

Laudanum and Fine Wine: Metaphors of Discernment in the Aesthetics of Hume and De Quincey

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In any discussion of Romantic aesthetic theory, the figure of Kant looms large. This is due primarily to his presence in the literary scholarship of Coleridge, the only theorist among the English Romantic poets. Typically, Kant's role in the emergence of Romantic aesthetics is explained as follows: in offering a new, witness-oriented account of the aesthetic response, he provided a useful epistemological framework for the Romantic shift toward subjectivism. Thanks to Kant, this argument goes, the subject began to take precedence over the object, and beauty could finally be understood as something *half perceived and half created* by the mind, to paraphrase Wordsworth in "Tintern Abbey." Kant's account of the sublime is another key contribution, of course, but remains secondary, in the critical consensus, to this all-important subjectivist shift. The persistence of this narrative over time and the primacy given to Kant (followed at some distance by fellow Germans Lessing and the Schlegels) means that the influence of other aesthetic theorists and philosophers—those closer to home, for example—is often downplayed. In our readiness to maintain a strict divide between empiricist and rationalist philosophy, and between Britain and the Continent, we may overlook important sources for the Romantics' understanding of aesthetic theory.

One author whose critical reception has been strongly influenced by this tendency is Thomas De Quincey,¹ who is generally counted a disciple

of the Germans. He was their translator, certainly, and one of the first periodical writers to introduce the philosophy of Germany to British audiences. De Quincey translated and explicated the aesthetic theories of both Kant and Lessing, who have since been cited as sources for the author's ideas on art—including his decision, in certain texts, to focus on the subjective dimension of the aesthetic response.² But De Quincey read widely in philosophy and was equally if not more familiar with English and Scottish aesthetic theory³—which should not, in any case, be understood as somehow anathema to subjectivist considerations. David Hume, for example, for all he is an empiricist, in no way denies the role of the individual observer in the process of aesthetic perception. Though it is not the work for which he is best known, Hume did weigh in on aesthetic theory and the problem of taste, and in this work he demonstrates a marked interest in the way that *a priori* features of the mind and senses (what he calls the organs of perception) may lead to unpredictable variations at the individual level, and consequent differences of opinion from person to person and culture to culture. His texts in this line include “Of the Standard of Taste” (1757), “Of Tragedy” (1742), and the lesser-known “Of Eloquence” (1742), the last of which informs De Quincey's theory of rhetoric.⁴

In all these works, but especially in “Of the Standard of Taste” and its famous story of the hogshead of wine, Hume provides an account of the aesthetic response that is wholly subjectivist in focus, and concerned to a much greater degree with the observer than with the observed in attempting to establish a universal aesthetic standard. The passions, especially, are of the utmost importance to Hume; and for this reason he is sometimes referred to by specialists as a “sentimentalist” philosopher,⁵ a nuance often lost in discussions by Romantic literary theorists, for whom “empiricist” and “rationalist” have tended to be the preferred categories.⁶ In such discussions, empiricists like Hume may be pitted against rationalists like Kant, and a dichotomy emerges between objectivism and subjectivism, reason and emotion, Enlightenment and Romanticism, and the “it” and the “I.” This may be done without a sense of the irony of fashioning Kant, the author of “What is Enlightenment?,” into a figurehead of post-rational Romantic

subjectivism; and it also neglects the importance accorded by sentimentalist philosophers like Hume to the role of the passions and individual difference in human thought and perception.

Returning to the case of De Quincey, however, it may be said that—like Hume—he is concerned first and foremost with the role of the observer in aesthetic perception. In De Quincey's most famous work, the *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (first published in the *London Magazine* from September to October 1821), he provides a novel and highly interesting metaphor for the process of aesthetic perception: that of laudanum, or the mixture of opium with spirits. De Quincey's use of the metaphor of laudanum strongly recalls Hume's use of wine to the same end in "Of the Standard of Taste." Hume and De Quincey employ these metaphors to illustrate the way in which the same aesthetic object may be experienced differently by differently-abled subjects. Furthermore—and this is where Hume and De Quincey most closely resemble one another as theorists—they seem particularly concerned with establishing *levels of competence* across observers. For Hume, however, the establishing of aesthetic experts or "true judges" is merely a way to approximate a universal standard of taste; whereas for De Quincey it becomes a much more self-interested strategy for asserting his own superiority of discernment and consequent authority as non-fiction essayist and critic, still a new professional niche. De Quincey builds on Hume's original metaphor of wine and introduces opium as a similar but superior measure of what Hume calls "the delicacy of taste"—a quality that De Quincey, according to himself, possesses in the very highest degree.



Hume's "Of the Standard of Taste" may be said to make two claims. As in the previous "Of Eloquence," he begins by observing how the sheer variety of works of art, as well as the variety of opinions surrounding them, would seem to preclude any possibility of establishing a universal standard of taste. Hume's solution to this problem is to suggest that, although we cannot establish a universal standard, we may nonetheless establish a category of judges—"true judges"—whose opinion may be taken *in lieu of* a standard, or as an approximation thereof. Of course, as many readers have

since pointed out, the proposed solution is in a sense tautological (the true judge is one who recognizes the best works, and the best works are those recognized as such by the true judge). Nevertheless, Hume's essay remains one of the simplest and most elegant approaches to the age-old problem of taste. Its most distinctive feature is the concept of the true judge, the individual in whom "the organs of internal sensation" are uncommonly fine and receptive (SOT 228). These judges, whether by practice or innate ability, demonstrate what Hume calls "the delicacy of taste."

And what does "the delicacy of taste" entail? In order to answer this question, Hume recounts an anecdote from *Don Quixote*, the story of Sancho's kinsmen and the hogshead of wine. In book one of Cervantes's novel, Sancho boasts to another character of possessing an especially delicate palate and nose, and attributes this delicacy of taste to his lineage. Hume paraphrases:

It is with good reason, says Sancho to the squire with the great nose, that I pretend to have a judgment in wine. This is a quality hereditary in our family. Two of my kinsmen were once called to give their opinion of a hogshead, which was supposed to be excellent, being old and of a good vintage. One of them tastes it; considers it; and after mature reflection pronounces the wine to be good, were it not for a small taste of leather, which he perceived in it. The other, after using the same precautions, gives also his verdict in favour of the wine; but with the reserve of a taste of iron, which he could easily distinguish. You cannot imagine how much they were both ridiculed for their judgment. But who laughed in the end? On emptying the hogshead, there was found at the bottom, an old key with a leathern thong tied to it.

The great resemblance between mental and bodily taste will easily teach us to apply this story. [...] Where the organs are so fine, as to allow nothing to escape them; and at the same time so exact as to perceive every ingredient in the composition: This we call delicacy of taste [...]. (SOT 216-18)

Besides the delicacy of taste, the passage also illustrates the *variance* of taste that may occur across true judges, since Sancho's two equally capable kinsmen are sensitive to separate features of the wine. They are different but equal, suggests Hume, and both are superior to those who had earlier deemed the wine "excellent" and by whom the two kinsmen are "ridiculed for their judgment." The kinsmen are true judges, in short, and Hume uses this concept to answer the question at the core of his essay, namely: what is to be the standard of taste? If taste and opinions are variable, how can we reliably identify a valuable work of art? We cannot, answers Hume, but we can identify the true judges, "and the joint verdict of such, wherever they are to be found, is *the true standard of taste and beauty*" (229, emphasis added).

In Hume's retelling, the story of Sancho's kinsmen becomes a compelling illustration of the way the same aesthetic object—in this case, the hogshhead of wine—will be perceived differently according to the capacities of each perceiving subject. In the *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, De Quincey makes a similar aesthetic argument. Opium, he argues, will give rise to different reactions on the part of the user according to varying levels of perceptiveness, intelligence, imagination, and—most importantly—ethnicity. (De Quincey's discussion of drug use is marked by certain Montesquieuean notions of the so-called Asian temperament, as will be the case in many future texts also.)⁷ His dream-visions are those of an *English* opium-eater, we are reminded; similarly, the work's subtitle—"Being an Extract from the Life of a Scholar"—reminds us that we are in the presence of someone "in possession of a superior intellect," as De Quincey says, and should therefore prepare ourselves for some uniquely insightful visions. He explains:

If a man "whose talk is of oxen," should become an Opium-eater, the probability is, that (if he is not too dull to dream at all)—he will dream about oxen: whereas, in the case before him, the reader will find that the Opium-eater boasteth himself to be a philosopher; and accordingly, that the phantasmagoria of *his* dreams (waking or sleeping, day-dreams or night-dreams) is suitable to one who in that character *Humani nihil a se alienum putat*. (WTDQ, ii.12)

Nothing human, in other words, is alien to a man of De Quincey's self-professed erudition. Yet knowledge alone does not suffice, and to be a "philosophical" opium-eater requires "not merely the possession of a superb intellect in its *analytic* functions [...] but also such a constitution of the *moral* faculties, as shall give him an inner eye and power of intuition for the vision and the mysteries of our human nature" (ii.12-13). De Quincey then goes on to say that this is a quality that "our English poets have possessed in the highest degree—and Scottish Professors in the lowest"—though he is not here thinking of Hume.⁸

Scottish professors aside, De Quincey's argument is that the most exalted opium visions will only occur to a select type of individual: the individual he calls "the philosopher," in whom "a superb intellect" is matched by an equally powerful imagination, the inner vision that allows its possessor to intuit "the mysteries of our human nature." This is similar to Hume's caveat that the delicacy of taste (i.e., the acuteness of "the organs of internal sensation," including the mind) is not a sufficient condition for the status of true judge, but must be accompanied by an equal "delicacy of imagination, which is requisite to convey a sensibility of the finer emotions" (SOT 216). In De Quincey the delicacy of taste and the delicacy of imagination are present in equal degree, making him a superior opium-eater—superior, for example, to the Turk, in whom the drug will inspire no visions at all but only a listless, stupefied torpor. In De Quincey's pseudo-medical ethnography, these users are likely to sit or to lounge while taking opium, whereas the same drug, for an Englishman, will have an invigorating effect. "Turkish opium-eaters," he explains, "are absurd enough to sit, like so many equestrian statues, on logs of wood as stupid as themselves. But that the reader may judge of the degree in which opium is likely to stupify the faculties of an Englishman, I shall [...] describe the way in which I myself often passed an evening in London" (ii.47). His description includes long walks through the city and, on Tuesday and Saturday nights, special trips to hear Grassini at the opera. "I question whether any Turk," he writes, "of all that ever entered the Paradise of opium-eaters, can have had half the pleasure I had. But, indeed, I honour the Barbarians too much by supposing

them capable of any pleasures approaching to the intellectual ones of an Englishman" (ii.48). Like his enjoyment of opium, the Turk's enjoyment of music will be severely limited in comparison to his own, "for music is an intellectual or a sensual pleasure, according to the temperament of him who hears it" (ii.48). This distinction between the sensual and the intellectual modes will prove essential to De Quincey's theory of aesthetic pleasure.

In his description of these laudanum-fueled trips to the opera De Quincey makes the following observation, similar to Hume's, that the listener plays an active role in the process of aesthetic perception.⁹ The subject, not the object, determines the nature and degree of aesthetic enjoyment:

The mistake of most people is to suppose that it is by the ear that they communicate with music, and, therefore, that they are purely passive to its effects. But this is not so: it is by the reaction of the mind upon the notices of the ear, (the matter coming by the senses, the form from the mind) that the pleasure is constructed: and therefore it is that people of equally good ear differ so much in this point from one another. Now opium, by greatly increasing the activity of the mind generally, increases, of necessity, that particular mode of its activity by which we are able to construct out of the raw material of organic sound an elaborate intellectual pleasure. (WTDQ, ii.48)

In De Quincey's description, the process of *appreciation* (whether of music or opium) becomes an active and participatory process. It is in fact a *creative* process, and he very tellingly speaks of pleasures as being "constructed" rather than felt. The "raw material of organic sound," like the raw material of opium, is merely a starting-point for the construction of elaborate pleasures and visions. As perception becomes creation, the passive becomes the active; and listeners, drug-users, memoirists, and critics may become artists in their own right. Here De Quincey anticipates a view of the critic and connoisseur that would concretize slowly throughout the century, finding expression in the 1830s by a range of writers from Coleridge¹⁰ to

John Stuart Mill.¹¹ As Jason Camlot explains in *Style and the Nineteenth-Century British Critic*, it is owing to early figures like De Quincey's opium-eater that "the *aesthetic* critic is born, that is, the critic who not only presents an account of the work itself, but also provides a lyrical account of his own feelings upon experiencing the work, in prose" (73). Of course, De Quincey had a vested interest in presenting non-fiction prose as a creative endeavor. Unlike his better-known mentors, Wordsworth and Coleridge, he never published poetry, and even his fictional prose often adopted the sort of non-fiction forms at which he excelled. This is the case, for example, in the successful "On Murder" papers, which adopt the form of the scholarly essay—De Quincey's bread and butter in the magazines. His occasional work in more traditional fictional forms (tales like *Klosterheim* and "The Avenger") was never quite as well-received. Today, De Quincey is seldom remembered for these brief and unsuccessful forays into fiction, but instead for the creative non-fiction or "impassioned prose" of his various memoirs—the *Confessions*, naturally, but also the "Autobiographic Sketches" and "Suspiria de Profundis." His biographies, too, and particularly his biographies of writers, remain an important part of De Quincey's legacy, as do his insightful analyses of these writers' work.

Prior to the *Confessions*, De Quincey's output had consisted mainly of non-fiction journalism and editorial work, political writing, and literary criticism, and this would continue to be the case for much of his career. But his status as mere *magazinish* did not always sit well with De Quincey, since it effectively barred him from the realm of literature proper. As David Stewart and others have noted, the proliferation of periodicals in the early nineteenth century (including the *London*, in which the *Confessions* first appeared) had the effect of provoking "a shift in scope of 'literature' from designating all writing to designating imaginative writing" (777). This was exacerbated by the fact that so much periodical copy was anonymous. Magazines like the *London* were normalizing a new kind of writing in which the roles of author, editor, and publisher were often irretrievably mixed, resulting in what Jon Klancher calls "an essentially authorless text" (51). This made non-fiction writers-for-hire (the faceless producers of reportage,

essays, and criticism) seem interchangeable and therefore replaceable. But by re-framing this writing as its own form of creative genius, De Quincey might hope to elevate himself—at least in his own eyes¹²—from the status of hack journalist to that of creative author.

Returning to De Quincey's description of music appreciation, the passage also reiterates his previous statement that it constitutes "an intellectual or a sensual pleasure, according to the temperament of him who hears it" (ii.48). The former requires only the delicacy of taste; that is, the refinement of the organs of perception. This in itself is a rarity, but rarer still is the combination of taste and imagination, "the activity by which we are able to construct out of the raw material of organic sound an elaborate intellectual pleasure" ii.48). The rarity of subjects in whom the two qualities are joined—what De Quincey calls the philosophical opium-eater, and Hume the true judge—is a point to which De Quincey will return in future mentions of the *Confessions*. In the introduction to the "Suspiria," for example, he writes that "the object of that work [the *Confessions*] was to reveal something of the grandeur that belongs potentially to human dreams. Whatever may be the number of those in whom this faculty of dreaming splendidly can be supposed to lurk, there are not perhaps very many in whom it is developed" (WTDQ, xv.129-30). Hume makes a similar observation, but adds that in spite of their scarcity, such figures are always easy to identify, since they tend to stand out from the mass of lesser men. "Though men of delicate taste be rare," he writes, "they are easily to be distinguished in society, by [...] the superiority of their faculties above the rest of mankind" (SOT 231).

Eventually, De Quincey's distinction between intellectual and sensual pleasures leads him to an interesting departure from Hume's use of wine-tasting as a metaphor of discernment. According to De Quincey, opium is superior to wine in the same measure that intellectual pleasures are superior to sensual ones. First, he begins by asserting that opium—contrary to popular belief—does not and cannot "intoxicate" the senses. Furthermore, as pointed out by Barry Milligan,¹³ De Quincey aligns himself with the new and controversial theories of John Brown in the *Elementa Medicinæ* (1780)

by asserting that opium is not a sedative but in fact a powerful and invigorating stimulant (at least for the Englishman), and will therefore sharpen and strengthen the same faculties that are typically dulled by wine:

But the main distinction lies in this, that whereas wine disorders the mental faculties, opium, on the contrary (if taken in a proper manner), introduces amongst them the most exquisite order, legislation, and harmony. Wine robs a man of his self-possession: opium greatly invigorates it. [...] In short, to sum up all in one word, a man who is inebriated, or tending to inebriation, is, and feels that he is, in a condition which calls up into supremacy the merely human, too often the brutal, part of his nature: but the opium-eater [...] feels that the diviner part of his nature is paramount; that is, the moral affections are in a state of cloudless serenity; and over all is the great light of the majestic intellect. (WTDQ, ii.44-45)

This extensive comparison of laudanum and wine (abridged considerably here) has been the subject of much discussion in De Quincey scholarship. V.A. De Luca sees the comparison as symbolic of communal versus individual pursuits,¹⁴ and Joel Black has read the same passage in terms of De Quincey's "geography of addiction."¹⁵ However, for our purposes here, its primary point of interest remains the way in which De Quincey aligns opium with the intellect and wine with the body. This is in keeping with his objective, announced earlier in the work, to demonstrate how "the divine luxuries of opium" far surpass "the gross and mortal enjoyments of alcohol" (ii.11).

What explains this insistence on the superior status of opium and its connection to "the majestic intellect"? In the first place, De Quincey is attempting to rescue the drug from its old reputation as an Asiatic habit, as well as from its newer association with the urban poor, who had begun taking the drug as an inexpensive and widely-available pain remedy. As Alina Clej observes, "De Quincey's innovation was to transform opium eating from a working class pleasure into a refined enjoyment" (vii). In future works, De Quincey would continue to refer to the drug as the marker

of superior natures. This is the case, for example, in the essay "Coleridge and Opium-Eating" (*Blackwood's* 1845), where he attributes the poet's appreciation of opium and the nature of his visions to "an original higher sensibility" (xv.125). Of course, this higher sensibility went hand in hand with the sort of immoderate enthusiasm that might easily lead an opium-eater to excess (as did in fact happen with Coleridge), and De Quincey says in the same essay that opium "killed Coleridge as a poet." Ironically, this was the same assessment that De Quincey's own reviewers and biographers, as well as his obituarist,¹⁶ would later make of him.

In the *Confessions* De Quincey had also alluded to Coleridge's addiction, although, as Daniel Mangiavellano suggests in "De Quincey, Coleridge, and the Literary Model of Habit," he exaggerates its negative effects on his friend in order to position himself as the superior opium-eater. According to Mangiavellano, De Quincey frames Coleridge's addiction in terms of "uncontrollable appetite, bankrupt individual agency, and [...] disappointed intellectual potential" in such a way as to imply that he himself is less vulnerable to these dangers and better suited than Coleridge to opium use, despite Coleridge's talents (38). Although De Quincey does therefore acknowledge its possible negative effects on creativity, these do not appear to apply to himself, for whom opium (whatever other side-effects it might have) always increases the creative impulse. For this reason, De Quincey's rather half-hearted warnings in the *Confessions* did very little to diminish the drug's appeal, and the work's portrayal of opium as the marker of superior natures would continue to gain traction among readers. Charles Baudelaire, who was inspired by De Quincey to experiment with opium and who adapted the *Confessions* for *Les Paradis artificiels* in 1860, parrots De Quincey's views when he writes that, "If coarser natures, dulled by the daily grind of a charmless worklife, may find vast consolations in opium, then what may be its effect on a spirit that is subtle and learned, the possessor of an ardent and cultivated imagination [...]?" (my translation).¹⁷ This portrayal appealed to readers' vanity, of course, especially if they considered themselves to be of a more intellectual or literary bent. In *Opium and the Romantic Imagination*, Alethea Hayter describes how the *Confessions*

reinforced the perception that “certain mental traits may predispose their possessor to become an addict” and that “the more imaginative and sensitive intellectual temperaments” constituted the typical opium “type” (39).

De Quincey’s agenda in his autobiography is partly to establish himself as the philosophical opium-eater *par excellence*. Having posited that opium is an intellectual pleasure, therefore, he must then prove to the reader his intellectual credentials. This is done not only in the passages seen heretofore, but also in De Quincey’s account of his youth and early accomplishments at school. His mastery of Greek, especially, is a source of considerable pride to him, and he refers to his spoken fluency as “an accomplishment which I have not since met with in any scholar of my times” (ii.14). Here as elsewhere in the *Confessions*, De Quincey is at pains to impress upon the reader the depth and breadth of his particular genius, which is less poetic than scholarly. Ultimately, it is this lyrical scholarship of the *Confessions* that proves one of its most distinctive features. In “Commerce, Genius, and De Quincey’s Literary Identity,” David Stewart notes the importance of De Quincey’s erudite style to the tone and originality of the *Confessions*. “De Quincey insists that the book’s value consists of his scholarship rather than his addiction,” writes Stewart, and “early reviewers recognize how integral De Quincey’s learning was to the experience of the book itself” (780). In time, the opium-eater as inspired scholar and polyhistor would become an essential part of the literary persona that De Quincey exploited throughout the course of his career in the periodical press.

Robert Morrison has written at some length on the curation and commercialization of De Quincey’s persona “the Opium-eater” as well as the other personae to which it gave rise. In “De Quincey and the Opium-Eater’s Other Selves,” he recounts how the author maintained a variety of alter egos at different magazines, several of whom, like his “Emeritus” at *Blackwood’s* and his “Metacriticus” at the *Edinburgh Saturday Post*, implied by their very names the sort of gentlemanly intellectualism for which his writing would come to be known, appreciated, and—eventually—imitated.¹⁸ One of the most successful of these imitators was Edgar Allan Poe, and Morrison recounts elsewhere how De Quincey’s American

doppelganger was able to mimic the opium-eater's performative erudition by stuffing his articles with "Latin tags, recondite references, and repeated claims of vast learning" ("Poe's De Quincey" 426). Though his career was only just beginning in 1821, the *Confessions* established the main features of De Quincey's most marketable and most enduring literary persona—the scholarly opium-eater—, in all his genteelness, refinement of taste, and intellectual authority.



In the introduction to this study, it was suggested that this self-positioning of De Quincey's may be usefully understood in terms of Hume's concept of the delicacy of taste. In the *Confessions*, the tincture of laudanum becomes a sort of chemical litmus test, not unlike Hume's and Cervantes's hoghead of wine, which separates the connoisseur from the philistine and reveals the true judge. I do not, however, wish to overstate the connection between the two texts. My argument is not that De Quincey's aesthetic theory in the *Confessions* is based on Hume's "Of the Standard of Taste." Rather, I believe that in discussing De Quincey's subjectivist aesthetics, concepts like Hume's delicacy of taste and the figure of the true judge may prove useful additions to what has been, thus far, a very Kantian conversation. De Quincey's essays on Kant are more numerous, to be sure (by contrast, his only substantive discussions of the Scottish philosopher's work occur in the 1839 essay "On Hume's Argument Against Miracles" and the 1824 "Falsification of the History of England"), but this disparity should be viewed in the context of De Quincey's wish to position himself as a specialist of German philosophy and letters, an area of professional expertise he shared only with Carlyle, Coleridge, and a handful of others. This position as expert was one he guarded jealously, pouring scorn on competing writers (especially if they did not speak German) for having the temerity even to attempt to explicate Kant's work.¹⁹ A homegrown philosopher like Hume, by contrast, required little in the way explanation, but this did not mean he was of no interest to De Quincey; on the contrary, he receives frequent casual mention throughout the author's work. Thus in one article he alludes to Hume's preoccupation with language, and in

another calls him a superior *litterator*.²⁰ Typically, the mentions are brief and offhand. He does not *discuss* Hume as he does Kant, but this in itself is the most reliable indication that Hume's ideas were already well-known to De Quincey and, as he knew, to his readers. (This was particularly true of his readers in Scotland, where philosophy was still a compulsory subject and where De Quincey spent a sizeable part of his career.)²¹

Finally, there is one important difference between the two texts that has not yet been mentioned, and it is a difference highly revelatory of De Quincey's unstated motives in writing. In Hume's essay, the delicacy of taste is something that can be *improved through education and practice*,²² whereas for De Quincey it is a much more elusive and mysterious quality, one that subjects either possess or do not. This is what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has called discernment "as grace." Like having perfect pitch, the true appreciation of art is often presented as something that no amount of training or educational capital can purvey.²³ Good taste and artistic sympathy—the ability to *feel* a work of art—cannot be acquired but are intrinsic to the subject. This is an idea Bourdieu dates back to the nineteenth century and the beginnings of universal education (a development to which De Quincey was strongly opposed). As Bourdieu explains, once contact with the great works of literature and art became more common, the dominant class had an obvious interest in maintaining a vague, vaguely unattainable category of good taste and "genuine" appreciation of art. According to this logic, taste was a personal quality, not an ability that could be developed. One either had it or one did not. "Is this not the mystical logic of Christian grace?" asks Bourdieu. "This esoteric representation of the aesthetic experience means that only an aristocratic *chosen few* [...] are granted the grace of artistic vision" (my translation).²⁴ In the *Confessions*, it is precisely this mystical sense of "chosen-ness" that pervades De Quincey's descriptions of his opium dream-visions, as well as his innate sensitivity to literature and music.

De Quincey was, as already mentioned, strongly opposed to educational reform, and authors like Cian Duffy have traced this opposition to his simultaneous fear and disdain of the new reading public.²⁵ Educational

and parliamentary reform were linked, in De Quincey's mind, to the looming possibility of a middle-class revolution, and this is reflected in his frequent disparagement of the political left as jacobinical "education-mongers." For despite the *Confessions*' somewhat disingenuous (and frequently criticized) accounts of mixing with the poor on Saturday nights and sharing in their enjoyments, De Quincey was in reality highly suspicious of this segment of society, writing at one point to his editor: "I look upon the working poor, Scottish or English, as latent Jacobins—biding their time."²⁶ This is in contrast to the more benign superiority of authors like Wordsworth and Coleridge, whom Jon Klancher has described as paternalistic but well-meaning in their desire to elevate the sensibilities of a newly-educated readership. This readership might include the sort of "lower-order" readers who were not engaged exclusively in literary pursuits—people who worked, in other words (or, as De Quincey might call them, "men whose talk is of oxen"). Klancher explains these authors' understanding of their newest readers and the possibility of instilling in them a higher sensibility:

Coleridge echoes both William Godwin and Arthur Young when he writes, in 1795, "Truth, I doubt not, is omnipotent to a mind already disciplined for its reception; but assuredly the overworked laborer, skulking into an alehouse, is not likely to exemplify the one or prove the other." [...] The Truth will always already be recognized as the Truth by a mind habituated to receive it. To thus habituate readers will be the most profound task of nineteenth-century writers, as Wordsworth announces in his paradoxical desideratum, the necessity of "creating the taste by which [the writer] is to be enjoyed." (36)

The very idea that taste might in fact be "created" where it is absent (i.e., in the masses) flies in the face of the aristocratic logic of grace, and Klancher echoes Bourdieu when he writes that "for the classical aristocracy, 'taste' was precisely that quality which could not be created, the natural expressivity of the class whose destiny was its cultural inheritance" (36).

Wordsworth's self-imposed artistic mission, therefore, contains an undercurrent of élitist but ultimately forward-leaning progressivism that is mostly absent from the work of his younger protégé. And even Coleridge, whose 1810 "Essay on Taste" makes similar claims to De Quincey's regarding the role of observers' intellect and "moral sense" in aesthetic perception, does not go as far as to propose a hierarchy of observers, or to argue that perceptiveness is either uncommon or unimprovable (18).

Differently from either Coleridge or Wordsworth, however, De Quincey was deeply invested in the idea of taste as a rare and untransferable gift—an idea that may be traced back to his professional insecurities regarding the function and status of the non-fiction magazinist. Like Hume, De Quincey understands the problem of taste essentially as one of *competence* or ability. Some individuals are simply more perceptive than others and consequently better suited to the business of art appreciation. However, De Quincey's categories of competence are decidedly more rigid and less permeable than are Hume's (no amount of well-meaning practice will turn the Turk into an Englishman, for example), and this rigidity of division reveals an understanding of race, class, and artistic sensitivity that is ultimately self-serving.

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Notes

¹ Citations of De Quincey's work refer to the *Works of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. Grevel Lindop, 21 Volumes (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2000-2003).

² See, for example, the work of Frederick Burwick, who writes in *Knowledge and Power* that in De Quincey's literary criticism "he adopted a personal method of 'psychological criticism' [...] for examining a work in terms of its effect on the reader" (xi). He also writes that "De Quincey focusses attention on the aesthetic response" partly as a result of "his attention to Kantian aesthetics" (78). For more on this subject, see also Burwick's "De Quincey and the Aesthetics of Violence," which uses the "On Murder" series to show how "his aesthetics are German"—specifically,

Kantian (78). Joel Black, in *The Aesthetics of Murder*, makes a similar argument, and also sees the Kantian viewpoint as an inherently subjectivist one (72).

³ Of course, this did not mean that De Quincey was universally admiring. Of Dugald Stewart he was especially skeptical, pouring scorn on his ignorance of German philosophy and his misunderstanding of Kant. "Dugald Stewart is *not* a preparation for reading Kant," he writes in 1827. "No man is more entirely ignorant [...] or boasts more of his ignorance, than Mr. Stewart" (WTDQ, v.146). De Quincey's disparagement of other "Scottish Professors" in the *Confessions* is a point addressed further on.

⁴ In the essay "Elements of Rhetoric" (*Blackwood's* 1828), De Quincey provides a description of the aesthetic degradation of rhetoric over time that relies heavily on Hume's "Of Eloquence" and the philosopher's position "that eloquence is a rarer growth of modern than of ancient civil polity" (WTDQ, vi.164).

⁵ See among others Julia Driver (2015) and Jesse Prinz (2017).

⁶ This has begun to change only recently, as the work of theorists like Adela Pinch has drawn attention to nineteenth-century notions of sympathy and their indebtedness to Hume. Pinch's 1996 study, *Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen*, was one of the first in this line.

⁷ In future essays like "On the Temperance Movement of Modern Times" (*Tait's* 1845) and "Opium and the China Question" (*Blackwood's* 1840) De Quincey will reiterate the idea of drugs' acting differently on different races. For an analysis of De Quincey's ethnography of opium and alcohol consumption, see Joel Black's "National Bad Habits: Thomas De Quincey's Geography of Addiction" (2007). Here as elsewhere, De Quincey's ideas are traced back to his reading of Kant, and more specifically to a chapter in Kant's *Observations on our Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* entitled "Of National Characteristics, so far as They Depend upon the Distinct Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime."

⁸ The slight is directed at more recent figures of the Common Sense school (Thomas Reid and the previously mentioned Dugald Stewart)—as well as some of his own contemporaries and friends: John Wilson, Adam

Black, and other professors of the Edinburgh and Glasgow universities. For a more thorough reading of this passage in the context of De Quincey's place at the edge of Scottish academia, see Grevel Lindop in "De Quincey and the Edinburgh and Glasgow University Circles" (1998), in which Lindop calls him "essentially an Edinburgh writer" (48) and demonstrates how "De Quincey's contact with academic Scotland was more important for the nature of his work than has generally been recognized" (56).

⁹ This is a fact noted by Sigmund Proctor as well, who observes, "It is interesting that De Quincey here conceives of the final effect of music as being created by the listener at least as much as by the composer. [...] There is no other passage in De Quincey which so stresses the contribution that the reader, spectator, or listener makes to the art experience" (105).

¹⁰ Like De Quincey, Coleridge differentiates between the ability to produce and the ability to appreciate music, and positions himself as a critic rather than a musician. In a Table Talk column from 1830, Coleridge writes: "An Ear for music is a very different thing from a Taste for Music. I have no ear whatever. I could not for my life sing an air. But I have the intensest delight in Music, and can detect bad from good" (209).

¹¹ In his essay "On Genius" (1832) Mill argues that the critical faculty is a talent as valuable and nearly as rare as that required to produce a work of art, for it demands "the same powers of imagination, abstraction, and discrimination." He continues: "Do we not accordingly see that as much genius is often displayed in explaining the design and bringing out the hidden significance of a work of art, as in creating it? I have sometimes thought that *conceptive* genius is, in certain cases, even a higher faculty than *creative*" (333).

¹² In reality, of course, this strategy was only partly successful. De Quincey was able to gain a certain level of recognition in the periodical press (what we might today call brand recognition); however, this was often through the use of literary personae like "The Opium-eater" and "X.Y.Z.," which could be adopted by a fellow contributor or by the editor when convenient. Though he was not entirely "faceless," therefore, he did remain, to some extent, replaceable.

¹³ Barry Milligan writes that "De Quincey's extended comparison and contrast of alcohol and opium, establishing that opium increases and focuses the powers while alcohol decreases and disorders them, directly reiterates Brown's controversial assessments" (51).

¹⁴ De Luca argues that in De Quincey's text wine takes on religious and communal significance, whereas the opium user is self-isolating. "Opium may provide physical relief and apertures of vision," he writes, "but it cannot restore the community of human love, the hallmark of the innocent state" (20).

¹⁵ Black discusses De Quincey's view of the different effects on the user of opium and wine, and the popularity of each across different regions and races (144-49).

¹⁶ The *Athenæum*'s unsympathetic obituary of De Quincey portrays him as a writer of rather limited potential, which potential was in any case annihilated by his use of opium and general dissipation. It even compares him to Coleridge, observing how "in both men the indulgence produced the same results,—pecuniary embarrassment, bodily decay, and mental debility" (815). A posthumous review of his work in the *British Quarterly Review*, though more sympathetic overall, nonetheless makes the same argument, insisting that De Quincey's potential was wasted by opium and that "he could have done and ought to have done more" (15). His failure to do so is attributed directly to the drug, as are the worst defects of the work he did produce. However, in the very same review, the author also says that opium "made him more than eloquent [...] it gifted him with more than second sight, and made the gates of the spirit-world fly open at his approach" (7).

¹⁷ "Si des natures grossières et abêties par un travail journalier et sans charme peuvent trouver dans l'opium de vastes consolations, quel en sera donc l'effet sur un esprit subtil et lettré, sur une imagination ardente et cultivée [...]" (116).

¹⁸ Morrison writes that De Quincey's opium-eater, "one of the most potent fictive constructs of the era" (101), was inspired in great part by Coleridge, though he eventually eclipsed his model. For more on this subject, see also Morrison's "Opium-Eaters and Magazine Wars: De Quincey and Coleridge in 1821" (1997).

¹⁹ For a discussion of De Quincey's sometimes scathing reviews of other would-be explicators of Kant, see Daniel Sanjiv Roberts in *Revisionary Gleam*, 180-83. De Quincey is especially incensed when an article on the philosopher appears to have been written by a man—Mr. T. Wirgman—who works as a silversmith, of all things. “Such a representation of Kant as associated with working-class aspirations to literacy,” observes Roberts, “arouses De Quincey's fiercest indignation” (182). De Quincey writes in his response to the article that, far from having contributed anything of the slightest value to Kant's work, Mr. Wirgman has “done nothing but degrade and misrepresent Kant by the heap of stupidities which he has fathered upon him, and the absolute Babylonian gibberish in which he has delivered them” (183).

²⁰ The allusions appear in De Quincey's articles “How to Write English—Introductory Paper” (*Hogg's Instructor* 1853, WTDQ, xviii.51) and “Dr. Parr and his Contemporaries no. IV” (*Blackwood's* 1831, WTDQ, viii.83), respectively.

²¹ The magazines to which De Quincey contributed the lion's share of his writing—magazines like *Blackwood's*, *Tait's*, *Hogg's Instructor*, and the *Evening Post*—were based in Scotland, where, unlike in England, training in philosophy was still compulsory at the universities, and in fact constituted “the keystone of the Scottish academic edifice” (Lindop 46-48).

²² Hume writes: “But though there be naturally a wide difference in point of delicacy between one person and another, nothing tends further to encrease and improve this talent, than *practice* in a particular art, and the frequent survey or contemplation of a particular species of beauty. [...] A man, who has had no opportunity of comparing the different kinds of beauty, is indeed totally unqualified to pronounce an opinion with regard to any object presented to him” (“Of the Standard of Taste” 220-23).

²³ See Bourdieu's *Distinction: critique sociale du jugement* (1979), 13.

²⁴ “N'est-ce pas le ton de la mystique du salut? [...] la représentation mystique de l'expérience esthétique peut porter les uns à réserver aristocratiquement à quelques élus [...] cette grâce de la vision artistique” (*L'Amour de l'art*, 13).

²⁵ According to Duffy, "De Quincey's concern about the threat [...] of the new reading public echoes his earlier anxieties about the origins and implications of popular agitation for Parliamentary Reform. In both cases, an expanding merchant middle-class is understood to represent a revolutionary threat to traditional 'authority,' a threat that is being facilitated by the perceived apostasy of those who should have most reason to oppose it, be they landed gentry or gentleman scholars. De Quincey's own allegiance in this revolution, as gentleman scholar turned professional journalist, remains self-consciously and uncomfortably ambiguous" (8).

²⁶ The letter to De Quincey's editor at *Blackwood's* is available at the National Library of Scotland (4060, ff. 262/263) and is quoted in Robert Morrison's 2009 biography of De Quincey, page 326.

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