

## ‘HIGH’ ROMANTICISM: LITERATURE AND DRUGS

Sharon Ruston

Some of the most famous poems of this period may have been written under the influence of opium, such as Coleridge’s ‘Kubla Khan’; while others, such as Keats’s ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, refer explicitly to the wondrous powers of opiates. Thomas De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821) made clear what these poems only suggested or implied: that opium could be used to enhance literary creativity. This link between drugs and creativity is now something for which the Romantics are remembered. Aldous Huxley’s 1954 book detailing his experiences with mescaline was named *Doors of Perception*, alluding to a passage in Blake’s *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-3): ‘If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite. / For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern.’<sup>1</sup> Thus, the ‘high’ Romanticism in the title of this essay has a number of references, including the act of expanding, elevating, and extending one’s vision beyond the quotidian to reach a higher truth. In this, opium use takes its place alongside other attempts to intensify perception and transcend ordinary consciousness, such as the sublime.

My approach to this topic will place the most explicit account of opium use and addiction by a Romantic-era writer within the larger context of scientific experimentation with mind-altering substances, specifically Humphry Davy’s nitrous oxide experiments. Such substances were thought to hold the key to happiness, and thereby to offer the whole of mankind the means by which, in Davy’s words, we could ‘destroy our pains and increase our

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<sup>1</sup> William Blake, *Complete Writings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 154.

pleasures'.<sup>2</sup> Opium use, whether medicinal or recreational, could also be undertaken in the spirit of research; De Quincey, for example, was intrigued by the effects of opium upon his body and mind. He experimented with its use and recorded its effects. These drugs were taken either in company or alone, in situations arranged and planned for maximum effect, and seemed to offer writers new insights into subjectivity and the relationship between the body and mind. The visions, waking dreams, and revelations that often accompanied the use of opium and nitrous oxide appeared to present new worlds of perception. Addiction, withdrawal, and their symptoms, however, revealed the polar opposites of pleasure and pain, the joy and dejection that opium, in particular, could cause.

Coleridge's poem 'The Pains of Sleep' (published with 'Kubla Khan' and 'Christabel' in 1816) records nightmares that may well have been brought on by opium use, even though Coleridge said he took opium to ward against such nightmares.<sup>3</sup> Unlike De Quincey, however, Coleridge was not explicit in public about his opium use. For example, he claimed to have written 'Kubla Khan' during a sleep brought on by the prescription of an 'anodyne', widely accepted to have been opium but not identified as such.<sup>4</sup> This poem has contributed greatly to the Romantic myth, explored in M. H. Abrams's book *The Milk of Paradise* (1934), of an association between drug-taking and creativity or heightened states of consciousness.<sup>5</sup> According to Abrams, poets 'utilized the imagery' from their opium dreams in their 'literary

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<sup>2</sup> Humphry Davy, *Collected Works*, ed. John Davy, 9 vols (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1839), ii. 85-6.

<sup>3</sup> Neil Vickers, *Coleridge and the Doctors, 1795–1806* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 99.

<sup>4</sup> S. T. Coleridge, *Christabel &c.*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (London: John Murray, 1816), 52.

<sup>5</sup> M. H. Abrams, *The Milk of Paradise: The Effect of Opium on the Works of De Quincey, Crabbe, Francis Thompson, and Coleridge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934).

creations, and sometimes, under the direct inspiration of opium, achieved [their] best writing'; even Coleridge's 'The Ancient Mariner', subtitled 'A Poet's Reverie' in its 1800 version, has its 'source and development in Coleridge's opium hallucinations'.<sup>6</sup> The degree to which opium affected and enabled poetry of the period is still debated, however. Elisabeth Schneider's *Coleridge, Opium and Kubla Khan* (1953) disputed Abrams's claims, arguing that Coleridge's poem was not inspired by opium but by a complex set of cultural and psychological influences.<sup>7</sup>

Nicholas Roe has shown how in the 1790s literature, politics, and medicine were spheres of activity that were 'intellectually compatible, each overlapping with and reinforcing each other', and suggests that for Keats, medical training was an understandable choice of career given his family background, politics, and schooling.<sup>8</sup> By the time he was doing his medical training, however, after the new regulations of the 1815 Anatomy Act came into force, the situation had changed and 'the physician-poet John Keats was obliged to quit his medical studies in order to dedicate himself fully to his calling as a poet-physician'.<sup>9</sup> The drowsiness and numbness that we find associated with the opium poppy's effect in his 'Ode on Indolence' can be linked easily to Keats's desire to act as a 'poet-physician', where the poetry itself is charged with the soporific, sensual character of the drug. In his recent biography of Keats, Roe claims that Keats's personal laudanum use was in fact a 'habit' and that his 'Ode to a Nightingale' 'deserves a place alongside "Kubla Khan" or De Quincey's

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. ix, 36.

<sup>7</sup> Elisabeth Schneider, *Coleridge, Opium and Kubla Khan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 17.

<sup>8</sup> Nicholas Roe, *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 180, 172.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 181.

*Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* as one of the greatest re-creations of a drug-inspired dream-vision in English literature'.<sup>10</sup>

Drugs had been known and used for centuries before the Romantic period. The word 'drug' originally meant 'any substance, of animal, vegetable, or mineral origin, used as an ingredient in pharmacy, chemistry, dyeing, or various manufacturing processes', and only later came to refer to 'a natural or synthetic substance used in the prevention or treatment of disease'.<sup>11</sup> This medicinal meaning, involving a physiological effect on the body, shared currency during the Romantic period, as it does today, with the other meaning of 'a substance with intoxicating, stimulant, or narcotic effects used for cultural, recreational, or other non-medicinal purposes' (*OED*, 1b). Indeed, Thomas Green, writing in 1753, already links the effects of drugs to the imagination when he writes of 'The strange effects of drugs and opiates, and even of the imagination'.<sup>12</sup> Drugs, therefore, can be both medicinal and recreational, affecting both body and mind.

Opium, which was prepared from the opium poppy, *Papaver somniferum*, had been used to treat a variety of problems since medicine was first practised, but in the sixteenth century, Paracelsus (the alchemist whom Victor Frankenstein reads so avidly) developed laudanum, the form in which opium was most commonly taken in the Romantic period.<sup>13</sup> Laudanum was a tincture of opium, made up of about one-twelfth opium dissolved in

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<sup>10</sup> Nicholas Roe, *John Keats: A New Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 324.

<sup>11</sup> 'Drug', definition 1a, *Oxford English Dictionary* (online).

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Green, *A Dissertation Concerning Enthusiasm* (London 1753), p. xvi, cited in *OED*, 1b.

<sup>13</sup> Alethea Hayter, *Opium and the Romantic Imagination* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), 21-2.

alcohol.<sup>14</sup> By the eighteenth century, opium use was common and had no kind of stigma attached to it, as we can see from its frequent appearance in William Buchan's *Domestic Medicine* (1769), the much-reprinted handbook that remained the most popular guide to health throughout the Romantic period. Opium is recommended in *Domestic Medicine* as a treatment for a 'nervous cough', whooping cough, inflammation of the intestines, toothache, dropsy, and the hiccups.<sup>15</sup> Laudanum is recommended (either alone or in combination with other things) in cases of fever, sleeplessness (due to ophthalmia), a tickly cough, bilious colic, inflammation of the bladder, cholera morbus, diarrhoea, headache, wind, piles, and many other illnesses.<sup>16</sup> It has been said that in the early nineteenth century everyone 'took laudanum occasionally'; this may be no exaggeration given that laudanum was used to treat so many different ailments and that it was commonly used for children as well as adults.<sup>17</sup>

Buchan notes the drug's soothing qualities as well as its efficacy as a painkiller. In the section devoted to opium itself he agrees that 'It is indeed a valuable medicine when taken in proper quantity' but warns that 'an overdose proves a strong poison'.<sup>18</sup> Addiction was not

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<sup>14</sup> Grevel Lindop, *The Opium-Eater: A Life of Thomas De Quincey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 122.

<sup>15</sup> William Buchan, *Domestic Medicine: or, A Treatise on the Prevention and Cure of Diseases by Regimen and Simple Medicines*, 11<sup>th</sup> edn (London: A. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1790), 285, 287 n., 294, 359, 377, 437. For the wide circulation of Buchan's handbook, see Catherine Jones's essay in this volume; for popular medicine generally, see Roy Porter, *Disease, Medicine and Society in England, 1550-1860*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>16</sup> Buchan, *Domestic Medicine*, 149, 262, 281 n., 298, 303, 311, 313, 356, 444, 685.

<sup>17</sup> Hayter, *Opium*, 30.

<sup>18</sup> Buchan, *Domestic Medicine*, 318, 85, 476.

understood until late in the nineteenth century and many writers were lifelong, regular users, including Elizabeth Barrett-Browning, Byron, Coleridge, Wilkie Collins, George Crabbe, Charles Dickens, Keats, P. B. Shelley, Walter Scott, Tom Wedgwood, and William Wilberforce. Robert Clive of India and the Pre-Raphaelite model Lizzie Siddal died from overdoses of opium.<sup>19</sup> Before the 1868 Pharmacy Act, opium could be bought easily from ‘barbers, confectioners, ironmongers, stationers, tobacconists, wine merchants’ and other suppliers.<sup>20</sup> In order to understand how opium use was conceived at this time, it is instructive to look at a newly synthesized drug that seemed to offer everything that opium promised, and more: nitrous oxide.

In 1799, the radical chemist Thomas Beddoes set up the Pneumatic Institute at Clifton in Bristol to test the efficacy of a number of new gases that Joseph Priestley had discovered on a variety of diseases, but most particularly on consumption. He employed the dazzling young Humphry Davy to become an assistant at the Institute. Beddoes subscribed to John Brown’s system of sthenic and asthenic treatments (he had published Brown’s *Elements of Medicine* in 1795) and the Institute was run along these lines. In this system, all diseases were classified as resulting either from too much excitability (sthenic) or too little excitability (asthenic). If the former was diagnosed, a depressant (usually alcohol) was administered, and if the latter, a stimulant (usually opium) was given to restore the balance of the nervous system. The Institute began treating patients in early 1799, and in March of that year Davy

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<sup>19</sup> Barry Milligan, ‘Introduction’ to Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, ed. Milligan (London: Penguin, 2003), p. xxxiii. See also Mike Jay, *Emperors of Dreams: Drugs in the Nineteenth Century*, rev. edn (Sawtry: Dedalus, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Jay, *Emperors*, 61.

returned to experiments he had begun nearly a year earlier with nitrous oxide, a gas that an American chemist, Samuel Mitchell, had claimed would be fatal if inhaled.<sup>21</sup>

The apparent recklessness of Davy's self-experimentation with the gas is difficult to understand today; in these early years Davy used himself to test various gases that were extremely dangerous, often with alarming results including a near-death experience after inhaling a mixture of hydrogen and carbon monoxide. The nitrous oxide experiments of Clifton 1799–1800 show the optimism with which drugs were invested. It is clear from the notebooks that Davy kept at this time that he believed life was the result of chemical changes in the body, and thus could be affected by the introduction of new chemicals.<sup>22</sup> The Clifton project, as the following discussion will show, sheds light on both the social and solitary aspects of drug use in the period; at its centre was the tantalising claim that nitrous oxide, unlike opium, could offer a powerfully pleasurable experience without any negative after-effects.

On 9 April 1799, Davy wrote to a friend announcing his discovery that nitrous oxide could be safely respired. The letter reveals his delight at the effect of the gas:

I made a discovery yesterday which proves how necessary it is to repeat experiments. The gaseous oxide of azote is perfectly respirable when pure. It is never deleterious but when it contains nitrous gas. I have found a mode of obtaining it pure, and I breathed to-day, in the presence of Dr. Beddoes and some others, sixteen quarts of it for near seven minutes. It appears to support life longer than even oxygen gas, and

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<sup>21</sup> Humphry Davy, *Researches, Chemical and Philosophical* (London: J. Johnson, 1800), 453-4; hereafter *Researches*.

<sup>22</sup> This was only one of a number of competing theories concerning life or vitality; for others, see Sharon Ruston, *Shelley and Vitality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), ch. 1.

absolutely intoxicated me. Pure oxygen gas produced no alternation in my pulse, nor any other material effect; whereas this gas raised my pulse upwards of twenty strokes, made me dance about the laboratory as a madman, and has kept my spirits in a glow ever since.<sup>23</sup>

As we can see here, nitrous oxide, subsequently known as ‘laughing gas’,<sup>24</sup> could have the most delightful results.<sup>x</sup>Davy compares it favourably with oxygen, noting that it excited and enthused him, and that the effect continued long after he had stopped breathing the gas. This is the first of many accounts, by Davy and others, that seem to promise a drug that can make people happier, even energize and increase their activity, without any subsequent depletion of spirits. Following this successful trial, Davy’s experiments were repeated, extended, and developed, and some of the most famous writers of the age tried the gas.

The day after his successful trial, Davy wrote to William Nicholson’s *Journal of Natural Philosophy* with a hesitant but hopeful statement: ‘the effects produced by it were very peculiar: should they be confirmed by future experiments, it will probably prove a valuable medicine’.<sup>25</sup> Nitrous oxide did indeed prove to be a valuable medicine in the form of an anaesthetic, but this was not how Davy imagined its usefulness. His single sentence on this

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<sup>23</sup> To Davies Giddy, quoted in John Ayrton Paris, *The Life of Sir Humphry Davy*, 2 vols (London: Henry Coburn and Richard Bentley, 1831), i. 55-6. The collected letters of Davy and his circle are in the process of being transcribed and annotated for a print edition, forthcoming with Oxford University Press. Work in progress available at: [www.davy-letters.org.uk/](http://www.davy-letters.org.uk/).

<sup>24</sup> *OED* cites first use of the phrase ‘laughing gas’ as 1819.

<sup>25</sup> Davy to William Nicholson, 11 Apr. 1799, pub. in *Journal of Natural Philosophy, Chemistry and the Arts* 3 (1800), 55-6 (p. 55).



aspect of the drug in his published account of the experiments was not at this time explored further: ‘As nitrous oxide in its extensive operation appears capable of destroying physical pain, it may probably be used with advantage during surgical operations in which no great effusion of blood takes place’.<sup>26</sup> When Davy wrote this, pain was thought to be a crucial aspect of surgery and so serious investigation was not made into dulling the sensations. It took many decades before the anaesthetic property of nitrous oxide was properly understood.<sup>27</sup> Davy’s experiments – on himself and others – are detailed in his book *Researches, Chemical and Philosophical; Chiefly Concerning Nitrous Oxide*, published in 1800, but there also exist unpublished letters and manuscript diary entries from this period. As one would expect, the published account differs considerably from these, for example in adopting a more objective ‘scientific’ tone.

Taking nitrous oxide quickly moved beyond being solely of scientific interest to become a pleasurable pastime for the collection of like-minded men gathered around Beddoes and Davy in Bristol. Indeed, Davy speaks of taking his silk bag of gas along with him on a moonlight walk in an attempt to enhance by artificial means his experience of the sublime: ‘On May 5th, at night, after walking for an hour amidst the scenery of the Avon, at this period rendered exquisitely beautiful by bright moonshine; my mind being in a state of agreeable feeling, I respired six quarts of newly prepared nitrous oxide’ (*Researches*, 491-2). The experience lasts beyond the length of his walk and he experiences that night an ‘intermediate state between sleeping and waking’ of ‘vivid and agreeable dreams’ (*Researches*, 492). This trance-like state between dream and vision is one that we hear of in a number of Romantic poems, from Shelley’s ‘Triumph of Life’ to Keats’s *The Fall of*

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<sup>26</sup> Davy, *Researches*, 556.

<sup>27</sup> Stephanie Snow, *Operations Without Pain: The Practice and Science of Anaesthesia in Victorian Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 23.

*Hyperion*; it is a state that De Quincey and Coleridge describe as opium-induced, and clearly nitrous oxide can have the same effect.

When Davy visits the Wye valley to see Tintern Abbey by moonlight later in 1800, he experiences a kind of ‘reverie’ and we might speculate that nitrous oxide was involved on this occasion too.<sup>28</sup> Davy clearly thinks the drug offers access to the sublime, and after breathing it on 26 December 1799 records in a notebook that taking it makes him feel like he has become a ‘sublime being’ himself.<sup>29</sup> In another notebook he records these sublime experiences in a poem titled ‘On breathing the Nitrous Oxide’: ‘Yet are my limbs with inward transports thrill’d / And clad with new born mightiness round’.<sup>30</sup> The identification of the experience as a ‘reverie’ alerts us to its potential as a counterpart of the Romantic poet’s experience. In ‘Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey’ for example, Wordsworth describes how in

that serene and blessed mood,  
 In which the affections gently lead us on,  
 Until, the breath of this corporeal frame,  
 And even the motion of our human blood  
 Almost suspended, we are laid asleep  
 In body, and become a living soul:  
 While with an eye made quiet by the power

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<sup>28</sup> Davy to Davies Giddy, 20 Oct. [1800]; unpub. letter now in private hands. For details of the ‘reverie’, see Davy, *Collected Works*, i. 64-6 (p. 64).

<sup>29</sup> RI MS HD 20b, 133. The Humphry Davy manuscripts are quoted here by courtesy of the Royal Institution of Great Britain.

<sup>30</sup> RI MS HD 13c, 5-6 (p. 6).

Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,

We see into the life of things.

(lines 41-9)<sup>31</sup>

When the breath and the circulation of the blood are almost ‘suspended’, when our bodies are ‘asleep’, we enter into a new kind of consciousness and thus can see more deeply ‘into the life of things’. Wordsworth is here describing the new vision brought on by a trance that is not chemically induced but is the result of harmony and joy, a ‘serene and blessed mood’. Davy was asked by Coleridge and Wordsworth to proofread the second volume of the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800); while this volume did not contain ‘Tintern Abbey’, he would surely have known the poem.<sup>32</sup> Davy parodied Wordsworth’s lyrical ballad form in a notebook poem, ‘As I was walking up the street’, which mentions Wordsworth by name.<sup>33</sup> He may even have gone to see ‘Tintern Abbey’ because of Wordsworth’s poem.<sup>34</sup> For Davy, though, viewing the abbey and its surrounding scenery may not have been enough: nitrous oxide offered an enhancement of the sublime experience, and seemed, at times, even capable of creating the sublime.

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<sup>31</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads 1798 and 1800*, ed. Michael Gamer and Dahlia Porter (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2008), 144.

<sup>32</sup> See Roger Sharrock, ‘The Chemist and the Poet: Sir Humphry Davy and the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*’, *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London* 17.1 (May 1962), 57–76.

<sup>33</sup> RI MS HD 20c, 44, 46, 52. This notebook is marked ‘Clifton 1800 From August to Nov<sup>r</sup>’ in the front cover.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 64. See also Alice Jenkins, ‘Humphry Davy: Poetry, Science and the Love of Light’, in *1798: The Year of the Lyrical Ballads*, ed. Richard Cronin (Basingstoke: St Martin’s Press, 1998), 133–51 (p. 144).

One issue to be resolved was what these experiments proved for the theory of excitability, which was particularly associated with Brown and Erasmus Darwin. Privately, Davy told a friend early in 1799 in a letter that remains unpublished: ‘Both Browns and Darwins Theories seem to be daily loosing [*sic*] ground. I have had a number of conversations with D<sup>r</sup> Beddoes on this subject. D<sup>r</sup> Beddoes himself seems to give up altogether Browns Theory’.<sup>35</sup> This suspicion does not make its way into the published accounts of the experiments, though eventually both Wordsworth and Coleridge would also come to reject Brown’s ideas.<sup>36</sup> Despite this, the language of excitability can be clearly seen in their writing, notably in Wordsworth’s famous criticism of modern lifestyles which encourage a ‘degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation’,<sup>37</sup> and in *Biographia Literaria* (1817), where Coleridge accuses Charles Maturin’s *Bertram* of leaving the reader ‘craving alone the grossest and most outrageous stimulants’.<sup>38</sup>

In his published account, Davy declares of his nitrous oxide experiments: ‘I was unable to determine [at this early stage] whether the operation was stimulant or depressing’ (*Researches*, 457). If it is a stimulant, he would expect to find the usual weakness and

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<sup>35</sup> Davy to Henry Penneck, 26 Jan. 1799; unpub. letter held at the American Philosophical Society.

<sup>36</sup> See Neil Vickers, ‘Coleridge, Thomas Beddoes and Brunonian Medicine’, *European Romantic Review* 8.1 (1997), 47–94 (pp. 81–3).

<sup>37</sup> William Wordsworth, *Prose Works*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and J. W. Smyser, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), i. 150. See Gavin Budge, ‘Erasmus Darwin and the Poetics of William Wordsworth: “Excitement without the Application of Gross and Violent Stimulants”’, *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 30.2 (2007), 279–308.

<sup>38</sup> S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate, 2 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), ii. 229.

feebleness that comes after such treatment. The experiment he divines to decide the case involves him drinking a bottle of wine (a known depressant) in eight minutes: he experiences all the usual symptoms of extreme drunkenness – unsteadiness, slurring his words, and eventually sinks into ‘a state of insensibility’ from which he awakes a few hours later with a headache (482). After the third breath of some pure nitrous oxide, he forgets about his headache and experiences ‘the usual pleasurable thrilling’, but when that is gone, he feels nausea, and the headache, ‘langour and depression’ return, though he sleeps well and wakes up hungry (483). He concludes that ‘debility from intoxication was not increased by excitement from nitrous oxide’ (484). This experiment might be the same as that recorded in his notebook in a rather less scientific and objective manner: ‘On december 23. I breathed after a terrible drunken fit a larger quantity of gas 2 bags and 2 bags of oxygen it made me sick’.<sup>39</sup> These experiments show that Davy was attempting to find a drug that would excite and energize the body without any attendant suffering. In this, nitrous oxide seemed to be better than other stimulants, such as opium and alcohol.

In another notebook also kept around this time, Davy writes that it is probable ‘that the phænomena of life are capable of chemical solution’; his nitrous oxide experiments must have seemed to prove this since it seemed as though the gas was nothing less than a distilled form of happiness.<sup>40</sup> His experiments appeared to indicate that pleasure could be administered and controlled. Davy referred to the gas in a letter as the ‘pleasure-producing air’.<sup>41</sup> The language in which Beddoes publicly announced the discovery of a ‘new pleasure’ is that of the Romantic masculine sublime: ‘Man may, some time, come to rule over the causes of pain and pleasure, with a dominion as absolute as that which at present he exercises

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<sup>39</sup> RI HD 20b, 95.

<sup>40</sup> RI MS HD 13h, 17.

<sup>41</sup> Davy to John Tonkin, 12 Jan. 1801, in Davy, *Collected Works*, i. 81.

over domestic animals and the other instruments of his convenience'.<sup>42</sup> Certainly, nitrous oxide helped Davy feel increased sense of self-confidence. After a particularly enjoyable session with the gas in April, his notebook records 'I ~~cried out~~ said to myself I was born to benefit the world by my great talents &c'.<sup>43</sup> 'Davy & Newton' is written in a notebook quite possibly after inhaling seven quarts of nitrous oxide mingled with atmospheric air on 27 August.<sup>44</sup> The gas invited the subject into new realms of transcendent and sublime wonder.<sup>45</sup>

Just as Davy's supposedly scientific experiments can be seen in the light of recreational drug taking, so De Quincey's accounts of his opium experiences in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* demand to be seen as contributing to contemporary medical knowledge. Many of the same ideas and motivations that were seen in the nitrous oxide experiments appear again in De Quincey's account, and it is highly likely, given their mutual friend Coleridge, that De Quincey knew of Davy's experiments.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, it is possible that De Quincey is invoking Davy specifically when he describes how in his own endeavours, 'I ... have conducted my experiments upon this interesting subject with a sort of galvanic

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<sup>42</sup> Thomas Beddoes, *Notice of Some Observations Made at the Medical Pneumatic Institution* (Bristol: Biggs and Cottle, 1799), 27. For the Romantic masculine sublime, see Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 85.

<sup>43</sup> RI MS HD 20b, 153.

<sup>44</sup> RI MS HD 20b, 182.

<sup>45</sup> For Davy and the sublime, see my *Creating Romanticism: Case Studies in the Literature, Science and Medicine of the 1790s* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), ch. 4.

<sup>46</sup> De Quincey writes that he had some communication with the 'late Sir Humphrey Davy'; see his recollection of S. T. Coleridge, *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, 1, 10 (Nov. 1834), 685-90 (p. 686). Sorry David, I don't have access to the Pickering and Chatto version.

battery'.<sup>47</sup> This instrument is best known as the tool by which Davy isolated a number of chemical elements including chlorine, potassium, calcium, and magnesium. By thus allusion, De Quincey is both comparing his experiments to those of the scientific world, and implying that opium can deliver similarly spectacular results. In other words, both opium and the galvanic battery can be used to reach discover truths that could not be otherwise attained. De Quincey represents himself as an willing subject undertaking medical research for the greater good, telling his reader that he has 'for the general benefit of the world, inoculated myself, as it were, with the poison of 8000 drops of laudanum per day' and thereby comparing himself to surgeons who give themselves diseases in order to test treatments (65). Here is an image of the medical man as romantic explorer, very much in the Davy mould, experimenting upon himself in a courageous attempt to benefit the lives of others. When Jan Golinski describes Davy's self-experimentation as 'a profound enquiry into – and moulding of – his own subjectivity', he might equally be describing De Quincey's opium experiences.<sup>48</sup>

De Quincey's *Confessions* offer an explicit challenge to the medical profession. He declares that medical accounts to date, written by 'professors of medicine' from positions of apparent authority and expertise, are quite simply 'Lies! lies! lies!' (44). He uses technical, medical language in this text that shows he clearly thinks he can inform these doctors despite, disingenuously, near the end of *Confessions*, describing himself 'a man so ignorant of medicine as myself' (87). De Quincey's knowledge is on display throughout, not least in the huge array of literary allusions and quotations from ancient Greek to contemporary poetry. Interspersed with the medical language he adopts, there are strategically placed quotations

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<sup>47</sup> De Quincey, *Confessions*, ed. Milligan, 65. All quotations below are from this edition, cited parenthetically by page number.

<sup>48</sup> Jan Golinski, 'Humphry Davy: The Experimental Self', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 45.1 (2011), 15–28 (p. 25).

from his literary hero, Wordsworth, and the text in general knowingly displays both De Quincey's stylistic virtuosity and his intertextual range.

William Buchan comes in for particular ridicule in the *Confessions*; he is mentioned three times, which attests to the importance of his *Domestic Medicine* at this time. De Quincey mentions seeing a 'pirated edition' of this text 'in the hands of a farmer's wife' which had a serious misprint, warning readers not to take more than twenty-five ounces of laudanum when this should have read twenty-five drops (45 n.). He refers to the misprint twice more, at one point assuring the reader in a tone of ironic superiority that he never forgot Buchan's advice of taking no more than twenty-five ounces in one go. The playful sarcasm in his remark that 'it is far better to consult Dr. Buchan' on medical advice than other sources is evident too in his later note: 'The reader sees how much I kept within Dr Buchan's indulgent allowance' (58, 61). De Quincey's point is that medical men are not to be trusted on the matter of how much opium can be taken or what the short- and long-term effects are, and that he himself is the sole authority on such matters. As he puts it in one of many references to religion in the text: 'This is the doctrine of the true church on the subject of opium: of which church I acknowledge myself to be the only member' (47). He asks doctors to 'stand aside' while he delivers his own 'lecture' on the subject (45).

De Quincey concedes very few points to standard medical accounts of opium: only three facts, namely, that it is 'a dusky brown in colour'; that it is 'rather dear' to buy; and that if you take too much you will die, though this last point is in contention because he claims to 'have indulged in it to an excess, not yet *recorded*' (45, 4). The italics are there to signal that there is one other person who may well have indulged more than De Quincey, but that his experiences are not on record. He refers, of course, to Coleridge, whose struggles with opium were well known but not explicitly admitted in print. Again, taking the position of a martyr to a cause, De Quincey claims that he has published his *Confessions* as a 'service' to 'the whole



class of opium-eaters', which he claims is a far larger class than the reader was probably aware (5). He compiles his evidence in a scientific manner, listing two facts that persuaded him that this was the case: first, evidence from druggists in London, and secondly, evidence from 'several cotton-manufacturers' in Manchester concerning 'their work-people' (5–6). He grudgingly acknowledges one medical source, John Awsiter's *An Essay on the Effects of Opium Considered as a Poison* (1763), which is alive to what De Quincey calls the 'fascinating powers of opium' and the likelihood that once these were known, English people would become habituated to its use.<sup>49</sup>

De Quincey is keen to distinguish between two uses of opium; he uses the drug for the 'bare relief of pain', and this is how he first knowingly encountered the drug as an adult, but he also uses it for 'the excitement of positive pleasure' (5). His account of his early illnesses shows that his medical knowledge is steeped in Brown's theory of excitability. When he faints with hunger on the steps of a house in Soho Square in London, his friend Ann treats him with 'a glass of port wine and spices' (26). This is the 'powerful and reviving stimulus' that his body needs and it provides 'an instantaneous power of restoration' (26). Taking on the question, as Davy had for nitrous oxide, of whether opium is a stimulant or a depressant, De Quincey declares: 'Certainly, opium is classed under the head of narcotics; and some such effect it may produce in the end: but the primary effects of opium are always, and in the highest degree, to excite and stimulate the system' (49). Another 'leading error' among those who discuss opium is the idea that 'the elevation of spirits produced by opium is necessarily followed by a proportionate depression' (49). Instead, De Quincey portrays himself during what he calls, in a further religious reference, his 'noviciate' – that

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<sup>49</sup> John Awsiter, *An Essay on the Effects of Opium Considered as a Poison* (London, 1763).

Awsiter may have introduced the idea of 'habit' to the discussion of drug-taking; certainly his usage predates the *OED*'s account of the word.

honeymoon period when he claims to have experienced only pleasure from opium – as a serious student pursuing ‘severe studies’ at university in Oxford that required attention and activity (49, 50).

He is also forceful in his condemnation of the idea that opium intoxicates. Laudanum has the potential to intoxicate, he admits, but only if enough of it is drunk and that only because of the alcohol in which the opium is dissolved. He clearly wishes to make clear that the English opium-eater is not to be thought of as lying in a drunk-like torpor; his vision of himself as a philosopher is quite different from this image. It is important to him (as it was to Davy again) to prove that the experience of taking opium is quite different to that of drinking wine: the difference is not in degree ‘but even in *kind*’; it is a completely different kind of experience (45). Comparing the feeling one gets after drinking wine to that of taking opium, De Quincey borrows ‘a technical distinction from medicine’: one pleasure is acute and the other is chronic (46). Both terms are more usually applied to pain than to pleasure, and they point to another of De Quincey’s central messages, that there is equal and opposite pain to match the pleasure of opium-eating.

The extended comparison between the effects of opium and wine demonstrates how important it is to De Quincey to deny similarities of experience. Where wine ‘robs a man of his self-possession: opium greatly invigorates it’ (46). We see this in both Davy’s and De Quincey’s accounts, both of which involve moments of self-confidence and egotism. Wine also ‘unsettles and clouds the judgment’ whereas opium ‘communicates serenity and equipoise’; both wine and opium give ‘an expansion to the heart’ but wine tends to make ‘benevolent affections’ have a ‘maudlin character’, which opium does not (46). While wine may initially ‘steady the intellect’, it eventually ‘leads man to the brink of absurdity and

extravagance' and beyond this to 'disperse the intellectual energies' (47).<sup>50</sup> Opium, on the other hand, 'seems to compose what had been agitated, and to concentrate what had been distracted' (47). His final comparison is telling: alcohol reminds us that we are 'merely human' if not even 'brutal' or animal-like, whereas opium gives an indication of the 'diviner part of [man's] nature' (47). The opium-eater, at least the English one (and De Quincey repeatedly distinguishes between him and foreign others), is bathed in the 'great light of a majestic intellect' (47). *Confessions* in this respect if not others could be accused of glamourizing the drug.

It is amusing that De Quincey feels the need to point out that he has 'never been a great wine-drinker' (46), just as Davy in a footnote to his wine and nitrous oxide experiments writes: 'I ought to observe that my usual drink is water, that I had been little accustomed to take wine or spirits, and had never been completely intoxicated but once before in the course of my life' (*Researches*, 482 n.). Whatever the truth of this in Davy's case, if De Quincey consumed opium in the manner and quantity he claimed, then he simultaneously drank a great deal of alcohol. Robert Morrison calculates that even 'at the lower percentage of 45 per cent proof spirits, and even when he had his habit under some kind of control, his weekly consumption of alcohol was considerable, while during the periods of his worst excesses he

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<sup>50</sup> Cf. Lamb's uncompromising account of the effects of alcohol in his 'Confessions of a Drunkard', first pub. in the *London Magazine* in 1813 and repub. in Aug. 1822 in order, Jonathan Bate claims, to 'remind the literary world that De Quincey's stunning pathological self-analysis was not totally original': Charles Lamb, *Elia and the Last Essays of Elia*, ed. Jonathan Bate (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), introd., p. xvii. Lamb's essay is also an important precedent in English use of the autobiographical 'Confessions' genre.

drank the equivalent of between one and two pints of whisky per day'.<sup>51</sup> Morrison speculates that the withdrawal symptoms described in the *Confessions*, which do not quite fit usual accounts of opium withdrawal, may be the result of alcoholism rather than opium addiction.<sup>52</sup> For practical reasons, since laudanum is largely made up of alcohol, De Quincey keeps his in a 'wine decanter' on a table next to him (68). Despite this, and without seeing the irony, De Quincey accuses the reader of having indulged just as unhealthily an amount of 'claret, port, or "particular Madeira"' as De Quincey had opium (57).

Like Davy's nitrous oxide account, De Quincey finds that opium can give pleasure in both solitary and sociable occasions. It can be enjoyed in 'solitude and silence' and lead to 'those trances, or profoundest reveries, which are the crown and consummation of what opium can do for human nature' (54). At other times, and on occasions pre-meditated, De Quincey takes opium and goes to the opera or walks among people of the labouring classes, listening to and joining in with their conversations (52–3). This is a further example of the ways in which artistic perception can be expanded by the use of drugs: De Quincey speaks of his 'Opera pleasures' being greatly enhanced by opium (52). He portrays himself as an explorer – 'the first discover of some of these *terrae incognitae*' – literally and figuratively, courageously exploring new territory (53). These pleasures are personal to him though, or at least to men of his race and class. Other men, men whose only 'talk is of oxen' will 'if he is not too dull to dream at all ... dream about oxen' (7). De Quincey's experiences (and dreams) are superior to such men because he is superior himself; styling himself a philosopher, the reader can expect to hear about suitably philosophic dreams.

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<sup>51</sup> Robert Morrison, *The English Opium Eater: A Biography of Thomas De Quincey* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2009), 165.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

Looking for the reason for his attraction to opium, De Quincey declares: ‘I confess it, as a besetting infirmity of mine, that I am too much of an Eudæmonist: I hanker too much after a state of happiness, both for myself and for others’ (59). Again, we see a conviction that happiness is obtainable by chemical means. The first time De Quincey takes opium, he thinks he has discovered the ‘secret of happiness’ and a panacea for all human woes (44). Later he describes himself as having ‘taken happiness, both in solid and liquid shape’ (64). He feels that in offering these reports of opium experiences, he is engaged in a ‘science of happiness’ (65). Looked at in the light of Davy’s nitrous oxide experiments, De Quincey’s opium use seems less pleasure-seeking for its own sake and more in keeping with contemporary medical research, or at least this is what he would like us to think. *Confessions* is in many ways a challenge to the reader — to reflect upon his or her own bad habits before they judge his.

Unfortunately, while opium might seem to offer happiness, its long-term use was often accompanied by dependency and by the horrendous symptoms, including nightmares, which resulted when the user tried to reduce the amount taken or withdraw from the drug altogether. De Quincey uses quotations from Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and from Shelley’s recently published *The Revolt of Islam* (1818) to describe the ‘pains of opium’: the vivid and pleasurable dreams that accompanied initial opium use are now replaced by nightmares of ‘dreadful faces throng’d and fiery arms’ (88, quoting *Paradise Lost*, XII. 644). Dreams fascinated Romantic writers, and opium use and withdrawal offered even stranger and more fascinating dreams. Jennifer Ford notes that De Quincey claimed *Confessions* was written more to ‘reveal the mysteries and potential grandeur of dreams than to outline the dangers and pleasures of opium.’<sup>53</sup> Details from episodes of intense creativity described in early accounts come back to haunt him in his nightmares, and the qualities for which he had

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<sup>53</sup> Jennifer Ford, *Coleridge on Dreaming* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 3–4.

exalted opium later fail him. He is unable to pursue his intellectual work, or even to read poetry; he is incapable of finishing writing projects, describing himself as experiencing ‘intellectual torpor’, being in a ‘dormant state’ except for the pain and misery he feels, and having a ‘sense of incapacity and feebleness’ (74). The end of the *Confessions* is the reverse of its beginning: after harrowing accounts of his nightmares, we hear that ‘opium had long ceased to found its empire on spells of pleasure; it was now solely by the tortures connected with the attempt to abjure it, that it kept its hold’ (84). Here De Quincey’s and Davy’s experiences differ. For all its dangers, we do not hear of Davy falling out of love with nitrous oxide; in 1811 he writes in a love letter to his wife-to-be Jane comparing his feelings for her with the ‘exhilarating gas’.<sup>54</sup> Davy did, however, stop speaking about it in public. Like so many other Romantic experiments of the 1790s, laughing gas became firmly tied in satirical cartoons and periodicals to Jacobin politics, associated as it was with the radical circles of Joseph Priestley and Beddoes. As his career moved on and he entered into the metropolitan elite, Davy drew a discreet veil over his youthful nitrous oxide experiments; De Quincey, on the other hand, spent the rest of his career exploiting his notoriety as the ‘English Opium-Eater’.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Davy to Jane Apreece, 9 Sept. [1811]: unpub. letter held in the Royal Institution, HD/25/3a.

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, ‘The Pneumatic Revellers: An Eclogue’, *Anti-Jacobin Review* 23 (May 1800), 109-18.

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