Thomas De Quincey – *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*

De Quincey’s exploration of the mind, memory, and dreams is one so in tune with the activation of imagination that it becomes an experiment in creativity and recollection all in one. The agency of opium is so well expressed in De Quincey’s work that it justifies the mental tampering that comes from the drug itself. Without scientific explanation and jargon, De Quincey is able to show his reader the functioning of the brain. When I read his description of the palimpsest and the traumatic experience of Elizabeth’s death, I am convinced that we are forever being branded throughout our life, as our mind—not emotions—capture the moments we live. Despite the pains De Quincey suffers from opium, he is resigned to it being the thing that gives him access to the memories that have been concealed over time. The opium, much like his nightmares, open doors to the things he can no longer recollect when sober.

His realization of the nursery experience as the natural co-efficient of the opium is quite an amazing discovery because it does not seem as though his childhood was particularly traumatic. I often associate drug addiction with some kind of psychological aberration or childhood trauma, but De Quincey does not emphasize anything of the sort. His childhood, despite the death of his two sisters, appears to be as “normal” as most. Yet, it must have been this early experience with Elizabeth’s death that ignited the fire for dream, escape, and imagination. De Quincey’s love of books speaks to this as well. His
desire to escape into language and story seems a fitting response to an active imagination. The books become the fodder for his intellect, as well as his fancy. I remember a passage from The English Mail-Coach (At least, I think I read it in there) in which he recalls entering a library and seeing the stacks upon stacks of books and feeling overwhelmed at the idea of never being able to read all that has been written. I think his palimpsest essay speaks to this idea of literary abundance. De Quincey seems to have a voracious appetite for words—even his success at Latin translation is due to his ability to recall the words written in the English language, rather than from his study of Latin grammar.

His inversion of opium’s affect on time with his experience of sneaking into see Elizabeth’s dead body is quite remarkable. The elasticity/pliability of time recalls Saint Augustine’s discussion on time in his Confessions. For both writers, there is a sense of the infinity of time within the mind, or in God. As God exists outside of time, so, too, do the imagination and the interior mind. We can contract and stretch mental time at will even if physical/worldly time keeps ticking. I think De Quincey’s references to time, and the infinity within dreams, are philosophical inquiry at its best.