



Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-
speaking world

11 | 2015

**Expressions of Environment in Euroamerican Culture /
Antique Bodies in Nineteenth Century British
Literature and Culture**

The Conflicting Poetics of Antiquity in De Quincey's Autobiographical Works: Orestes, Oedipus and the Expression of Trauma

Françoise Dupeyron-Lafay



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/miranda/6786>

DOI: 10.4000/miranda.6786

ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

Electronic reference

Françoise Dupeyron-Lafay, "The Conflicting Poetics of Antiquity in De Quincey's Autobiographical Works: Orestes, Oedipus and the Expression of Trauma", *Miranda* [Online], 11 | 2015, Online since 23 July 2015, connection on 08 September 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/6786> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.6786>

This text was automatically generated on 8 September 2022.



Creative Commons - Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International - CC BY-NC-ND 4.0
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

The Conflicting Poetics of Antiquity in De Quincey's Autobiographical Works: Orestes, Oedipus and the Expression of Trauma

Françoise Dupeyron-Lafay

- 1 In his 1821¹ *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, Thomas De Quincey (1785-1859), who was a distinguished classicist, reminisces about the authors on the curriculum at the Manchester Grammar School which he attended as an adolescent, and evokes the study of Sophocles (C, 7).² Besides, when he ran away from his school in 1802 (at the age of 17), one of the few belongings he took along was a volume of nine plays by Euripides (C, 11). By then, he was already fully familiar with ancient Greek and Greek tragedies as the beginning of the *Confessions* shows:

I was sent to various schools, great and small; and was very early distinguished for my classical attainments, especially for my knowledge of Greek. At thirteen I wrote Greek with ease; and at fifteen my command of that language was so great that I not only composed Greek verses in lyric metres, but could converse in Greek fluently and without embarrassment [...]. "That boy," said one of my masters, pointing the attention of a stranger to me, "that boy could harangue an Athenian mob better than you and I could address an English one." (C, "Preliminary Confessions", 6)

- 2 However, in the 1856 version of the *Confessions*, he insists that the use of Greek is not so much a question of linguistic proficiency as of elective affinities: "[...] the faculty of clothing the thoughts in a Greek dress is a function of natural sensibility, in a great degree disconnected from the extent or the accuracy of the writer's grammatical skills in Greek." (C 1856, 41) He used this classical knowledge extensively in his works, both formally and thematically. The preambles to the various sections of the 1821 *Confessions*—the introductory "To the Reader", for instance—are informed by the rhetorical and oratorical models (exemplified by Cicero or Demosthenes) frequently followed by didactic essays from the early 17th century on in Britain. The full range of devices used is quite traditional and familiar: *captatio benevolentiae*, persuasion,

expostulation, justification and self-justification, rhetorical questions, together with the art of the period—a particularly well-balanced and masterful art of prose writing, resting on binary oppositions and syntax, and a very dynamic, dialectical form of thought.

- 3 But I will not address this aspect of his work at greater length because it has already received critical attention and it is one of the better-known sides of his productions. And this is not where De Quincey's originality lies, either. What really distinguishes his autobiographical writings, and has been overlooked or under-researched,³ is the presence and influence of Greek tragedy, and perhaps more crucially, the tension between his use of rhetoric, as an instrument ensuring measure and (self-)control, and his groundbreaking (and *uncanny*) resort to Greek tragic models (Sophocles and Euripides, in particular) in *The Confessions*, as in his other autobiographical texts, such as *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845), *Autobiographical Sketches* (1853), the longer 1856 version of his *Confessions*, and some of his essays. "Theory of Greek Tragedy", an essay published in *Blackwood's* in 1840, testifies to De Quincey's very original, personal and idiosyncratic interpretation of antique drama as "a thing long past", unlike the tragedy of England that stages "a thing now passing" and whereby "We are invited by Sophocles or Euripides, as by some great necromancer to see long-buried forms standing in solemn groups upon the stage—phantoms from Thebes or from Cyclopien cities." (9)
- 4 Charles Rzepka, referring to this essay in "The 'Dark Problem' of Greek Tragedy: Sublimated Violence in De Quincey",⁴ writes that "The state of mind in which, according to De Quincey, we view Greek tragedy resembles hypnogogic states of dream-waking that typify the opium hallucinations described in the *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* [...]." (97) Rzepka points out the strange kinship between the tragic stage, as De Quincey sees it, and his opium dreams and visions, as well as the way Greek tragedy represents a psychic space reverberating with the tragedies of childhood. But beyond the presence and various manifestations of this antique Greek tradition and its tight connection with opium in De Quincey's works, what has not, so far, been addressed, is the subliminal motives and mechanisms accounting for this presence, and its very unusual function as an indirect autobiographical vehicle.
- 5 De Quincey actually pioneered the use of the Greek tragic heritage as the expression of "thing[s] long past"⁵—dysfunctional family relationships and personal emotional disorder.
- 6 The figure of Orestes in *The Confessions*, and that of Oedipus that literally haunts his autobiographical works, and even features in some of his essays (such as "The Sphinx's Riddle", 1850), convey the author's trauma and represent his own doubles—explicitly in the case of Orestes, and in a barely disguised way in that of Oedipus.⁶ The novelty of this literary undertaking is twofold (at least): (non-religious) autobiographic writings were not only a relatively recent phenomenon, but what was quite unprecedented was this diverting or even twisting of the classical heritage for introspective purposes. This grafting of a mythological and tragic corpus upon modern Romantic writings testifies to De Quincey's realization of its deeply illuminating potential in the psychological sphere. What he writes in "Theory of Greek Tragedy" is particularly telling and sheds light on his strikingly elliptical, stylized, and lacunary autobiographical treatment of this antique material, whereby little occurs *on the stage*, and much remains invisible and implicit because, like Greek drama, it is part of a "life as it existed in elder days" (9): Greek drama presents a "mode of being in states of *suffering*, for suffering is enduring

and indefinite" (9) and proposes "only a few grand attitudes or situations, and brief dialogues, as the means of illuminating those situations, with scarcely anything of action *actually occurring on the stage*" (9). Indeed, Greek tragedy is used in a very reticent, oblique and disguised way, partly for the sake of conscious self-protection, partly because of unconscious forces of resistance. So that, for all their rhetorical skillfulness, the justifications given to account for some blanks and omissions in *The Confessions*, expounded in the anonymous letter signed "X.Y.Z", published in the December 1821 issue of *The London Magazine* following the anonymous publication of the text itself,⁷ fail to convince us fully of the motives justifying a sensitive and scrupulous writer's reserve:

To tell nothing but the truth—must, in all cases, be an unconditional moral law: to tell the whole truth is not equally so: in the earlier narrative I acknowledge that I could not always do this: regards of delicacy towards some who are yet living, and of just tenderness to the memory of others who are dead, obliged me, at various points of my narrative, to suppress what would have added interest to the story [...] thus far I imposed a restraint upon myself, as all just and conscientious men would: in everything else I spoke fearlessly [...]. (Hayter, 119)

- 7 Stylistically, thematically and ideologically, the "law of antagonism" that was the cornerstone of De Quincey's conception of existence, shapes his works, with a constant swinging of the pendulum between what he called the "Literature of Knowledge" and the "Literature of Power" in his essay entitled "The Works of Alexander Pope" (1848). I should like to explore this permanent tension between urbanity, balance and control (the rhetorical and demonstrative prose model) on the one hand, and on the other the emotional violence and the threat of disintegration expressed by the Greek tragic paradigms in De Quincey's self-exploration. The (fantasized) tragic figures of Orestes and Oedipus are used in a radically new way as autobiographical vehicles and as the filters through which the author revisits and represents his painful childhood and youth (and his disturbed relationship with his mother). What is also particularly striking in the corpus is the coexistence of two antagonistic movements, their antagonism hinging on temporality and genre: there is on the one hand the empowering rhetorical vein that guarantees, or at least seeks to achieve, discursive authority and works prospectively, along a rationally structured, forward-moving axis; and on the other hand, there is a conflicting discourse of trauma, that pertains to the poetical mode, works retrospectively along an ever-receding backward-moving axis, and is characterized by its representations of the self as disempowered.

- 8 It is in the third section⁸ ("Preliminary Confessions", Part II) that this backward-oriented movement originating in trauma begins to operate, with the enigmatic reference to Orestes as the opium-eater's double:

There it was that for years I was persecuted by visions as ugly, and as ghastly phantoms as ever haunted the couch of an Orestes [...] I therefore, who participated, as it were, in the troubles of Orestes (*excepting only in his agitated conscience*), participated no less in all his supports. My Eumenides, like his, were at my bed-feet, and stared in upon me through the curtains; but watching by my pillow [...], sate my Electra; for thou, beloved M., dear companion of my later years, thou wast my Electra! (C, 35-36; emphasis added)

- 9 Moreover, the visual properties, configuration and intertextual associations of the Orestes scene conflate the questions of genre and gender. The generic models are hybrid as De Quincey represents himself as a helpless, haunted Greek character that is however reminiscent of the persecuted heroines of the Gothic novel who feel

threatened in their own rooms and their own beds. His reclining position, the night setting, its nightmarish quality, and the horror of the visions harassing him evoke Fuseli's young woman and her incubus in *The Nightmare* (1791). We should quote the companion-piece to this Orestes episode in which the incubus is mentioned explicitly this time.

The opium-eater loses none of his moral sensibilities or aspirations. [...] *He lies under the weight of incubus and nightmare*; he lies in sight of all that he would fain perform, just as a man forcibly confined to his bed by the mortal languor of a relaxing disease, who is compelled to witness injury or outrage offered to some object of his tenderest love: he curses the spells which chain him down from motion; he would lay down his life if he might but get up and walk; but he is powerless as an infant, and cannot even attempt to rise. (C, 67; my emphasis)

- 10 The common denominator is of course the lying posture of the writer, as if chained to his bed, his helplessness (associated with the feebleness of an infant in the second extract), and above all the obscure sense of guilt that permeates the two passages. When one reads the Orestes scene for the first time, without a previous knowledge of the subsequent autobiographical works of the corpus, one is at a loss to understand why the *Confessions*, the first text in the autobiographical series, should feature the strange reference to this Greek tragic figure as the writer's cursed and criminal double, and implicitly evoke the notions of matricide (while the author's mother was quite alive), guilt, haunting and punishment? Why, moreover, should incest be added with Margaret, De Quincey's wife, in the role of Electra, his "sister"?

- 11 In the next section of *The Confessions*, "The Pleasures of Opium", the writer describes his night ramblings when he had taken opium and lost his sense of time and place in the maze-like streets of London. This symbolises and duplicates our own reading experience of this enigmatic, labyrinthine text seemingly so full of riddles and dead ends:

Some of these rambles led me to great distances, for an opium-eater is too happy to observe the motion of time; and sometimes in my attempts to steer homewards [...] I came suddenly upon such knotty problems of alleys, such enigmatical entries, and such sphynx's riddles of streets without thoroughfares, as must, I conceive, baffle the audacity of porters and confound the intellects of hackney-coachmen. (C, 47)

- 12 This could also be understood as a metafictional comment on the complexity of the autobiographical undertaking when one has to address such an entangled skein of conscious and repressed memories and affects, and to verbalize the many-layered meaning of one's past. The depiction of London spatializes and metaphorizes the status of the writing self as a stranger to himself and the reference to the sphinx's riddle is another reference to the Greek tragic corpus that strengthens the poetic coherence of the whole. It conflates the Greek and Egyptian antiquities, fusing the Oedipus story and the image of Memphis, dodging the mechanisms of defence and repression and shedding light obliquely on the traumatic complex at work.
- 13 Just as the city and the writer's experience are a labyrinth, they also have a hieroglyphic quality that makes them proof to immediate, univocal analysis and interpretation. As Emerson wrote in *Nature* (1836): "'Every man's condition is a solution in hieroglyphics to those enquiries he would put.' (I: 4)" (Irwin, 11) The labyrinth and the hieroglyph are almost interchangeable in De Quincey's corpus: the latter is used recurrently to refer to the opacity of life and pain; the writer expresses his hope that after death, he will ultimately understand "the hieroglyphic meanings of human

sufferings" (C, 23). It also refers to the mysterious workings of the mind. De Quincey evokes "the hieroglyphics written on the tablets of the brain" in *Suspiria de Profundis* (149), a very interesting image that equates the brain and a surface on which encoded messages can be inscribed from infancy. This makes of the mind both a sort of crypt (in the sense of an underground burying-place) and the receptacle of cryptic messages. De Quincey therefore defines the autobiographer's mission as deciphering. This may be feasible, as he claims, in the case of some childhood experiences: "I decipher what the child only felt in cipher. [...] I the child had the feelings, I the man decipher them. In the child lay the handwriting mysterious to him; in me the interpretation and the comment." (S, 113) However, despite this confidence in his powers as interpreter, his texts repeatedly prove how distant traumatic childhood episodes persistently resist expression, elucidation and rational control. The cryptic Orestes scene is, indeed, a case in point.

- 14 Passive memory and the occultation of the past were questions that deeply interested the Romantics, especially Coleridge⁹ but De Quincey's approach went further as it also tentatively and poetically addressed the key aspect of repression in a proto-psychoanalytical and spatialized way. He first briefly dealt with this in the 1821 *Confessions*.

Of this at least I feel assured, that there is no such thing as *forgetting* possible to the mind; a thousand accidents may and will interpose a veil between our present consciousness and the secret inscriptions on the mind; accidents of the same sort will also end away this veil; but alike, whether veiled or unveiled, the inscription remains forever [...]. (C, 68-69)

- 15 He then articulated and developed his theories on memory in a pioneering essay, entitled "The Palimpsest", in *Suspiria de Profundis*. It is symptomatically placed immediately after the section of *Suspiria* called "The Affliction of Childhood" that describes at length the writer's very early experience of loss and bereavement (linked to the death of his father and several of his siblings¹⁰). As early as 1821, and even more so in 1845, he firmly believed that oblivion (regarding anything emotionally important) was utterly impossible, and that what was thought to be irremediably lost and forgotten would actually survive in the depths of one's mind, obscure and unsuspected.
- 16 Therefore, memories may be *only* temporarily inaccessible because of "a thousand accidents" but they remain present, although invisible and out of reach, till the end and might ultimately be unearthed by "accidents of the same sort". In his 1845 essay, De Quincey resorts to the metaphor of a palimpsest to illustrate the workings of the human mind. When he describes its various layers, the most ancient, the deepest and the first one he mentions is unsurprisingly Greek; he calls it "the Grecian tragedy" (S, 126). It is covered with several other texts (some of which medieval "the monkish legend" and "the knightly romance", 126), and the uppermost and most recent one (the identity of which is unspecified, it may be his own autobiography) is the only one with visible writing on it.
- 17 By using clever chemical devices, the monks were able to hide the original Greek text so as to write over it but they could not destroy it: "They expelled the writing sufficiently to leave a field for the new manuscript, and yet not sufficiently to make the traces of the earlier manuscript irrecoverable for us." (S, 141) This backward process of unearthing the layers, from the more superficial to the deeper ones, is compared to "thaumaturgy" (143), to the miraculous resurrection of a series of Phoenixes, but it also appears as particularly painful: "Chemistry [...] has extorted by her torments, from the

dust and ashes of forgotten centuries, the secrets of life extinct for the general eye, but still glowing in its embers.” (S, 143)

- 18 When De Quincey refers to the medieval monks who erased the Greek text to write upon it, he adds that “we unravelled their work [...], restoring all below they had effaced.” (S, 142) This is precisely what the reader endeavours to do with the autobiographical texts, in order to retrieve the first story on the “parchment which contained some Grecian tragedy, the Agamemnon of Aeschylus, or the Phoenissae of Euripides.” (S, 142) Although the play is presented as a possible example among others, we see that the first Greek tragedy that comes to the writer’s mind is precisely the one involving Agamemnon. Besides, it is the first play in the trilogy of the *Orestiea*, and it stages the murder of Agamemnon by his wife Clytemnestra. Antiquity is omnipresent in the “Palimpsest” essay and it is closely associated with chronological inversion and backward reconstruction:

The traces of each successive handwriting, regularly effaced, as had been imagined, have, in the inverse order, been regularly called back [...]; and, as the chorus of the Athenian stage unwove through the antistrophe every step that had been mystically woven through the strophe, so [...] *secrets* of ages remote from each other *have been exorcised* from the accumulated shadows of centuries. (S, 143; emphasis added)

- 19 Therefore, in order to be deciphered correctly, the seemingly incomprehensible Orestes scene in the autobiographical palimpsest requires a backward reading of the texts, reversing their chronological publication order (1856, 1853, 1845, 1821). Just as Greek antiquity is the most ancient and invisible layer of the palimpsest, it is also the most ancient and invisible layer of the writer’s emotional experience. It is intimately associated with childhood trauma, and conveys it in multiple indirect ways. We may first point out the very puzzling *choice* of words (or might it be a *slip*?) in the extract from *Suspiria*: that the past may have “secrets” is not really surprising—referring to the secrets of the past, or of history, is almost a set phrase—but that these secrets should be “exorcised” does not make sense unless we understand the secrets as intimate, ghost-like secrets.
- 20 Indeed, what “The Palimpsest” reveals is the author’s traumatic fixation and the obsessive return of the same haunting scenes: “[...] the Grecian tragedy had seemed to be displaced, but was *not* displaced [...]. In some potent convulsion of the system, *all wheels back into its earliest elementary stage.*” (S, 146; emphasis added)
- 21 A very brief and elliptical passage, situated at the end of “The Palimpsest”, draws a parallel between the “Grecian” tragedies written on the parchment and personal tragedies. The passage suggests an original form of trauma linked to babies’ experience of being wrenched away from their mothers, but this will never be mentioned again, directly or explicitly at least: “But the deep deep *tragedies* of infancy, as when the child’s hands were *unlinked for ever from his mother’s neck*, or his lips for ever from his sister’s kisses, these remain lurking below all, and these lurk to the last.” (S, 146; emphasis added) The persistence of this traumatic memory can be compared to the survival of the “Agamemnon of Aeschylus” on the vellum and on the “memorial palimpsest”. Likewise, in “Theory of Greek Tragedy”, De Quincey claims that the plays do not present “states of conflict”, as “conflict is by its nature, fugitive and evanescent” but “a mode of being in states of *suffering*, for suffering is enduring and indefinite” (9).

- 22 We can see that the agonizing and obsessive sense of guilt present in the Orestes scene of the "Preliminary Confessions" is later revealed chemically (as with the palimpsest) by the opium nightmares of the *Confessions*. "I came suddenly upon Isis and Osiris: I had done a deed, they said, which the ibis and the crocodile trembled at." (C, 74) It is only when we get to understand the origins of this nebulous guilt complex that the meaning of Orestes can be grasped. In *Opium and the Romantic Imagination*, Alethea Hayter describes the last painful hours of De Quincey's father in 1793, when the writer was but a child (aged eight), explaining that "[...] he was present at his father's actual death-bed, and heard his delirious complaints that he was deserted by his wife and crushed by unbearable weights [...]" (Part III, Ch. 10, 242-43). The father's "crushing" burden was obviously bequeathed to his son, as the Orestes scene and the image of the opium-eater lying helpless under the "weight of incubus and nightmare" (C, 67) fully show. The father's "incubus" may have been his own wife, just as she probably was her own son's "incubus", though De Quincey never *explicitly* presented her in this light.
- 23 She is, however, a haunting figure throughout his works. His autobiographical corpus is characterized by the strong polarity between the conscious representations of his mother (which, although often elliptical and reticent,¹¹ are marked by admiration, if not awe) and the highly charged, palimpsest-like subliminal ones, fraught with desire, hate and guilt, although they may converge in some respects. Her brief psychological portrait in the *Confessions* is a case in point, as it is consciously eulogistic but unconsciously damning.
- My mother I may mention with honour, as still more highly gifted; for though unpretending to the name and honours of a *literary* woman, I shall presume to call her (what many literary women are not) an *intellectual* woman; and I believe that if ever her letters should be collected and published, they would be thought generally to exhibit as much strong and masculine sense,¹² delivered in as pure "mother English," racy and fresh with idiomatic graces, as any in our language—hardly excepting those of Lady M. W. Montague. (C, 31)
- 24 We may assume that, as a masculine woman, his mother usurped her husband's place, symbolically killing him a first time while he was yet alive. As Grevel Lindop writes in *The Opium-Eater: A Life of Thomas De Quincey*, "Mr Quincey" was "mild"—therefore, almost feminine in his gentleness—and "can never have been much of a disciplinarian", while his wife "could be very tough-minded" (p. 6). Moreover, it should be pointed out that, for business and health reasons, this "mild" father who suffered from tuberculosis, had lived away from home (in the West Indies) for years, that his wife had brought up her children single-handedly¹³, and that he had only returned home to die, at the age of 39. This is when his wife had symbolically killed him for the second time by what he saw (rightly, or because he was delirious) as her indifference and neglect.
- 25 Another central episode strengthens the symbolic coherence of the palimpsest-like Orestes scene. When Thomas De Quincey ran away from the Manchester Grammar School in July 1802, and briefly came back home (before rambling in Wales and living like a tramp in London during the Autumn and Winter 1802-1803), he was unable to explain his motives to his mother and stood helpless, paralyzed and speechless in front of this icy-cold paragon of virtue.¹⁴ De Quincey insists his mother was usually "reasonable", compassionate, and "patient of explanations", but in this particular instance, she viewed his flight from school as an act of wanton rebellion, or "an explosion of wilful insubordination" (C 1856, 88). The episode of the flight from school

is evoked in the first 1821 *Confessions*, and so is the subsequent life of misery led in London, but, significantly, the decisive interview with the mother and its disastrous consequences are omitted in the 1821 text and will never be dealt with until the 1856 version. A close reading of this key scene retrospectively illuminates the Orestes theme, conflating it again with the Oedipus story through the Sphinx motif. As in the haunting of Orestes, lying helpless in his bed and persecuted by his Eumenides, as in the Oedipus myth, with the sphinx's petrifying stare, the image of the writer, unable to summon a convincing rhetoric, is a disempowered (if not feminized and castrated) one in this scene:

If in the world there is one misery having no relief, it is the pressure on the heart from the *Incommunicable*. And if another Sphinx should arise to propose another enigma to man—saying, What burden is that which only is insupportable by human fortitude? I should answer at once—*It is the burden of the Incommunicable*. At this moment, sitting in the same room of the Priory with my mother, knowing how reasonable she was—how patient of explanations—how candid—how open to pity—not the less I sank away in a hopelessness that was immeasurable from all effort at explanation. She and I were contemplating the very same act; but she from one centre, I from another. [...] Nothing which offered itself to my rhetoric gave any but the feeblest and most childish reflection of my past sufferings. Just so helpless did I feel, disarmed into just the same languishing impotence [...] as most of us have felt in the dreams of our childhood when lying down without a struggle before some all-conquering lion. I felt that the situation was one without hope; a solitary word, which I attempted to mould upon my lips, died away into a sigh; and passively I acquiesced in the apparent confession spread through all the appearances—that in reality I had no palliation to produce. (C 1856, 88; italics in the original and emphasis added)

- 26 Despite the author's vindication of his mother's humanity, she and the "all-conquering", pitiless lion turn out to be one and the same, just as in Euripides' *Electra*, Clytemnestra, is herself described as a fierce lioness, because only a wild mountain beast would have acted as she did (murdering her husband with an axe).¹⁵
- 27 As the eldest surviving son, Thomas de Quincey should have set an example—his failure to do so when he ran away from school heightened his sense of guilt and unworthiness—and had in a way to adopt the role of his own father,¹⁶ "killing" him in his turn, a role that may additionally account for the presence of Oedipus¹⁷ in the corpus, and for its disturbing conflation with the Orestes figure.
- 28 Hayter considers that the "harrowing" scene that the child witnessed when his father lay dying "had no resurrection in De Quincey's dreams" (243), but one may on the contrary argue that its darkly fantasized reverberations echo throughout his texts. Besides, the description Hayter gives of the dying father's return home¹⁸ is clearly duplicated, in "The Pains of Opium" section of the *Confessions*, by the visions of mournful moving friezes staging the time before the original sins committed by both Oedipus and Orestes, and by the end of the essay "Theory of Greek Tragedy":

The gradual slow approach of the carriage that brought his dying father home by night was elaborated by De Quincey's dreaming mind into innumerable mournful processions [...]. (Hayter 2, 242)

[...] at night, when I lay awake in bed, vast processions passed along in mournful pomp; friezes of never-ending stories, that to my feelings were as sad and solemn as if they were stories drawn from *times before Oedipus or Priam*, before Tyre, before Memphis. (C 1821, 67-68; emphasis added)¹⁹

[...] the mysterious solemnity conferred by the chorus, presupposes, and is in perfect harmony with, our theory of a life within a life—a life sequestered into

some far off slumbering state, having the severe tranquillity of Hades—a life symbolized by the marble life of sculpture; but utterly out of all symmetry and proportion to the realities of that human life which we moderns take up as the basis of our tragic drama. (Theory of Greek Tragedy, 20)

- 29 The moving friezes are probably reminiscent of the Elgin marbles that had been exhibited at the British Museum since 1816.²⁰ But more importantly, beyond the contextual influence, the “vast”, “mournful” processions are “drawn” from a very distant past, “before Oedipus or Priam”; in other words, before Laius was killed by his son, and before the Trojan war, a period when both Agamemnon and Clytemnestra were alive. The vision of this yet unsullied period when sons were still innocent, when the parricide and the incest, the murder of Agamemnon and the matricide had not been committed, stands for the obliteration of guilt and is dominated by masculine figures that seem to erase the negative role of women and mothers.
- 30 In the early autobiographical corpus, Orestes and Oedipus are depicted as figures of guilt and impotence; however, as time went by, the writer's persistent identification with Oedipus also gave him the ironic and paradoxical privilege of clear-sighted blindness. Till the end, Oedipus stood for De Quincey's life-long, obscure burden of guilt but the Greek double gradually took on additional significance, enabling the “memorial palimpsest” to lose part of its opacity, and the feeling of guilt to find some attenuation. To some extent, the evolution from the 1821 *Confessions* to the later 1856 version is the same as between *Oedipus Rex* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, as the conception of the fault committed by Oedipus undergoes a radical change. At the end of the first play, the protagonist's servant tells him he was predestined to be unhappy and Oedipus, who has not yet blinded himself, cries out he can now begin to see what he is and what he has done. Years later, in *Oedipus at Colonus*, when he is now a blind, and broken man after undergoing the pains of exile, wandering and deprivation, he can understand he was the helpless victim of overwhelming forces, so that he was not morally responsible for the monstrous faults committed in his youth. As a toy in the hands of the Gods, he underwent but never willed what happened.²¹
- 31 At the beginning of the “Palimpsest” essay (1845), De Quincey represents himself as a *dragoman* (S, 139), a term of Arab origin that was later used in Byzantine Greece as *dragoumanos*, meaning “interpreter”. It is as such that he poses in his 1850 essay “The Sphinx's Riddle”²² in which he revisits Sophocles' tragedy, which he calls “this impassioned tale”, with “portentous solemnity”, the four “separate movements” of which “ascend” from “the dusky shadows of that deep antiquity” (“The Sphinx's Riddle”, 236). And he offers a very personal, partly tongue-in-cheek (as he pretends to understand better than Sophocles and Oedipus themselves²³), partly heartfelt exegesis of it. The similarity between the Oedipus story as De Quincey sees it and his vision of existence—not just his own but as a whole—as multi-layered and hieroglyphic is quite striking in the essay: “All great prophecies, all great mysteries, are likely to involve double, triple, or even quadruple interpretations—each rising in dignity, each cryptically involving another.” (245)
- 32 But, as in *Oedipus at Colonus*, De Quincey's double in “The Sphinx's Riddle” is not morally guilty and serves as a vehicle for self-vindication:
- Incestuous had he been? but how, if the very oracles of fate, as expounded by events and by mysterious creatures such as the Sphinx, had stranded him, like a ship left by the tide, upon this dark unknown shore of a criminality unsuspected by himself? (“The Sphinx's Riddle”, 240)

But the headstrong haughtiness of youthful blood causes him to recoil unknowingly upon the one sole spot of all the earth where the coefficients for ratifying his destruction are waiting and lying in ambush. (*Ibid.*, 248)

- 33 Indeed, in the 1856 *Confessions*, he repeatedly insists that, like the Greek character, he had from birth been manipulated and controlled by obscure powers leading him to his ruin, especially in the case of his flight from the Manchester Grammar School, and his subsequent wanderings in London:

But now at last came over me, from the mere excess of bodily suffering and mental disappointments, a frantic and rapturous reagency. [...]

In the twinkling of an eye, I came to an adamantine resolution—not as if issuing from any act or any choice of my own, but as if passively received from some dark oracular legislation external to myself. (C 1856, 57-58)

[...] as if some overmastering fiend, some instinct of migration, sorrowful but irresistible, were driving me forth to wander like the unhappy Io of the Grecian mythus, *some oestrus of hidden persecution that bade me fly when no man pursued* [...].

[S]uddenly I took a fierce resolution [...] to throw myself in desperation upon London. (C 1856, 106; emphasis added)

- 34 Of course, the crisis and hardships of 1802-1803 never led to actual incest, parricide or matricide (they had in a way already been committed by then, as we saw), but they are supposed to be the origin of De Quincey's life-long experience of exile, and his morally agonizing addiction to opium. Shifting the ultimate responsibility for his addiction onto a blind, relentless fate was a pretext or a smoke screen, a partly-conscious, and convenient way of not seeing the truth, and exculpating himself from *all* his faults. At the beginning of the *Anatomy of Melancholy*, in "Democritus Junior to the Reader", Burton described the old philosopher who, in order to achieve a perfect state of contemplation, had chosen to blind himself and was enabled to see much more than the whole of Greece had seen or written on all manners of subjects. Like the old Democritus, Thomas de Quincey was paradoxically both painfully clear-sighted as the searing intensity of the discourse of trauma shows, and irretrievably blind: the depths of his tormented mind could occasionally be glimpsed when the original layer of the palimpsest was briefly laid bare, but, because it was so violently and harrowingly dazzling, the whole unbearable truth had to remain hidden and out of reach till the end.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barrell, John. *The Infection of Thomas De Quincey. A Psychopathology of Imperialism*. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1991.

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Biographia Literaria. Or Biographical Sketches of my Literary Life and Opinions* (1817). George Watson, ed. London and New York: Dent, 1971.

De Quincey, Thomas. *Autobiographic Sketches, 1790-1803* (1853). University of Michigan: University Library, The Michigan Historical Reprint Series, 2010 (Facsimile of the edition New York: Hurd and Houghton, and Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1878).

---. *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821), *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845), *The English Mail-Coach, or the Glory of Motion* (1849). Grevel Lindop, ed. Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1998.

---. *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1856). Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 1994.

---. "Theory of Greek Tragedy" (1840). W. D. Armes, ed. San Francisco, California: William Doxey, 1893, pp. 1-28.

---. "The Sphinx's Riddle" (1850), in *Memorials and Other Papers*, vol. II. Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1856, pp. 235-251.

---. "The Works of Alexander Pope, Esquire" (1848), in *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, vol. VIII. Whitefish: Montana, Kessinger Publishing, 2006, pp. 1-53.

Euripides. *The Electra of Euripides*. Transl. Gilbert Murray, Jim Manis, ed. The Pennsylvania State University: Electronic Classics Series, 2010. Last consulted January 31, 2013. <http://ebookbrowse.com/euripides-electra-pdf-d50919942>.

Hayter, Alethea, ed. Introduction to Thomas De Quincey. *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1986, pp. 7-24.

---. *Opium and the Romantic Imagination* (1968). Wellingborough, Northamptonshire: Thorsons Publishing Group, Crucible, 1988.

Hillis Miller, John. « Thomas de Quincey », in *The Disappearance of God. Five Nineteenth-Century Writers*. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1963, pp. 17- 80.

Irwin, John T. *American Hieroglyphics. The Symbol of the Egyptian Hieroglyphics in the American Renaissance*. [1980] Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983.

Keats, John. *Selected Poetry*. Elizabeth Cook, ed. Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1998.

Lindop, Grevel. *The Opium-Eater: A Life of Thomas De Quincey* (1981). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Morrison, Robert and Daniel Sanjiv Roberts, eds. Thomas De Quincey. *New Theoretical and Critical Directions*. New York and Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2008.

Rzepka, Charles J. Chapter 7, "The 'Dark Problem' of Greek Tragedy: Sublimated Violence in De Quincey". *Selected Studies in Romantic and American Literature, History and Culture. Inventions and Interventions*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2010, pp. 95-106.

Sophocles. *The Oedipus Trilogy (Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus, Antigone)*, Trans. F. Storr (Trinity College, Cambridge). Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press and William Heinemann Ltd, Loeb Library Edition, 1912.

Whale, John C. *Thomas De Quincey's Reluctant Autobiography*. London: Croom Helm, 1984.

NOTES

1. By the end of his life (he died in 1859) and his writing-career, De Quincey published a much longer version of the same *Confessions* in 1856.
2. The references to the works at the end of the quotations will be abbreviated as follows: C for the 1821 *Confessions*; S for *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845); and C 1856 for the longer 1856 version of the *Confessions*.
3. The Hellenistic dimension of his writings is absent from most critical studies—from John Hillis Miller's *The Disappearance of God*, John C. Whale's *Thomas De Quincey's Reluctant Autobiography*, or

John Barrell's *The Infection of Thomas De Quincey. A Psychopathology of Imperialism*, to name but three very insightful critical works. But even in more recent studies, such as R. Morrison's and D. S. Roberts's collection of essays, *Thomas De Quincey. New Theoretical and Critical Directions* (2008), the Greek tragic substratum is present in one essay, but it is not really addressed for its own sake by Gregory Dart who treats it as one aspect of crime and the Gothic in chapter 10, "Chamber of Horrors: De Quincey's 'Postscript' to 'On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts'".

4. "The 'Dark Problem' of Greek Tragedy" is the seventh chapter of Rzepka's *Selected Studies in Romantic and American Literature* (2010). Illuminating though it is, its brevity and status as isolated chapter provide a new confirmation that Greek tragedy is not yet a critical priority.

5. "Theory of Greek Tragedy", 9.

6. Because of these doubles, and because his autobiographical identity is particularly unstable, a binary logic is not sufficient to apprehend De Quincey's writings as several critics pointed out. The text "offers no single or consistent foundation from one point of view. The tactics mentioned create a system of various authorities which can alternate or can be superimposed one upon another." (Whale, 196-197) "In De Quincey's writing, however, there is often a particular process or scheme of displacement at work, one which suggests that a simple binary model, of self and other, might not always be adequate [...]" (Barrell, 8).

7. It was published in two instalments in *The London Magazine* in September and October 1821.

8. De Quincey's 1821 *Confessions* are not divided into chapters but into (at least) six main sections: "To the Reader", "Preliminary Confessions" (itself in two parts), "The Pleasures of Opium", "Introduction to the Pains of Opium", "The Pains of Opium", with its four entries as in a diary. *Suspiria de Profundis* is just as fragmented, each part bearing a title.

9. "[...] reliques of sensation may exist for an indefinite time in a latent state, in the very same order in which they were originally impressed; and as we cannot rationally suppose the feverish state of the brain to act in any other way than as a stimulus, this fact (and it would not be difficult to adduce several of the same kind) contributes to make it even probable, that all thoughts are in themselves imperishable; and, that if the intelligent faculty should be rendered more comprehensive, it would [...] bring before every human soul the collective experience of its whole past existence. And this, this, perchance, is the dread book of judgment, in the mysterious hieroglyphics of which every idle word is recorded! Yea, in the very nature of a living spirit, it may be more possible that heaven and earth should pass away, than that a single act, a single thought, should be loosened or lost from that living chain of causes, with all the links of which, conscious or unconscious, the free-will, our only absolute Self, is coextensive and co-present." (Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, Ch. VI, 66)

10. By the age of 12, Thomas De Quincey, born in 1785, had lost two of his eldest sisters (Jane in 1788, and his beloved Elizabeth, aged 9, in 1792); then, his father in 1793, and his elder brother William (aged 16) in 1797.

11. She is barely mentioned in the 1821 *Confessions*. And even in *Suspiria*, she is occasionally referred to anonymously, as "a lady": "[...] in the original Opium Confessions, I mentioned a case of that nature communicated to me by a lady from her own childish experience. The lady is still living, though now of unusually great age; and I may mention—that amongst her faults never was numbered any levity of principle, or carelessness of the most scrupulous veracity; but, on the contrary, such faults as arise from austerity, too harsh perhaps, and gloomy—indulgent neither to others nor to herself. And, at the time of relating this incident, when already very old, she had become religious to asceticism." (S, "The Palimpsest", 144-145)

12. The adjectives "literary" and "intellectual" are italicized in the original; emphasis is added for "as much strong and masculine sense".

13. After her husband's death, Mrs De Quincey was assisted by four guardians.

14. John Hillis Miller speculates on the presumably traumatic and devastating influence Mrs De Quincey's strict and austere evangelicalism (evoked in *Suspiria*, 144-145) must have had on her

son, probably accounting (partly so, at least) for his angst and exacerbated sense of guilt (60). See note 11.

15. "Herself, none other, laid / The hone to the axe's blade; / She lifted it in her hands, / The woman, and slew her king. / Woe upon spouse and spouse, / Whatso of evil sway / Held her in that distress! / Even as a lioness / Breaketh the woodland boughs / Starving, she wrought her way." (Euripides, *The Chorus*, 55-56)

16. "I had besides, through the casual allusion to my brothers, suddenly become painfully aware of another and separate failure in the filial obligations resting on myself. Any mother, who is a widow, has especial claims on the *co-operation on her eldest son in all means of giving a beneficial bias to the thoughts and purposes of the younger children* [...]. [she] had on her part satisfied all the claims made upon her maternal character, by self-sacrifices as varied, as privately I knew them to be exemplary." (C 1856, 89; emphasis added)

17. In the section entitled "The Affliction of Childhood" (*Suspiria de Profundis*), the comparison De Quincey draws between Oedipus and himself, as a child, when he had secretly got into debt, sounds quite enigmatic in this particular context. As a child, he could obviously not perceive his own predicament through the prism of Greek tragedy, a reference superimposed (quite or half) consciously by the adult looking back upon his early years. "No Grecian audience ever waited with more shuddering horror for the anagnorisis of the Oedipus, than I for the explosion of my debt." (S, 130)

18. The family feverishly waiting for the belated coach carrying the dying father back home and its slow, almost endless, approach at night, are described in a forceful, darkly dreamlike way in chapter II (60-62) of *Autobiographic Sketches* (1853).

19. This prefigures a passage from "Theory of Greek Tragedy": "But being, by the early religious character of tragedy, and by the colossal proportions of their theatres, imperiously driven to a life more awful and still—upon life as it existed in elder days, amongst men so far removed that they had become invested with a patriarchal or even an antediluvian mistiness of antiquity, and often into the rank of demi-gods—they felt it possible to present this mode of being in states of *suffering*, for suffering is enduring and indefinite; but never in states of *conflict* for, conflict is by its nature, fugitive and evanescent. The tragedy of Greece is always held up as a thing long past [...]." (9)

20. Their influence on, and fascination for, the Romantics is well-known, illustrated for instance by Keats's sonnet "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles" (1817). His evocation of the marbles in the poem, although quite different from the fantasized representation of the "friezes" in De Quincey's text, is, however, just as angst-ridden and saturated with the presence of death, the word "mortality" appearing as early as line 1. The marbles are "wonders" that generate a "most dizzy pain" (11) "That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude / Wasting of old time [...]" (12-13), casting "a shadow of magnitude" (14).

21. Therefore, Oedipus reproaches Creon with being unfair to him, as his hand was "all-unconscious" and he was "no willing sinner": "Murder and incest, deeds of horror, all / Thou blurtest forth against me, all I have borne, / No willing sinner; so it pleased the gods / Wrath haply with my sinful race of old, / Since thou could'st find no sin in me myself / For which in retribution I was doomed / To trespass thus against myself and mine. / Answer me now, if by some oracle / My sire was destined to a bloody end / By a son's hand, can this reflect on me, / Me then unborn, begotten by no sire, / Conceived in no mother's womb? And if / When born to misery, as born I was, / I met my sire, not knowing whom I met / or what I did, and slew him, how canst thou / With justice blame the all-unconscious hand?" (*Oedipus at Colonus*, 102)

22. The essay was initially published in the weekly *Hogg's Instructor*.

23. May we take his boast at its face value when, for instance, he claims that his answer to the sphinx's question is a major improvement? "Three thousand years, at the least, have passed away

since that riddle was propounded; and it seems odd enough that the proper solution should not present itself till November of 1849." (*Ibid.*, 236)

ABSTRACTS

Thomas De Quincey was a distinguished classicist who appropriated the Greek antique heritage in his works, both formally and thematically. Some of his texts are informed by rhetorical and oratorical models, as had often been the case for didactic essays from the early 17th century onwards in Britain. But De Quincey's originality lies elsewhere, since this rhetoric, as an instrument ensuring measure and (self-)control, is at odds with his groundbreaking (and *uncanny*) resort to Greek tragic models (Sophocles and Euripides, in particular) in his autobiographical texts. He pioneered the use of the Greek tragic heritage as the expression of dysfunctional family relationships, personal emotional trouble and trauma.

The figure of Orestes in *The Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, and above all that of Oedipus which literally haunts his autobiographical works and even features in some of his essays, represent his own uncanny doubles—explicitly in the case of Orestes, and in a barely disguised way in that of Oedipus. This diverting, or even twisting, of the classical heritage for introspection purposes was quite unprecedented but is also deeply illuminating.

Stylistically, thematically and ideologically, the "law of antagonism" that was the cornerstone of De Quincey's conception of existence, also shapes his works, with a permanent tension between balance and control (achieved through classic rhetoric) and the emotional violence, and the threat of disintegration (expressed by the Greek tragic paradigms). The paper highlights the radically new use of the (fantasized) tragic figures of Orestes and Oedipus as autobiographical vehicles, showing how they serve as the filters through which the author revisits his painful childhood and youth, his disturbed relationship with his mother, and represents them reticently and obliquely.

Thomas De Quincey, classiciste distingué, s'est réapproprié l'héritage grec antique dans ses œuvres, tant au plan formel que thématique. Certains de ses textes sont informés par les modèles rhétoriques et oratoires, à l'instar de bon nombre d'essais anglais à caractère didactique à partir du 17^{ème} siècle. Mais l'originalité de l'auteur se situe ailleurs, car cette rhétorique, synonyme de mesure et de contrôle (de soi), est en rupture radicale avec le recours pionnier (et « *unheimlich* ») aux modèles tragiques grecs (Sophocle et Euripide, en particulier) dans ses œuvres autobiographiques. La tradition grecque antique concourt à la représentation novatrice de troubles familiaux et personnels, et à l'expression du trauma.

Oreste, dans *Les Confessions d'un mangeur d'opium anglais*, et plus encore Œdipe qui hante littéralement les textes autobiographiques et apparaît même dans certains essais, constituent les doubles de l'auteur—de façon explicite pour Oreste et à peine déguisée pour Œdipe. Ce détournement de l'héritage classique à des fins d'introspection était sans précédent mais est aussi profondément révélateur.

Dans les domaines stylistique, thématique et idéologique, la « loi des antagonismes » qui sous-tendait la conception de l'existence de l'écrivain, est aussi le principe structurant ses œuvres, avec leur tension permanente entre équilibre et maîtrise (le pôle rhétorique) et violence émotionnelle, et menace de désintégration du moi (le paradigme tragique grec). Cet article met en lumière la nouveauté radicale de cet emploi des personnages tragiques (fantasmés) d'Oreste et

d'Œdipe comme mode d'expression autobiographique. Ils constituent les filtres qu'utilise l'auteur pour faire retour sur son enfance et sa jeunesse douloureuses, ses relations tourmentées avec sa mère, et pour les représenter d'une manière réticente et oblique.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Héritage classique, autobiographie, rhétorique, tragédie grecque, Oreste, Œdipe, trauma, inquiétante étrangeté, modes discursifs antithétiques, réticence

Keywords: Classical heritage, autobiography, rhetoric, Greek tragedy, Orestes, Oedipus, trauma, uncanny, conflicting discourses, reticence

AUTHORS

FRANÇOISE DUPEYRON-LAFAY

Professor of English Literature
University Paris-Est Créteil
dupeyron@u-pec.fr