

Thomas De Quincey and the Palimpsest of Empire

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ABSTRACT

This paper reexamines De Quincey's imperial imagination through emerging network theories of Empire. In the wake of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* (2000), binary constructs of imperial power based on the metropole and colony have increasingly been called into question. Historians of the British Empire have produced "new imperial histories" that take into account the decentralized ways in which imperial power is maintained and distributed. De Quincey's writings embody and anticipate postmodern understandings of imperial power, amalgamating into a "palimpsest of empire" that resonates strongly with the present-day globalized moment.

This reconfiguring of De Quincey's representations of imperial power proposes De Quincey's metaphor of the palimpsest as a trope for understanding the new complexity of Empire. The palimpsest appears in *Suspira de Profundis* (1845) as a metaphor of human consciousness: a multilayered vellum on which all past markings survive indefinitely, even as the past is constantly put under erasure by the present. The accumulated markings give rise to the essential order and totality of consciousness, suggesting a structural and imaginative analogue between the palimpsest of consciousness and its externalization as the totality of imperial networks. Reexamining texts such as *Suspira de Profundis* and "The English Mail-Coach" (1849) reveals the possibilities of the palimpsest in articulating a multimodal and multilayered concept of Empire that not only applies to De Quincey's imagination but also may be symptomatic of Romantic-era imperial writing in general.

KEYWORDS: Thomas De Quincey, palimpsest, empire, imperialism

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I. The Palimpsest

The palimpsest is perhaps the most influential metaphor of consciousness to arise out of De Quincey's *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845), and may be read as a stylistic blueprint for De Quincey's multivalent, intertwining opium writings in their totality. Contemplating the origin and effects of his opium-induced dreams, De Quincey famously speculates on the multilayered structure of human consciousness: "What else than a natural and mighty palimpsest is the human brain? Such a palimpsest is my brain; such a palimpsest, O reader! is yours" (15: 173).¹

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a palimpsest as "a parchment or other writing surface on which the original text has been effaced or partially erased, and then overwritten by another; a manuscript in which later writing has been superimposed on earlier (effaced) writing" ("Palimpsest" 2a). De Quincey's statement in 1845 is cited as the earliest use of the word in its extended or metaphorical sense: "a thing likened to such a writing surface, esp. in having been reused or altered while still retaining traces of its earlier form; a multilayered record" ("Palimpsest" 2b). De Quincey conceives of the human brain as a membrane or surface that bears repeated acts of inscription and erasure, forever being written anew even as the buried strata of the past remain: "Everlasting layers of ideas, images, feelings, have fallen upon your brain softly as light. Each succession has seemed to bury all that went before. And yet in reality not one has been extinguished" (175). The interplay of surface and depth, presence and absence, connectivity and disjuncture has imbued the image of the palimpsest with a multitude of resonances beyond its origins in antiquity.

In particular, the palimpsest has taken on a life of its own in modern thought, anticipating psychoanalytic concepts of the unconscious as well as poststructuralist iterations of linguistic instability and semantic displacement.² As Sarah Dillon remarks, "De Quincey's essay *inaugurated*—that is, both

¹ All quotations from De Quincey are cited from *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, general editor, Grevel Lindop, Pickering and Chatto, 2003, 21 vols. Quotations from the primary texts under discussion, *Suspiria de Profundis* and "The English Mail-Coach," are cited from volume 15 of this edition unless otherwise noted.

² See Robert Maniquis, "De Quincey, Varieties of the Palimpsest, and the Unconscious" (2011) for a survey of the palimpsest in modern and postmodern contexts. For the palimpsest as a general trope for the multitudinous forms of hypertextuality, see G erald Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (1997).

introduced and initiated the subsequent use of—the substantive concept of the palimpsest . . . [which] marks the beginning of a consistent process of metaphorization of palimpsests” (243). For instance, Freud speculates on the “Mystic Writing Pad” as an analogue to the workings of the conscious and unconscious mind: “the Pad provides not only a receptive surface that can be used over and over again, like a slate, but also permanent traces of what has been written” (179). The writing pad is a palimpsest-like device, retaining the layers of the unconscious while sense perception repeatedly plays upon its surface. The past inscriptions of childhood, though superimposed and overwritten, are retained in the unconscious as permanent traces influencing the present. The palimpsest has been influential to semiotics and theories of signification as well: Roland Barthes draws on De Quincey to substantiate his definition of the text as “a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (146). For Barthes, every text essentially exists as palimpsest, bearing traces of other texts in an unending chain of signification that undermines any claim to authenticity or originality. Michel Foucault further invokes the palimpsest in relation to the concept of genealogy, which is antithetical to idealized origins and must be recovered through an archeology of shifting and elusive singularities. Genealogy, as Foucault argues, “operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times” (139). The palimpsest of genealogy complicates and frustrates the search for origins by modeling history as “an unstable assemblage of faults, fissures, and heterogeneous layers” that is spatially complex rather than linearly knowable (144). The imperative for Foucault is not to discover the moment of emergence but to comprehend the heterogeneous systems that constitute history and identity, which are structured as palimpsests.

With its extensive influence on modern analogues, De Quincey’s concept of the palimpsest is similarly expansive in its originary moment, articulating not merely a theory of mind but also historical and material reverberations that have increasingly come to light with the recent development of new imperial studies. This paper presents a rather different genealogy of the palimpsest that is grounded in materiality, and traces its relevance to the British imperial project during De Quincey’s time. Drawing on more recent theories of Empire, it reexamines the geopolitical implications of the

palimpsest while attempting to uncover a more troubling cultural context for De Quincey's metaphor of interiority. De Quincey's palimpsest extends its significations beyond the processes of mind and in effect becomes a trope for Empire, overdetermined by the increasingly complex structure of British imperial networks.

II. Imperial networks

Postcolonial criticism has taken what might be described as a “global” turn after the millennium with the publication of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* (2000), which challenges traditional constructs of unipolar imperial power based on the nation-state and the colony. Historians of the British Empire have followed suit by writing “new imperial histories” that take into account the cultural forms of power and the decentralized ways in which that power is maintained and distributed. It may prove fruitful to apply these trends in the understanding of imperial history to a nineteenth-century writer whose political and cultural concerns were cosmopolitan and global. The objective of this paper is to investigate the extent to which De Quincey's writings embody and anticipate postmodern understandings of imperial power, and the degree to which De Quincey's imperial imagination resonates with reflections of Empire in the present-day globalized moment.

Hardt and Negri propose that “a new form of sovereignty” governs the global order, different in kind from the idea of sovereignty embodied in distinct and separate nation-states (xii). The authors insist on distinguishing this new form of sovereignty, simply termed “Empire,” from imperialism, which they view as a straightforward territorial expansion of the sovereignty of the nation-state. Their principal assertion establishes the diffused, decentered nature of power that eludes borders and nations:

Empire establishes no territorial center of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers. It is a *decentered* and *detritorializing* apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers. Empire manages hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges through modulating networks of command. (xii)

This new formulation attempts to advance the theory of empire beyond earlier conceptualizations of imperial power, which conventionally relied on binary structures of colonizer/colonized or metropole/colony.³ In its place, Hardt and Negri propose a more fluid and malleable formation that is plural, heterogeneous, and constantly in flux. The theoretical concept of Empire conceptualized by Hardt and Negri consists of distinct characteristics: 1) the absence of boundaries, which extends Empire's reach over "the spatial totality" of the world; 2) its self-definition as a trans-historical world order that supersedes history rather than as a specific historical regime; 3) the diffusion of its rule throughout the human body and the human social order, so that it becomes the representative form of biopower. Analyzing the transition from classical imperialism to Empire, the authors propose the construct of Empire as a network of powers:

Empire can only be conceived as a universal republic, a network of powers and counterpowers structured in a boundless and inclusive architecture. This imperial expansion has nothing to do with imperialism, nor with those state organisms designed for conquest, pillage, genocide, colonization, and slavery. Against such imperialisms, Empire extends and consolidates the model of network power. (166-67)

Certain postcolonial critics have taken issue with Hardt and Negri's demarcation of Empire as separate from imperialism, and have censured their neglect of historical realities in the colonizing past (Lomba 213-28). From a historical perspective, Hardt and Negri overstate their view that "imperial expansion has nothing to do with imperialism" and appear to contradict the reality of centuries of western colonization. For the purposes of this paper, however, those criticisms may be addressed in two ways: 1) the application of the concept of Empire has, over the past decade, been put into the service of writing history in the "new imperial histories" movement, underlining the

³ See Edward Said's seminal definition of "imperialism" as "the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory" and colonialism as "the implanting of settlements on distant territory" (9). Although Said certainly acknowledges the fluidity of movement and hybridity of cultures throughout his work, the emphasis nonetheless falls on the dichotomy between the modern metropolitan West and the movements of resistance that oppose European imperialism.

importance of the complex network of cultural practices and material realities; 2) the theoretical concepts proposed by Hardt and Negri closely align with discursive networks of signification, and therefore usefully apply to the *literary* precisely because of its abstract and tropic formulations. Viewing Empire as a network of power allows one to perceive the totality of the imperialistic structure operating in the literary text as a constructive supplement to localized interpretations of discrete historical facts. In the case of De Quincey's writings, this totalizing and transcendent network structure of Empire will be shown to mirror the palimpsest structure of opium dreams and fantasies.

III. New imperial histories

As a recent movement within studies of the British Empire, the emerging school of new imperial histories has attempted to move beyond the metropole/periphery binary prominent in established models of colonialism, while examining the extent to which Negri and Hardt's conceptualization applies to earlier periods in British history. Webs, matrices, and networks have emerged as the dominant metaphors for the analysis of imperial power, emphasizing the "global force fields" (Antoinette Burton's term) that allow us to grasp distinctly the structure of Empire in its totality.⁴

Imperial networks originated as material trade networks specializing in transporting goods between increasingly distant sites as the British Empire expanded geographically. Trade routes were no longer limited to the two-way traffic between the metropole and colonies, but were extended to routes between and among multiple colonies along with the metropole. The increasing complexity of multidirectional and multinodal imperial trade, relying on ships and ports as the mechanisms of worldwide transportation, created an early network of global trade. In Alan Lester's illustrative example:

⁴ For pioneering work in new imperial histories published after the millennium, see Catherine Hall's *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830-1867* (2002), Antoinette Burton's *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the Nation* (2003), Alan Lester's *Imperial Networks: Creating Identities in Nineteenth-Century South Africa and Britain* (2001), and Tony Ballantyne's *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire* (2002). Excerpts from these works are collected in *The New Imperial Histories Reader* (2009), edited by Stephen Howe.

Indian calicoes moved to Africa to purchase slaves, Tahitian breadfruit was taken to the Caribbean to feed those slaves, Caribbean molasses was transported to New England where it was made into rum for trade with Native Americans, and tea, coffee, chocolate, tobacco, sugar, rice and potatoes converged, from sites dispersed across the globe, on the British metropole. (140)

Obviously, the movement of raw materials, goods and products, and human bodies across the globe served the interests of the British Empire. As a global commodity, opium encapsulates the geopolitical tensions and inequities of power embedded in such a network. In Nigel Leask's summary:

Opium was produced by the British East India Company in India for export to China, as an exchange commodity for China tea. This formed a delicately balanced trade triangle: the Chinese had to pay for Indian opium, Britain's Indian subjects had to pay for the privilege of British rule, and the British consumer had to pay for China tea. These outstanding claims were cancelled one against the other, to the benefit of Britain's worldwide trade. (217)

The Chinese confiscation of British opium shipments in 1839 thus created an intolerable disruption in the global network of British imperial trade. The aggressive reaction of the British Government instigated the First Opium War that resulted in the Treaty of Nanking in 1842, forcing China to open its markets and restore the imperial network favorable to British interests.

Goods and merchandise were not the only commodities that connected the colonial sites; the flow of information, knowledge, and ideology was no less crucial to the reification and consolidation of Empire. As Lester further points out, "While each different site within the imperial site had its own possibilities and conditions of knowledge, these differentiated knowledges were connected by the communicative circuits of empire, and could thus be mutually affecting" (140). The publication and circulation of news, bulletins, letters, journals, and travelogues among Britain, India, Africa, Australia, and the West Indies constituted an early information network that served as the

precursor to the modern structure of global communication. This juxtaposition of material and ideological circuits within the totality of imperial territories has led to new models for understanding the British Empire. To describe the complexity of this phenomenon, Tony Ballantyne argues for “a multi-sited imperial history that uses webs as its organizing analytical metaphor, an approach that views empires as integrative structures that knit, often forcibly, previously disparate and unconnected points together into a shared space” (236). The spatiality of De Quincey’s palimpsest, with its interlacing threads of memory and experience across disparate imperial geographies, suggests such a labyrinthine web.

New imperial studies have demonstrated that applying contemporary models of globalization to the nineteenth century is not at all anachronistic; rather, current conceptualizations of globalization derive their roots from the unprecedented expansion of the British Empire. Ballantyne clearly emphasizes this point:

The imperial globalization generated by British commerce, conquest and colonization had two important effects. First, and most obviously, imperial networks brought previously unconnected regions together into a system, albeit a highly uneven one, of exchange and movement. Second, it transformed worldviews: globalization was (and is) as much a state of mind as a series of capital flows or migratory movements. (236)

De Quincey’s palimpsest of the mind appears precisely to recreate this “state of mind,” which is structured by the complex webs and lattices of imperial power. The “shared space” of Empire, encompassing dense exchanges of materials and information, is replicated rhetorically and figuratively within the textual space of De Quincey’s prose.

IV. De Quincey and Imperialism

Important studies examining De Quincey in relation to imperialism have paved the way for the application of new imperial studies in a global framework. It is well established that De Quincey’s political opinions lie squarely in the camp of Tory conservatism: he was a staunch defender of

private property, a fervent supporter of capitalism conducted under the aegis of the British Empire, and an incorrigible apologist for the Opium Wars, the Peterloo massacre, the British intervention in Afghanistan, as well as the continuation of slave labor in the West Indies.⁵ He explicitly and publicly expressed these opinions across the diverse genres of his prose: in autobiographical writings, political commentaries, historical narratives, and literary criticism. Yet it was only in the 1990s, in the wake of postcolonial criticism, that scholarship began to integrate De Quincey's imperial politics into literary interpretations of his opium writings.

In his groundbreaking book *The Infection of Thomas De Quincey* (1991), John Barrell demonstrates that a "whole historical and geopolitical system" underlies De Quincey's opium writings (10). To a subject complicit with and formed by the British Empire, the East emerges as a form of disease necessitating continual inoculation. As Barrell argues, "De Quincey's life was terrorised by the fear of an unending and interlinked chain of infections from the East, which threatened to enter his system and to overthrow it" (15). Paradoxically, the inoculation took the form of the disease, leading to ever more intense breakouts of the infection. De Quincey's opium writings depicts the infection as increasingly disturbing repetitions of the terrors of the East. Barrell traces De Quincey's fear of the oriental back to a "mythic melodrama he created from his childhood memories and adult fantasies" (20), centering on the trauma caused by the death of his sister Elizabeth. Barrell's formulation of the writer's psychical life, as structured by a larger geopolitical system, parallels De Quincey's palimpsest of the mind, which inscribes external and material realities generated by the network of Empire.

Nigel Leask's *British Romantic Writers and the East* (1992) situates De Quincey more specifically within the nexus of British imperial capitalism, focusing on the anxieties and instabilities of Orientalist discourse generated through a system of trade and commodification. Opium as an imperial commodity becomes a double-edged metaphor, at once representing the fascination with the exotic as well as the fear of the Orient; the novelty of exploring dream states and heightened consciousness is accompanied by

⁵ For a recent revisionist view of De Quincey's politics, see Robert Morrison, "'Earthquake and Eclipse': Radical Energies and De Quincey's 1821 *Confessions*" (2008). Morrison situates De Quincey's conservatism within a more complex, diverse map of ideologies, arguing that his "attraction to power is subverted by a wide-ranging series of liberal commitments and radical sympathies" (78).

nightmarish and grotesque visions that originate from the East. For Leask, opium symbolically expresses the relation between the colonizer and colonized in the binary formation of classic postcolonial criticism:

Opium becomes a metaphor for imperialism as both a cure for national torpor, and stimulant, and a compulsive narcotic, a wasting away. Hopes about the invigorating effects of imperial expansion on the metropolitan society turn into a nightmare realization that it has become economically dependent on (or addicted to) its subjugated Other; the relations of power have been grotesquely reversed. (9)

While the consumption of opium signifies the dominance of the Western subject over trade and commodity in the East, opium as a drug also induces dependence, incapacity, and emasculation—thus bearing witness to the subject’s dependence on the Other for its self-construction. While De Quincey sought to rationalize his dreams as “homeopathic agencies” (222) and exploited them for their curative effect on his Orientalist anxieties, the dreams ultimately signify a reversal of the power dynamics of dominant/subjugated and reveal the vulnerability of the Western subject to its colonial Other. Leask identifies this great anxiety as “orientalization,” which sets into motion the psychic breakdown of the British/European upon “discovering the Other in the Same” (228). Barrell and Leask paint a disturbing picture of De Quincey’s psychological attitude toward the East, albeit circumscribed within a more conventional binary framework of self/other and colonizer/colonized. This paper continues their major lines of inquiry while integrating recent developments in network theories of Empire and new imperial histories.

V. Suspiria de Profundis

For De Quincey, who throughout his career was a zealous apologist for British interests across the globe, the narrative of opium, dreams, and consciousness is intimately bound up with larger geopolitical concerns. A structural connection exists in De Quincey’s writings between the interiorized metaphor of the palimpsest and its externalization as imperial networks that consist of heterogeneous nodes and encapsulate a totality of power.

Conceived as the sequel to the *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821), *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845) takes the form of a series of meditative essays relating to De Quincey's opium experience. The text's ostensible subject of consciousness and interiority in fact incorporates De Quincey's imperial imagination. Conversely, De Quincey's conceptualization of the palimpsest of the mind may be viewed as a symptom of Empire that replicates its structure in the workings of consciousness.

The introduction to Part I of *Suspiria* makes clear the historical situatedness of De Quincey's writing. He frames his narrative with contemporary reference: "Already, in this year 1845, what by the procession through fifty years of mighty revolutions amongst the kingdoms of the earth . . . the calmest observer is troubled" (130). His excursions into consciousness are situated in the half-century aftermath of the French Revolution and the rise and fall of Napoleon's power. He speaks of "this fierce condition of eternal hurry" as civilization enters a modern phase, the "vast physical agencies" that are brought under the control of scientific advancement, and the development of awesome military prowess with "artillery and the forces of destruction" (130). This period is contemporaneous with the rapid expansion of British imperial power, which echoes the assessment of modern historians of the British Empire.⁶ Although De Quincey uses the context as an argument for individual solitude and meditation in a rapidly modernizing society, his narrative is simultaneously conditioned by its inexorable link to empire.

Metaphors of empire abound in *Suspiria*. De Quincey warns that his narrative resembles "a caduceus wreathed about with meandering ornaments, or the shaft of a tree's stem hung round and surmounted with some vagrant parasitical plant" (135). Specifically, the caduceus is the shaft of Mercury, intertwined with serpentine adornments. Like the digressive prose writer, Mercury traverses great distances and geographies to connect disparate subjects and narratives. Yet the structure of the caduceus also references power and its dependency. The entwining of a dependent subject around a primary axis forms a parasitic relationship—colonialism being one such

⁶ For instance, see C. A. Bayly's *Imperial Meridian* (1989) as a widely influential account, which dates "the emergence of the British empire and the origin of contemporary international order, the massive expansion of British dominion" to the years 1780-1830 (1-2).

relationship. De Quincey goes on to relate the caduceus to the physical appearance of the opium plant:

The mere medical subject of the opium answers to 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*. (135)

The “pole” of the opium plant may also be representative of the *metropole* of the British Empire, which only “seems” to exert external force; the subject colonies naturally curl round the center of power to form an exotic web. Opium itself is a commodity of the imperial network as it traverses the Indian subcontinent to the metropolis of London and is consumed by De Quincey’s body. Ironically, opium is transmuted into a metaphor by De Quincey only to implicate the material system of imperial trade that produced it in the first place. In fact, De Quincey’s labyrinthine prose is intricately connected to the network of power that constitutes Empire. That power manifests itself in the imperial commodity of opium as well as the manifold layers of dream consciousness that opium generates.

If the introduction to the *Suspiria* is overdetermined by the material realities of imperial power, so too is De Quincey’s exposition of the palimpsest of the mind. De Quincey begins by providing a working definition of a palimpsest as “a membrane or roll cleansed of its manuscript by reiterated successions” (171). The prominence of “cleansing” and effacing in De Quincey’s account is troubling in the context of his imperial imagination, for the erasure of previous layers of manuscript is a physical and material process akin to the displacement of geographies and cultures by empires. De Quincey uses metaphors of agriculture and cultivation to describe this cleansing: “The soil, if cleansed from what once had been hot-house plants, but now were held to be weeds, would be ready to receive a fresh and more appropriate crop” (172). Just as the pole of the opium plant suggests the workings of imperial networks, here the “more appropriate crop” that expels the native weeds suggests a colonial power with its civilizing mission. De Quincey goes further to link explicitly the process of erasure and re-inscription to violence and warfare: “To bid a generation kill, but so that a subsequent generation may

call back into life; bury, but so that posterity may command to rise again” (173). De Quincey’s palimpsest continually tends to escape its circumscribed province of the mind, expanding its materiality into the realm of conquest and colonization.

As an instance of this recurring effacement of the palimpsest, De Quincey imagines the vellum being reused over the course of distinct regimes: the Greek or “Western Empire,” the Christian empire, and the new era of chivalry, embodied respectively by the literary genres of “Greek tragedy, the monkish legend, the knightly romance, each [of which] has ruled its own period” (173-74). The original palimpsest emerges from the history of empires and is re-inscribed through subsequent forms of writing representative of that era’s primary structures of power. The submerged history of the palimpsest and its entanglement with the progression of empires suggests a network of material forces that is inevitably fused with the metaphor itself. This material network, like the structure of De Quincey’s representation of human consciousness, is comprehensive, infinite, and omnipresent. De Quincey labors to stress that in the mind’s palimpsest, “there are not and cannot be such incoherencies”; “heterogeneous elements . . . will not permit the grandeur of human unity greatly to be violated”; “the organizing principles . . . fuse into harmony”; the subject becomes “omnipresent at one moment to every feature in the infinite review” (175-76). These features comprise a vision of a unified, organized, all-encompassing entity without territorial borders, corresponding to the boundless architecture of Empire.

“Savanna-La-Mar,” the final section of Part I of the *Suspiria*, encapsulates the workings of the palimpsest of Empire, weaving together the fear and desires of the mind with historical realities in the British-controlled Caribbean. De Quincey narrates the destruction of the Jamaican seaport by a combination of earthquake and hurricane in 1780, and reimagines the city sunk and frozen below the depths of the sea as a modern-day Atlantis. Much like the sunken city, the West Indian material context lurks in the depths of De Quincey’s life. As Charles Rzepka recounts, De Quincey’s father was a wholesaler who profited from the cotton trade via slave plantations in the West Indies, the profits from which he bequeathed to Thomas. For Rzepka, the apocalyptic narrative of “Savanna-La-Mar” thus exposes “a deep-seated sense of guilt over the slave-labor origins of his own inheritance” (119).

However, that episode may simultaneously function as an act of erasure, as De Quincey's dream vision provides an all-encompassing religious justification for the destruction of the colony, corresponding to a layer of inscription on the palimpsest of Empire.

Years before writing the *Suspiria*, De Quincey had published his political opinions on the West Indies, arguing forcefully against the immediate abolition of slavery.⁷ Taking a firm position on the British citizen's absolute right to private property, De Quincey was of the opinion that the abolition of slavery would jeopardize the financial interests of the colonial proprietors, amounting to "invading colonial property in ways abominable to British ears" (6: 211). He adheres to the civilizing mission of British imperialism without question, and notes the great advancement in prospects for African slaves: "In Africa they are level with the beasts of the field; in the West Indies, after one generation, they become a contented peasantry" (6: 210). Furthermore, he lauds the "steady current of wise and benign reforms" that had much improved the labor conditions of the slaves (6: 213). Rather than abolishing slavery by an act of Parliament, De Quincey argues, "slavery would not be violently extinguished, but would expire naturally" (6: 215). Equally important to emphasize, however, is that this natural expiration would benefit not only the slave: "the very same steps by which those blessings were secured to the negro, would bring indemnity to his master" (6: 215). In the final analysis, the protection of the British colonists' ownership rights and private property were paramount.

Within the context of De Quincey's imperial attitudes toward the West Indies, the apocalyptic narrative of Savanna-La-Mar suggests both a moral justification for the absolute ontology of Empire as well as a symptom of anxiety concerning its decline: Empire must be maintained at all costs, or else complete annihilation will ensue. Historically, De Quincey's episode takes its origin from three catastrophic hurricanes in the West Indies in 1780, of which much documentation survives. The first of these hurricanes slammed directly into the port city of Savannah-La-Mar with storm surges as high as 20 feet. The storm laid waste to the city and its surrounding sugar plantations, demolishing the majority of habitable structures with fatal casualties: in the

⁷ These essays are "West India Property" in two parts, published in the *Edinburgh Evening Post* in June 1828, and "West India Petition" in September 1827. See *Works* 5: 43-45 and 6: 202-16. For fuller elaboration on the context of the essays, see Rzepka.

neighboring city of Lucea, 400 people died; further north in Montego bay, 360 lives were taken. Anglican clergyman George Wilson Bridges described the tragedy in graphic detail:

The shattered remains of houses, whose tenants were dead or dying—the maddening search for wives and children, who were lost—the terrific howling of the frightened negroes, as it mingled with the whistling but subsiding winds—and the deluged state of the earth, strewn with the wreck of nature, and ploughed into deep ravines, was the scene which daylight ushered in.
(qtd. in Emanuel 64)

The British naval and transport ships in the region—the Monarch, the Phoenix, the Victor, the Barbadoes, the Scarborough, the Sterling Castle—lost all their crew. The first hurricane claimed approximately 3,000 lives in total, including 1,500 sailors. The second hurricane rent a path of destruction from Barbadoes to Bermuda, killing 22,000, resulting in one of the worst disasters in Caribbean history. The British Navy in the region and the colonial plantation economy were severely impaired and would never recover.⁸

In *Suspiria de Profundis*, De Quincey re-inscribes the mindscape of his dreams onto the material reality of the city. Savannah-La-Mar is variously “a crystal dome,” “a mighty galleon,” “one ample cemetery,” a “submarine asylum,” the annihilation of the city and its imperial interests sublimated into scenes of beauty and calm (186). As he visits the scene with the Dark Interpreter of his dreams, De Quincey transforms apocalyptic scenes of terror into vignettes of preternatural calm:

We looked into belfries, where the pendulous bells were waiting in vain for the summons which should awaken their marriage peals; together we touched the mighty organ keys, that sang no *jubilates* for the ear of heaven, that sang no requiems for the ear of human sorrow; together we searched the silent nurseries, where the children were all asleep, and *had* been asleep through five generations. (186)

⁸ See Emanuel’s *Divine Wind: The History and Science of Hurricanes* (2005) for a detailed description of the Caribbean disasters.

The horrors of the hurricanes have been re-inscribed by another layer of the imaginative vellum, and put under erasure by the palimpsest of De Quincey's writing. De Quincey uses the spectacle of disaster to meditate on the metaphysical issue of how consciousness experiences time and, by extension, how God conceives of time. Yet the sublime experience of temporal consciousness only mediates the real disasters wreaking havoc on the distant nodes of Empire. De Quincey attempts a religious rationalization of the destruction: "This is sad: this is piteous: but less would not have sufficed for the purposes of God" (186). Faced with the anxiety of a breakdown in the imperial system of trade and property, De Quincey reverts to a sense of divine sanction to make sense of the catastrophe:

Therefore, it follows—that for God there can be no present. The future is the present of God; and to the future it is that he sacrifices the human present. Therefore it is that he works by earthquake. Therefore it is that he works by grief. (187)

De Quincey literally removes the sunken city from the face of the earth; in terms of the pragmatic purposes of Empire, the city is instrumentally useless and can now be transmuted into a sublime vision of the grandeur of consciousness and religiosity. De Quincey finally speculates that the catastrophe may even have been necessary for the improvement of civilization in the colonies: "Upon a night of earthquake he builds a thousand years of pleasant habitations for man" (187). De Quincey's fantasy of annihilation and imperial resurrection operates according to the structure of palimpsest: by allowing the glorification of Empire to overwrite historical and material realities, De Quincey's palimpsest of the mind transmutes itself into the palimpsest of Empire.

VI. The English Mail-Coach

The network architecture of imperial power and its palimpsest of imperial consciousness are further substantiated in "The English Mail-Coach," in which the transportation and dissemination of the national mail becomes representative of the diffused structure of Empire. First published in *Blackwood's Magazine* in October and December 1849, "The English Mail-

Coach” was originally conceived as part of *Suspiria de Profundis*, and may be approached as an extension of or sequel to the 1845 *Surpiria*.⁹ The sections comprising the complete texts of “The English Mail-Coach, or the Glory of Motion” and “The Vision of Sudden Death” (the latter of which includes the influential “Dream-Fugue”) are narratives of De Quincey’s youthful mail-coach travels, transfigured decades later into dream visions under the influence of opium.

De Quincey begins the text by profusely extoling the invention of mail coaches, as he takes great delight in their unprecedented speed, the power and beauty of the horses, and the splendid visual effects observed by the traveler.¹⁰ Most of all, he is impressed by the system of organization that comprehends the totality of all mail coaches; he senses “the conscious presence of a central intellect, that, in the midst of vast distances, of storms, of darkness, of night, overruled all obstacles into one steady co-operation in a national result” (409). The total flow of information generated by the mail system might be analogous to a neural network dominated by a powerful national consciousness. As Nigel Leask observes, “De Quincey’s writings are full of panegyrics to the organic power of capitalism, a network of communications across the nation forged by technological advance, first of the mail coach system, then by telegraphs and railways” (196). De Quincey is fascinated by the idea of an organic network that materializes the power of the state and forms the basis of the palimpsest of Empire. “The connexion of the mail with the state and the executive government,” De Quincey asserts, “gave to the whole mail establishment a grandeur and an official authority” (414). The official authority of the state presides over “great respirations, ebb or flood, of the national intercourse” and “tidings running day and night between *all* nations and languages” (414; emphasis added). Communications both national and international connecting the English towns and the network of British colonies are all brought under the aegis of the British mail system. Indeed, as

⁹ See De Quincey, *Works* 16: 401-08 for the text’s provenance and publication details. In his 1854 collection *Selections Grave and Gay*, De Quincey grouped the essay “The English Mail-Coach, or the Glory of Motion” along with “The Vision of Sudden Death” (including the “Dream-Fugue” section) under the heading “The English Mail-Coach.”

¹⁰ For the significance of mail-coach travel in De Quincey’s times, see Jarvis. Jarvis reminds us that the system of mail coaches was being replaced with the rail network and on the verge of becoming obsolete at the time of De Quincey’s writing. Thus the sentimentalism associated with the mail-coach “expresses an unstable modernity and the headlong flight of Britain into an industrialized future” (83).

Andrew Franta argues, De Quincey's admiration of "material agencies of transmission" gives rise to a vision in which "the mail is transformed into an idealized emblem of the British nation itself" (325).

Within the multitudinous flow of global information, a specific type of communication was established as singularly consequential: the news of military victories. Timothy Ziegenhagan has noted that in its dissemination of triumphant news, "the mail-coach becomes a spectacle of British power as much as the grandest military parade" (93). De Quincey identifies the years 1805-15 as furnishing a long string of British victories against Napoleonic France, during which he would willingly give "five years of life" for "the privilege of an outside place on a mail-coach, when carrying down the first tidings of any such event" (423). Receiving the news of victory on the mail coaches united the citizens as one in national glory: "The great national sentiment surmounts and quells all sense of ordinary distinctions. . . . One heart, one pride, one glory, connects every man by the transcendant [sic] bond of his English blood" (424). As the mail-coaches journey through English towns, disparate locales and geographies are connected via the news of imperial splendor, the process expressing "the grandeur of the empire by the antiquity of its towns, and the grandeur of the mail establishment by the diffusive radiation of its separate missions" (424).

The diffusion of victory reaches beyond national concerns to signal larger imperial aspirations. The Anglo-French Wars of 1805-10 would not merely determine the balance of power between the two nations but also establish the new world order among competing imperial powers, culminating in radical shifts in Europe and the colonized globe. Although De Quincey appears to emphasize national victories throughout "The English Mail-Coach," nationalism radiates and diffuses outward to the logical conclusion of imperialism. Anne Frey argues that De Quincey's focus on the English nation is itself an imperial gesture: "even national identity is imperial because nationality imposes upon a citizen's other identities. The nation must imperially conquer its own people in the name of the king, even if only through a battle of information" (44). The erasure of individual identity of disparate citizens becomes a means by which the palimpsest of Empire is overwritten with a monolithic imperial totality. Furthermore, De Quincey imagines the dissemination of national identity as proliferating into infinity, generating a transcendent form of consciousness:

The half-slumbering consciousness that . . . many of these mails, like fire racing along a train of gunpowder, will be kindling at every instant new successions of burning joy, has an obscure effect of multiplying the victory itself, by multiplying to the imagination into infinity the stages of its progressive diffusion. (425)

The gunpowder metaphor amalgamates the dissemination of information with the material reality of conquest and warfare. The imperial diffusion will continue *ad infinitum*, until it brings all subjects imaginatively into the fold of Empire. David Higgins observes that in the text, “English identity becomes an endless outward movement of power and signification from the metropolis, to provincial cities, archipelagic peripheries, imperial colonies, and, ultimately, the whole world” (173-74). However, De Quincey goes further in putting the idea of origins under erasure, asserting no end to imperial expansion but also no clear beginning.

Although De Quincey represents Empire as a conscious and homogeneous presence, there appears to be no specific point of origin for the multiplication of national sentiment. Instead, that ideology organically disseminates itself materially and imaginatively throughout all imperial subjects. The mail becomes a trope for the decentralized network of Empire proposed by Negri and Hardt, an all-encompassing totality that knows no borders or limits. Frey elaborates on how the instantaneous transfer of news and information organically results in a diffused construct of Empire:

No single place or person controls the empire. Instead, when communication moves instantaneously, “each acts upon all, and all react upon each.” The revolution De Quincey imagines here would remove the need for a center because every part would be linked to every other part. Such a model diffuses agency: it is difficult to suggest where the action or movement might begin; we can only be sure that any movement or idea will spread across the empire. (48)

In “The Vision of Sudden Death,” the second section of “The English Mail Coach,” De Quincey dramatizes the anxieties and misgivings that the imperial

consciousness inevitably generates, remarking that the glory of motion is paradoxically accompanied by “an under-sense . . . of possible though indefinite danger” (409). The vision of danger intrudes into his panegyric to imperial networks at its seemingly most invulnerable moment. De Quincey recounts a narrowly averted accident on the mail-coach that momentarily challenges the unimpeded motion of imperial power and shocks the subject into terror. Once again, De Quincey places himself firmly within the currents of imperial networks, this time traveling from London to Glasgow. Although the northern region between Liverpool, Manchester, and Lancaster is not typically regarded as the center of imperial power, De Quincey happens to be traveling during the session of assizes, periodic law courts that collectively formed a network of national governance. Thus, lawsuits of import temporarily dominated the region: “all the law business of populous Liverpool, and of populous Manchester, with its vast cincture of populous rural districts” constituted a thriving and complex web of local and national interests (437). In this context, the cincture of business encircled the cities, reinforcing the representation of national authority as a geographical network of power. The assizes, “that dreadful *hurricane* of flight and pursuit . . . that swept to and from Lancaster all day long” (437; emphasis added) depict an echo of the disastrous event of Savannah-la-Mar, its fearful destruction and conversion to imperial sublimity.

Significantly, De Quincey “took a small quantity of laudanum” as he mounted the coach (434), which transformed this incident into the dream fugue of his opium consciousness. As De Quincey recounts, the coachman falls asleep while driving, leaving the carriage to veer onto the wrong side of the road. At first De Quincey retains a strong sense of the invulnerability and invincibility of the royal mail: “It was not that I feared for ourselves. What could injure *us*? Our bulk and impetus charmed us against peril in any collision. . . . The mail was not built, I felt assured, nor bespoke, that could betray *me* who trusted to its protection” (438). It appears that the subject has internalized the notion of Empire built into the English mail-coach and has no doubts about the triumph of its power against any opposing force. Yet that veneer of impregnability is abruptly challenged by an oncoming gig—a light two-wheeled carriage conveying a pair of lovers whose current course would result in a catastrophic crash. Unable to steer the carriage from his position, De Quincey attempts to warn the other vehicle to no avail, as he conveys the

“impossibility of saving them by any communication with the guard” (439). If the mail-coach is a vehicle of news dissemination across the vast network of Empire, its communicative function ironically breaks down precisely when the subject seeks it most desperately. Furthermore, De Quincey cannot reach the reins that are blocked by “the foreign mails being piled upon the roof” (439), the medium of communication forming a physical obstacle to De Quincey’s attempt to reassert control. These details undercut the sense of invulnerability embodied in the mail coach, and by extension, expose the grand narrative of Empire to critique and instability.

The encroachment of a presence that disturbs and resists the workings of Empire is perhaps De Quincey’s greatest fear. In this episode, that presence is manifest in the imminent collision between the mail coach and the oncoming carriage. Unable to avert the crash entirely, the carriage swerves at the last minute and is struck obliquely by De Quincey’s mail coach. The horse is immobilized; the young man sits on the ground paralyzed; the carriage is upended and still trembling. The lady’s reaction leaves the most visceral impression on De Quincey’s mind:

But the lady—! O heavens! will that spectacle ever depart from my dreams, as she rose and sank upon her seat, sank and rose, threw up her arms wildly to heaven, clutched at some visionary object in the air, fainting, praying, raving, despairing? (442)

The hysterical, epileptic gestures of the lady offer several interpretive possibilities: 1) as a physical reaction to obstructing and standing in the way of Empire, symbolized by the mail coach; 2) as an indication of shock and vulnerability due to the sudden violence that upends the safely ensconced British subject; 3) as an expression of the anxiety and agitation that Empire unwittingly exerts on its own subjects. In the subsequent Section, “Dream-Fugue,” De Quincey simultaneously transfigures the near-death of the lady into apocalyptic fear and ecstasy:

Ah, vision too fearful of shuddering humanity on the brink of abysses!—vision that didst start back—that didst reel away—like a *shriveling scroll* from before the wrath of fire racing on the wings of the wind! (443; emphasis added)

De Quincey regards this vision as a “shriveling scroll” that resembles the structure of palimpsest. The vision unreels like a filmstrip, revealing the underlying truth beneath all pretenses of imperial power and velocity. The compelling image of the raving lady thus discloses the submerged layers of the palimpsest of Empire that lie exposed when the surface of invulnerability peels away.

VII. Dream-Fugue

The image of fear and hysteria leads into the remarkable concluding section, “Dream-Fugue.”¹¹ De Quincey attaches supreme importance to the Dream-Fugue as the “ultimate object” of the series, and describes it as “an attempt to wrestle with the utmost efforts of music in dealing with a colossal form of impassioned horror” (430). That horror, fused in a musical form of dream narrative, nominally arises as a consequence of the near-fatal experience of the preceding section, “the mail itself having been carried into the dreams by the incident in the Vision” (430). Yet the dream-fugue ultimately expresses the anxieties of national conquest, and dramatizes a process of redemption and salvation through the state religion of British imperialism.

The fugue opens with a passage from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, which might be a *leitmotif* throughout De Quincey’s writings, echoing his profound sense of lost innocence and fixation on originary moments of sin and guilt. De Quincey’s autobiographical revelation of himself in the fugue is a portrait of exile, discontent, and loss, mirroring the Biblical Fall within the compass of an individual psyche: “Pariah heart within me, that couldst never hear the sound of joy without sullen whispers of treachery in ambush; that, from six years old, didst never hear the promise of perfect love” (448). Frederick Burwick has noted how De Quincey frequently alludes to Milton in order to reflect on his own sufferings and guilt (112-13). In the passage that De Quincey cites, Adam is shown a vision by the archangel Michael of an earthly

¹¹ De Quincey unambiguously states the causal relationship between the two sections: “The Vision of Sudden Death contains the mail-coach incident, which did really occur, and did really suggest the variations of the Dream, here taken up by the Fugue” (16: 430).

paradise, centering on a musician whose virtuosic touch on his instrument “Fled and pursued transverse the resonant fugue” (Milton 11.563).

That fugue in *Paradise Lost* provides an initial literary context for De Quincey’s dream-fugue, though the lines resonate darkly in their multiple implications. For Milton depicts not only the expert beauty of the musical form but also a movement of flight and pursuit, which underscores the sense of anxiety and unease in De Quincey’s narrative. Moreover, Adam’s delight at the hedonistic vision promptly earns him a reprimand by the archangel Michael, who reveals the scene to be an illusory paradise full of wickedness, lust, and atheism (Milton 11.603-27). The menacing undercurrent of a false paradise likewise haunts De Quincey’s fugue until its final moments.

In the opening movement of the fugue, the hope and exhilaration of an “almighty summer” and the “everlasting gates of life” open up to a vista where De Quincey and the lady from the vision are floating on boats on a tranquil ocean, experiencing “festal happiness” in the moment (443). This idyllic pastoral scene abruptly fades into silence and rapidly vanishes, replaced by a tempestuous storm reminiscent of Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. The lady reappears with the panic-stricken gestures portrayed in “The Vision of Sudden Death”—“rising, sinking, fluttering, trembling, praying” until she disappears in a peal of “malicious laughter and mockery” (444). This personal, circumscribed vision of near-fatal tragedy repeats in different forms and eventually expands into a piercing anxiety of the consequences of Empire. In another dream-iteration of the accident, De Quincey helplessly witnesses a girl sinking into quicksand, “tossing, faltering, rising, clutching” in her final moments like the lady on the light carriage. In this version, however, the scene is suddenly interrupted “by a shout as of many nations, and by a roar as from some great king’s artillery, advancing rapidly along the valleys, and heard afar by echoes among the mountains” (445).

In this dream, large-scale warfare intrudes upon the circumscribed tragedy of the sinking girl; the “great king’s artillery” captures a sense of enormity in the violence, but is simultaneously a repetition of the English mail-coach with its symbolism of national pride and incorporation of velocity and power. Specifically, this artillery belongs to the almighty British Empire, as it clears the field of its enemies in the post-Waterloo imagination. De Quincey’s initial shock gives way to the realization that “oh heavens! it is

victory that swallows up all strife” (445). De Quincey’s guilt at witnessing the tragedy of the girl is compensated by his investment in the power of Empire. One might characterize this movement as the palimpsest of dream consciousness being overwritten by the palimpsest of Empire. As a metonym of imperial conquest, the “great king’s artillery” advancing through the valleys is itself an act of imperial inscription on the surface of the earth, and it echoes the very process by which this new scene of martial prowess is inscribed onto De Quincey’s mind.

The process of inscription continues in the subsequent movement, a transparent paean to imperial conquest experienced through the British victory at Waterloo. In his trance-like state, De Quincey traverses great distances on the map of Empire:

Immediately, in trance, I was carried over land and sea to some distant kingdom, and placed upon a triumphal car, amongst companions crowned with laurel. . . . Tidings had arrived, within an hour, of a grandeur that measured itself against centuries; too full of pathos they were, too full of joy that acknowledged no fountain but God, to utter themselves by other language than by tears, by restless anthems, by reverberations rising from every choir, of the *Gloria in excelsis*. (445)

In this passage, space and time are first distorted and then reconstituted to form the glorious totality of Empire. De Quincey geographically transports his immediate experience on the *English* mail-coach to “some distant kingdom” that proclaims British victory, implying a colony that celebrates the magnificence of Empire. The hour required to propagate the victorious news expands its significance into centuries, while uniting the disparate individuals in the crowd into one body proclaiming the glory of God. The network of Empire is thereby consolidated into a totality of experience that may be characterized as religious in its ecstasy and exhilaration. The “secret word” that constitutes the news is revealed to be “Waterloo and Recovered Christendom” (446), the signal event that solidifies Britain’s status as *the* world power. The grand victory sets into motion global repercussions:

Every city, at the presence of the secret word, threw open its gates to receive us. The rivers were silent as we crossed. All the infinite forests, as we ran along their margins, shivered in homage to the secret word. (446)

The lack of geographical specificity heightens the generality and universality of the vision: municipalities welcoming the presence of Empire while offering no resistance (“silent”), political and natural boundaries (“margins”) dissolved in the service of Empire, localities trembling with fear and excitement (“shivered”) at the proliferation of Empire. De Quincey embodies all this in the unimpeded and omnipotent motion of the mail coach, which now emerges clearly as a wish-fulfillment of British imperial aspirations. The passage underscores the loss of individual/ethnic/national identity, which is to be replaced by the talismanic “secret word” that encapsulates all significations of Empire. De Quincey here offers a quintessential instance of re-inscription upon his palimpsest of Empire, signaling a totality that recalls Negri and Hardt’s characterization as “a network of powers and counterpowers structured in a boundless and inclusive architecture” (166).

The palimpsest extends its significance as the carriage then journeys through a landscape reminiscent of the Campo Santo at Pisa, a medieval burial ground atop of which cloisters and chapels were constructed.¹² In a footnote, De Quincey recounts the legend of the Campo Santo (literally *holy field*) “composed of earth brought from Jerusalem for a bed of sanctity, as the highest prize which the noble piety of crusaders could ask or imagine” (446). The unequivocal association between the archeology of the landscape and religious warfare is laid bare, implying that De Quincey imagines his present company as modern crusaders waging war in the long history of Western dominance. De Quincey depicts the scene in somber colors: “A vast necropolis rising upon the far-off horizon—a city of sepulchers, built within the saintly cathedral for the warrior dead that rested from their feuds on earth” (446). A greater sense of the sublime absorbs the city of the dead, populated by those who have sacrificed their lives for the crusades. De Quincey hurries with “bridal rapture” toward this destination, and the “purple stain” of the necropolis far on the horizon transforms itself into a vast expanse as they

¹² Frederick Burwick suggests that De Quincey may have derived his vision of the Campo Santo from Coleridge, who had visited the Pisan site twice during his sojourn in Italy (138-39).

charge forward (446). In the midst of this quickening motion, De Quincey admires the relief sculpture on the sarcophagi that forms a palimpsest:

Every sarcophagus showed many bas-reliefs—bas-reliefs of battles—bas-reliefs of battle-fields; of battles from forgotten ages—of battles from yesterday—of battle-fields that, long since, nature had healed and reconciled to herself with the sweet oblivion of flowers—of battle-fields that were yet angry and crimson with carnage. (447)

One might regard the bas-reliefs as pictorial inscriptions narrating scenes of exploit and conquest inspired by the medieval crusades as well as the contemporary victory at Waterloo. The description does not point to battles or battlefields in specific times or places, but represents the *totality* of the imperial experience littered by war and carnage. The battlefields are effectively material palimpsests inscribed by human death and re-inscribed by the overgrowth of nature—and, by the inexorable logic of historical cycles, more likely than not to turn “crimson with carnage” again. The multilayered meta-structure of the palimpsest finds full expression here: conquests from ancient and modern times compose the many strata of the landscape; those battles are repeatedly inscribed on the bas-reliefs, which are in turn inscribed onto De Quincey’s dream consciousness. The totality of the web-like architecture is reified as the palimpsest of Empire, in which individual consciousness is inextricably bound up with the materiality of Empire.

In a magnificently telling passage, De Quincey describes the heady excitement of his carriage as it rushes through the landscape:

Where the terraces ran, there did we run; where the towers curved, there did we curve. With the flight of swallows our horses swept round every angle. Like rivers in flood, wheeling round headlands; like hurricanes that ride into the secrets of forests; faster than ever light unwove the mazes of darkness, our flying equipage carried earthly passions—kindled warrior instincts—amongst the dust that lay around us; dust oftentimes of our noble fathers that had slept in God from Créci to Trafalgar. (447)

A sense of omnipresence pervades the scene: the carriage is literally everywhere, traversing distant spaces and suffusing them with De Quincey's imperial subjectivity. Whatever human structures are present automatically come under the English mail-coach's power, mirroring the sheer range of colonial conquest over the greater part of civilization. The awesome forces of nature are appropriated to express the national will, while the flood and hurricane once more recall the annihilation of Savannah-la-Mar. De Quincey leaves no doubt as to the origin of their power: it is their collective "warrior instincts" that manage to thrive and prosper among the surrounding dust, marked by decisive English victories at the Battle of Crécy in 1346 and the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805. British imperial dominance is figured in its totality, temporally and spatially, encompassing centuries over the whole of the earth.

Yet De Quincey's comprehensive vision of Empire is not without its anxieties. Subsequently, the glory of motion reaches a temporary impasse in a nightmarish vision that evokes De Quincey's opium dreams. In the midst of the sarcophagi appears suddenly "a female infant that rode in a carriage as frail as flowers" (447), the dream-incarnation of the lady that De Quincey had nearly struck down in reality. As a vision of pure innocence within the vast geography of death, De Quincey immediately recognizes its meaning as *that which must be sacrificed* for the glories of conquest. He asks in sudden horror: "Shalt thou be the ransom for Waterloo?" (447). Compressed into a single figure, the infant suggests the collective native innocence that the long history of European imperialism has destroyed. De Quincey is unable to reconcile this singular anomaly with the splendor and magnificence of empire, giving rise to a further nightmarish scene. On the bas-relief, a "Dying Trumpeter" becomes animated, raising his trumpet and blows the trump of death, signaling the moment of apocalyptic sacrifice. The sculpture and the human observer in effect exchange subject positions: "By horror the bas-relief had been unlocked into life. By horror we, that were so full of life, we men and our horses, with their fiery fore-legs rising in mid air to their everlasting gallop, were frozen to a bas-relief" (447). The paralysis of De Quincey's company signifies an impasse in the progress of the English mail-coach and its imperial aspirations when confronted with a manifestation of the Other—here the material reality of human sacrifice that undergirds all national and imperial conquest.

VIII. Conclusion

The animation of lifeless objects is a recurring horror in De Quincey's dreams, as evidenced by a parallel scene in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* in which Chinese cane tables come to life:

All the feet of the tables, sofas, &c. soon became instinct with life: the abominable head of the crocodile, and his leering eyes, looked out at me, multiplied into a thousand repetitions: and I stood loathing and fascinated. (2: 71)

Faintly echoing the resurrection of the dead on Judgment Day, scenes of animation in De Quincey often serve as the prelude to an apocalyptic fantasy. Those fantasies are invariably connected to being overwhelmed by an Other that challenges the supremacy of Empire. In the *Confessions*, the fearful presence of Oriental civilization—cane tables, crocodiles, “mummies and sphynxes” associated with “all unutterable slimy things”—threatens to destabilize the dominance of the Western subject (2: 71). The “Dream-Fugue” further configures the malevolent sacrificial entity as a presence of “crimson glory” without a silhouette:

Whence came *that*? Was it from the reddening dawn that now streamed *through* the windows? Was it from the crimson robes of the martyrs that were painted *on* the windows? Was it from the bloody bas-reliefs of earth? (448)

The structure of palimpsest is once again vividly apparent in De Quincey's emphasis on the multilayered effects of this mysterious power. He cannot decide if it manifests *through* the window as an external force, is immanently present *on* the window's stained glass figures, or is reflected onto the glass via the bas-reliefs. Each of those possibilities contributes to a kind of inscription that operates on multiple strata but is impossible to trace to any original source. The nefarious presence is visually nebulous as well: “dimly was descried the outline of the dreadful being that should baptize her with the baptism of death” (448). In this moment of horror and recoil, De Quincey exposes the uncanny structure of Empire: imperial power has been thoroughly

decentralized and deterritorialized, reconfigured as an abstract, omnipresent force without borders or frontiers, inscribed upon manifold geographies and architectures as well as upon the subject's consciousness. The ontology of the network of Empire is, in the final analysis, *a disappearance of form*: the multitude of inscriptions has effaced its distinct structure and has made its presence ubiquitous.

Although the ontology of Empire has been momentarily revealed under De Quincey's intense fear and anxiety, its glittering appearance is typically restored with a dramatic reversal of events. At the moment of greatest terror—the imminent sacrifice of the female—an angel intercedes and prevails over the malevolent force, eradicating all pretenses of harm in the nightmarish vision. This sudden rehabilitation restores De Quincey's vision of imperial triumph to its original glory. The reversal constitutes a final re-inscription on the palimpsest of Empire, an erasure of the fear, sacrifice, and death that accompanies imperial expansion. As Ian Balfour argues, the erasure or elision of death is necessary in order to fulfill the destiny of the sublime nation: “the nation resists imagining its own voluntary death. . . . [I]t is, rather, projected forward infinitely. The ending of the ‘English Mail-Coach’ stresses not death but transfiguration” (184). In the text, this transfigurative movement builds up to a grand finale that justifies the divine glory of conquest:

War, once again was ascending—was ascending from Waterloo—in the visions of Peace:—rendering thanks for thee, young girl! whom having overshadowed with his ineffable passion of Death—suddenly did God relent; suffered thy angel to turn aside his arm; and even in thee, sister unknown! shown to me for a moment only to be hidden for ever, found an occasion to glorify his goodness. (448)

Geoffrey Hartman notes the recurring pattern in De Quincey's narratives of “a descent deeper and deeper into hopeless darkness, followed at the last moment by a sudden ascent of light” (76).¹³ In the finale, the sudden salvation of the young girl is inextricably bound with the British victory at Waterloo; as

¹³ In Hartman's phenomenological reading, only in the moment before death can God's presence be revealed as the final repetition of the loss of paradise: “At the moment of death, we shall experience a fathomless solitude, but through it we shall also experience, by anticipation, our reconciliation with God and with all we lost when we were exiled from the Paradise of childhood” (79).

Robert Hopkins observes, the girl represents the apotheosis of the British nation: “she is as Britannia both victim and victor, both slain and resurrected” (150). The consolidation of British imperial power not only releases its subjects from the grip of death but is firmly associated with the transcendental power of religiosity, making whole the soul which had been suffering in panic and despair. Alina Clej remarks that the near-death experience has reconstituted De Quincey as subject: “the writer’s voice arises now only from the brink of death and draws its energy from death itself” (258). De Quincey psychically resurrects himself and finds personal redemption for his “pariah heart” in this vision of “endless resurrections of [God’s] love” (448, 449). Such is the uppermost layer of the palimpsest of Empire: inscribed by national triumph and individual salvation, it overwrites the sacrificial victims of Empire, consigns the anxiety of conquest to erasure, and shares in the boundless ambition of a national and religious “scroll” that will overspread the corners of the earth. The endpoint of the palimpsest of the mind is none other than Empire. De Quincey, who in his dream narratives unveiled layer upon layer of the palimpsest marked by psychological fear and terror, re-inscribes his vision of salvific Empire with such force and conviction that the palimpsest of consciousness ultimately becomes a replication of the material and ideological structure of Empire. As a multivalent trope linking the interior realm of dream consciousness to the exterior world of imperial expansion, De Quincey’s palimpsest in its diverse iterations may also be symptomatic of imperial writing in the nineteenth century and beyond.

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