

A Missing Suspiria de Profundis

Matt Schumacher

*“The opium eater crossed us once
with a dazzling path, and bath
as suddenly left us darkling.”*

—Charles Lamb, letter to Wordsworth

DEAR _____,

I hereby bequeath you the most frustrating case of my career, the baffling phantom, absurd goblin, and born wanderer of alleyways known as Thomas De Quincey. This De Quincey, famously laudanum-laced poet, is almost impossible to track, a slithering enigma, whose escape routes multiply everywhere he turns. He is a spectre who casts no shadows. His children, pack of mischievous urchins, have invented a number of games which leave us laughingstocks. On the sole occasion I recall the debtor standing before us, these little schemers put on innocent faces and contended he was a visiting relative. De Quincey himself slipped from the room unnoticed, as if liquid. I confess to wondering if his essence consists of smoke wisps, or if he is made of rain, able to dissolve his body at will. I trust you will have better luck than I—I, sir, have thoroughly given up hope.

THE ENGLISH OPIUM-EATER HURLED BY WHIRLWIND INTO AN AMERICAN HALLOWEEN

October’s upset apple cart spills its redfaced audience, applauding the god of laudanum, that fraudulent whirlwind, unleashing his opium-laced genius. He dervishes into our midst from the eighteenth century. O poisonous paradigm-bender fancying De Quincey a fresh-faced, runaway teenager on a blustery night, placing him in a long line for a modern halloween-themed house of nightmares, of the stripe that give people the creeps for a fee. *What bottom-dwelling bowls will this frightpalace belch and drawl?* young master De Quincey yells. Ushered in by bad actors pretending to be dead, frosted with a glut of black and white makeup, admitted for free due to his archaic costume, feigned accent, a fetching derelict poet hefts his effects. Some fake wretch pushes the splendidly weatherbeaten troubadour through creaking doors. Slanderous critics like jack o’lanterns grinning. Editors, ludicrous ghouls hanging upside down from the ceiling, hounding for another as-yet-unwritten masterclass on murderous art. Who could tire of sword-swallowing Wordsworths hailing from lakes of fire? Even with trick or treat-sized bags under the eyes. Hags whose faces are lashed with blood bounce above bony legs chase De Quincey through mazes. This little Englishman’s grinning. He favors the world when it’s most satirically, wildly spinning, the lack of pain via liquid delivery. He resiliently barks lines from Radcliffean villains at brooding monks in hoods, plays dead, then slides under the curtain, gives the slip to debtcollectors who hoard razorblades, chainsaws, and axes.

DE QUINCEY ACCIDENTALLY ENTERS AN ANGEL'S HOUSE

In another fitful, difficult life, De Quincey's a soot-covered sweep with narcolepsy, constantly surprised on sloping, high-pitched roofs by the heads of angels leering out of chimneypots. "Blake! Is that you playing tricks again?" he inquires. Blue angels with burning spheres clenched in their teeth, heavenly ones who vanish as he dives down after them. He finds himself falling into a house which is not a house, a houseful of stratosphere, blue sky, vaults of cumulus. See him skydive, laughing as he freefalls, pulling the ripcord from a parachute he has no business in the world having, landing softly in a meadow of daffodils.

THE ENGLISH OPIUM-EATER, REPORTEDLY ALIVE AND LIVING HIS DREAMS

De Quincey is such an uncontrollable seventeen-year-old runaway that he escapes the industrial age and enters an existence as trickster, confiscating NASA's cameras on the moon, one after another. He splices together a documentary film entitled, "a fit of wild, haggard bohemian roaming and staggering from worse to worse." Unmistakably, his likeness walks past as if ashambles in Wales or asunder in London. A lunar flâneur shuffling to and fro in tattered trenchcoat, scuffed shoes caked with moondust, declaiming his discoveries to the astronauts to whom he must have been invisible. Whithersoever comes this thin ghost estranged from English Romanticism, nineteenth-century relic, looking for what he never can recover? Is he an escapade of pure vapor? So many smoke rings of outrageous hoax? Flickering of trick spirit photography? De Quincey proves an innovative provocateur of cinema, and reveals the undersea cities, the phantasmatic eternities fit neatly within the poppy seed, *the great tube through which humans communicate with the shadowy*. He spirits the cameras away, climbs fully aboard the spaceship called *the faculty of dreaming*. Now we can see what astronomers see: De Quincey lowers himself into a crater and crawls through the ceiling of unknown opium dens. He's welcomed and cheered on by those who ghostify what we'd deemed mere barren dead sphere. We see him be a child again, carried into the air on triple ferris wheels, hyperdrive rollercoasters, gravity-defying rides that are not, were never there! Look closely through any telescope, and see for yourself: the man in the moon is writing his own *Biographia Literaria*, and gazes down on us so many evenings with the glum, all-knowing face of Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE HAS ALWAYS BEEN THE MAN IN THE MOON

"Picturesquely enveloped in his nightcaps," a glowingly pale Coleridge rose slowly to the podium, De Quincey assures us, but "often seemed to labour under an almost paralytic inability to raise the upper jaw from the lower." To see Coleridge in this light explains centuries of silence and a history of missing communications from the true man in the moon. To those of us long in wait for a word from him, one might read "Kubla Khan" and note the lunar innuendos of its pleasure dome. Bedridden in the attic like any man in the moon should be, Coleridge was known to shout down at his sole attendant, Mrs. Brainbridge, in the basement three floors below, just as the moon might shout at the earth, "Mrs. Brainbridge! I say, Mrs. Brainbridge!" Help from many brains and bridges—just what a sad or lazy moonman needs. Need more proof? There were rumors he sleptwalk with a lantern on the roof. And Coleridge alone wrote how the moon could partake in the murmur of an unwrinkled lake, how it was suffused over a sapphire heaven.

