

Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821 ; ed. Grevel Lindop, Oxford World's Classics, 1985)

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CM 2 Autobiographical writing and the form of the *Confessions*

Introduction : the genre of confession

DQ's initial address "to the reader" (1) defines the mode of his "writing", which belongs to the genre of the confession, makes it clear to the reader how he would like to be read.

What about "confession" as a literary genre? Generally considered, it seems to imply

1. a form of autobiographical writing (i.e. use of first-person + coincidence (adequation) between "narrator" and "author" (the "author" commits himself as such, as a living human being and not only as an abstract "persona" ; the "I" refers to a real entity and to a life-story, existential facts, the performance of some deeds, as opposed (normally) to mere comments or opinions
> coincidence between "author," "narrator," and "main subject of the narration" [Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique*])
2. a commitment to a form of sincerity, which often goes together with the acknowledgement of some guilt. But this definition has to be qualified : DQ refuses to acknowledge any sense of guilt ("my self-accusation does not amount to a confession of guilt," p. 2). The notion of "confession" may be understood in a more or less distant way, a more or less figurative sense (*Confession d'un enfant du siècle* : no sense of guilt at all, confession becomes a literary genre : autobiography written in a spirit of defiance (def. "defiance" : open and daring resistance to authority or an opposing force). Furthermore perfect sincerity does not exist : it verges on insincerity, it is in many cases a more or less disguised lie, it "shows" in order to "hide"; sincerity betrays a complex of guilt and transgression, a desire of forgiveness, expiation, sometimes a quest of mortification which is also a quest of recognition.

DQ rejects two previous modalities of literary confession: 1) proceeds from "demireps, adventurers, or swindlers" (1): what does he mean exactly? Not many precisions. The texts DQ seems to aim at were often spurious, or fake autobiographies (Fanny Hill, *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*. An eighteenth-century genre. Looks like a description of Defoe's novels (falsely genuine confession). Ex : *Moll Flanders*: "was twelve years a whore, five times a wife (whereof once to her own brother), twelve years a thief, eight year a transported felon in Virginia, at last grew rich, liv'd honest, and died a penitent—written from her own memorandums" (title-page) ; 2) confession as a "gratuitous act of self-humiliation" : moral reprobation (> moral rigidity of DQ). Rejects the cult of confession for confession's sake, the "public exposure of our own errors and infirmities," the "obtruding on our notice our moral ulcers and scars," particularly when confession emanates from someone who uses his faults to attract the public's attention; the "over-sincerity" of someone like Rousseau for instance (*Les Confessions*), whose "over-sincerity" is excessive and morbid, who indulges in "gratuitous self-humiliation," chooses to capitalize on his weaknesses to attract sympathy.

> DQ : a blend of sincerity and insincerity ; could be classed among those he criticizes ; yet rejects both pride and self-humiliation.

3) another famous example belongs to the tradition: Augustine's tale of his conversion to God in his *Confessions* (397-401: "œuvre lucide et sincère").

As Lejeune showed, autobiographical writing is regulated by a form of "pact" with the reader: fictional contract between writer and reader that the work will present an authentic representation of the writing subject.

How does DQ satisfy to these requirements?

The paradox of "erring" and "error"

DQ's first fear is that of being misunderstood, the fear of misconception—yet he chooses "error" as the primary event ("cardinal event," 37) in his life story.

Text of the *Confessions* originates in:

- the crucial event of his "elopement" or "abscondence" from school:

"That I would elope from Manchester—this was the resolution. *Abscond* would have been the word, if I had meditated anything criminal" (1856 Revision, 168); def. "abscond": hide oneself, go away hurriedly and secretly (eg from justice);

- the primary "error" that determines much of his later life: "this fatal error in my life" (163);

- the "ruin . . . which threw me out a homeless vagrant upon the earth before I had accomplished my seventeenth year" (164).

Cf. "English Mail-Coach": "luxury of ruin" (212), intense pleasure taken in the contemplation of one's "fall" (each man repeats the original fall), of one's end.

"Error": double meaning "mistake" + "wandering", conflation of meanings, fusion of two readings into a composite one.

Through a development of this ambivalence, this conflation of errors may be said to apply both to his life, the reading of his life by himself as adult, and to the reading of his manuscript by the public.

An indissoluble link is created between the "error" from which the C seems to emanate and the process of writing.

The indirect consequence of his "erring" upon the roads as a result of his elopement was writing—and the form of his writing reproduces, mimics, his meanderings and wanderings on the road (cf. his account of his walking in Wales ["After wandering about for some time . . .," 11], his pacing up and down Oxford Street, etc.

We can see a form of his obsession with "erring" in the compulsive activity of rewriting which he carried on endlessly, to the end of his life, feeling bound to revise and expand upon his text to make sure that he was read correctly and was not misconceived. Showed a fear, a maniac obsession of being misunderstood, misinterpreted by the reader: thought it very likely to happen (cf. "English Mail-Coach" 219: "in the first step toward the possibility of a misfortune, I see its total evolution" ;

or this remarkable letter written during the revision of the *Confessions* for his collected edition:

". . . to evade misinterpretation and constant ambiguity, requires a redundancy of words—and . . . requires in addition a *Reader* that is not only singularly attentive, but also that has a surplus stock of *leisure time* . . . I am and *have* been at all stages of this nominal reprint (but virtually *rifacimento*) of the *Confessions*, in terror of mutual misunderstandings—consequently [*sic*] of each party unintentionally thwarting or embarrassing the other by movements at *cross purposes*."

The process seems apparently to extend itself for ever: "despite the negative characterisation implied in the definition of experience as error, DQ is enabled to overcome the threat to the meaning of his words by the endless extension made possible by having erred" (Baxter).

The "erring" (the "Pariah heart" [232], the fact of being a misfit, an outsider) (the digressive form of the manuscript, which mimes the physical wanderings in England and London) is the materialization of the "fatal error" of the start.

Inner logic vs contingency

In addition to the anguish of misconception, DQ was acutely aware of the "contingent" nature of his writing, which entailed a parallel preoccupation with its inner logic.

Cf. the following quotation, from the revised *Confessions* (*Selections Grave and Gay*, vol. 5, 113-14) which throws light on this intense preoccupation with the logic of one's life, the shifting logic to which it is perpetually submitted:

"In fact, every intricate and untried path in life, where it was from the first a matter of arbitrary choice to enter upon it or avoid it, is effectually a path through a vast Hercynian forest, unexplored and unmapped, where each several turn in your advance leaves you open to new anticipations of what is next to be expected, and consequently open to altered valuations of all that has been already traversed. Even the character of your own absolute experience, past and gone, which (if anything in this world) you might surely answer for as sealed and settled for ever—even this you must submit to hold in suspense, as a thing conditional and *contingent* upon what is yet to come—liable to have its provisional character affirmed or reversed, according to the new combinations into which it may enter with elements only yet perhaps in the earliest stages of development."

Numerous endeavours to impose a logic, to explain the "natural order of succession" and the "regressive" logic of the work (89, introduction to *Suspiria*): "the outline of the work travelled in this course" : the wish to give an account of his dreams ("to display the faculty itself," 88), led him back to opium, which in turn took him back to his elopement as an adolescent (argumentation repeated in an expanded form in Revision 204-205).

The work shows major inconsistencies between early and late stages: for instance in what concerns the part played by opium: the "true hero" [78] becomes an "ugly pole" [94].

As Josephine McDonagh shows (*De Quincey's Disciplines*: Oxford, Clarendon, 1994 [BU]), the theory that opium works as a unifying principle bringing order and harmony is obviously contradicted by the text. No unity, no order, no harmony, no centre: an "incomplete, digressive narrative that defies all semblance of unity," made of "linear narratives leading from and to absence and loss" (McDonagh).

Two opposed logics at work: that of the **autobiographer**, whose task is necessarily incomplete, self-expanding, unending: the unending process of filling in the gaps, adding further details . . . the process of revision, explanation, justification, towards or away from the center, we may wonder; and the logic of **dream-narrative**, which is supposed to be the end-result of the biographic reconstruction, but which runs counter to biography, since it evinces a loss of control on the part of the writer and subject, a loss of agency and ultimately of identity—as attests the process of reduction, pruning to which the "sequel" to *Confessions*, *Suspiria*, is submitted.

Two opposed dynamics inform the compositional histories of the *Confessions* and its "sequel" *Suspiria*. The former work is the result of an additive process of composition in which the narrative section was increasingly extended over the years while the projected dream component had to be virtually scrapped. The *Suspiria*, on the other hand, underwent a paring-down process of decomposition. The autobiographical narrative sections were slowly stripped away, ostensibly as part of DQ's effort to reorganize his writings for the collected edition. Dissolving the writer-reader bond, opening up a space for a radically different discourse without subject matter and without subjects (speakers, thinkers, even dreamers)—in short, a pure discourse of dream.

CM 3 Digression in the *Confessions*

We have established that there are two logics at work in the writing of the *Confessions*: that of **dream-narrative**, supposed (according to DQ's statements) to be the "be-all and end-all" of the writing enterprise; and that of **autobiographic reconstruction**, supposed to provide the keys, to be instrumental, to the images and revelations of dreams.

The poetics of dream-narrative may be characterised as follows:

- 1) fragmentation. A dream-narrative is a closed unit, a micro-narrative in itself, it is by essence discontinuous
- 2) a loss of control of the dreaming subject (over his material)
- 3) enlargement and disrupting of the categories of space and time
- 4) law of figurability (specific rhetoric).

On the other hand autobiographic reconstruction obeys a logic of digression. The writer has never finished filling in the gaps in his life story, the reconstruction is endless. These two features of digression and fragmentation are important components in the law of composition of the *Confessions*. We must be aware that the original *Confessions* represent the first stage of what DQ wished to achieve. In later years and with the distance he reconsidered some of his initial formulations, discovered/uncovered the truth of what he had more or less spontaneously achieved, fully exploited tendencies which were already at work in the original text.

Now both the fragment and the digression can be seen as components of romanticism, such as was notably practised by the novelist Jean Paul [John-Paul-Frederick Richter] and expounded by the "theorists" of German romanticism (notably August and Friedrich Schlegel).

A few words about the figure of "Jean Paul"

Filiation with Swift, Sterne, Diderot. Forged a new literary aesthetic which combines personal confession (labeled as "sentimental") with the form of the digression (of a "humorous" character).

Jean-Paul was influenced by Sterne, he developed Sterne's sentimental humor into a specifically "romantic" (acc. to Schlegel) aesthetic; he integrated Sterne's art of digression with the fantasy of dream description.

Schlegel claims that JP improves on the work of his predecessor in this regard: "I place Richter over Sterne because his imagination is far more sickly, therefore far more eccentric and fantastic."

DQ: same opinion about superiority of JP. In *Suspiria* (1845) praises him for the "wandering fancy of his poetic heart" (n. 101). Could have subscribed to Schlegel's judgment.

- sees him as the inheritor and the main promoter in the "modern" age of the "digressive" tradition (a mixed British and German one);
- borrows from him some of his concepts: the notion of man's individual and collective "up-bringing" (*Bildungsprozess*); the correlation between religion, science and writing as animated by the same law of antagonism: Fall of Man/resurrection of Christ as theological concept, gravitation-levitation as scientific notions, gravity-levity as stylistic notions.

A "digression on digressions" [Swift: "Digression in Praise of Digressions," *A Tale of a Tub*]: *digression as a rhetorical concept*

Cf. the passage from the beginning of the *Confessions* (pp. 4-5) which explains the unity of the work, the link between the "preliminary confessions" and the "opium confessions": the story of the "early sufferings", the biographic element, create an *interest* in the person of the opium-eater.

This last argument reminds us of what was said of *parekbasis* [Greek word for digression = "a step to the side"] in ancient rhetoric: the use of digression is oratorical, it is part of the art of the solicitor (attorney, barrister) and consists in attracting the attention of the audience on the *life and personality* of the defendant in order to divert it from the crime for which he stands accused and to gain leniency from the tribunal. Hence this curious link between biography and digression, which seems to apply perfectly to our case in hand. A digression could be made in the course of a plea, for the purpose of recapitulating the events of someone's life, his lineage, education, achievements, and so forth.

In the novel, particularly in 18th-c works, this rhetorical sense of digression is adapted: the narrator is allowed to *intrude into the story of his protagonist's adventures*, for the purpose of presenting his own personal views on a variety of topics. Inversion of perspectives: the biographical element (component), which formerly had been restricted to the digression, now emerged as the principal subject matter and was liable to be punctuated by digressions and asides.

As we approach the Romantic era, the emphasis shifts from the narration of the hero's adventures to the narrator's **digressions**.

Significant quotations

- Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*: "digressions, incontestably, are the sunshine;--they are **the life, the soul of reading**; take them out of this book for instance,--you might as well take the book along with them."
- Jean Paul: "Make digressions, but do not plant them in the footnotes"
- De Quincey: compares his own narrative technique to "a *caduceus* wreathed about with meandering ornaments, or the shaft of a tree's stem hung round and surmounted with some vagrant parasitical plant. . . . The true object in my "Opium Confessions" is . . . those **wandering musical variations** upon the theme—those parasitical thoughts, feelings, **digressions**, which climb up with bells and blossoms round about the arid stock . . ." (Introductory Notice, *Suspiria* 94).

In the Romantic novel as envisioned by Schlegel, *parekbasis* becomes a destructuring principle, a means of dissolving the speaker-listener, writer-reader relation, and of canceling those "framing techniques"—such as the modern device of the self-conscious narrator—which fiction has repeatedly adopted to differentiate itself from the "real" world. The specific rhetorical relation of supposed confidence and communication between the narrator and the reader is destroyed. Such a literature of permanent *parekbasis*, of uninterrupted interruption, provided the only available approach to a realm of pure vision, to the world of the dream.

Digression and wandering

The form of the *Confessions* : permanent digression, joy felt in wandering (wandering as a principle of composition and a physiological state of enjoyment)—and yet at the same time quest of a hidden pattern, obsession with the origin, the founding event from which everything derives (elopement from school, death of Elizabeth) : everything afterwards is the repetition of a primal scene, of an originary event. Shapes the « economy of the mind ».

On the one hand, DQ wants to have his reader understand that the link between the « early sufferings » and his addiction was a « casual » one (1856 revised *Confessions*, 204-05): a mere chain of causes and effects. Something merely contingent ("contingent upon"). Hence the off-handed tonality of his early "wanderings": in North Wales, for instance (11 sq.): light-hearted and digressive, for instance when he decides to leave the lady who rented him a room in Bangor because her employer, a Bishop, wanted to warn her against the risk of harbouring robbers (12-13). Same tonality in the "Pleasures of Opium" in London: he delights in losing his way in the labyrinth of the streets, to merge with the crowd (sympathise with the pleasures of the poor). Many such "digressions", changes of mood, change of course [changement de cap: "steer homewards, upon nautical principles, by fixing my eye on the pole-star," 47].

What takes place in those "digressive" episodes (the meeting with the Malay for instance, 55-58) is likely to become central, essential, hieroglyphic : the figure of the Malay becomes a central one in his dreams. Dialectical law by virtue of which what is most digressive is likely to become most central : equivalence "centrifugal/centripetal" (88). What one tries to evade by a "step to the side" comes back to the centre.

- In quest of a pattern of order, harmony, permanence, which is to be grasped under the apparent "contingency" (quotation already given) of his life.

Characteristic examples borrowed from the Confessions

- 11 "Accident, however, gave a **different direction** to my **wanderings**," "after **wandering** about for some time"
- 12 "An **accident** . . . drove me out to **wander** again"
- 23 "Soon after the period of the last **incident** I have recorded . . ."
- 35 "years that were far asunder were **bound together** by subtle links of suffering derived from a common root"
- 45 "**by the bye**," "a subject **foreign to my present purposes**"
- 47 "wander forth, **without much regarding** the direction or the distance"
- 52 "This event, being **no ways related** to the subject now before me . . ."
- 55 "**by the way**," "a little **incident**"
- 57 "this incident I have **digressed** to mention"
- 58 "I shall **quit** the subject"
- 62 "For several reasons, I have not been able to compose the notes for this part of my narrative into any regular and connected shape. I give the notes **disjointed** as I find them . . ."
- 67 "the **history and journal** of what took place in my dreams" : day-to-day account, no plan, no connectedness

75 “I have had **occasion** to remark, at various periods of my life, that the deaths of those whom we love, and indeed the contemplation of death generally, is (*caeteris paribus*) more affecting in summer than in any other season of the year” : presented like a digression yet a central topic.

+ **digressive footnotes** : ex. p. 5 analysis of the intellectual situation in Britain ; p. 25 the Jewish money-lender and the money tractations : could have been inserted in the main narrative ; 101 Jean Paul and Milton.

Further elaboration of the concept of digression : the death of Elizabeth

An event « of a nature to alter the whole economy of his mind » (*Suspiria* 91), the « one which affected his childhood as a privilege exception » (92). Yet in the heart of his narration, DQ introduces a « **digression** » (105)—a fundamental one since it is here that he forges the word « **involute** » (104). What is the function of this digression ? to ward off (*tenir à l'écart*) the climactic event by means of a development on the interrelation of death and summer, the affinity between summer and the feeling of death (already introduced in the original *Confessions*, 75).

DQ does not present death directly, the child DQ does not confront his sister's corpse directly. He is distracted from the scene of death by the radiance of summer, which provides the occasion for this digression. Digression functions as a **mechanism of deferral** ("stratégie de détournement"). In spite of the importance of the event (Elizabeth's death), the narrator does not directly proceed to tell the episode of himself as a six-year-old setting eyes on his sister's corpse. The transcendent reality of death is approached, “passes to us,” through an “involute” (104).

Religious/ theological dimension of the concept : romantic theorizing of digression as connected with transgression and fall (Schlegel)

Newton's formulation of a gravitational principle, and the central role of that principle in the emerging natural sciences, was registered by several Romantic writers as constituting, after the Fall in Eden caused by Adam and Eve's partaking of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, man's *second fall*.

Every digression represents a transgressive impulse to escape the straight line of the narrative, the gravity of the plot, and ultimately the curse of the Fall.

Man compelled to permanent digression as a means of avoiding a return to the center which was now seen for what it was—a center of mortality, a center of death: Jerusalem is no longer the “*omphalos* (navel) of the earth” (105).

Thus in DQ (*Suspiria* 103-06) the "gravity" of a narrative preoccupied with death is counterbalanced by the "levity" of a *digression* (105) concerned with the connection between death and summer.

Schlegel was the first critic to recognize the digressive principle in "Romantic Poesie" as a result of his study of the novels of Sterne, Diderot and Jean Paul. This same recognition, moreover, was intuitively understood and developed by DQ, who created a **dialectic of digression and dream vision** in his own confessions, and who thematized the **hidden counterforce of gravitation** as both the agency and the consequence of man's spiritual and moral fall. . . . Gravity must be deferred, postponed, or sidestepped (meaning of "parekbasis") by a permanent performance of digressive levity.

Philosophical dignity of the fragment in the romantic period

A long tradition of fragmentary writing : Chamfort's *Maximes*, Shaftesbury's *Characteristics*, La Rochefoucauld's *Maximes*, Heraclitean fragments.

The fragment may take the form of "aphorism" : a short paradoxical statement, through which one strives at reaching and expressing some kind of higher truth or degree of meaning. What is favoured in the fragment is the clash of ideas and images, the use of insight and intuition instead of the reasoning faculty.

In the romantic period, the fragment becomes one of the major modes of writing and is particularly favoured by German romantics. Dual fascination in Romanticism for *organic form* and *fragments*. How are the two things correlated?

The romantics are fascinated by the "infinite" potentialities (of meaning) of the fragment, and by its link with its dialectical opposite, the much favoured idea of "oneness," totality, organic unity (hence Coleridge's famous definition of poetry as "esemplastic"). The whole can only be conveyed or approached, "intuited," through the mode of the fragment; the fragment is a pre-condition of the whole.

The qualities of the fragment fall under three headings:

1. brevity, unachievement, absence of discursive development, infinite potentiality of meaning
2. variety of tone, mixture of objects, heterogeneity, digressive character

3. unifying principle, which is to be sought not in the fragment itself but at a transcendent level

Fragmentariness = essential. L'"essence propre" de la poésie romantique est de "ne pouvoir qu'éternellement devenir, ne jamais s'accomplir"

Vision of romantic poetry as (Schlegel) "un océan de forces en lutte où les particules de la beauté dissoute, les morceaux de l'art disloqué s'entrechoquent dans le désordre d'un trouble mélange."

"La tâche proprement romantique—poïétique—n'est pas de dissiper ou résorber le chaos, mais bien de le construire ou de faire oeuvre de désorganisation" (Lacoue-Labarthe).

Digression, fragmentariness : aesthetic of discontinuity

- Variety of discursive (levity/gravity)
- Discontinuity of the narrative structure
 1. disrupted chronological framework. DQ jumps over periods of time, creates links between different moments in his existence
 2. disrupted frameworks of events (ellipsis, interruption, etc.). A good deal of overlapping in the divisions of the narrative, encroaching (pleasures, pains, etc.)
- Architecture of the self
 1. process of "involution" (104), process of unconscious reminiscence, the unity of a life "in a piece of arras-work" (45): illumination, epiphany; recurring figures (feminine paradigm, the Malay).
 2. duplication of the same, "Piranesi-effect," a "Piranesi-self." Architecture of the work: constant effects of duplication, mirroring, embedding, displacement > no central, "reflecting consciousness" (in the sense of James). Cf. the dream of his life in a cottage: depicts himself being looked at, framed and fashioned by the reader.

CM 4 Dream and dream-narrative in the *Confessions*

Preliminary remarks

1) we have to make a distinction between *dream* and *dream-narrative*

To what extent do words faithfully convey the actual content (“manifest content” in Freud) of dream?

A question we have to leave aside

2) Reflections on cultural history

It may be considered that the *Confessions* testify to a new importance of dream in prose fiction and to the growth of an interest for the unconscious in general. This is true up to a certain point, but we have to be aware that dream and dream-narrative also belong to an old cultural and literary tradition. One is tempted to perceive an object of study, whatever its nature and field of reference, as a landmark, the emergence of something new—whether in the history of ideas or in artistic forms. This is true and false at the same time. We can speak of

- a permanence of forms, a resilience, a permanent revisiting of forms (more or less voluntary: e.g. the revisiting of the “epic” with Joyce in *Ulysses*)
- a permanent evolution or “dissolve”: every work is original and brings in something new, contributes in its way to an evolution of forms)
- radical transformations, the passage from one age or era to another, sometimes called “epistemological breaks”: the whole intellectual framework, the whole theoretical and critical apparatus is altered, the centre of gravity is displaced.

DQ : wrote “minor” literature yet a very important figure historically speaking, as a link between romanticism and modern age. The importance given to dream is part of this displacement of interests and values.

Dream-n. in C can be studied from several pts of v.:

- *rhetoric and poetics of dream*. Rhetoric = inner organisation of particular discourse; poetics = system of writing as a whole. Poetics: insertion of dreams within the overall narrative framework. Dreams participate in the fragmented/digressive structure of the work. Yet at the same time testify to its quest for a unifying pattern: they permit to link different episodes through the recurrence of figures etc. Rhetorically speaking, dream-narrative function as closed units, specific for their staging of space and time and for their narrative structures (close to parataxis : principle of juxtaposition)
- *theory and practice of dream*. Dream as linked to vision in general, an exemplary form of vision. Was generally favoured by romantics (German ones even more than English ones) because of its essential link with the romantic concept of vision. Vision for the romantics is a power (“visionary power”), a power of revelation which manifests itself in moments of epiphany. Vision is a privileged mode of apprehension of reality. Not analytic but synthetic: it allows a concentration of meaning (quintessential meaning). It escapes the constraints of time. Ex p. 45: “the whole of my past life as in a piece of arras-work.” Vision allows the grasp of wholeness (totality) and is simultaneous. Cf. 145: “not as succession, but as parts of a coexistence.”

Cultural references

Middle Ages

“dream vision” : a popular genre in medieval times, a kind of allegorical poem (allegory = speak otherwise, the apparent sense refers to another sense hidden under the first)

two types : secular love vision/religious-philosophical vision (ex Wordsworth : a philosophical dream, the Arab, DQ’s favourite passage in Pr.), which descends from prophetic books in the Bible (Book of Ezekiel)

German and English Romanticism

According to Abrams (*Natural Supernaturalism*): romanticism develops out of a Christian tradition of “visionary poetics”

Fichte (post-kantian idealism): nature is a projection of the self, the universe is within us

Novalis: dream is a revelation, an ecstasy, a union of opposites (night and day, death and life, unconsciousness and consciousness)

Jean Paul: dream as an activity of the inner sense and imagination. In dream man is cut off from outside perception.

French romanticism

Nerval: dream permeates real life, archetypal value of dreams (through dreams we communicate with the memory of mankind, dream images are symbols and myths)

Baudelaire: “savoir rêver,” “hieroglyphic dream”

Rimbaud, “illumination profane”

Psychoanalysis and the Freudian framework for the study of dream

“Dream-work”: allows the transformation of the “material of dream” into its “manifest content” (as opposed to its “latent content” produced by interpretation)

Four mechanisms are at work in dream-work

1. “condensation”: one representation may be the gathering point of several chains of associations
 2. “displacement”: the intensity of a representation is likely to be displaced on apparently less important chains
 3. “representability” [not “figurability”!]: dream-thoughts take a visual form
 4. “secondary elaboration”: transformation of dream-thoughts into coherent scenario
- “Mnemonic trace,” “memory trace”: inscription of an event in memory

"History and journal of what took place in my dreams" (67)

Last section of the *Confessions*, their culmination and accomplishment.

A section in itself, a sequence of dream narratives, a homogeneous body of dreams, even if incomplete and fragmentary, according to what DQ said later.

Yet these dream narratives are simply presented as a study in "physical economy" (67): the expression reminds us of DQ's interest in and fascination for "economic" systems, particularly that of David Ricardo (64-66).

DQ admired Ricardo primarily as the "gothic architect of political economy" (McDonagh), the one whose theory revealed "secret and phantasmatic chambers" and whose system could but satisfy DQ for another reason (apart from its sheer difficulty): its economy is built on a model of scarcity, the circulation (of money, capital, etc.) rests upon impossibility that a consumer's desire can ever be fulfilled—a feature which reminds us of the image of the architectural engraver Piranesi: "power of endless growth and self-reproduction" (71).

The dreams are intensely personal, yet through the use of this formula ("physical economy") DQ suggests that he presents them as a kind of case study and gives a clinical description ("The *Opium Confessions* were written . . . with the purpose of displaying the faculty itself," *Suspiria* 88). Paradoxical though it may appear, he refuses to view himself as a unique individual, shows no cult of the personality, no "egotistical sublime," according to the phrase forged by Keats to give the key-note of Wordsworth's poetry.

If the dreams are a culmination and an accomplishment, it is in two respects and for two fundamental reasons:

- in their sheer capacity for creation, as producing and offering, in the mighty "theatre" of the brain (68), "nightly spectacles of more than earthly splendour" (68), the most extraordinary, "gorgeous spectacles" (68) one can imagine (the word "splendour" is repeated twice, so is the word "spectacles");
- together with this capacity for creation, dream is also shown to be a source of intense pain, pain at its most intense. The "splendour" of dreams quickly becomes "insufferable" (68); and the "gorgeous" spectacles, through a significant alliteration, are attended with a deep sense of "gloom" (68).

The essence of dream thus lies in an alliance of extremes, a paroxysmic union of "horror" and "splendour" expressed in the text through the form of the oxymore: "insufferable splendour". If, on the one hand, dreams appear as an *analogon* of poetic creation, or, to quote from *Suspiria*, "the magnificent apparatus which forces the infinite into the chambers of a human brain" (88), on the other hand, they are a challenge to the existence of the moral faculties, an experiencing with the most extreme forms of moral repulsion, as shown through the journeying from terror to horror, hatred, abomination in the "oriental dream" (73-74). The oxymore which epitomises the condition of the opium-dreamer, "insufferable splendour," suggests a new mode of creation, an experimenting with limits—both the limits of artistic creation and those of existence as a moral subject.

Dream as analogon of poetic creation

If dreams are described as an exploration of the "depths" of the human mind, a "descent into chasms and sunless abysses, depths below depths, from which it seemed hopeless that I could ever re-ascend" (68), the image of drowning which this description implicitly conveys, connects the experience of dream with that lived by a "near relative of his" (69, presumably his mother, when she fell into a river at the age of nine. This episode is narrated three times in DQ's works: a first time in the introduction to the dream narratives in the original *Confessions*, a second time in the "palimpsest" section of *Suspiria* (145), and a third time with a more circumstantial account of facts in a note to the revised *Confessions* (Hayter 213-14). The "process of struggle and deadly suffocation" undergone by the child (Hayter 214) ends in a "blow on or in the brain," "a blazing rocket sent up from the brain" (*Suspiria* 145), to which succeeds, in a "dazzling rush of light," the "solemn apocalypse of the entire past life." Such an extraordinary mode of "epiphanic" vision, elsewhere called the "vision of sudden death" ("English Mail-Coach" 209), described somewhat morbidly by DQ, but with a noteworthy insistence on clinical, physiological details, is not essentially different, according to him, from the experience of dream. It has in common with dream two essential features: the power of bringing back to consciousness (a power of "resurrection," *Suspiria* 145) forgotten scenes from childhood, and the break with the logic of successivity on

which it is founded. DQ connects this clinical faculty of apocalyptic vision with the biblical symbol of the "Last Judgment": the sudden revelation to an individual, when on the verge of dying, of the whole of his past life (69)-the "whole and every part" (69), which, to Coleridge, is a definition of poetry ("cette forme de discours linguistique dans lequel chaque partie n'a de sens que par rapport à un tout"). The experience of time is enlarged and distorted (when compared with that of ordinary experience): strangely enough, time becomes both that of slow motion and that of accelerated speed. "In the twinkling of an eye" (145), the whole past life lives again, an instant becomes equivalent to an infinity of duration (cf. DQ's use of the word "aeon," p. 106). The "vision of sudden death" can be discomposed into its elements, fraction of a second after fraction of a second (219-25); but in the process, each particle of time becomes a fragment of eternity.

The faculty of dreaming, particularly when intensified by opium, is essentially similar to those experiences of sudden vision. It is a phenomenon of the brain, a "fierce chemistry" (68), but also a phenomenon of the soul, a theology.

Like imagination, with which it has much in common, dream is essentially creative. We can speak of dream as a "laboratory" for literary creation: a laboratory for dreadful experiments, a "fierce chemistry." Because of its power of transformation, transference ("metaphor" in Greek), coalescence. A "power"—not merely of reproduction but of transformation: "a power not contented with reproduction, but which absolutely creates or transforms" (157). "Shaping" power: explains the prevalence of the "architectural dreams." But we can also speak of a chemistry, a fusing together of different substances (cf. use of chemical vocabulary to account for mental phenomena: "phosphoric radiance" (145). A form of creation over which the dreamer has no control (> "automatic creation"), and which gives rise to an intense suffering, anguish, doom, melancholy, darkness, horror, hatred, violent moral repulsion: it reveals innermost secrets, the "secret inscriptions" (69) of the soul, and thus becomes a "mighty theatre" of self-defeat, self-humiliation, self-hatred. The dreamer finds few opportunities of self-glorification through his dreams (except perhaps when he stages himself as a worshipped priest, the performer of terrifying rites (74). In the "resurrection dream" he reaches a mood of exalted serenity, but the dominant images are those of persecution, terror, loss, farewell, and the dominant figures may be ranged into two categories: the swarming multitudes of his eastern dreams, and the ladies and human faces of his English, Christian ones. The "mother" is (implicitly) present at the beginning of the dream sequence (the drowning), she emerges again at the end with the reference to *Paradise Lost* and the "incestuous mother." Satan, the "self-enemy" or "dark interpreter," has given birth to a daughter, self-engendered, out of his own brain, called "sin." His incestuous union with Sin gives birth to Death. Not clear why "incestuous." A mother gifted with exceptional moral faculties. Through his opium dreams DQ gives life to a second self, in the manner of Satan or Frankenstein (cf. image of the "dark interpreter" as a duplicated self).

CM 5 Apocalyptic vision, “arras work,” and musical composition in the dream sequence

“a chorus, &c. of elaborate harmony, displayed before me, as in a piece of arras work, the whole of my past life” (45)

“the solemn apocalypse of the entire past life” (Penguin 214)

Dream and drowning

Three passages to be read in detail :

1. introduction to the dream narratives in the original *Confessions* (68-69, 4.)
2. palimpsest" section of *Suspiria* (144-45)
3. note to the revised *Confessions* (Penguin 213-14):

Connected with

1. a theology : a power of "resurrection," *Suspiria* (145), “the dread book of account, which the Scriptures speak of” (69) = Last Judgment: the sudden revelation to an individual, when on the verge of dying, of the whole of his past life (69)
2. the experience of poetic writing: “a faculty for comprehending the whole and every part” (69): for Coleridge, this was a definition of poetic discourse (“A poem is that species of composition, which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for its *immediate* object pleasure, not truth; and from all other species . . . it is discriminated by proposing to itself such delight from the *whole*, as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component *part*. . . . the parts of which mutually support and explain each other,” *Biographia Literaria*, Chapter 14)

Genesis of dream (67-68)

A precise account in which DQ studies the link between waking dream and dream proper “re-awakening of a state of eye generally incident to childhood”, “power of painting, as it were, upon the darkness all sorts of phantoms” (67) [= “hypnagogic visions”: “that accompanies the process of falling asleep”]. This is the first step in the process of creation (“creative state of the eye,” 68). A power which belongs specifically to children (as a gift)—but also to the dreamer—and which may be “cultivated”: may be conceived as something merely “mechanic”, a physiological process over which the mind has no control, or as a “voluntary” or at least “semi-voluntary” process (67).

DQ insists on two correlated phenomena:

- 1) the power of forming images
- 2) the “sympathy,” “sympathetic bond,” between the “waking and dreaming states of the brain” (68) (“whatsoever I happened to call up and to trace by a voluntary act upon the darkness was very apt to transfer itself to my dreams,” 68).

The images vaguely “called up” by waking dream, become fully revealed in dreams (comparison with the process of “sympathetic ink,” 68).

- contamination of dreams by waking life (and of waking life by dreams)
- cultivation of the visionary power, weaving of the “arras work”: bringing together the different fragments of one's life, deciphering the secret meaning of one's life

The dream sequence

The “mother” is (implicitly) present at the beginning of the dream sequence (the drowning, 69), she emerges again at the end with the reference to *Paradise Lost* and the “incestuous mother” (77). Satan gives birth to a daughter, self-engendered, out of his own brain, called “sin.” His incestuous union with Sin gives birth to Death. Why this image? Probably because of a “self-engendered” sense of sin. Through his opium dreams DQ gives life to a second self, a “dark interpreter.”

- 1) Meant to illustrate the process of sympathy between the waking state and the dream: “now furnished me with matter for my dreams” (70) (first dream : “Consul Romanus,” 69-70). Other illustrations of the link between waking and dreaming states: “tyranny of the human face” (72)/“the human face tyrannized over my dreams” (48); a Malay, the Malay, this Malay, other Malays (55, 57, 58, 72); “architectural dreams” (71) traced back to

two sources in waking life: Coleridge's description of Piranesi's Antiquities, DQ's own reading of Wordsworth's *The Excursion* (transfiguration of a natural landscape: a mountain vision after a thunderstorm).

The "waking thoughts" precede the dream: DQ not concerned with interpretation in psychoanalytical sense.

2) Cultural inscription of dreams. The images of DQ's dreams borrow from and give shape to a "collective unconscious." Most significant example: "oriental dreams" (74). The romantic age, as a whole, was fascinated by the discovery of "oriental" culture. What is meant by "oriental"? A melting pot of different cultures, civilisations, traditions. Indians, Chinese, Egyptians, Arabs all fall under the category of "oriental" people. Mostly approached through their religious traditions (the worship of Indian gods, of Egyptian divinities). What is the link between "Nilotic mud" and Chinese pagodas? Notion of "antiquity": "the vast age of the race and name overpowers the sense of youth in the individual . . . A young Chinese seems to me an antediluvian man renewed" (73). A subtle and sophisticated reasoning, but one which serves as a justification for a strong feeling of repulsion: "I am terrified by the modes of life . . . the barrier of utter abhorrence . . . I could sooner live with lunatics, or brute animals" (73). Such a word as "immemorial" becomes negatively connoted. More than that, DQ insidiously becomes the spokesman of a whole community: transition from "I am terrified" to "placed between us" (73). How to define this community? Implicitly, the community of Christians.

Dual paradigm Christian/Oriental throughout the dream sequence: on the one hand a swarming multitude, the individual as such is denied the right to exist, he is associated with animal life, and, even more important, he is denied a sense of youth, a right to renewal, in other terms a power of "resurrection." What DQ sees in his dreams, the slimy creatures swarming in Nilotic mud, is not far from Coleridge's "water snakes" in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. The difference is that the water snakes are blessed and open the way to redemption. No redemption is possible with DQ while he remains in his oriental fantasies. He has to move to an entirely different universe, which is basically one of Christian symbols and values. The multitudes seen in the bottom of the sea have "faces": "the sea appeared paved with innumerable faces upturned to the heavens" (72). Spiritual dimension, hope of resurrection and redemption, which becomes even more implicit in the "Easter Sunday" dream (75-76), in spite of its "oriental" setting (The whole dream is to be read together with the digression on the affinity between summer and death in *Suspiria* 103-05).

The sequence of dreams as musical composition

The dream sequence may be read like a piece of music, a symphony in several movements—or, to use more relevant images, may be compared to the writing of a "fugue" (*English Mail-Coach* 226).

DQ's first evocation of music, the description of his "opera pleasures" (44-46), suggests that he was thinking of the genre of "opera seria" (on mythological or historical themes), as practised in London in the 18th c., or of the oratorio, usually based on a Scriptural theme, performed by a choir with soloists and a full orchestra.

Fugue : derived from Italian "fuga" = flight.

Reference to Milton ("resonant fugue" 225)

Two main features:

1. one statement of the theme seems to chase another
2. same notes repeated (re-sounding)

- Each dream has its own climate, its own tonality
- Use of tempo (acceleration, slowing down)
- Intricate texture of "voices" (counterpoint).
- Repetition of themes, thematic unity.
- Large-scale composition meant to be read as a whole, built according to principles of composition: the last three dreams may be singled out, whereas the second series are concatenated (metamorphosis of water). A dream is often built on a dual structure and a dual setting : like the movement of a piece of music built on two themes.

➤ Concept of "prose poem": "La structure spatiale du poème en prose," *Poétique* 59 (1984)

Conclusion

A combination of "apocalyptic vision," "arras work," and musical composition