Tea and the Limits of Orientalism in De Quincey’s Confessions of an English Opium-Eater

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[...]

Happiness [...] in my judgment, enters the room with the tea-tray: for tea, though ridiculed by those who are naturally of coarse nerves, or become so from wine-drinking, and are not susceptible of influence from so refined a stimulant, will always be the favourite beverage of the intellectual: and, for my part, I would have joined Dr. Johnson in a bellum internecinum against Jonas Hanway, or any other impious person, who should presume to disparage it.¹

Thomas De Quincey would cut a very different figure in literary history if he had authored Confessions of an English Tea-Drinker. The text he did write, Confessions of an English Opium-Eater (1821), reveals the opium-eater to be equally dedicated to drinking tea, but, unlike opium use, tea-drinking simply is not the stuff of ‘confession’. Samuel Johnson made just this point in the piece to which De Quincey refers, a scoffing review of Jonas Hanway’s 1756 diatribe against the British tea habit.² In his Essay on Tea, Hanway had argued at length that Britons of all social ranks had developed a ‘wild infatuation’ with the fashionable beverage, to the detriment of the nation.³ Employing xenophobic and medical rhetoric to posit tea as a foreign invader and its consumption a form of malady, Hanway claimed that the tea trade was as bad for the British economy as tea-drinking was pernicious to Britons’ health. Tea, he wrote, is a ‘Chinese drug’, an ‘intoxicating liquor’, and a ‘slow poison’; it is no less than ‘a

¹ Thomas De Quincey, Confessions of an English Opium-Eater and Related Writings, ed. Joel Faflak (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Editions, 2009), p. 111. All references are to this edition.
seven-headed monster, which devours [...] the best fruits of this land'.

While the tea trade holds Britain in thrall to the Chinese – ‘the most effeminate people on the face of the whole earth’ – the consumption of tea ‘is an epidemic disease’ and ‘universal infection’. ‘Habit reconciles us to tea,’ Hanway warns, ‘as it does Turks to opium,’ and makes the British ‘act more wantonly and absurdly than the Chinese themselves’. Johnson countered the fervor of Hanway’s claims by declaring himself ‘a hardened and shameless tea-drinker, who has, for twenty years, diluted his meals with only the infusion of this fascinating plant, whose kettle has scarcely time to cool, who with tea amuses the evening, with tea solaces the midnights, and, with tea, welcomes the morning’. His suggestion that any amount of tea consumption could be thought ‘shameful’ is, of course, tongue-in-cheek; Johnson refutes Hanway’s warning about the dire effects of Britain’s ‘infatuation’ with the ‘Chinese drug’ known as tea by offering himself as living evidence of tea’s congruity with normal routines and general English well-being.

Johnson’s response to Hanway demonstrated how fluidly certain Chinese imports were accommodated as icons of English identity in the eighteenth century, even as Hanway’s essay gave voice to emergent anxieties about English accommodation of and dependence on Chinese goods. When De Quincey alludes to this debate in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, he registers the ambivalence that characterized British attitudes toward Chinese commodities in general since they became ubiquitous in the previous century. By siding so definitively with Johnson in

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5 Hanway, *Essay on Tea*, pp. 213, 244.
defense of English tea-drinking, however, De Quincey performs a sleight of hand that directs our attention to the singular problem of opium; focusing on opium's narcotic effects allows him to frame Britain's ambivalence about foreign goods as a matter solely of opium addiction. The substance of opium is held accountable for the mixture of desire and horror with which De Quincey's narrator responds to it; the well-known descriptions of the Opium-eater's 'oriental dreams' in the text's final pages suggest that the drug itself comes to impose 'Asiatic scenes' on the narrator's imagination by exercising a 'fascinating power' over him.\(^\text{10}\) Thus, he concludes, 'Not the opium-eater, but the opium, is the true hero of the tale; and the legitimate centre on which the interest revolves. The object was to display the marvellous agency of opium, whether for pleasure or for pain: if that is done, the action of the piece is closed.'\(^\text{11}\)

In short, by making opium 'the true hero of the tale', De Quincey establishes a prototypical narrative of drug abuse that invites us to see the complicated effects of Britain's metabolization of global trade as a form of psychological confusion caused literally by the ingestion of a foreign substance.\(^\text{12}\) Confessions can only tell this story of opium's 'marvellous

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\(^{10}\) De Quincey, *Confessions*, pp. 124–9.

\(^{11}\) De Quincey, *Confessions*, p. 129.

\(^{12}\) Robert Morrison argues that 'De Quincey created what we now recognize as the contemporary experience of opiate use and abuse, both in his descriptions of opium as a profoundly paradoxical substance that simultaneously deepens and eviscerates subjectivity, and in his many narratives which represent the drug as an invasive force that terrorizes the body'. Robert Morrison, 'De Quincey’s Addiction', *Romanticism*, 17 (2011), 270–7 (p. 270). Barry Milligan similarly points out that the vocabulary we continue to use today to discuss drug use and addiction derives from mid-nineteenth-century anti-opium movements. *Pleasures and Pains: Opium and the Orient in Nineteenth-Century British Culture* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1995), p. 22.
agency’, however, against a backdrop of commonplace, unaltered English life, which De Quincey relies on the recurrent trope of tea to depict. Tea is ever-present in the text; what the Opium-eater calls at one point the ‘eternal tea-pot’ – an echo of Johnson’s eternally warm kettle – is perhaps its most potent signifier of a vision of English life uncompromised by opium’s ‘fascinating power’.13 “The favourite beverage of the intellectual defines the world to which the English opium-eater aspires to belong, and from which he finds himself increasingly alienated. Readers are encouraged to read tea as a counterpoint to opium, an icon of domestic normality that helps the text dramatize the disruptive and disorienting effects of opium as it insinuates itself into daily habits, alienating English culture from English identity. But tea is also latently present in its supposed opposite, opium: De Quincey’s ‘Chinese drug’ and its terrifying effects on the English psyche are modeled on Hanway’s hyperbolic account of tea. The mention of Hanway’s essay (ostensibly to dismiss it, but in effect bringing it into the frame) introduces a minute tear in the seam of the text’s vision of ideal English life, a fissure that destabilizes the fantasy of domesticity that frames the troubled subjectivity of the opium addict. While the text indicts opium for the narrator’s flights from norms of reason, moderation, and self-possession that define English selfhood, the historical fluctuation of the trope of tea in English writing disturbs these standards of normativity from within.

Confessions’ semiotic entanglement of the two commodities mirrors their convolution in the vexed political economy between Britain and China in the era of the ‘Opium Wars’. As Joel Black points out, ‘[i]t was Britain’s insatiable tea habit, after all, that drove it to export Indian opium into China in the first place as a way of balancing its trade deficit with that nation’.14 Black notes that ‘De Quincey was clearly aware of Britain’s

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13 De Quincey, Confessions, p. 111.
dependence on China for tea’, without which ‘our daily life would, generally speaking, be as effectively ruined as bees without a Flora’. Carol Margaret Davison has also pointed out the irony that while the popular association of opium with China ‘ran contrary to historic fact’ given that the vast majority of opium imported into Britain until the late nineteenth century came from Turkey, ‘if a costly “addiction” actually existed that made Britain dependent on China, that “addiction” was the consumption of tea’. By directing our attention to the problem of opium, De Quincey’s narrative reproduces the scapegoating of opium for a host of cultural anxieties that can be traced to the history of British tea consumption. At the same time, however, the text displays a constant awareness of the stakes and pitfalls of precisely this kind of cultural reproduction – the retelling of certain stories, the reincarnation of particular ideals – and by allowing us to perceive his narrative as a reiteration of cultural myths, he – perhaps unwittingly – enables a critical perspective on the mythologies supporting modern English self-definition, and the ironies and internal contradictions that render them strange to their own task.

By emphasizing the text’s awareness of the ‘Chineseness’ of its preferred icon of Englishness, this essay argues that the infamous orientalism of De Quincey’s *Confessions*, far from consolidating a model of English identity secured by an aversion to foreign (and particularly Chinese) influence, instead reveals De Quincey’s acute awareness of the ways in which British subjects of the early nineteenth century were fundamentally, to borrow Julia Kristeva’s phrase, ‘strangers to themselves’, even in their most ‘English’ predilections. While the hyperbolic orientalism of De Quincey’s depiction of opium seems, to some extent, to preserve tea-drinking as part of an alternate world, in which English identity is secured against exotic influence and monstrous transformations, *Confessions’ tale* (pp. 218–19). For a discussion of how a ‘tea and opium cycle’ characterized Britain’s belated entry into a global silver economy, see Dennis Owen Flynn and Arturo Giraldez, ‘Cycles of Silver: Global Economic Unity through the Mid-Eighteenth Century’, *Journal of World History*, 13 (2002), 391–427 (p. 411).


16 Carol Margaret Davison, “‘Houses of Voluntary Bondage’: Theorizing the Nineteenth-Century Gothic Pharmography’, *Gothic Studies*, 12 (2010), 68–85 (p. 71).

of addiction inevitably poses questions about the dependencies both material and conceptual that structure even the most apparently self-sufficient forms of English life and identity. At stake is not only the validity of Britain’s tea habit but the whole premise of a national culture made of consumer habits that acquire the status of tradition: the material reproduction of Englishness through routines of imitation and repetition. The pervading ‘Chineseness’ of one of England’s most sacrosanct rituals provides De Quincey a way of considering the abiding strangeness of English self-representation in general.

There is, of course, a vast body of scholarship on De Quincey that examines the pervasive problem of self-coherence in his writing, including a number of psychoanalytic readings that show how various pressures of empire manifest as apparent pathologies in his narratives.  

Confessions’ trope of opium addiction has proven extremely generative ground for accounts of how orientalism simultaneously compels and destabilizes British concepts of self. Rajani Sudan, for example, pointing to De Quincey’s ‘exceedingly convoluted representation of the self’, reads the Opium-eater’s addiction as ‘a domesticating habit: it denatures tigerish ferocity and recontextualizes the whole scope of “an obscure and imaginary oriental ferocity” within the security of the English household’. As a result, ‘opium and its attendant potential for invoking oriental fantasy and horror have a curiously familial place in De Quincey’s household’; the imagined oriental ‘other’, rather than being abjected from English domesticity and selfhood, is ‘introjected’ into them, instilling a fundamental strangeness at the heart of that which is most familiar – a psychological phenomenon that Freud later called the unconscious.

18 The most influential of these studies is John Barrell, The Infection of Thomas De Quincey: A Psychopathology of Imperialism (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991). See also Nigel Leask, British Romantic Writers and the East: Anxieties of Empire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Milligan, Pleasures and Pains; Alan Bewell, Romanticism and Colonial Disease (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); and Rajani Sudan, Fair Exotics: Xenophobic Subjects in English Literature, 1720–1850 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002). See also Robert Morrison, “Earthquake and Eclipse”: Radical Energies and De Quincey’s 1821 Confessions’, in Thomas De Quincey, pp. 63–80. Morrison focuses on inconsistencies in De Quincey’s ‘attitude toward class, race, imperialism, and political violence’ in order to show how ‘De Quincey’s delighted confidence in his own Englishness is frequently undermined by sympathies that disrupt the political and social ideologies he is ostensibly bent on affirming’ (pp. 63–4).

19 Sudan, Fair Exotics, pp. 69, 71.

20 Sudan, Fair Exotics, pp. 71–3. For a different reading of Confessions’ relationship
demonstrates how the vocabulary cultivated in psychoanalytic readings of the Opium-eater opens up formal analyses not only of subjectivity but also of the material world that subjects inhabit. Also focusing on ‘the work of opium’ in the text, Krishnan shows how it ‘forces a relationship between things alien or repugnant to one another’.21 In its character as a narcotic, Krishnan argues, opium ‘shows up the alien as the effect internal to the modalities of the commodity regime’, revealing how heterogeneity ‘is not … in “excess” of the comprehensible or thematizable’ within Britain’s empire but rather ‘gnaws at the system from within’.22 The contradictory functions of opium – as a narcotic, it ‘pushes the self toward the terrors and possibilities opened up by difference’, while as a commodity, it ‘functions as part of a material process to make homogeneous through mechanisms of discipline and “exchange” the different temporalities and histories of the non-European world’ – have the same paradoxical effect on the empire that they have, in Sudan’s reading, on the imperial subject, ‘pointing to the activation of difference within a world that has ostensibly been made safe in being made the same’.23

But the dynamic that both Sudan and Krishnan locate in opium – the resonance of strangeness in an object designed, whether by habit or economic imperative, to serve English normality – could also be identified to Freudian theory, see Humberto Garcia, ‘In the Name of the “Incestuous Mother”: Islam and Excremental Protestantism in De Quincey’s Infidel Book’, Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies, 7 (2007), 57–87.


in tea. In a way, tea supports the argument even better than opium does: tea’s supposed stability as a symbol of English domesticity heightens the uncanniness of its own Chinese origins. In tea, the exotic does not arrive, like the traveling Malay in one of Confessions’ most oft-cited episodes, at the Englishman’s door; it already occupies – indeed, defines – the home. How does the account of Chinese influence on, and infiltration of, English culture and identity change when the alibi of addiction is taken away, when the boundaries that define impropriety cannot be located? In the figure of tea, does Confessions’ orientalism confront its own limit in the form of a Chineseness that cannot be imaginatively estranged from English selfhood?

G. G. Sigmond opens his 1839 history of tea, Tea; Its Effects, Medicinal and Moral,

Man is so surrounded by objects calculated to arrest his attention, and to excite either his admiration or his curiosity, that he often overlooks the humble friend that ministers to his habitual comfort; and the familiarity he holds with it almost renders him incapable of appreciating its value.24

Such is the case, he argues, with the British and their tea. Julie E. Fromer, reading Sigmond, suggests that tea’s history as an exotic import, introduced into Britain in the late seventeenth century and popularized in the eighteenth, is radically sublimated in Victorian culture’s embrace of it as a symbol of everyday, quintessentially English life.25 Only a few decades before Sigmond remarks on the unremarkability of tea in British culture, it was being marketed to British consumers as a ‘Chinese’ luxury. Markman Ellis, Richard Coulton, and Matthew Mauger have shown that mid-eighteenth-century trade cards advertised tea ‘as an exotic commodity brought to London by the remarkable transoceanic reach of British mercantile activity’, and that the majority of surviving trade cards from the late eighteenth century ‘make use of a series of stock images representing oriental gardens, tea bushes, pagodas, harbours, Chinese labourers and merchants’ (Fig. 3).26 ‘This apparent exoticization of tea’, they point out, ‘paradoxically demonstrates its increasing naturalization in Britain’ as ‘consumers

26 Ellis et al., Empire of Tea, pp. 132–4.
were increasingly being asked to re-interpret their own newly acquired cultural practices [...] as the luxurious (yet commonplace) habits of the inhabitants of a trading superpower. Consumers are apparently asked to reinterpret their tea habit yet again in the early decades of the nineteenth century, as representations of tea as an exotic yet accessible luxury give way to Sigmond’s ‘humble friend that ministers to [one’s] habitual comfort’; according to Fromer, ‘Victorian novels focus exclusively on the domestic resonances of tea-drinking.’

This naturalization of tea’s place in British culture took place, ironically, amid swelling strains of sinophobia in British popular culture. In the early nineteenth century, cartoonists elaborated popular chinoiserie designs into monstrous caricatures designed to humiliate Chinese political pretensions and persuade viewers, through a combination of mockery and fear-mongering, of the absolute incompatibility of British and Chinese cultures. Satires like George Cruikshank’s ‘The Court at Brighton à la Chinese!’ (1816), which depicts the Prince Regent as a Chinese despot, supported the popular idea that the more Chinese things Britons consume, the more Britons are consumed by a virulent Chineseness (Fig. 2; see p. 72). This

27 Ellis et al., Empire of Tea, pp. 135–7.
28 Fromer, A Necessary Luxury, p. 293.
29 On the orientalization and racialization of the Chinese in British culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Michael Keevak, Becoming Yellow: A Short
vicious orientalization of the ‘Chinese taste’ largely bypassed tea and porcelain, flourishing instead in representations of opium addiction. But the extraordinary effort that British culture invested in generating specters of Chinese menace through the trope of opium addiction preserved a latent form of exoticism even in seemingly domesticated objects like teagthings. Together with the porcelain vessels in which it was typically served, Chinese tea was, by the nineteenth century, perhaps the best example of what Elizabeth Hope Chang calls the ‘familiar exotic’: an object that is simultaneously ‘a comforting icon of British domesticity and a dangerous token of visual difference’. While tea may never have appeared as dangerous a substance as opium in Victorian culture, as a cultural object it possessed the uniquely unsettling capacity to admit occasional glimpses of its foreign origins and once-exotic aura from its position as a mundane fixture of ordinary British life. As orientalist caricatures like The Brother to the Moon’s Visit to the Court of Queen Vic (1843) illustrate, the familiar form of the teapot could be recruited to participate in siniphobic visual satire (Fig. 4).

De Quincey participated explicitly in Britain’s anti-Chinese discourse in his writings on the ‘Opium Wars’. In ‘The Opium and the China Question’ (1840) he urged ‘armed interference’ to preserve British trading interests in China, specifically the export of opium to support the British import of tea, referring to the Chinese as ‘vagabonds’ and ‘idolaters’, and citing a ‘horrible Chinese degeneration of moral distinctions’ in Canton. He defines the English by ‘our indomitable energy, and our courageous self-dependence’ in imperialist endeavors; Englishmen are characterized by a capacity for ‘relying upon themselves against all enemies [...] with a reverence for laws – with constitutional energy, and, above all, with a pure religion’. ‘Now, what we are in the very supreme degree’, De Quincey declares, ‘that is China in the lowest’. ‘Oriental powers like China’, he


30 See Milligan, Pleasures and Pains; Black, ‘National Bad Habits’; Davison, ‘Houses of Voluntary Bondage’; Chang, Britain’s Chinese Eye, pp. 111–40; and Krishnan, ‘Opium and Empire’.

31 Chang, Britain’s Chinese Eye, p. 73.


33 De Quincey, ‘The Opium and the China Question’, p. 545.
insists, are ‘incapable of a true civilization, semi-refined in manners and mechanic arts, but incurably savage in the moral sense’. Indeed, one of the reasons *Confessions* has received such immense critical attention is because of the ways, as a self-indictment of a certain kind of English character under ‘oriental’ influence, the memoir both introduces and complicates the orientalist vocabulary De Quincey calls upon in these later defenses of English character and British national honor. The confidence with which the author of the political essays proclaims, following his list of cultural and political virtues, ‘Such are we English people – such is the English condition,’ while disparaging Chinese cultural and moral integrity, cannot take root in *Confessions*. This is not only, as many readers have already shown, because the English narrator’s own addiction to opium compromises his claim to English virtue and moral purity. It is also because *Confessions*’ depiction of the cultural sites where ‘the English condition’ is materially reproduced reveals them to be saturated with the ‘familiar exotic’: forms, like tea, that flicker with a potentially alien agency.

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34 De Quincey, ‘The Opium and the China Question’, p. 554.
35 For a reading of the ‘Opium War’ essays that complicates the conventional view of them as ‘garden-variety, jingoistic war-mongering’, see Charles Rzepka, ‘The Literature of Power and the Imperial Will: De Quincey’s Opium War Essays’, *South Central Review*, 8 (1991), 37–45 (p. 42).
and fail to sustain a subject marked by genuine and undiluted ‘English character’.

Opium may be the ‘hero of the tale’ but tea is essential to the setting in which *Confessions* ‘action’ takes place. De Quincey repeatedly uses the ritual of tea to demarcate the world of domestic comforts that opium addiction ruptures, a world he identifies as distinctly English in contrast to the orientalized dreamscapes into which opium plunges him. ‘Surely everybody is aware of the divine pleasures which attend a winter fire-side’, he writes, establishing the atmosphere of a typical English cottage:

... candles at four o’clock, warm hearth-rugs, tea, a fair tea-maker, shutters closed, curtains flowing in ample draperies on the floor, whilst the wind and rain are raging audibly without,

And at the doors and windows seem to call
As heav’n and earth they would together mell;
Yet the least entrance find they none at all;
Whence sweeter grows our rest secure in massy hall.

– *Castle of Indolence*

All these are items in the description of a winter evening, which must surely be familiar to every body born in a high latitude.36

The most common pleasures of English domestic life may be efficiently rendered by the mention of tea, a metonym for hearth and home so familiar to nineteenth-century British readers that it anchors a vision of intimate English well-being insulated from whatever hostile forces rage beyond the threshold.37

While this vision is proffered as a self-explanatory, universally familiar image to British readers – this is precisely Sigmond’s realm of ‘habitual comfort’ – it wavers immediately under scrutiny. As David Simpson has pointed out, De Quincey refers here not simply to recognizable tropes

36 De Quincey, *Confessions*, p. 110. The quoted verse is from James Thomson, *The Castle of Indolence* (1748), 11. 43.6–9.

of domesticity but to particular literary deployments of them. Not only does the passage explicitly invoke James Thomson’s verse, but the scene, Simpson writes, ‘recalls Cowper and Coleridge with uncanny exactness […]’ This fireside is a very literary, almost tongue-in-cheek fireside; it is Leigh Hunt’s sociable scene, and in its specification of a “winter evening” it cites […] of course, the title of the fourth book of Cowper’s The Task’.38

As Marie Odile-Bernez has shown, novels too relied on this mythologized interior scene to naturalize commodities like tea, once considered ‘luxuries,’ as middle-class domestic ‘comforts’: ‘Novelists concentrated on some essential elements: an independent house, often a farm or cottage, pleasantly situated in the country, and a happy family life, with the wife at the center of an array of domestic material objects’.39 The repetition of details like tea in this shared vision not only propagates a particular image of domestic comfort as the representation of ‘English life’, but also makes recognition of this image the basis of English literary tradition. As many critics have observed, De Quincey was preoccupied throughout his career with his own relationship to the English literary canon, and the writers generating it; he documented his own determined pursuit of a friendship with Wordsworth in his essays on the poet, published in Tait’s Magazine in 1839,40 and he was keenly aware of the way his Opium-eater persona drew on Coleridge’s reputation.41 The ‘very literary, almost tongue-in-cheek’ quality Simpson points to in this passage is characteristic of De Quincey’s consistently overwrought way of representing his own relationship to the

41 Leask reads Confessions as a rewriting of the Biographia Literaria in which De Quincey self-consciously and anxiously presents himself as a ‘double’ of Coleridge; David Stewart argues that De Quincey models himself on Coleridge ‘most particularly in using a distinctively Coleridgian paradox to integrate himself into the marketplace’. Romantic Writers and the East, pp. 170–228; David Stewart, ‘Commerce, Genius, and De Quincey’s Literary Identity’, SEL: Studies in English Literature, 50 (2010), 775–89 (p. 781). Robert Morrison has argued that ‘as De Quincey borrowed from Coleridge, others borrowed from him: Maginn, Knight, Wainwright, Wilson, Poe, Musset, Baudelaire, and a host of others all saw in the Opium-Eater construct the potential for notoriety and profit’. Morrison, ‘De Quincey and the Opium-Eater’s Other Selves’, Romanticism, 5 (1999), 87–103 (p. 101).
‘geniuses’ of Romanticism; Margaret Russett has called this his ‘grandiose humility’, noting that at the same time that it ‘marks him […] as a writer of putatively diminished powers, it also suggests that to publish another’s genius is to replicate oneself, even while instantiating the devious turns of what Pierre Bourdieu calls “reproduction”.

These ‘devious turns’ in the processes of material cultural production are in evidence in this self-consciously literary fireside scene. In order to examine the formal effects of the tea De Quincey places at the center of the image, it is worth examining the way the passage undermines its own claim to present a stable image of Englishness through its convoluted evocation of other English authors, particularly Wordsworth. The period of De Quincey’s life that corresponds to this episode in Confessions finds De Quincey living at Dove Cottage, Wordsworth’s house in Grasmere, which De Quincey occupied – having finally forged a personal relationship with the poet (which went from close to strained) – from 1809 to 1820. Thus when the Opium-eater declares, ‘Let there be a cottage’, adding in the course of his description of this cottage that in his details, ‘I must abide by the actual scene’, we seem to have every reason to believe that this is an ‘actual’ description of Dove Cottage, and that we are being given a glimpse of De Quincey occupying the position of Wordsworth. In an editorial note in the Oxford World Classics edition of Confessions, Grevel Lindop asserts unequivocally that the description of the house that contains the idyllic fireside scene ‘is of Dove Cottage, Grasmere’. As Daniel O’Quinn has argued, however, De Quincey never names the cottage in Confessions and, indeed, goes to formal lengths to present it as an explicitly fictional creation: ‘Let there be a cottage, standing in a valley, 18 miles from any town’, he opens. In O’Quinn’s words, ‘Throughout the “analysis of happiness” the Opium-eater has produced a representation which makes sense but which eludes direct referentiality’; Lindop’s note ‘solves a critical problem at this point in the text: namely he ensures the
referentiality of the “picture”’. The reader’s will to interpret this ‘cottage, standing in a valley, 18 miles from any town’ as Dove Cottage, in other words, tries to close a gap that the text leaves provocatively open between the scene it paints and the ‘actual’ site to which it refers.

Over the entire, extended passage in which the Opium-eater directs us to imagine him within this cottage, at the fireside with his tea, the question of whether this is a vision of Wordsworth’s house hovers. If his opium addiction aligns the narrator with Coleridge, his ‘oriental dreams’ calling to the reader’s mind an image of ‘Kubla Khan’, then the gesture of installing himself in Wordsworth’s cottage with a pot of tea seems to counter the orientalism of opium, grounding the narrator in a scene that could not be more typically English. This binary has been set up by Coleridge himself, who opens ‘Kubla Khan: Or, A Vision in a Dream. A Fragment’ with a preface explaining that the dream occurred in another version of the typical English cottage, ‘a lonely farm-house between Porlock and Linton, on the Exmoor confines of Somerset and Devonshire’. But where Coleridge’s poem attributes the poet’s oriental visions to a combination of opium and reading Chinese scenes in the travel narrative Purchas His Pilgrimage (1613), Confessions traces the disruptive alienation associated with opium to the narrator’s own uneasy impersonation of Wordsworth. Charles Rzepka has suggested that ‘De Quincey, as tenant of what was gradually becoming something of an unofficial shrine to Wordsworth, often found himself placed in the position of a false “English idol” by pilgrims to the Lakes more recent than himself.’ The Malay who arrives at the cottage and exposes the Opium-eater’s limitations as both host and linguist dramatizes, for Rzepka, De Quincey’s awareness that ‘he had disappointed hopeful pilgrims to Dove Cottage’, his awareness of ‘the flimsiness of [his own] pretensions to authorship’ compared to Wordsworth, but also his own perception of Wordsworth, now an estranged friend, as a ‘fallen god of poetry’. Regardless of the extent to which we agree that these biographical details ‘explain’ the imagery of Confessions, it is clear that the text teases us into imagining Wordsworth’s spectral presence under the pretense of anchoring us in a scene of unwavering Englishness.

and then refuses to let this supposed cultural anchor hold anything fast: the narrator is hardly Wordsworth, Wordsworth himself is hardly Wordsworth, the scene is not quite Dove Cottage. De Quincey’s own admiration and imitation of Wordsworth give way to an unsettling ‘idolatry’ that finds expression in the ‘monstrous scenery’ of the Opium-eater’s ‘oriental dreams’, in which ‘I was the idol; I was the priest; I was worshipped; I was sacrificed’.48

Rzepka’s reading helps us see how Confessions frames the exotic less as a flight away from the familiar than as a persistent, disruptive sense that the familiar is fundamentally strange. The text may try to displace exoticism on to the traveling Malay who appears at the door, or the physiological influence of opium, but it cannot help tracing its disorienting effects back to the narrator’s efforts to inscribe himself within a fantasy of Englishness. We may furnish this cottage, standing in a valley, 18 miles from any town, with ‘items […] which must surely be familiar to every body born in a high latitude’, but the fact remains that we have no idea where we actually are, or on what ground the text’s subject stands. In the same way that he thus opens a version of Coleridge’s orientalized ‘romantic chasm’49 in his own relationship to his English idols, De Quincey uses tea’s potent status in English culture to emphasize that the most mundane signifiers of familiar life operate mysteriously. At the height of his opium addiction, the narrator describes his attempt to simulate a normal domestic routine comprising tea and poetry with his wife, ‘M.’: ‘A young lady sometimes comes and drinks tea with us: at her request and M.’s I now and then read W[ordsworth]’s poems to them.’50 The poignancy of this particular confession – that the narrator ritualistically goes through the motions of this ideal form of English life while being psychologically distanced from it by his opium use – draws on one of the text’s signature moves, which is to depict English culture as having a sheltered ‘inside’ by dramatizing the narrator’s torment at not being able fully to inhabit it. Counter to Thomson’s image of sweet ‘rest secure at massy hall’, De Quincey’s interiors have already been punctured by something that does not belong: the Opium-eater himself, the stranger who corrupts the sanctity of English space by imperfectly embodying a mastery of its terms. Here, yet again, he is merely impersonating Wordsworth. Summoning his characteristic combination of self-aggrandizement and self-deprecation, the narrator notes

48 De Quincey, Confessions, p. 125.
49 Coleridge, ‘Kubla Khan’, line 12.
50 De Quincey, Confessions, p. 115.
that ‘reading [aloud] is an accomplishment of mine; and, in the slang use of the word *accomplishment* as a superficial and ornamental attainment, almost the only one I possess: and formerly, if I had any vanity at all connected with any endowment or attainment of mine, it was with this; for I had observed that no accomplishment is so rare’. He adds, ‘W[ordsworth], by the bye, is the only poet I ever met who could read his own verses: often indeed he reads them admirably.’ He thus frames his greatest ‘accomplishment’ as the art of imposture: the one measure by which he might slightly surpass Wordsworth is in the art of *imitating Wordsworth*.51

The narrator’s rehearsal of the tea-and-Wordsworth routine echoes the text’s rehearsal of the typical tea-and-hearth scene, revealing that the signs and rituals that define English culture are established precisely through such patterns of repetition, but also registering an anxiety that this mode of reproduction hollows out the culture it is supposed to fortify. De Quincey relies on the trope of tea to apprehend a version of ‘true’ English culture, even as his narrator suffers the awareness that a reliance on tropes is what removes him from a state of authenticity. In the Opium-eater’s hands, like the figure of Wordsworth to which it is attached, tea’s iconic relationship to Englishness begins to take on a cast of obsessive idolatry. The text therefore attempts to stabilize its representation of Englishness by erasing all traces of tea’s status as a *figure*: while opium is hyperbolically inflated as a literary creature, taking center stage as the ‘hero’ of *Confessions*’ gothic tale, tea eschews the reader’s scrutiny even as it continually crops up. It is all but buried in the concatenation of ‘candles at four o’clock, warm hearth rugs, tea, a fair tea-maker, shutters closed, curtains flowing in ample draperies on the floor’, hiding in plain sight at the very center of the ‘divine pleasures’ afforded by the English domestic scene.

Through such barely visible repetitions, De Quincey’s text insists that tea is hardly worth mentioning, though to live without it is to test the bounds of English civilization itself. When the narrator finds himself, as a young man, wandering through Wales with only enough money for one meal per day, ‘the single meal, which I could venture to order, was coffee or tea’.52 These imported beverages are the Englishman’s last tether to social autonomy; when he can no longer afford them, he is reduced to a kind of feral grazing, ‘subsist[ing] either on blackberries, hips, haws, etc.

52 De Quincey, *Confessions*, p. 64.
or on the casual hospitalities’ of compassionate strangers. Tea appears again to mark a distinction between ‘respectable’ domestic life and the seedy existence of the Opium-eater’s early years in London. Narrating his difficult years squatting in a derelict house with an orphan girl who is convinced the site is haunted, he notes that upon returning to the house years later he found it:

now occupied by a respectable family; and, by the lights in the front drawing-room, I observed a domestic party, assembled perhaps at tea, and apparently cheerful and gay. Marvellous contrast, in my eyes, to the darkness – cold – silence – and – desolation of that same house eighteen years ago, when its nightly occupants were one famishing scholar, and a neglected child.

Each of these mentions of tea is designed to come across as merely incidental. Here, tea need not even be directly observed; its presence is implied by the ‘cheerful’ family scene. The conditional adverb ‘perhaps’ attaches tea to English domestic happiness with the lightest touch, insulating the tea-table from the full charge of a metonym (which would allow tea to substitute for happiness) while simultaneously naturalizing the association. Unlike opium, in which the narrator identifies a ‘marvellous agency […] whether for pleasure or for pain’, tea performs its cultural work by receding into the background: its presence attests to nothing more than a normal order of things in English spaces, where no object exercises the ‘fascinating power’ that opium wields over its addicts. This was precisely Dr Johnson’s argument about tea: that ‘as it neither exhilarates the heart, nor stimulates the palate, it is commonly an entertainment merely nominal, a pretence for assembling to prattle, for interrupting business, or diversifying idleness […] indeed, there are few but discover, by their indifference about it, that they are brought together not by the tea, but the tea table’. The English can take or leave tea, Johnson suggests; it just so happens that many of them choose to take it. In contrast to opium, tea signifies a world in which the English subject commands his own space and the things within it, which are there quietly, tacitly, to serve his own comfort.

Even as he draws this distinction, however, De Quincey unsettles it by

53 De Quincey, Confessions, p. 64.
54 De Quincey, Confessions, pp. 69–70.
introducing a kind of rhetorical excess that taints the reassuringly prosaic quality of the domestic scene. The ‘marvellous contrast’ the scene illustrates presages the ‘marvellous agency’ the text later attributes to opium. By revealing that such a mundane image generates, ‘in [his] eyes’, effects on the order of ‘marvellous’, the narrator gives us to understand that the domestic scene assembled (perhaps) around everyday tea-drinking exercises the same grip on his imagination that opium does. Even as it quells the material significance of tea to the scene – perhaps there is tea, perhaps there is not – the passage registers the power of tea as a cultural symbol. Does not the phrase ‘perhaps at tea’ display a kind of ‘marvellous agency’ in its ability to transform household space so dramatically, demarcate the quality of life so starkly, and render so efficiently the shape and substance of English happiness?

The ‘outsider’ status that the Opium-eater assigns himself not only removes him from the comfort and stability afforded by the scene in the window, but allows him, despite himself, a perspective on the scene from which it appears first and foremost as a representation of something. The comforts such scenes comprise are, from his perspective, less actual comforts than they are signs of comfort; while tea presents itself within the scene as ‘the humble friend that ministers to [the Englishman’s] habitual comfort’, to the Opium-eater who watches from beyond the window, tea remains a stranger. Even when the Opium-eater manages to install himself in one of these fabled interiors, and partake of the pleasures of tea, poetry, and female company, he presents himself as going through the semiotic motions of normality in a way that is anathema to ‘being normal’.

The narrator’s strange relation to the representation of Englishness, which exposes a strangeness in the representation of Englishness, culminates in the odd way in which the Opium-eater finally inserts himself into the interior scene of the cottage that both is and is not Dove Cottage. Daniel O’Quinn has analyzed the ‘complex distantiation’ that De Quincey achieves in the final paragraphs of this section, when, in order to place himself in the scene, he shifts from describing the interior of a cottage to giving directions to an imaginary painter of the scene: ‘But here, to save myself the trouble of too much verbal description, I will introduce a painter; and give him directions for the rest of the picture.’ From this point, O’Quinn writes, “The Opium-eater separates an addressee from the reader and places the reader in the position of a spectator or accessory. This spectatorship is, of course, metaphorical – this is still a reading

56 De Quincey, Confessions, p. 111.
practice – but the reader is separated from a scene of representation and becomes a witness to a verbal action.\(^{57}\) This device, in other words, puts the reader in the very position into which the Opium-eater finds himself perpetually slipping: at just enough of a cultural distance from the scene that its contours lend themselves to analysis but not occupation. While, from this perspective, certain formal qualities of the scene come into focus – as both O’Quinn and Simpson point out, these passages mimic still life in the way they focus on the particular material things that domesticity comprises – the human subject of the virtual painting, the person defined by domestic order, refuses to take shape.\(^{58}\) ‘Paint me, if at all, according to your own fancy’, the Opium-eater instructs.\(^{59}\) ‘Two options are offered in this command’, O’Quinn explains: ‘either don’t paint me at all or paint what suits you best. The first involves the refusal of representation; the second involves the refusal of a specific visual referent in favour of a delusion.’\(^{60}\)

What is it, then, that we are being made to see here? First, let me ask, what might we make of the fact that the rhetorical shift described above, with the turn to a fictional painter, occurs immediately after the narrator, invoking Dr Johnson, defends tea ‘against Jonas Hanway, or any other impious person, who should presume to disparage it’? In this context, the subsequent line ‘But here, to save myself the trouble of too much verbal description, I will introduce a painter’ serves as an argumentative tactic: it interrupts the defense of tea that is in progress by saying, in effect, ‘Rather than state my case in so many words, let me show you.’ The picture that the fictional painter is then instructed to paint is thus presented as if the image will speak for itself:

Paint me, then, a room seven feet by twelve, and not more than seventeen and a half feet high […] Make it populous with books: and, furthermore, paint me a good fire; and furniture, plain and modest, befitting the unpretending cottage of a scholar. And, near the fire, paint me a tea-table; and (as it is clear that no creature can come to see one such a stormy night,) place only two cups and saucers on the tea-tray:

\(^{57}\) O’Quinn, ‘Murder, Hospitality, Philosophy’, p. 156.
\(^{58}\) O’Quinn, ‘Murder, Hospitality, Philosophy’, p. 157. Simpson points out that the evocation of still life enhances the Opium-eater’s status as a ‘stranger’, since still life formally dictates that ‘the stranger always be kept out of the picture, even if always about to arrive’. Simpson, Romanticism and Question of the Stranger, p. 74.
\(^{59}\) De Quincey, Confessions, p. 112.
\(^{60}\) O’Quinn, ‘Murder, Hospitality, Philosophy’, p. 157.
and, if you know how to paint such a thing symbolically, or otherwise, paint me an eternal tea-pot – eternal à partie ante, and à partie post; for I usually drink tea from eight o’clock at night to four o’clock in the morning.\textsuperscript{61}

The romantic interior drawn from Thomson, Cowper, and Coleridge has, through the addition of books and modest furniture, metamorphosed into Dr Johnson’s study. Tea remains central: the ‘eternal tea-pot’ testifies that this room is occupied by one who, like Johnson, ‘with tea amuses the evening, with tea solaces the midnight, and, with tea, welcomes the morning’. The spirit of Johnson joins the list of British authors summoned by the secure cottage interior; the still life has been reprised explicitly to refute Hanway’s claims that Britain’s homes have been invaded by a Chinese menace, and English lives threatened by an infectious addiction.

In this capacity, however, the tableau takes an odd turn when the narrator inserts himself into it: ‘the next article should naturally be myself – a picture of the Opium-eater, with his “little golden receptacle of the pernicious drug”, lying beside him on the table’.\textsuperscript{62} The phrase ‘pernicious drug’ is taken from a novel the narrator cites earlier in a footnote: Thomas Hope’s \textit{Anastasius, or, Memoirs of a Greek} (1819).\textsuperscript{63} But it also recalls Hanway’s characterization of tea, which his essay (the very subtitle tells us) ‘considered as pernicious to health’.\textsuperscript{64} Two things occur simultaneously in this moment: the scene of scholarly tranquility becomes a portrait of addiction, and the case for tea is corrupted by the testimony of the Opium-eater’s body. Johnson had supported his claims of English physiological ‘indifference’ to tea by offering his own body as evidence: in Hanway’s warnings about the ‘pernicious’ effects of tea, Johnson writes, ‘he has aggravated in the vehemence of his zeal’, for ‘after soliciting them by this watery luxury, year after year, I have not yet felt [them]’.\textsuperscript{65} But

\textsuperscript{61} De Quincey, \textit{Confessions}, p. 111.
\textsuperscript{62} De Quincey, \textit{Confessions}, p. 112.
\textsuperscript{63} De Quincey, \textit{Confessions}, pp. 92–3.
\textsuperscript{64} As De Quincey would have been well aware, the term ‘pernicious’ continued to adhere to tea in anti-luxury tracts of the late eighteenth century. Ellis et al. point out that an \textit{Essay on Tea, Sugar, White Bread and Butter, Country Alehouses, Strong Beer and Geneva, and other Modern Luxuries} (Salisbury, 1777) claims that tea causes ‘Indian melancholy’, and that ‘a puny race of children are the wretched consequences of this pernicious liquor’ (pp. 14–27, quoted in Ellis et al., \textit{Empire of Tea}, p. 188). Milligan quotes a 1795 lecture by Coleridge that refers to tea as a ‘pernicious Beverage’, \textit{Pleasures and Pains}, p. 31.
\textsuperscript{65} Johnson, ‘Review’, p. 515.
the Opium-eater is defined by exactly the kind of relationship to Chinese substances against which Hanway sounded the alarm. The ‘marvellous contrast’ of worlds we have been led to expect by the juxtaposition of tea-drinking and opium-eating folds, in the figure of the Opium-eater himself, into an unsettling consonance. Even as opium usurps the role of protagonist from the narrator, the ‘eternal tea-pot’ exerts pressure on opium’s own semantic autonomy. Its seemingly innocuous but ubiquitous presence, in challenging opium’s prerogative to define the world into which the Opium-eater’s agency disappears, threatens to come startlingly to the fore of the image.

This helps to explain why the narrator eschews direct representation of himself in the imagined painting, and directs our attention instead to the image of opium itself:

As to the opium, I have no objection to see a picture of that [...] you may as well paint the real receptacle, which was not of gold, but of glass, and as much like a wine-decanter as possible. Into this you may put a quart of ruby-coloured laudanum: that, and a book of German metaphysics placed by its side, will sufficiently attest my being in the neighbourhood; but, as to myself, – there I demur. I admit that, naturally, I ought to occupy the foreground of the picture; that being the hero of the piece, or (if you choose) the criminal at the bar, my body should be had into court. This seems reasonable: but why should I confess, on this point, to a painter? or why confess at all? [...] No: paint me, if at all, according to your own fancy.66

At least since Johnson, the depiction of English culture, space, life, and subjectivity relied on emergent middle-class conventions of contrast: the opposition of suffering and comfort, vice and virtue, fantasy and reality, and, increasingly, East and West. In the Opium-eater, De Quincey has created a persona who persistently rattles these oppositions, not by trying to transgress or disrupt social norms and ideals but by trying too earnestly, and without success, to embody them. His own flawed reproduction of Englishness exposes the ideological structures and processes on which the effect of Englishness relies. He calls upon the figure of opium rather explicitly here to stand in for himself as the protagonist of the ‘crime’ upon English standards, a desperate gesture that tries to support the orientalist theory of some kind of external attack or infiltration of what would otherwise be a perfectly sound, self-same existence. The story that unfolds

66 De Quincey, Confessions, p. 112.
from this point forward, of opium’s ‘marvellous agency’ that subsumes the narrator’s own, can be read as a fiction in which opium is made to stand trial for the uncanny cultural effects that converge on the Opium-eater in his mission to embody Englishness.

Like all his other narrative tactics, this one is only partially successful, and is therefore not successful at all, in producing an uncompromised form of English identity. For in order to deflect accountability for English disorder away from himself and on to the orientalized culprit of opium, the Opium-eater must claim, finally, the level of intimacy between English subject and Eastern commodity that Johnson’s version of Englishness disavows. The Opium-eater, in his attempt to ally himself with Johnson, ends up rehearsing the hysterical sinophobia of Hanway, and, moreover, embodying exactly the kind of cultural pollution that Johnson declared absurd. The Opium-eater’s typically quixotic way of aligning himself with the great men who define English tradition and character, in this instance, unravels the whole set of images and associations that this tradition has woven into the *habitus* of modern English masculinity.

*Habitus*, a term introduced by Bourdieu, describes the ‘systems of durable, transposable dispositions’ specific to a given culture that structure individual subjectivities within the culture. Cultural reproduction consists fundamentally of the reproduction of *habitus* over time, such that

the *habitus*, a product of history, produces individual and collective practices – more history – in accordance with the schemes generated by history. It ensures the active presence of past experiences, which, deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the ‘correctness’ of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms.

The Opium-eater again and again presents himself as clumsily embodying the threads of the English *habitus*: he is bound to and by them, but he deploys himself awkwardly, not quite achieving the ‘correctness’ or fluency of being that ought to be guaranteed by cultural coherence. By excessively

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67 *Habitus*, Bourdieu writes, consists of ‘structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them’. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, p. 53.

68 Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, p. 54.
reiterating the tropes of English domesticity through an incessant series of quotations, references, and aesthetically self-conscious gestures, *Confessions* ultimately generates, in the narrator’s imagined painting, not an image of Englishness per se but of Englishness as *habitus*. It puts us in a position to see not only the confluence of postures that come together in modern English subjectivity, but the convoluted histories that demand graceful negotiation in the ‘active presence’ of subjectivity. The Opium-eater’s lack of grace in this capacity disrupts the regeneration of *habitus* even as it participates in it, in the manner of a cultural mutation. As David Simpson puts it, ‘It is hard not to suspect that in turning our attention to [Johnson’s review of Hanway], De Quincey is artfully opening out the still-life painting of secure domesticity he is, with an equal knowingness, at the same time constructing.’

The Opium-eater, in other words, is never at home in his own *habitus*. He is fully aware that cultural assimilation can only occur through material processes of repetitive habituation, but as he pursues the ‘habitual comforts’ that assimilate English rituals to a concept of English identity, he reveals the paradoxical way in which the very cycles of repetition that smooth out difference introduce their own processes of alienation. In *Suspiria De Profundis: Being a Sequel to the Confessions of An English Opium-Eater* (1845), De Quincey uses the formal model of ‘involution’ to describe something very like Bourdieu’s *habitus*:

> Often I have been struck with the important truth – that far more of our deepest thoughts and feelings pass to us through perplexed combinations of concrete objects, pass to us as involutes (if I may coin that word) in compound experiences incapable of being disentangled, than ever reach us directly, and in their own abstract shapes.

Tea and opium ultimately constitute one of these ‘perplexed combinations’ that mediates English subjectivity. In another late essay, ‘The English Mail-Coach’ (1849), De Quincey elaborates further on ‘involuted’ subjectivity, tracing the ‘dream-horror’ described in his earlier works to the principle of self-repetition:

> The dreamer finds housed within himself – occupying, as it were, some separate chamber in his brain – holding, perhaps, from that station a secret and detestable commerce with his own heart – some horrid

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70 De Quincey, *Confessions*, p. 151.
alien nature. What if it were his own nature repeated, – still, if the
duality were distinctly perceptible, even that – even this mere numeri-
cal double of his own consciousness – might be a curse too mighty to
be sustained. But how, if the alien nature contradicts his own, fights
with it, perplexes it, and confounds it? How, again, if not one alien
nature, but two, but three, but four, but five, are introduced within
what once he thought the inviolable sanctuary of himself?71

The horrifying multiplications of ‘alien natures’ in the mix of selfhood is
a formal consequence of becoming habituated to oneself in and through
material cultures: the ‘perplexed combinations of concrete objects’ generate
a self made of its ‘own nature repeated’ with the additionally alienating
material supplement of foreign objects.

In this version of the narrative, not opium but tea proves the ‘true
hero of the tale’. Read as a tale less of addiction than of the paradoxically
alienating effects of habit, Confessions seems directly to summon the very
forebear it tries hardest to disavow: Jonas Hanway, who warned that ‘habit
reconciles us to tea, as it does Turks to opium’. When, in the ‘Introduction
to the Pains of Opium’, the Opium-eater catalogues the kinds of ‘concrete
objects’ that end up as ‘involutes’ that channel, from the outside, the
innermost contents of the self, it is not exotic objects he names but the
things so familiar to one’s daily habits that they pass in and out of one’s
life without being accounted for. Among this set of objects, tea-things
loom large:

My [student’s] gown is, by this time, I dare to say, in the same con-
dition with many thousands of excellent books in the Bodleian, viz.
diligently perused by certain studious moths and worms: or departed,
however (which is all that I know of its fate), to that great reservoir
of somewhere, to which all the tea-cups, tea-caddies, tea-pots, tea-ket-
tles, &c. have departed (not to speak of still frailer vessels, such as
glasses, decanters, bed-makers, &c.) which occasional resemblances in
the present generation of tea-cups, &c. remind me of having once
possessed, but of whose departure and final fate I […] could give, I
suspect, but an obscure and conjectural history.72

In De Quincey’s nightmarish revision of the Lockean mental storehouse,
the part of the mind that defines the self contains things that one cannot

71 De Quincey, Confessions, pp. 250–1.
72 De Quincey, Confessions, p. 101.
remember admitting. Locke theorized a self that assimilates foreign objects to itself in the form of ideas acquired through the senses and made ‘familiar’; De Quincey inverts this model to imagine a self in which familiar objects are lost, only to reappear in strange forms. The ‘great reservoir of somewhere’ into which such things disappear is both that ‘separate chamber in [the] brain – holding […] some horrid alien nature’ and the source of what the Opium-eater identifies as ‘that inner eye and power of intuition for the vision and the mysteries of our human nature’ that ‘our English poets have possessed in the highest degree’. These mysteries include the retired realities of the past, which are preserved, in uncanny forms, in the deepest chambers of modern subjectivity. Those who are most in touch with the wellspring of Englishness recognize that it is a ‘nature repeated’: a phenomenon with no self-same origin, but rather, being the effect of repetition – especially in and through a rotating inventory of accoutrements – a diffused, disorganized, and dislocated ‘nature’ that is as little at home in the ‘inviolable sanctuary’ of the individual self as that self is in a global material world.

While the idea of being polluted by foreign matter forms the premise of the Confessions, the text’s more frightening insight is what happens to the self when material things become thoroughly familiar. Ultimately, what is strange about tea in the cultural landscape De Quincey depicts is how apparently English it is – how relentlessly English culture insists on identifying with tea even as, in other ways, it becomes increasingly invested in virulent anti-Chinese orientalism. In a material as well as figurative way, attaching these orientalist specters to opium serves to secure the intimacy of British subjects and their tea. But by teasing open the whole problem

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73 According to Locke, ‘The Senses at first let in particular Ideas, and furnish the yet empty Cabinet: And the Mind by degrees growing familiar with some of them, they are lodged in the Memory, and Names got to them […] In this manner the Mind comes to be furnish’d with Ideas and Language.’ John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 55.

74 For example, when, under opium’s influence, the narrator finds himself in the internal ‘reservoir of somewhere’ to which all the tea-things of earlier times have disappeared, he finds these objects – what Charles Lamb calls ‘old china’ – in horrifically mutated form: ‘I … found myself in Chinese houses, with cane tables, &c. All the feet of the tables, sophas, &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.’ De Quincey, Confessions, p. 126. See Lamb, ‘Old China’, London Magazine (March 1823), pp. 269–72.

75 De Quincey, Confessions, p. 55
of assimilation – the question of how someone or something comes to inhabit the form of the familiar – De Quincey unravels the whole premise of selfhood around which Englishness and orientalism alike are organized. The theory of the self that emerges through De Quincey’s writing about opium refers us, compulsively, to the figure of tea, which refuses to uphold the abstract opposition of England and China, instead revealing their involuted intimacy in the everyday practice of English selfhood.