of Barbey d'Aurevilly, he places him in a class of dandy writers “pour lesquels écrire est une façon de vivre . . . Ils demandent aux mots et à la sorcellerie de l'art ce que l'Anglais De Quincey se procurait en appuyant sur ses lèvres sa fiole noire de laudanum, un autre songe des jours et une autre destinée” (xii-xiv). He sees Barbey d'Aurevilly as using writing much as the dandy uses drugs, namely, as an “affranchissement” from “la haïssable réalité” (xiv). Bourget makes the same comparison – in almost the same words – when describing the period's second most famous dandy, Baudelaire. In the essay “Charles Baudelaire” he paints a similar picture of the artist as someone turning to words as to a narcotic. In Bourget's telling, Baudelaire has become sated and even disgusted with reality and the natural world, and uses stimulants to fill a growing void: “Ce sont alors, afin de combler ou de tromper ce vide, de furieuses recherches des excitants. Ce sont des lectures, exaltantes et irréelles comme le haschisch . . . de Thomas de Quincey, de tous les écrivains qui ont célébré l'envolement de l'âme” (12). Here the same reference is made as in the *Memoranda* to the works of De Quincey, whose name has become a catch-all metonymy for the *Confessions*, drug-use, and the aesthetic escapism drugs have come to represent. Reiterating his idea of the opiate dreamworld as an artificial replacement of external reality, Bourget says of Baudelaire that “ce qu'il faut à cet être assoiffé d'un infini perdu, c'est le ‘paradis artificiel’ à défaut de la croyance dans un paradis vrai” (12). His point could hardly be clearer: for the dandy writer, art replaces reality, and drugs like hashish and opium may provide both the method and the metaphor of this process.

Bourget is not overstating the importance of drugs to Baudelaire's aesthetics, nor is the reference to De Quincey offhand. De Quincey *was* in fact the origin of Baudelaire's drug-use, as George Clapton confirms. In true dandy style, Baudelaire wished to distinguish himself by curating a handful of carefully chosen eccentricities, to which drug-use seemed an obvious addition. “Le

simple désir de se distinguer par une bizarrerie voulue,” explains Clapton, “le goût de l’étonnement et de l’originalité à tout prix, si naturels au tempérament particulier de Baudelaire, suffisent pour expliquer l’adoption d’une attitude un peu à la mode dans les milieux qu’il fréquentait” (3). Two slight qualifications are required here: firstly, that “le goût de l’étonnement” was not so much a personal trait of Baudelaire’s as part of the reigning dandy aesthetic and performativity of dandyism in Baudelaire’s milieu; and secondly, that recreational drug-use was not “*un peu à la mode*” in this milieu but rather one of its defining activities. Clapton is right, however, in ascribing Baudelaire’s first ideas on opium (and especially his impression of opium as a more sophisticated and intellectual drug) to De Quincey and the *Confessions*. In particular, he cites De Quincey’s theory that opium will work effectively only on higher natures,⁶ “ce qui flattait l’orgueil de Baudelaire” (4). In short, like many before him, Baudelaire undertook his first experiences with drugs due in great part to the influence of De Quincey and the popular *Confessions*. Like dandyism itself the work was an English import and therefore tied inextricably to French anglophilia and French preconceptions of Englishness (a fact to which the full title of the work must have contributed). It is interesting to note, therefore, that once Baudelaire himself became famous, his own version of the dandy – the French Decadent dandy – would then be exported back to England.

6. CONCLUSION AND SOURCES

⁶ De Quincey argues in the *Confessions* that opium is only a stimulant to higher natures; lower natures (here he means Asiatic natures like the Turk) will experience nothing more than a state of torpor. Similarly, more intelligent users will have different, more interesting hallucinations than can be expected from “dull” users. “If a man ‘whose talk is of oxen’ should become an opium-eater,” explains De Quincey, “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 . . . the possession of a superb intellect” (II:12).

English Aestheticist theorists like Walter Pater and Algernon Swinburne owe a great deal to the Decadence and especially to the Decadent precept of art for art's sake. In the same line there is also Oscar Wilde, who followed Baudelaire's example in turning his personal life into its own form of performative art, adopting a studied dandyism and arch dandy humour as part of his public persona. Wilde also, it should be mentioned, explored the idea of the dandy murderer. In "Pen, Pencil and Poison," a *Fortnightly Review* piece from 1889, he takes up De Quincey's conceit of murder as a fine art. Wilde fictionalises the life of Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, a painter, critic, and serial poisoner. Wilde's editor, Frank Harris, described the essay as "conceived and written from the standpoint of the artist, and the artist alone, who never takes account of ethics, but uses right and wrong indifferently as colours of his palette" (Danson 87). The resemblance to De Quincey's earlier protagonist in "On Murder" is notable.

In a strange coincidence, Thomas Griffiths Wainewright had actually been an acquaintance of De Quincey's through Charles Lamb. De Quincey met the artist and critic in 1821, the year he published the *Confessions* in the *London Magazine*. The *Confessions* appeared in the same issue as a piece of art criticism by Wainewright (a piece highly praised by De Quincey), and the two were introduced at a subsequent contributors' dinner. In "The Final Memorials of Charles Lamb," De Quincey reminisces about the night of the party: "Nothing memorable, I am sure, passed upon this occasion, which was in November of 1821; and yet the dinner was memorable by means of one fact not discovered until some years later. Amongst the company, all literary men, sate a murderer...and a murderer of a freezing class; cool, calculating, wholesale in his operations" (XVI:388). Besides his coolness and his impeccable taste in art (De Quincey lauds the "native sensibility" that comes across in Wainewright's writing on Renaissance painting), De Quincey also describes being struck by his refined appearance and bearing, "the dandyism which

overspread the surface of his manner” (XVI:389). According to De Quincey, it was Wainewright’s dandyism, as much as anything else, that accounted for the sensation caused by the later discovery of his crimes. De Quincey attributes the public’s fascination with the Wainewright murders to “the contrast which existed in this case between the murderer’s dandy appearance, and the terrific purposes with which he was always dallying” (XVI:388). One would think this had had an influence on De Quincey’s portrayal of the dandy-criminal in “On Murder,” but the resemblance is purely coincidental: De Quincey only learned of the art critic’s second life as a murderer in 1848, well after the series’ first two installments. His memory of Wainewright might, it is true, have had some influence on the depiction of the dandy Williams of the “Postscript” (1854), but by then the general outlines of De Quincey’s conceit had already been laid.

Another reason for the sensation caused by the Wainewright case, as well as its long literary afterlife, is perhaps to be found in the rise of a specific literary type. The many fictionalisations of Wainewright’s story (by Oscar Wilde, Charles Dickens, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, and others) can be understood as part of a larger trend in nineteenth-century crime-writing that focussed on the trope of the gentleman-criminal. As explained by Foucault in *Surveiller et punir*, this figure subsequently developed into the more specific type of the criminal-as-artist. This phenomenon is best exemplified in France by the fictionalisation of another real-life murderer, Pierre François Lacenaire, a figure who came to represent both a new form of artist (he was an amateur poet) and a new form of murderer, one whose crimes became a potent symbol of social and aesthetic transgression. In the following chapter, we examine how “On Murder” fits in with what Foucault calls “la réécriture esthétique du crime” (72), as well as the relation of De Quincey’s protagonist to the criminal-as-artist and its predecessor, the artist-as-criminal or *poète maudit*.

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CHAPTER SEVEN: DE QUINCEY'S ARTIST AS *POÈTE MAUDIT*

1. INTRODUCTION

The earliest and perhaps the most famous example of the *poète maudit* is the young poet, forger, and suicide Thomas Chatterton, memorably rendered in Alfred de Vigny's three-act play from 1835. The poet's posthumous rise to fame and canonization as Romantic hero was a phenomenon felt on both sides of the Channel, although his story was not received in entirely the same way in England as it was in France, nor in the early- as in the late-Romantic period. For early English Romantics like Wordsworth, it was often the tragedy of Chatterton's story that seemed its most salient aspect: the poet's unrecognised and wasted genius, his loneliness, and finally his early suicide at seventeen. This is also the Chatterton of De Quincey's teenage diary, where the poet sporadically appears. For De Quincey, an equally salient aspect of Chatterton's story was the stark distinction it drew between artistic and practical concerns. As Robert Morrison explains in "Chatterton at the Races," De Quincey was "keenly interested in the example of Chatterton as a young, tortured genius driven to suicide by a mercantile society" (52). This is in line with an understanding of the artist-figure that had been in emergence since the end of the eighteenth century, described by Bourdieu as "the comprehensive fiction, launched by the Romantic movement, of the image of the artist in conflict with society, a rebel whose originality is measured by the misunderstanding to which he falls victim" (31). For the French, the "rebel" dimension of the *poète maudit* narrative was at least as important as its tragic dimension, since a victim may be merely pitied, whereas a rebel is to be admired.

For this reason, French iterations of the *poète maudit* tend less toward the narrative of the victim or martyr and more toward that of the subversive or criminal. They are closer, in this respect, to what Mario Praz has called the “fatal man,” sometimes also referred to as the satanic hero. In the case of Chatterton they may be more likely to mention his status as forger; and his suicide, likewise, may become an expression of revolt rather than despair, a sort of unanswerable challenge to society. De Quincey’s murderer anticipates this second, later-stage portrayal of the artist figure, uniting several Decadent concerns (such as the relation of art to crime, and the status of both artists and criminals as social “degenerates”), though in an admittedly more joking spirit. De Quincey was both too elitist and too bourgeois to see the artist as a literally criminal figure, but some of his concerns, like the artist-criminal’s relation to the market economy, are explored more or less in earnest, despite the alibi of their comic premise. De Quincey’s protagonist acts on what Jean Pierrot calls “l’amour du mal pour le mal” (40), and not – or not solely – for pecuniary gain. Thus he writes of the artist Williams that “murder was not pursued by him simply as a means to an end, but also as an end for itself.”¹ For this and other reasons, De Quincey’s murder-artist provides a useful point of comparison with the Decadent *poète maudit*. In the present chapter, his most famous protagonist is explored in relation to three avatars of this important late-nineteenth-century trope: firstly, to Foucault’s description of the criminal as artist and celebrity; secondly, to criminologist Max Nordau’s definition of the “degenerate” (a term he applied to several famous *poètes maudits*,

¹ (“Postscript” XX:63). One of the most important distinctions in the essay is that drawn between the categories of “amateur” and “professional,” a distinction also noted by John C. Whale, who writes that “although the distinction between [the ‘moral handle’ and the ‘aesthetic handle’] has a more obvious historical importance, the distinction made in ‘On Murder’ between ‘amateur’ and ‘professional’ would seem to be more significant in determining the nature of the work” (46). However, Whale understands this distinction to mean something like the division “between theory and practice” (i.e. those who spectate and those who act), whereas I would argue that De Quincey’s categories actually pertain to a distinction between love versus money as artistic drivers.

whom he saw as disturbed and possibly criminal subjects); and finally to Baudelaire's albatross, a well-known metaphor from *Les Fleurs du mal* for the brilliant but ill-adjusted artist.

2. FOUCAULT'S ARTIST-CRIMINAL

Just as the real-life Chatterton was appropriated and transformed by the literary community into a shared symbol of their aesthetic concerns, so too were other, later figures (often the perpetrators of much more serious crimes than Chatterton's forgery hoax) used to similar ends. In France, the poet and multiple-murderer Pierre François Lacenaire became a minor celebrity after his arrest in 1835, and a figure-head among the Decadents. Baudelaire famously called him "un héros de la vie moderne," and Gautier wrote a poem in 1852 about his severed hand, embalmed as a relic. (Lacenaire's hand and Gautier's poem would later receive mention in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as well.)² Besides his embalmed hand, there were other relics of Lacenaire in circulation, including portraits drawn of him in prison, which continued to be traded, bought, and sold after his execution at the guillotine in January 1836.³ This recalls De Quincey's purchase of a similar relic of Williams: a plaster cast of the murderer's head. Clearly, a new cult of celebrity was arising around a handful of individuals lionized as artist-criminals. This is a phenomenon that continues to this day, and as Jean-Paul Sartre once remarked (in a text entitled "Des Belles-Lettres considérées comme un assassinat"⁴), there would seem to be something universally intriguing

² "When [Dorian] had stretched himself on the sofa, he looked at the title-page of the book. It was Gautier's *Émaux et Camées* . . . As he turned over the pages his eye fell on the poem about the hand of Lacenaire, the cold yellow hand 'du supplice encore mal lavée,' with its downy red hairs and its 'doigts de faune.' He glanced at his own white taper fingers, shuddering slightly in spite of himself . . ." (Wilde 103-104).

³ For more on the Lacenaire story and its influence on the Decadents (as well as other French writers like Balzac and Stendhal) see Lisa Downing in *The Subject of Murder: gender, exceptionality, and the modern killer* (2013), pages 36-47.

⁴ The title is from a chapter in Sartre's book *Saint Genet* (1952), which deals with a more contemporary artist-criminal figure, the controversial Jean Genet.

about these figures, and consequently “les grands criminels sont souvent plus célèbres que d’honorables écrivains qui furent leurs contemporains” (449).

The re-writing of the criminal as artist and celebrity is a phenomenon explored by Foucault in 1975’s *Surveiller et punir*, a study of the role of violence, corporal punishment, and the prison system in maintaining social order. It also examines some of the different cultural representations of transgression. Foucault sees the example of Lacenaire, especially, as a testament to the emergence of a new literature of crime in the nineteenth century,

une littérature où le crime est glorifié, mais parce qu’il est un des beaux-arts, parce qu’il ne peut être l’œuvre que de natures d’exception, parce qu’il révèle la monstruosité des forts et des puissants, parce que la scélératesse est encore une façon d’être un privilégié: du roman noir à Quincey, ou du *Château d’Otrante* à Baudelaire, il y a toute une réécriture esthétique du crime . . . C’est, en apparence, la découverte de la beauté et de la grandeur du crime, de fait c’est l’affirmation que la grandeur aussi a droit au crime et qu’il devient même le privilège exclusif de ceux qui sont réellement grands. Les beaux meutres ne sont pas pour les gage-petit de l’illégalisme. (72)

Here Foucault’s emphasis is very much on the supposed *superiority* of the artist-criminal, who appears as a sort of Nietzschean transgressor. When Dostoyevsky created his most famous protagonist, *Crime and Punishment*’s Raskolnikov, he based the young murderer’s entitled worldview on a combination of Nietzsche, Napoleon, and Lacenaire,⁵ which goes to show the currency and reach of an idea (“que la grandeur aussi a droit au crime,” as Foucault puts it) that was not, after all, entirely new. When Foucault writes that “la scélératesse est encore une façon d’être un privilégié,” or that violence may be seen as “le privilège exclusif de ceux qui sont réellement grands,” he is alluding to a viewpoint that predates the nineteenth century, and that predates even Sade in the eighteenth. One of its earliest articulations may be found in Hobbes’s

⁵ Dostoyevsky was very familiar with the case of Lacenaire, having covered the trial during his editorship of a Russian newspaper. Derek Offord writes that “In the journal *Time*, which he edited from 1861 to 1863 . . . Dostoyevsky himself had written a preface to the first transcript dealing with the trial of the French professional criminal Lacenaire” (44).

Leviathan (1651), depending on how the author is read. De Quincey, a subtle reader of Hobbes, reappropriates the Hobbesian argument that strength implies at least a measure of right, distorting it to comic effect in the first “On Murder” essay. If Hobbes were faced with a would-be murderer, reasons De Quincey, then according to his own philosophy he would have to submit entirely to the stronger man’s will. “He had no right to make the least resistance,” explains De Quincey facetiously, “for, according to himself, *irresistible power creates the highest species of right*, so that it is rebellion of the blackest die to refuse to be murdered, when a competent force appears to murder you” (VI:121, emphasis added). Here De Quincey is more obviously joking, but there are other passages in the series – particularly those concerning the murderer Williams – that present in a more plausible light the potential connections between violence and privilege.

In “Beyond Reasonable Doubt: aesthetic violence and motiveless murder in French Decadent fiction,” Decadent scholar Lisa Downing addresses this aspect of De Quincey’s essay, as well as its legacy among Decadent writers. She traces the idea through a number of French Decadent texts, including for example Octave Mirbeau’s *Divagations sur le meurtre* (1896), a short newspaper piece in which the author imagines the conversation of an elite, semi-secretive group of intellectuals musing freely on the subject of murder. “As in De Quincey’s essays,” writes Downing, “Mirbeau establishes the right to murder as a matter of superiority and elitism” (195). She quotes Mirbeau’s statement in the story that “il n’y a que les meurtriers sans élégance et sans esprit, les brutes impulsives dénuées de toute espèce de psychologie, qui se laissent prendre...un homme intelligent et qui raisonne peut commettre tous les crimes qu’il voudra” (Mirbeau 1). In other words, the superiority of the artist-criminal ensures not only his right to commit the crime, but also his ability to elude any subsequent punishment. Downing also explores the artistic aspects of murder as “a project of self-expression and self-assertion,” one that will be taken up by later

French authors like Camus, Gide, and Genet as “the prototype of the *acte gratuit*” (191). The *acte gratuit*, in its lack of discernible motive (recalling Williams’s pursuit of murder “as an end for itself”), would seem like the ultimate antisocial, anarchic crime; however, this is not the view Downing presents.

Downing’s argument, in essence, is that contrary to appearances, the sort of murder described by De Quincey is in fact a pro-social reinforcement of the bourgeois hegemony. She agrees with Josephine McDonagh’s assessment⁶ that De Quincey’s account of murder as a fine art “fails to meet the definition of the *acte gratuit* as an apparently senseless defiance of orthodoxy and routine. Instead, it is a reactionary strategy, shoring up predictable codes of gender and class” (Downing 193). Foucault, in *Surveiller et punir*, arrives at a similar conclusion. After considering the cases of real-life murderers Lacenaire and Pierre Rivière, as well as the emergence of fictional characters like the gentleman-thieves Robert Macaire and Arsène Lupin, Foucault determines that although they may initially appear to pose a challenge to conventional morality, this is not in fact the case. Especially in their public re-writing, these figures represent instead the *domestication* of crime into yet another intelligible discourse, the discourse of class, with its usual upper and lower distinctions. The popularity of these artist-criminals and their attendant narratives is little more than “l’appropriation de la criminalité sous des formes recevables” (Foucault 72). They represent crime “transformé en discours – c’est-à-dire rendu deux fois inoffensif; la bourgeoisie s’inventait là un plaisir nouveau” (290). This of course ties in to Foucault’s larger argument in *Surveiller et punir*, namely, that violence is more often an implement of control than of revolt. In the study, he spends considerably more time on the state-sponsored arts of public execution and corporal

⁶ Downing is referring to McDonagh’s “Do or Die: Problems of Agency and Gender in the Aesthetics of Murder” (1991).

punishment than on the illicit art of murder. Much more so than “l’art de l’assassinat,” Foucault is interested in “l’art de faire souffrir” (13), “l’art de châtier” (92), “l’art de punir” (106), and “l’art du bourreau” (261). This has interesting implications for the work of De Quincey, which, as we have seen in chapters one and four, deals not only with the violence of the lone artist-murderer, but also with the legal, public forms of violence enacted at the gallows and the circus. These are two essential loci of the power of the state. They are reminders of the principle (expressed by Foucault and others but which goes all the way back to Hobbes’s *Leviathan*) that the state, by definition, holds a monopoly on legitimate violence.

3. NORDAU’S DEGENERATE

By enacting a form of individualistic, even anarchic violence, the lone murderer poses a threat to this monopoly. Downing and Foucault do not see the violence of the *artist-criminal* as genuinely threatening, however, and argue that the figure’s refined superiority actually places him within the usual hegemonic discourse of class and class-privilege. The actions of the artist-criminal are tolerated and even celebrated on the principle that “quod licet Iovi, non licet bovi”⁷ – what is forbidden to most may be permitted to some. In other words, he is depicted as belonging to a select group of individuals (what Gautier calls in the poem on Lacenaire “la criminelle aristocratie”) who exist above the law and beyond good and evil. This is the case of the criminal-as-artist – but what of the criminal-as-degenerate? This second, less exalted view of the nineteenth-century criminal originated with sociologists and criminologists like the Italian Cesare Lombroso, who published *L’Uomo delinquente* in 1876 and *L’Uomo di genio in rapporto alla psichiatria* in 1888. The latter

⁷ Literally: “What Jove may do, an ox may not.”

work received some attention in England, where it was translated as *The Man of Genius* in 1891. Even more influential, however, was the work of Lombroso's mentee, the German Max Nordau, whose *Degeneration (Entartung)*, 1892) was conceived as an application of Lombroso's theory of psychopathology to the areas of art and literature. In his preface, Nordau addresses Lombroso directly and says to him that

Degenerates are not always criminals, prostitutes, anarchists, and pronounced lunatics; they are often authors and artists. These, however, manifest the same mental characteristics, and for the most part the same somatic features, as the members of the above-mentioned anthropological family, who satisfy their unhealthy impulses with the knife of the assassin or the bomb of the dynamiter, instead of with pen and pencil. (Nordau xvii)

Nordau spends a considerable amount of time on Decadent authors, stressing their "predilection for the artificial" (298) and their "glorification of crime" (296). He focuses his attention on several works (including Barbey D'Aurevilly's *Diaboliques*, Péladan's *Le Vice suprême*, and of course Huysman's *À Rebours*) which went on to become classics of the Decadent canon. His primary example, however, is Baudelaire, whom he sees as having influenced several subsequent degenerate writers,⁸ and who himself is described as the product of the influence of Gautier. In Nordau's telling, Baudelaire is a sort of intensified Gautier, the combination and concentration of all his worst degenerative tendencies, to which are then added the further negative influences of writers like De Quincey and Poe:

If we exaggerate Théophile Gautier's worship of form and lasciviousness, and if to his indifference towards the world and men we associate the aberration which caused it to degenerate into a predilection for the bad and the loathsome, we have before us the figure of Baudelaire. [...] It is not necessary to demonstrate at length that Baudelaire was a degenerate subject. He died of general paralysis, after he had wallowed for months in the lowest depths of insanity... [...] [Baudelaire also] felt himself attracted in the characteristic fashion by other degenerate minds, mad or

⁸ Nordau sometimes refers to the more Decadent features of Baudelaire's writing as his "diabolism" and says that it was this quality of his work that proved most influential (ex. "The diabolism of Baudelaire has been specially cultivated by Villiers de l'Isle-Adam and Barbey d'Aurevilly" 296).

depraved, and appreciated, for example, above all authors, the gifted but mentally-deranged Edgar Poe, and the opium-eater Thomas de Quincey. (Nordau 285-286)

The mention of De Quincey is hardly surprising, since by the time of Nordau's *Degeneracy* the opium-eater had already been discussed in a number of similar clinically-oriented discussions of delinquency and decline.⁹ In Nordau's account above, drug-use, lasciviousness, insanity, and general ill-health are all swept together as symptoms of the degeneracy of the artist. This was coming to be seen as the rule – rather than the exception – among writers, painters, and other creatives, who were increasingly understood by physiologists as unwholesome, quasi-criminal types. Studies like those of Nordau and Lombroso stressed the link between artistic ability and insanity,¹⁰ thereby contributing to the view of artists as marginal and possibly dangerous elements of society. One of Nordau's arguments in this vein was that the degenerate artist was morbidly egocentric and, as such, incapable of contributing productively to the larger workings of society. He cites Bourget's short text "Théorie de la décadence" (part of the article on Baudelaire in his *Essais de psychologie contemporaine*, examined previously in chapter five), in which Bourget compares the atomization of the Decadent text to the atomization of the social organism. Nordau agrees wholeheartedly with this assessment, though not quite in the same spirit as meant by Bourget. The full passage reads as follows:

Par le mot de décadence, on désigne volontiers l'état d'une société qui produit un trop petit nombre d'individus propres aux travaux de la vie commune. Une société doit être assimilée à un organisme. Comme un organisme, en effet, elle se résout en

⁹ Notable among these was Alonzo Calkins's *Opium and the Opium-Appetite*, published in the United States in 1871. In *De Quincey Reviewed*, Julian North says of the book that it was "one of the first of a series of medical studies of De Quincey written within a larger framework of belief in the connection between drugs and degeneracy. Calkin's book argues that the human race is declining spiritually, morally, and intellectually, and opium is aiding the process" (38).

¹⁰ Pierrot describes the "physiologistes et médecins contemporains qui auront tendance à considérer les artistes comme des anormaux, à identifier le génie et la maladie mentale. Car si la névrose menace l'ensemble de l'humanité moderne, l'artiste, du fait même de ses facultés exceptionnelles et du genre de vie qu'il mène, en sera la victime privilégiée. Cette idée, répandue dans les milieux médicaux de l'époque, sera à l'origine de deux ouvrages dont la publication connaîtra un grand retentissement. *L'Homme de génie* du médecin italien Lombroso; et *Dégénérescence* du journaliste allemand Max Nordau" (70).

une fédération d'organismes moindres, qui se résolvent eux-mêmes en une fédération de cellules. L'individu est la cellule sociale. Pour que l'organisme total fonctionne avec énergie, il est nécessaire que les organismes moindres fonctionnent avec énergie, mais avec une énergie subordonnée...[sinon], l'anarchie qui s'établit constitue la décadence de l'ensemble. (Bourget 14)

The Decadent artist, in both Nordau's and Bourget's assessments, is an individual incapable of acting otherwise than *as* an individual, and whose energy remains unsubordinated to the momentum of the whole. Bourget sees this energy as anarchic but artistically productive; whereas Nordau, in his reading of Bourget's text, interprets it as destructive and therefore criminal.

This sort of physiological and sociological account of the artist as criminal, especially as deployed by 'scientific' writers like Nordau and Lombroso, ran directly contrary to the Decadent portrayal of the artist-criminal as the refined, deliberate, and emotionless dandy examined in chapter six. Nordau's portrayal resembles, on the literary front, the Naturalists' account of the individual as the helpless product of deterministic forces. The Decadents firmly rejected this approach; in fact, some scholars have described the early stirrings of the movement as a reaction against the biological and social determinism of the Naturalists (Pierrot 13). This may be seen most clearly in Huysmans's break from his mentor, Émile Zola. In the 1903 preface to *À Rebours*, Huysmans describes writing his novel as a reaction against the psychopathology and determinism of Zola's method, which he saw as overly clinical. "Ses héros étaient dénués d'âme," complains Huysmans, "régis tout bonnement par des impulsions et des instincts" (iv). *À Rebours* expressly rejects the Naturalist approach, and Zola was therefore disappointed upon reading it. Huysmans recounts how Zola "me reprocha le livre, disant que je portais un coup terrible au naturalisme" (xiii).

The tension between Decadence and Naturalism is seen by Lisa Downing as an essential element of the Decadents' portrayal of the artist-murderer. According to her, these texts protest

too much the artist-murderer's intentionality, agency, and refinement – an insistence which masks a nagging fear. In her reading of “On Murder” and the series of artist-criminals it inspired, Downing detects an uneasy tension between the artistic killer and the genetic killer. “Try as they might to hide it,” she says of these characters, “a trace of Zola's human beast – the homicidal maniac, Jacques Lantien – is revealed beneath their artists' masks” (198). All this leads to a difficult question: do these figures kill because they *choose* to do so (indulging a whim, as aristocrats and dandies), or because they *must* (as instinct-driven degenerates)? A second, related question concerns Bourget's account of these individuals as “unsuited” to social life. He writes, as we have seen, that a Decadent society is one “qui produit un trop petit nombre d'individus propres aux travaux de la vie commune” (14). In Bourget's view, the artist is unfit to participate in the larger workings of society – but should we understand this to mean that he is *above* the tasks of workaday life and employment, or that he is *incapable* of them? A Decadent would say the former; whereas Nordau argues the latter. As shall be seen, this tension is resolved in one of Baudelaire's most interesting and enduring metaphors of the artist figure: the alternately clumsy and majestic albatross.

4. BAUDELAIRE'S ALBATROSS

In Baudelaire's poem, the artist is a creature both too good and not good enough for normal social life. He is a synthesis of the superior and the inferior being. For the second, 1861 edition of *Les Fleurs du mal*, Baudelaire adds a new poem which likens the artist figure to a sea-bird, the albatross, whose wings make him the monarch of the skies but who, if he is forced to land and to walk (for example on the deck of a ship), is suddenly heavy, clumsy, and vulnerable to taunting

from sailors. In other words, the albatross's giant wings are both a gift and a liability, with Baudelaire writing that

À peine les ont-ils déposés sur les planches,
Que ces rois de l'azur, maladroits et honteux,
Laissent piteusement leurs grandes ailes blanches
Comme des avirons traîner à côté d'eux . . .

Le Poète est semblable au prince des nuées
Qui hante la tempête et se rit de l'archer;
Exilé sur le sol au milieu des huées,
Ses ailes de géant l'empêchent de marcher. (11-12)

This is a helpful way of understanding De Quincey's artist-figure also, an individual who is both superior and vulnerable. In the "Postscript," after describing at length Williams's artistry and refinement (in keeping with the first two essays of the series), De Quincey eventually admits that he may also, in some small degree, have killed the Marrs for the money inside their house. This is a difficult and contradictory admission for a narrator having so emphatically stressed the loftiness and disinterestedness of the artist's motives, as well as his superiority to lesser, mercantile "professionals." Nevertheless, De Quincey reluctantly admits that despite Williams's genius he was financially "a needy man," since a person of his class is unlikely to be satisfied with – or capable of – steady and gainful employment. He was a needy man, admits De Quincey, "and a needy man of that class least likely to seek or to find resources in honourable modes of industry; for which, *equally by haughty disgust and by disuse of the appropriate habits*, men of violence are specially disqualified" (XX:55, emphasis added). As in Baudelaire's poem, it is both his superiority and his ineptness that preclude the artist-murderer from participating normally in social life and work. In a sense, this is the position of the intellectual as well, and we may perhaps draw a parallel here between De Quincey's character (the artist-murderer) and his persona (the opium-eater and gentleman-scholar). Robert Morrison has said of this persona that it constitutes "the prototype of the brilliant but estranged intellectual whose indulgences and reclusiveness detach

him from society while paradoxically bestowing upon him an insight and an objectivity that make him profoundly knowledgeable of it” (“Poe’s De Quincey” 428). In other words, the intellectual’s unsuitability to social life becomes his strength, since it affords him a farther and higher vantage-point from which to observe its workings (as well as, perhaps, a certain measure of frustration). He becomes what Coleridge calls the *spectator ab extra*, or observer-from-without.

Finally, there is also a possible parallel of this superior-inferior tension in the device that De Quincey chooses to frame his essay series: that of the secret society. Mario Praz connects the essay’s “Society of Connoisseurs in Murder” to several real and fictional clubs, including the high-society “Hell-Fire Club” and Sade’s “Société des amis du crime” (173), a lineage which suggests an air of exclusiveness and elite membership. On the other hand, in *De Quincey’s Gothic Masquerade*, author Patrick Bridgwater sees this interest in secret societies as connected to De Quincey’s lifelong fascination and self-identification with the figure of the pariah (94-102). The question remains: is De Quincey’s club a secret because it is *exclusive*, or because it is illegal and would otherwise be subject to persecution? The answer, of course, is a mixture of the two. To borrow Grevel Lindop’s expression, De Quincey is interested in characters who are “outcast initiates” (357), a turn of phrase which encapsulates perfectly the paradox of being both aloof and excluded, superior and inferior.

5. CONCLUSION AND SOURCES

In short, De Quincey’s most famous protagonist is a collection of contradictions, especially when observed across the separate essays of the series. In the first two installments, “On Murder” and “A Second Paper,” he is typically portrayed as a non-specific figure: the generic murder-artist and

murder-connoisseur, a caricature or type. He has no particular identity, though his traits are made clear enough. These are his refinement and fastidiousness, his aristocratic superiority, and his dandyism. The portrait is, on the whole, a coherent one. Where contradictions begin to emerge is in the “Postscript,” as De Quincey turns his attention to the historical figure of John Williams. Here new details and inconvenient facts (such as the robbery which accompanied the murders) complicate the previously coherent image of the murderer as a “pure” and disinterested artist. Whereas before he might stand in as a near-perfect example of the *poète maudit*, a superior being free from both animal impulses and mercantile pursuits, this superiority is severely undermined by the “Postscript,” which hints at a problematic undercurrent of brutishness, degeneracy, and poverty. In the end, even when we consider the character as an “outcast initiate” or Baudelairean albatross, these contradictions are never entirely resolved. This is also true of the series as a whole, which is not always assimilable to the rest of De Quincey’s work, nor to De Quincey’s general outlook and personal beliefs as expressed elsewhere. Although the “On Murder” series makes light of violence and crime (using them as pretexts for humour or, in true Decadent fashion, as convenient metaphors of an aesthetic ideal) De Quincey at his core is no transgressor.

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CONCLUSIONS

Here some qualifications are in order regarding the true extent of De Quincey's transgressiveness. Thus far, we have taken his least conventional work, the "On Murder" series, and focussed only on its least conventional features. In chapter two, we saw how De Quincey's theory of rhetoric rejected the pursuit of truth as an aesthetic ideal, exploring instead the sophistic and aesthetic possibilities of rhetoric as an end in itself. In chapters one and three, we saw how De Quincey's treatment of violence as an aesthetic opportunity, though not entirely novel, went slightly further than that of his predecessors at *Blackwood's* and developed into a theory of "violence as an occasion for pleasure" that prefigured not only the concept of black humour, but also the aestheticized and even eroticised violence of later, more intentionally transgressive authors like Baudelaire and, in the twentieth century, Bataille. Chapter five showed De Quincey's attempt to subvert his mercantile periodical context; and chapters four, six, and seven examined the similarity of De Quincey's themes in "On Murder" to Decadent themes like urban violence, the rejection of the nature-cult, and the possibility of rewriting the figure of the criminal as artist and celebrity.

Despite these similarities to later Decadent writers, however, it is important not to overstate De Quincey's parentage to the movement. So much of the Decadent sensibility is tied to transgression (to moral, social, and religious trespassing) as well as to sheer shock-value: graphic sex and violence in the style of Sade, Mendès, Péladan, and – visually – Félicien Rops. De Quincey may have been appropriated by Decadent writers, but if, in his old age, he had actually read any of these new authors' work, it is unclear how he would have reacted. Most likely he would have found it distasteful. In his comparisons of the literature of different European nations, De Quincey

frequently refers to the French as a lascivious, undisciplined lot, and it is unlikely that contact with the Decadents would have done anything but confirm these misgivings.

De Quincey remained all his life a conservative bourgeois. He was also a confirmed Tory, supporting measures like the opium wars and vehemently opposing educational and parliamentary reform. In contrast to the Decadents' disdain of political life and its "luttres publiques sans intérêt et vulgaires" (Pierrot 309), De Quincey wrote frequently and passionately on the political issues of his day. He may not have seen persuasion and civic engagement as the primary duties of rhetoric, as did writers like Richard Whately, but he certainly made use of his rhetorical abilities in defending the views he supported and pouring scorn on "Jacobinical" proposals for reform. Much of his periodical writing is on political and economic issues, and Daniel Sanjiv Roberts goes as far as to say that "De Quincey's career was first and last that of a political journalist" (26). What is more, this political writing was often markedly partisan in tone. De Quincey's contemporary, John Stuart Mill, writes of his articles in this line that they are "deformed by ultra-Tory prejudices in a degree of virulence now seldom seen in men at all approaching to his standard of intellect" (330), an assessment which gives a good idea of just how vitriolic De Quincey could be.

Besides his vocal political involvement, other factors disqualify De Quincey as Decadent author. Wholly absent from his writing is, for example, the Decadent atmosphere of wariness and fatalism regarding the course of humanity. De Quincey was part of an optimistic bourgeois majority who saw history mainly as the history of Progress, especially for the favoured nation of England. He saw the success of England abroad as proof of her superiority; and, domestically, innovations like the English mail-coach and the national postal system confirmed his belief in the organisational powers of the state. For De Quincey, England was in no way an empire in decline. Also absent from his work is any trace of the obscenity that made certain Decadent texts so

notorious; and the same may be said of graphic sexuality, or indeed any sexuality beyond the most abstract, sublimated kind. In fact, De Quincey often criticized the presence of sexual elements in the work of others. One notorious example of this is his indictment in 1824 of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, a review which Mario Praz calls "prudish" in its censure of an innocent romantic scene. Praz argues that despite his continental reputation as an early Decadent, in texts like these "De Quincey talks like a Victorian, like an Englishman of the period during which there was formed, abroad, the conception . . . of British narrow-mindedness and hypocrisy" (*The Hero in Eclipse* 78). Instead of Goethe, he likes Jean Paul, which he sees as further confirmation of his bourgeois sensibilities (80).

Praz is hardly alone in this view, and he refers, for example, to the assessment of Edward Sackville-West, one of De Quincey's earliest biographers. Regarding the notion of De Quincey as a Decadent thinker, Sackville-West writes in 1936 that "nothing could be more at variance with the facts. To regard him as a decadent, *fin-de-siècle* figure is fundamentally to misconceive the nature of his being" (Sackville-West 211). In more recent times, Alina Clej has written that "De Quincey meant transgression to be compatible with middle-class standards of decorum" and that although later writers may have tried to "radicalize" his ideas, in De Quincey "subversion remains unconsciously . . . tied to larger complicities within social norms" (vi-vii). This is similar to the assessments of Lisa Downing and Josephine McDonagh as seen in chapter seven.

Despite such reservations, however, it is important to remember that what matters when considering the reception of De Quincey among the French is not the reality of the author's life and writing but the image of it as conveyed by his two most famous texts, the *Confessions* and "On Murder" – the latter in particular. For although these texts account for only a small portion of De Quincey's body of work, the bulk of which consisted of non-fiction journalism and political

writing, these political pieces were largely unknown to the French, and would not, in any case, have been regarded by them with much interest. Furthermore, as Julian North observes, once De Quincey was taken up and popularised by Baudelaire, he was unlikely to be seen as anything but a Decadent writer. North writes that “the thriving French critical interest in De Quincey as a decadent stylist and degenerate [was] an image largely culled from the association in French minds of De Quincey with Baudelaire. This association meant that French criticism projected an image of De Quincey which was in many respects distinct from the British and American views” (33). It was, in essence, a darker image. The British and American views were more accurate, it is true, but the French view proved to be the longer-lived, as his continued presence in the texts of Sartre, Foucault, and Derrida (at a time when he was mostly forgotten in English letters) attests.

Another reason for De Quincey’s different reputation in England than on the continent has to do with French perceptions of Englishness at the time of his reception. These perceptions were tied not only to English humour and the English dandy (as seen in chapter six) – but also, bizarrely, to a sexual perversion referred to simply as “le vice anglais.” In *The Romantic Agony*, Mario Praz (though not in reference to De Quincey) alludes to “the French legend of the Englishman whose greatest pleasure was to attend executions, a legend which was developed during the Romantic period” (416). *Le vice anglais* was, in short, sadism – particularly sexual sadism. When the Decadents imagined characters with a love of violence and violent perversions, therefore, as in Edmond de Goncourt’s *La Faustin*, they often used an English character. And even non-fiction works like Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s essay “Le Sadisme anglais” contributed significantly to “the attribution of sadism as an English characteristic” (Praz 421). This may perhaps account for French thinkers’ readiness to conflate the author of “On Murder” with his narrator and characters, and to

turn De Quincey into a darker, more transgressive figure than he was understood to be in his native Britain.

Cultural details such as these are part of what makes it so interesting to study the image of De Quincey in France, even when the image is a false one. For although De Quincey was not a particularly transgressive writer, his reception as such by the Decadents remains, in its own way, revelatory. De Quincey's reputation and legacy across the Channel reveal a great deal about the cultural exchange between England and France in the nineteenth century. Just as the Decadent Bourget travelled to the Lake District partly to satisfy his curiosity about the English De Quincey (Pierrot 22), so too would Oscar Wilde – himself a product of the Decadents – travel to France in 1891, where he would meet and influence a young André Gide (30), a figure who continues even today to challenge our ideas on transgression and art. De Quincey is an essential part of this cycle of cultural exchange, in which he appears just after Sade. (Although we seldom think of the two as belonging to the same era, their lives in fact overlap by close to thirty years.) In any discussion of French and English ideas on violence, aesthetics, and transgression, therefore, it is important to include De Quincey and to acknowledge the influence of De Quincey's work on some of his more successful and better-remembered successors.

It has been the goal of the present study to do so – that is, to reevaluate the preconception of what Margaret Russett calls De Quincey's "canonical minority" and his long-held reputation as merely a lesser, parasitical Romantic. In addition to tracing his influence on later figures, therefore, it has also attempted to consider the author's work on its own terms. De Quincey's humour, especially, is an aspect of his writing that is purely his own: it cannot be said either to originate from his Romantic mentors or to have greatly influenced his successors (with the notable exception of Poe, who borrows considerably from De Quincey's comic banter). De Quincey's particular

brand of humour was an aspect of his writing for which he was well-known by his contemporaries, and in the preface to an early edition of his works the editor David Masson classes him among the category of the “English Humorists” alongside Shakespeare and Swift. Masson further adds (and in a tone that does not appear to anticipate contradiction) that “*as the world everywhere knows*, it is by the two essays on *Murder considered as one of the Fine Arts* that De Quincey has most of all established his reputation for originality among English Humorists” (3, emphasis added). Since the time of Masson’s writing, however, this reputation has undergone a considerable shift, and today De Quincey is seldom discussed as a humorist. The present study, therefore, takes a tentative step in this direction – although further work naturally remains to be done. In particular, given the current critical interest in De Quincey as magazinist, it may be worthwhile to consider his use of humour and “scholarlike badinage” in terms of their periodical context: the marketability of this comic style, its use in the often scathing feuds that took place between magazines, and finally its role in De Quincey’s self-branding and creation of a recognisable literary persona.

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