VINTAGE DE QUINCEY

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY HOWARD MARKS

Once upon a time, opium (the main ingredient of heroin) was easily available over the chemist’s counter. The secret of happiness, about which philosophers have disputed for so many ages, could be bought for a penny, and carried in the waistcoat pocket: portable ecstasies could be corked up in a pint bottle. Paradise? So thought Thomas de Quincey, but he soon discovered that ‘nobody will laugh long who deals much with opium’.

About the Author

Thomas De Quincey was born on 15 August 1785 in Manchester, the son of an affluent cloth merchant. He ran away from the Manchester Grammar School aged seventeen and lived in poverty in Wales and London before being reconciled with his family. He then attended Oxford University, where he first began to take opium. Despite excelling at his studies, De Quincey left university without completing his degree and married Margaret Simpson, the daughter of a local farmer. Having exhausted his inheritance, partly due to his addiction to opium, De Quincey found work as a journalist and wrote prolifically on various subjects for numerous publications. *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* was published in the *London Magazine* in 1821 and found instant success. He went on to write several novels and biographies, and his unusual autobiographical style made his work extremely popular on both sides of the Atlantic. When De Quincey's wife Margaret died in 1837, his opium addiction worsened and he moved away from London to Scotland to relieve his straitened finances. He died in Edinburgh on 8 December 1859.

THOMAS DE QUINCEY

Confessions of an English Opium-Eater

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
Howard Marks

VINTAGE BOOKS
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Introduction

… 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…. Thou only givest these gifts to man; and thou hast the keys of Paradise, oh, just, subtle, and mighty opium.

Cultivation of opium for anaesthesia and treatment of dysentery began during the aptly named New Stone Age (10,000 BC), and its use was widespread in the Indian, Sumerian, Egyptian, Minoan, Assyrian, Greek, Persian, Roman, and Arab Empires. Opium, which contains morphine and codeine, was the strongest painkiller available to the ancient world and later enabled both the performance of prolonged life-saving surgical procedures and peaceful deaths for people with terminal illnesses. The most significant medical texts of the ancient world, i.e., those of the Ebers Papyrus (BC 1550), Dioscorides (AD 65), Galen (AD 175), and Avicenna (AD 1020) constantly refer to opium's use and properties.

Opium has long been associated with the Far East, particularly China, leading to the misconception that the Chinese have been caning themselves with the drug for several millennia. In fact, the opium poppy travelled along Arab trade itineraries from its Asia Minor roots into Persia, reaching India at the beginning of the Moghul Empire (in the sixteenth century) and only reached China in the seventeenth century, through Tibet and Burma. The word then current in China for opium, *a-fu-jung*, was derived from Arabic and meant 'foreign medicine'.

The production of opium has not changed since ancient times. During ten days of its annual life cycle, the seed box of the opium poppy exudes a milky juice of extraordinary chemical complexity, still not fully understood. A bitter, brown, granular powder (commercial opium) is then derived from this liquid and swallowed raw. Tobacco also reached China during the seventeenth century, and smoking became popular and prevalent throughout the country. Tobacco smokers and opium eaters discovered the two substances combined to give a mixture that significantly increased the intensity of the opium effect and decreased the time taken to achieve it. Smoking is the quickest way to achieve a high from any drug as the oxide or vapour enters the arteries directly. Even mainliners have to wait until the blood traverses through the heart. The Chinese were quick to realise opium was addictive. A few grains would give the novice a feeling of euphoria that would inevitably be followed by a comedown, leaving the user with the choice of either giving up the drug or repeating and increasing the dose. Giving up precipitated acute withdrawal symptoms, including giddiness, a chill over the whole body, aching limbs, diarrhoea, watering of the eyes, prostration, torpor, and agonising psychic misery. Confucian morality holds that the body is not one's own to abuse: it has been entrusted by one's ancestors. Accordingly, an Imperial decree against opium was enacted but had little effect on the constant trade of opium across Chinese borders, fed primarily by the East India Company, who saturated the eager Chinese with the drug. Opium smoking became endemic and led to the Opium Wars between China and Britain, the history and consequences of which are fascinating but beyond the scope of this introduction.

However, as the historian Richard Newman stated in his excellent article 'Opium Smoking in Late Imperial China': 'Opium smoking undoubtedly produced some addicts, and

some of those addicts were reduced to a pitiable condition, but it is not their image that should be foremost in the mind; we should also remember the peasants carrying their lumps of poppy juice to market, the boatmen wrapped in their blankets passing around an opium pipe in the twilight, and the Chinese gentleman smoking peaceably at home with his friends. It is not the existence of addiction that requires explanation so much as the fact that, in a society in which opium was cheap and widely available, so many people smoked lightly or not at all. The production and consumption of opium were, for most people, normal rather than deviant activities, and it is the implications of this normality which ought to be explored, both for the sake of China's history and for the sake of their relevance to modern societies learning to live with drugs.'

Meanwhile, in Salzburg, a Swiss-German chemist Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, better known as Paracelsus, had discovered (*circa* 1540) that the alkaloids in opium were far more soluble in alcohol than in water. Experimenting with various opium concoctions, he prepared a tincture most effective in reducing pain. Paracelsus named this preparation, which comprised opium, crushed pearls, musk, amber, and other substances, *laudanum* (praiseworthy). Physicians paid it scant, if any, attention for over a hundred years until Thomas Sydenham compounded a tincture, that he also named *laudanum*. It comprised opium, saffron, mercury, castor, hashish, ambergris, cayenne pepper, ether, chloroform, belladonna, musk, nutmeg, brandy, wine, and whisky. Thomas De Quincey 'ate' *laudanum*; he never smoked opium.

Born into a prosperous mercantile family in Manchester in 1785, Quincey (the 'De' was an affectation of his mother, added to his surname when he was a teenager) was traumatised by the death of his sister Elizabeth and tortured by the image of her head after a post-mortem had

sliced off the top of her skull. He was a promising scholar, acquiring the art of conversing fluently in Greek, but he ran away from school and ended up in London, where he almost starved to death. He found refuge (but almost no food) in a lawyer's house, where he shared a floor with an orphan girl whom he calmed during the ghostly night hours. Mrs De Quincey, in an effort to improve her son's motivation, enrolled him at Oxford. At the university, Thomas excelled academically, and was accepted and welcomed into the literary circle that included William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He lent Coleridge a large amount of money and eventually became the tenant of Dove Cottage, succeeding the Wordsworths. Nevertheless, De Quincey felt socially isolated and left Oxford without completing his degree. As William Bolitho, who wrote the introduction to an early edition of *Confessions*, stated: 'Where many of the most magnificent dunces of England succeeded, were confirmed even, and consecrated, De Quincey failed.'

De Quincey first took laudanum as a teenager to relieve a toothache. It worked. The toothache disappeared. He took laudanum about once a week thereafter for recreation. De Quincey had suffered all his life from a severe stomach disorder, and at the age of twenty-eight the chronic gastric illness had become so unbearably painful that he was taking laudanum on a daily basis. Scratching a living by translating German writings into English for publication in British periodicals, he wrote about his habit, and published *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* anonymously in two parts in consecutive months' editions of *London Magazine* in 1821. The following year it appeared as a complete work, has been regularly reprinted ever since and, as a work of Western drug prose, stands out as the earliest and best example. De Quincey, the patron saint of the erudite junkie, the father of the drug underground literati, single-handedly

changed opium's popular status from a respected medicine to an exotic mind-altering drug. He was the world's first to win fame as a drug addict and launched the description of intoxication into the literary atmosphere. To him we owe the mescaline experiments of Aldous Huxley and Henri Michaux, the adventurous heroin scholarship of William Burroughs and Irvine Welsh, the writings of William James on nitrous oxide, and the gonzo journalism of Hunter S. Thompson. These days, drug confessionals have become the litter of literature and are generally best ignored in favour of De Quincey's remarkable classic. His writing style, not any perceived message, demands the reading of this book, which abounds in real and supposed pleasures and sufferings, fanciful dreams, and imagery of profound magnificence and beauty.

In addition to Wordsworth and Coleridge, De Quincey's literary friends and cohorts included John Keats, Percy Shelley, William Blake, and Lord Byron, who collectively became known as the British Romantic Poets. When today's reader looks back on the Romantic Age, it is the poetry that tends to be first considered. These poetic works dwelled on the beauty of the sublime, the championing of the individual, the importance and personality of nature, and the dangers of technology. In my opinion, De Quincey was the first and only writer to incorporate these characteristics into brilliant prose, although Charles Lamb and William Hazlitt must not be ignored.

The writing is fluid, grandiose and ornate, rendering it one of the greatest works of prose in the English language. Romantic archetypes, such as the noble vagabond, humbled and impressed De Quincey. He wrote about living with prostitutes, treating them as friends who shared his period of poverty rather than availing himself of their sexual services. His unbridled philanthropy shines throughout, as does the sincerity of his confessions. De Quincey accepts

we all try our best to hide whatever we aren't proud of, thereby making the reader feel like his friend and confidant.

De Quincey extols in unparalleled style the exhilaration produced by opium. He frequently attended operas in this stoned state and maintained he enjoyed the music much more. Whatever De Quincey did, from people-watching to conversation, was improved by opium, but the most remarkable effect of the drug was to enable him to study with phenomenal success the German metaphysics of Immanuel Kant and Joseph Schelling. De Quincey also highlighted the pain relief available from opium, describing it as 'a panacea for all human woes', referring to Homer's *Odyssey*, when Helen gives Telemachus and his men (who had visited Sparta on their journey to find Telemachus's father, Odysseus) a drug to ease their grief: 'Into the wine of which they were drinking she cast a medicine of heartsease, free of gall, to make one forget all sorrows, and whoever had drunk it … would have no tear fall down his face.'

At this point in the narrative I, and I suspect many others, become strongly tempted to rush out and score some opium, but De Quincey goes on to use the power of his prose to erase memories of the drug's pleasures. He describes ruthlessly and relentlessly the destructive effects of opium on his intellectual and physical faculties. He began to suffer in bodily health, and to be oppressed with melancholy. He couldn't read, focus or accomplish anything. His experiences with opium led him to believe that nightmares chronicled the soul's development and that hell was in the mind, and what he reveals about the subjective effects of opium alongside the visionary experience provided a vital link between Romanticism, the later Decadents' movement and generations of writers,

including Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Baudelaire, and Jorge Luis Borges.

★

De Quincey's great success with *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* gave him a temporary respite from debt, but the rest of his life was spent in a long struggle with his creditors. In 1856, over thirty years after the first publication of *Confessions*, De Quincey produced a volume of his collected works, which included a sequel to *Confessions* (*Suspiria de Profundis*), its sequel (*The English Mail Coach*), and a revision of *Confessions* that was twice as long as the original. He corrects some of his mistakes, enhances certain passages, fills in some blanks, and annotates with little restraint. Although many critics feel his later version draws richer portraits, makes connections more complete, and heightens his psychological awareness, De Quincey himself was unsure whether it was any improvement, and I much prefer the lively imperfection of the earlier edition, which is reproduced for this edition

De Quincey's confessional writings are remarkably germane to today's audience. One can easily recognise the essence of society's opium debates and discussions that took place in De Quincey's time in more recent arguments about the use of drugs for either pleasure or ease of suffering. Although the international treaties of the 1960s and 1970s produced harsh and authoritarian legal partitions between medicinal and recreational drug use, the border remains blurred and ill-defined, particularly as regards cannabis and LSD. Thomas De Quincey felt the pulse of his country, its empire, businesses and banks, and came to reflective and philosophical realisations of the effects of the habituated practices of these institutions on individuals and the world that are very relevant today. Plus De Quincey's England had become increasingly