

**The Addict within Divine Space: A Deconstruction of Opium**

**Life Narratives**

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One of the most discussed social issues in the contemporary United States is that of opioid addiction. Every day, whether in social media, academic journals, or the evening news, the pains and pleasures of opioid addiction are debated. The magnitude of the problem may suggest that opioid addiction is a phenomenon of the twenty-first century. This, of course, is not the case.

*Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* by Thomas De Quincey was first published in *London Magazine* in 1821. The text explores De Quincey's early education, his flight from Oxford, and his introduction to opium and the addiction that followed. *Opium Talk* by Zhang Changjia was published in 1878 by Quaker missionaries in Shanghai. Not much is known about Zhang himself, but given that fact he is literate in nineteenth century China says much about him. It can be comfortably ascertained that Zhang belonged to China's literati class. The literati made up the scholar-gentry class of China; it was this social class that governed imperial China in the name of the Emperor. As such, the bureaucratic responsibility of an individual was determined by their performance in the imperial examinations (科舉). Literacy therefore carried many socio-political implications in China. For a man like Zhang to find himself in the position he is in (abandoned by his family, homeless and addicted to opium) speaks volumes to the destructive and revolutionary role opium played in ending China's imperial era.

Opium is a substance that has been used around the world for thousands of years for a variety of reasons, including religious practices and medicinal treatment. Opium had been actively used in China for hundreds years before the Opium Wars of the mid-nineteenth century. According to Zheng in *The Social Life of Opium in China*, opium was first used in China for medicinal reasons, typically in decoctions mixed with herbs and alcohol. Towards the end of the

Ming Dynasty and the beginning of the Qing, the literati-bureaucratic class began to use opium as an aphrodisiac. As trade with the West increased throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, new commodities and customs were introduced and naturalized into Chinese culture. One such introduction that led to mass opium consumption in China was tobacco smoking. At first a luxury, tobacco smoking reached the masses and became an intimate part of social life in China. As tobacco became outlawed by the Qing court, many people began to smoke madak, a mix of opium and tobacco. The continuing scarcity of tobacco, meant an increasing amount of opium was being imported and smoked. The British East India Company exploited this growing reliance. China had very limited trade with the West, since the Qing were primarily interested in exchanging tea for silver. Unable to sustain the trade with silver, the East India Company began trading opium. This was especially favorable towards the East India Company firstly because the opium being exported originated in India and secondly because opium addiction ensured a constant demand. When the Qing dynasty outlawed the opium trade, Britain declared war to force China to trade with the West. The Opium Wars led to the complete destabilization of the Qing dynasty, the beginning of the end of a political system that had lasted over a thousand years. It is for this reason that the Communist Party of China considers the Opium Wars the beginning of China's modern history. In the midst of this chaotic and global political landscape, De Quincey and Zhang write of their intimate relationship with opium.

Though *Opium Talk* shares some qualities with the *Confessions*, it is less autobiographical and more of a series of meditations on the different aspects of the experience of opium smoking in nineteenth century China. These two texts are extremely different in many ways, including language, culture, style, genre, and literary tradition. However, the most

fundamental element of these texts that pertain to this thesis is the fact that they are *written* accounts. Though the analyses of *Opium Talk* within this thesis will primarily use Keith McMahon's English translation, it will be shown how writing, in whatever script, is susceptible to the same issues of representation and temporality. That being stated, the original Classical Chinese of *Opium Talk* will be included throughout this thesis.

Both Zhang and De Quincey belonged to the educated class of their respective countries, granting them the positionality of the literati and the privilege to write about their experience with opium. Moreover, both authors claim to have supreme authority on all matters concerning opium. This thesis will show how language both negates *and* affirms the authors' claim to this authority and will reveal how temporality complicates (maybe even destroys) what is understood as addiction. It is not the purpose of this thesis to challenge the physical reality of addiction but to challenge the authority of its representation. Once language comes into the picture, ambiguity is introduced, both in representation and perception. Given the temporality of text, opium life narratives negate *and* affirm notions of addiction, for the temporality of text inherently destabilizes the notion of presence, not only in the general sense of Being but also in the specific sense of Being Addicted.

Reality and language are artificial yet "real" at the same time because of the nature of the sign as defined by Ferdinand de Saussure. The sign is arbitrary yet particular. Language, as a system of signs, is defined by negatives. Language has no "positive" term of origin. In one word, language (reality) is made of an artificial system of signs, yet it is the universal filter through which the entire lived experienced must pass.

What is considered reality, therefore, is ultimately formulated by the lived experience *and* the manner by which those experiences are recounted. Yet, in the Western Tradition, language holds a supremacy in the construction of the world. It is often understood as a divine (otherworldly) force. One must only look to the first verse of the Gospel of John to locate the seemingly timeless association between language and divinity: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (King James Bible, 1 John 1). The word, language itself, is quite literally the source of divinity. To name and to signify the lived experience is to manifest it into reality. For before there was light, there was the utterance of “let there be...” Within the main tenets and proclamations of Judeo-Christianity, one finds a direct relationship between life and language. Life cannot exist without language. And language cannot exist without life. Within the tradition, these two concepts are inseparable.

The danger of poststructuralism and deconstruction, therefore, lies in the separation of these concepts. Poststructuralism and deconstruction have revealed that language itself is an artificial construction. There is no primordial state in which language existed without an individual to articulate it. And an individual cannot exist without the acquisition of language. But language is also a seemingly unbreakable knot that ties the lived experience and language, life and the Word, together. Once the artificiality of language is brought to light, however, it becomes much more comprehensible to understand the artificiality of reality. It should be noted that artificiality is defined here as being undivine, impure, chaotic, chronically susceptible to change and lacking in authority.

It is therefore surprising when the poststructuralist understanding of language’s (reality’s) artificiality is ignored in regards to nonfiction. Given that there is no outside-text, to paraphrase

Derrida, approaching nonfiction texts, specifically life narratives, through a lens of deconstruction is as appropriate as approaching a fictional text through the same lens. As Smith and Watson write in the introduction of *Reading Autobiography*,

What could be simpler to understand than the act of people representing what they know best, their own lives? Yet this act is anything but simple, for the teller of his or her own story becomes, in the act of narration, both the observing subject and the object of investigation, remembrance, and contemplation. We might best approach life narrative, then, as a moving target, a set of shifting self-referential practices that, in engaging the past, reflect on identity in the present (Smith and Watson 1).

Though Smith and Watson open the definition of autobiography, it should be further complicated. Temporality, an innate component in the function of language, is in constant movement. So much so, that the present is a state that remains infinitely out of reach. It is not enough, as Smith and Watson suggest, for the writer of a life narrative to engage with the past to reflect on the identity of the present. The stakes are actually much higher, for the moving condition of temporality is itself a threat to the conceptualization of Being.

This thesis, therefore, aims to engage in the question of temporality within the life narrative, specifically the life narratives of two opium addicts from the nineteenth century. Life narratives surrounding opium addiction are extremely valuable in complicating the understanding of the human experience. Since at least the late eighteenth century, when bureaucrats and eunuchs of the Qing dynasty court began to ignore their responsibilities because of their opium habit, addicts have been perceived as pacified individuals. There is an endless number of stereotypes easily associated with addicts: lazy, irresponsible, negligent. This perception leads to the assumption that addiction is one static state of being. However, analyzing opium life narratives reveals that not only is addiction experienced distinctly, but the temporal

quality of the text itself signifies that the state of addiction in constant flux, an experience that is constantly deferred.

Before engaging with the *Confessions* and *Opium Talk* directly, the question of temporality should be considered first. “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote”, a short story by Jorge Luis Borges, will show how a new method of reading can provide a template for how to engage with temporality in literature. It is important to note that the use itself of “Pierre Menard...” signifies that the conclusions below can be reached through the sole act of reading. Moreover, the use of a fictional text to better analyze a nonfictional text further blurs the borders of differentiation of literary genres. This thesis promotes an opening of the opium life narrative. It would therefore be ironic and contradictory to not open the definition of analytical texts, to not challenge the methodological frameworks normatively used in literary analysis.

The plot of “Pierre Menard...” is fairly simple. It follows an unnamed narrator reevaluating the life of his recently deceased friend, Pierre Menard. The narrator claims that Madame Henri Bachelier, an acquaintance of Menard, has done an injustice to Menard’s memory by only cataloguing his *visible* works. However, the narrator is interested in discussing Menard’s *invisible* works. According to the narrator, Menard’s greatest contributions to literature can be found in these *invisible* works.

Paso ahora a la otra: la subterránea, la interminablemente heroica, la impar. También ¡ay de las posibilidades del hombre! la inconclusa. Esa obra, tal vez la más significativa de nuestro tiempo, consta de los capítulos noveno y trigésimo octavo de la primera parte del don Quijote y de un fragmento del capítulo veintidós. Yo sé que tal afirmación parece un dislate, justificar ese “dislate” es el objeto primordial de esta nota.

I move now to the other bibliography: the subterranean, endlessly heroic, and unique one. Also---oh, the possibilities of man!---the inconclusive one. That work, probably the most significant of our time, consists of the ninth and thirty-eighth chapters of *Don Quixote* and a fragment of chapter twenty-two. I know that this affirmation may seem an absurdity. To justify that ‘absurdity’ is the primordial goal of this note (Borges 446).

This passage performs two roles. Firstly, it emphasizes the *invisible* works of Menard. Secondly, it presents the narrator as being conscious of the absurdity of the task at hand. For an author's unwritten works to be considered over their written works is to deny any importance to the role of the author. Enumerating and discussing an author's catalogue is often understood as a way to further comprehend the author's ideology, ideas, etc. The narrator proposes what is important is not the works that carry Menard's name on the front cover but the works that Menard had the *potential* to write. By emphasizing the *invisible* works, primacy is placed upon the text and solely the text, subverting the need to distinct between the writer and the reader, for all individuals hold the potential of *invisible* works.

In the article, “‘Pierre Menard, Autor Del Quijote’: a Phenomenological Approach,” Rita De Grandis presents an analysis of the short story, and the consequences of prioritizing the text above the distinction between the writer and the reader. De Grandis writes that the process of reading is a double dialectical process, where reading is as active as writing: “The reading experience is an act of ‘*parole*,’ of ‘performance;’ it actualizes one of the multiple possibilities of the text as a system of references” (De Grandis 14). With this being stated, the text becomes the only entity of consideration, liberating the reader/writer to interpret, decipher, and approach the text through any one of the infinite entryways that the text provides.

One such entryway is that of time. Towards the end of “Pierre Menard...”, the narrator begins to consider time in reviewing the *invisible* works of Menard. He first notes the eroding quality of time, and how writing is affected by this erosion: “No hay ejercicio intelectual que no sea finalmente inútil. Una doctrina filosófica es al principio una descripción verosímil del universo; giran los años y es un mero capítulo---cuando no un párrafo o un nombre---de la

historia de la filosofía.” [There is no intellectual exercise that is not ultimately useless. A philosophical doctrine is at first a plausible description of the universe. As the years go by, a mere chapter, if not a paragraph or a noun, in the history of philosophy] (Borges 449-450).

As a system of signs, language relies exclusively on generalizations. As new conceptualizations are formulated by philosophers, they must use this system of generalizations. Through the meticulous use of language, a philosopher may arrive at a unique conceptualization. But temporality, an innate quality of language, ultimately erodes a doctrine into a chapter into a paragraph into a word. The passage of time results in the condensation of language, forever denying the ability to fully capture meaning(s).

Upon arriving at this conclusion, the ability to read a text *outside* of time becomes possible. If reading a text *within* time erodes a stable meaning, then reading *outside* of time allows for the text to be completely open to the infinite range of meanings that may inhabit it. The narrator arrives at the same conclusion, writing, “Menard (acaso sin quererlo) ha enriquecido mediante una técnica nueva el arte detenido y rudimentario de la lectura: la técnica de la anacronismo deliberado y de las atribuciones erróneas. Esa técnica de aplicación infinita nos insta a recorrer la Odisea como si fuera posterior a la Eneida.” [Menard {probably by accident} has enriched the slow and rudimentary art of reading through a new technique: the technique of deliberate anachronism and erroneous attributions. This technique of infinite application urges us to reread *The Odyssey* as if it came after *The Aeneid* ] (Borges 450).

How can one justify reading in this manner, as if *The Odyssey* came after *The Aeneid*? The lived experience, just as the traditional novel, follows the same actualization of temporality. There is a past and future that is conceived in the present. If chronology could be made to seem

arbitrary, then this technique for reading can be justified. A more focused analysis of temporality will show how it is not only possible but preferable to read a text outside of time.

*About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* by Mark Currie discusses temporality within writing explicitly. Within the introduction, Currie is quick to point out how unstable the understanding of the present is within narrative. He writes,

If, in order to look back at what has happened, we tell a story, we must also know that the present is a story yet to be told. The present is the object of a future memory, and we live it as such, in anticipation of the story we will tell later, envisaging the present as past. The present might be lived in anticipation of some future present from which it is narrated, but this may also entail the anticipation of events between the present present and the future present from which it is narrated which will also be part of that story (Currie 5).

Currie asserts in this passage how the present is never experienced in the *present* itself. The present can be better defined as the anticipation of future memory. Memory, considered alone however, is an object of the past. The present is therefore no different than the past or the future. The past is experienced in the present because remembrance and recollection can only occur in the present. Likewise, the future can only be experienced in the present because the infinite possibilities of later can only be imagined and conceptualized in the now.

Ultimately, the distinctions of time become arbitrary because of its ceaseless movement. Time is experienced chronologically, but its ceaseless movement indicates that the past, present, and future are all indistinguishable. Any given moment may be or become a moment of the past, present, or future. The movement of time contradicts the stillness of the word, making it impossible to ever capture the present within language.

As Currie also notes later in the introduction, “But as long as the present has duration, any duration at all, it can be divided into the bits of it that are to be, and so are not yet, so that the very duration of its existence consigns it to nonexistence” (Currie 8). The present therefore takes

a position of simultaneous existence and nonexistence. It exists because there is a word for it, a word that can refer to a state of being in the present. Yet it does not exist because the movement of time implicates that the present can always be divided into moments of the past and moments of the future. The past, present, and future inhabit each others' realms because of the nature of duration, creating the possibility of experiencing "blocked time," to experience time as a single dimension, as Currie suggests.

If there is no distinction between the past, present, and future, then this signifies that there is no past, present or future at all. There is simply time as a single dimension. Currie writes later in the chapter titled "Present,"

What is being rejected here is a *tensed* view of time, and what is being adopted is an *untensed* view of time. Understood at its most basic level, tense is a relation between the time of an utterance and the time of the event being spoken about...Untensed views of time, however, generally hold that there is no ontological distinction between the past, present and future, and that in order to purge understanding of its egocentricity and its linguistic aberrations, time must be viewed as a single dimension (Curries 15).

It can therefore be assumed that reading a text in an untensed manner holds a greater sense of "objectivity" because the present is an innately egocentric concept. To read a text from the realm of the present is to immediately place all events in relation to the present. The past and the future seem to orbit the present as a stationary force. It has been shown however that there is no distinction between the past, present, and future. These distinctions are as arbitrary as the political borders of countries. Arbitrary should be understood in this context as having no intrinsic value. The distinctions of countries are as arbitrary as the distinctions of time. The consequences of political borders are *real* in the most basic sense of the word, just as the consequences of understanding time in a linear manner are *real*. However, time, just like

political borders, can be understood in both a real and artificial manner, i.e. time can be experienced chronologically *and* as a single dimension. This is possible because of the linguistic contradiction of having a sign for the *present* but the inability of the sign to capture the present. If the present cannot be contained, and therefore fully realized in unto itself, the instability of the present begins to complicate understandings of Being.

Jacques Derrida's essays "Différance" and "Speech and Phenomenon," under this new complicated understanding of temporality, will assist in further complicating the concept of Being. In "Différance", he begins his discussion by presenting an understanding of the sign, as described by Ferdinand de Saussure. To review, Saussure claims that the sign, the basic unit of language, is composed of the signified and the signifier. The signifier is the concept or image produced in the mind to mirror the physical object. The signified is the sound image associated with the object. Both exist simultaneously to create the sign. It is through the relation of signs that meaning is therefore created.

Derrida relates this understanding of the sign as a representation of temporality: "The sign represents the present in its absence. It takes the place of the present. When we cannot grasp or show the thing, state the present, the being-present, when the present cannot be presented, we signify, we go through the detour of the sign" (Derrida 61). According to this understanding, the formation of the sign was not an accidental or random phenomenon. In this citation, Derrida presents the sign as a solution to the inability to articulate the present in the present moment. The sign is therefore "deferred presence," i.e. *différance*. The articulation of the sign marks an infinite delay. The sign indicates, it points away from itself to the object that it signifies. The object is addressed only through the passageway of the sign.

Once *différance* within language is revealed, once one becomes conscious of its existence, this acknowledgement begins to disturb the stability and adequacy of language. A significant way in which *différance* shakes the understanding of meaning, and also accessibility to it, is by calling into

question the authority of presence, or of its simple symmetrical opposite, absence, or lack. Thus one questions the limit that has always constrained us, still constrains us---as inhabitants of a language and a system of thought---to formulate the meaning of Being in general as presence or absence, in the categories of being or beingness (Derrida 62).

The implication of *différance* is the destabilization of the legitimacy of the presence/absence binary. *différance* blurs the then clear boundaries between presence and absence because of the instability of the sign. It is impossible to know with certainty that something is present or absent when the sign is in a constant flux of presence and absence through the differing and deferring of meaning.

The inability for language to clearly demarcate presence through a system of signs complicates (maybe even destroys) the understanding of Being in Western thought. Being is the stable unit that the signs defers away from. The movement of *différance* is only possible if there is something relative that may accentuate that movement. This metric can be regarded as Being or consciousness. Yet, Derrida dismantles this stable entity in further analysis. Quoting Saussure, he writes, “That ‘language [which only consists of differences] is not a function of the speaking subject.’ This implies that the subject (in its identity with itself, or eventually in its consciousness of its identity with itself, its self-consciousness) is inscribed in language, is a ‘function’ of language, becomes a *speaking* subject only by making its speech conform” (Derrida 67). On the surface, the line of this argument may seem contradictory. Saussure clearly states: “language is

not a function of the speaking subject.” In other words, the speaking subject, the holder of consciousness, is outside of language. Language is therefore a tool, an option rather than a necessity. Immediately following this claim, Derrida says the complete opposite: that the subject, that Being (or consciousness) is inscribed within language. This holds sense, regardless of the trajectory of the argument, because the ability to even articulate Saussure’s sentence implies that consciousness-articulated is differed and deferred unto itself.

Derrida continues, marking his most significant claim in regards to consciousness. “If, by hypothesis, we maintain that the opposition of speech to language is absolutely rigorous, then *différance* would be not only the play of differences with language but also the relation of speech to language, the detour through which I must pass in order to speak, the silent promise I must make” (Derrida 67). Self-consciousness can be assumed, within itself, to be self-present and in a state of self-presence. But language is the great filter that prevents the speaking subject from experiencing consciousness in a state of self-presence. The moment of articulation marks a delay, an infinite inaccessibility to the Self. Every thought and emotion is deferred and differed, reduced to the unstable unit of the sign before being expressed.

This does not necessarily mean that the Self is nonexistent. However, it signifies that language can never capture consciousness, that self-presence resides in a territory that language cannot access. In the essay, “Speech and Phenomena” Derrida articulates this idea, writing, “Consciousness is the self-presence of the living, the *Erleben* [experience], of experience. Experience thus understood is simple and is in its essence free of illusion” (Derrida 17). If consciousness (or the state of Being) is inaccessible through language, what does this mean in regards to the life narratives of opium addicts? What does Being Addicted *mean*? Quite simply,

this inaccessibility signifies that the experience of addiction is unreachable through language, as *all experiences* are unreachable through language. Being Addicted is simply a modification of Being. The distinction is necessary because addiction, as it will be shown, is an altered form of consciousness, initiated through a new relationship with temporality. Opium addiction alters the Self's sense of temporality, which alters the Self's sense of self (how Being is experienced and articulated). Being Addicted, just as Being, cannot be fully captured within language. Moreover, it cannot be clearly delineated and demarcated from simple Being. Just as the sign is in a constant flux of presence and absence, so too are Being and Being Addicted in constant flux.

Antithetically, it is necessary to distinguish Being and Being Addicted in order to show how they are not completely distinguishable. Language is a system of signs, a system of representations that continually *point away* towards meaning but can never capture it.

Representations are the repetition of images, a shared system of images. This shared system of repeated images suggests that language is not suffice when capturing what is *real* versus imaginary, or who is addicted versus those who is not:

By reason of the originally repetitive structure of signs in general, there is every likelihood that 'effective' language is just as imaginary as imaginary speech and that imaginary speech is just as effective as effective speech. In both expression and indicative communication the difference between reality and representation, between the true and the imaginary, and between simple presence and repetition has always already begun to be effaced (Derrida 11).

Through this lens of understanding language as a system of representations (and re-presentations), whose byproduct is a linear understanding of time (as the past, present, and future), *The Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* and *Opium Talk* can be approached as a play of representations and significations. The process of reading (and writing) these texts is a

dialectical interaction with the infinite differences between the lived experience and the system of representations that is language. This infinite play of words makes it impossible to determine the transmission of experience, i.e. the articulation of Being (Addicted). The inability to capture a stable meaning *does not* deny significance (in the basic understanding of the word). What it signifies is the constant swaying between Being and Being Addicted. Opium life narratives should therefore not be approached as a mirror or a transmission of the experience of addiction. They are the *representations* of the experience of addiction. And because they are representations, the texts are also generalizations, for representations are only possible through the repetition of generalizations. This “opens” the *Confessions* and *Opium Talk* to be read and interpreted as they are *and* also as what they are not. The *Confessions* and *Opium Talk* portray both Being and Being Addicted, addiction and non-addiction, affirming *and* denying every claim, experience, and articulation in these texts. Moreover, it is therefore futile to “reach” or “understand” De Quincey’s or Zhang’s experience of addiction. What is possible, however, is analyzing the text and the representations of addiction that have been formulated by these authors, to assess how writing has struggled (and will continue to struggle) to complete its ideal end of meaningful transmission.

To begin the analysis, both De Quincey and Zhang view their respective opium highs as not only forms of pleasurable escape but as vehicles of enlightenment. This enlightenment is tied directly to having entered a space occupied by ancient divinity, a space that is still and atemporal. Opium is seen as a gateway to this space, for it removes the individual out of the movement of time despite the fact that the individual is *still* moving through time. A new relationship with time is established, but the former, chronological relationship with time never

truly disappears. Both the writings of Zhang and De Quincey, through content and structure, reflect the inability to negotiate these two experiences.

In the opening paragraph of “The Pleasures of Opium” section of De Quincey’s *Confessions*, he presents the reader with his first encounter with opium. At this point, he is living in London and had been suffering from pains and aches when someone recommends he try opium:

By accident I met a college acquaintance, who recommended opium. Opium! dread agent of unimaginable pleasure and pain! I had heard of it as I had of manna or of ambrosia, but no further. How unmeaning a sound was it at that time: what solemn chords does it now strike my heart! what heart-quaking vibrations of sad and happy remembrances! Reverting for a moment to these, I feel a mystic importance attached to the minutest circumstances connected with the place and the time and the man (if man he was) that first laid open to me the Paradise of Opium-eaters (De Quincey 42-43)

The passage creates a direct comparison between opium and the holy foods of the Western religio-mythological tradition. De Quincey refers to manna and ambrosia, mythological foods from the Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman traditions respectively. Manna and ambrosia, as foods, hold a close proximity to the divine, or at the very least, always *point away* towards the divine.

All consumable substances carry significations. Manna, a holy food provided by Yahweh to the ancient Israelites, and ambrosia, the food of the ancient Greek gods, signify divinity. Though manna was meant for human consumption, it was a gift endowed by Yahweh to His Chosen People. It is an exclusive food, one meant for a chosen people, a divine people because of their closer proximity to Yahweh. Manna and ambrosia are always already *deferred* away from humanity because they are not substances of the human world; they are substances meant to transcend for they belong to those who are out of time and are considered divine. These foods

belong to an unreachable area of existence away from humanity. But not opium. Opium, within this passage, seems to hold an equal value to these holy foods. Opium, like manna and ambrosia, seems to have an equal signification in regards to the divine. Atemporality, transcendence, the nearing to the divine, is something not just restricted to the ancient Israelites or the Greeks gods. It is available to everyone. Opium has made the divine, the atemporal, accessible.

The consumption of opium therefore marks a redefinition of the relationship between humanity and the divine. Atemporality is the realm of the divine because to *be* divine is to exist outside of time, to therefore escape death. With the consumption of opium, the addict is able to step out of time like the divine. However, unlike the divine, the addict cannot experience atemporality *exclusively*. This claim is based on the fact that writing cannot capture atemporality, for writing and reading are innately temporal, both in its actualization and its structure.

The passage above very much reflects the struggle to accommodate atemporality within a temporal system of signs. Prior to the passage cited, De Quincey writes in a very chronological fashion. Suddenly, when recalling this memory, the text struggles to step out of time. The series of exclamatory sentences that follow abandon the chronology of the text. It is as if the text itself stimulates the out-of-timeness that can occur when experiencing an opium high, without being out of time itself, for the reader *must* read from left to right.

The sentence “How unmeaning a sound was it at that time” is of particular interest because it marks a complete collapse of the text. The sentence evokes a status of present, i.e. De Quincey, in the present, remembering (regretting) the past. But from the reader’s perspective, the entire text occupies a single realm of temporality: that of the past. However, the ability for the reader to distinguish between De Quincey, the college student and De Quincey, the writer and

author, reveals evermore how the text is unable to accommodate the atemporality of opium addiction. The text is unable to represent the out-of-timeness that De Quincey suggests. Instead, the reader only experiences a disorientation due to language's inability to re-present the simultaneous states of temporality and atemporality.

Remarkably, there is a similar moment within Zhang's *Opium Talk*, even though this piece is written in a different script and within a different genre. The text, unlike the Western memoir, is not written in narrative prose but as a series of passages. In a way, Zhang's writing is much closer to capturing the atemporality of the experience of opium addiction than that of De Quincey. The passages do not have to be read chronologically; they can be read in whatever fashion the reader chooses, since each passage stands on its own. Moreover, unlike Western languages, Chinese characters have an instantaneous quality to them. When one reads the word *opium*, though it may seem instantaneous for the trained reader, the eye must trace along each letter, sew the word together, then, once pronounced, connect this signifier with its signified to create the sign. But when one reads 煙 (opium), the eye does not trace each stroke to sew the word together. It is a static ideogram, an instantaneously complete signifier that conjures the signified. And yet, *there is still a passage of time*. There is still a temporal spacing that exists between the time that the reader's eyes meet the character and when that character signifies. Therefore, Zhang's text, though written in a different script and a different genre, is still unequipped to accommodate atemporality within the temporal space of writing. This can be seen in Passage 16, where Zhang writes,

儀狄作酒，禹飲而甘；易牙烹庖，桓公食之，至日不覺，猶其淺也。自今觀之，上下千古，尤物之中，此為獨絕。

When Yi Di made wine, Yu drank it and enjoyed its sweetness. When Yi Ya cooked fine dishes, Duke Huan of the kingdom of Qi ate them and slept soundly until the next morning. How shallow were these pleasures! Looking back from today's perspective, all the tantalizing things from ancient times are absolutely pale before opium (Zhang 200).

Yi Di, Yu, Yi Ya, and Duke Huan are all beings within ancient Chinese mythology. In this citation, Zhang suggests that the cultivation and consumption of wine and fine dishes are shallow, nothing compared to opium. Similarly to manna and ambrosia, these ancient foods have a quality of divinity because they *point away* towards the divine, and are therefore in close proximity to the divine. Unlike manna however, there is no possibility for humanity to consume these divine foods. It is no matter though. Opium is a much more pleasurable substance, one that not even the gods of the ancient world could have experienced. If the divine exists in an atemporal state of being, opium, being a subject distinct from divine foods, brings the user to a *distinctive* space of atemporality. In contrast to De Quincey, Zhang does not come to a closer proximity to the divine but enters an atemporal space that is not inhabited by the traditionally divine.

Following this logic, it can be abstracted that what one consumes is a marker of their onto-epistemology. Opium is beyond the gods, beyond the divine. This moment marks an ontological break for Zhang, one where he, as an opium addict, experiences a pleasure that the gods do not understand, one that the gods do not have access to. With a new sense of being, Zhang's sense of knowledge also takes a paradigm shift.

Through the approximation to divine spaces via the consumption of opium, both authors are demarcated, made distinguishable through their relationship with opium. Approximation to the divine through consumption signifies a greater access to knowledge not previously

understood by humanity. The break that Zhang experiences places him in a position that is ontologically unique. The same can be said for De Quincey. Nonetheless, the point must be driven: *both authors require a static, immovable divine force to define their experience*. In order for opium to be an enlightening agent, a status of prior ignorance must be assumed. The authors can acknowledge they have entered a space of divine atemporality solely because they had *only* previously experienced temporality. Their experiences of enlightenment, in other words, their articulation of the Self is *still* predicated on the Other, their sense of Being Addicted is defined by *not* Being Addicted. Their written accounts are not their experiences but the mirror (or mirage) of those experiences. Writing necessitates a Self and an Other. For De Quincey and Zhang to write on their opium addiction means that the experience must be crushed into a binary. A necessary differentiation must occur in order to write of these experiences, in order for these experiences to be considered *real*. But if the reader is only presented with the mirror (or mirage) of opium addiction, if writing is nothing more than the images and re-presentations of the lived experience, then the opium life narrative must be understood by all that it *is* and all that it *is not*. The reader must accept the fact that the addict is both a Subject and an Object, that the experience of opium addiction, once articulated is forever limited by the Subject/Object binary within language.

It is for this reason that Zhang and De Quincey require an Other in order to represent to the reader their enlightenment through opium. Returning once more to the “Pleasures of Opium” section of the *Confessions*, De Quincey shares an anecdote to illustrate the enlightenment supposedly provided by opium. As a preface, De Quincey presents how mechanically he consumes opium. He says that he rarely takes laudanum, a mixture of hard alcohol and opium.

He would drink it only about once every three weeks, particularly on Wednesday or Saturday nights, for those were the nights when he would visit the opera house to see Giuseppina Grassini, an opera singer, perform. “The choruses were divine to hear,” De Quincey writes,

and when Grassini appeared in some interlude, as she often did, and poured forth her passionate soul as Andromache, at the tomb of Hector, &c. I question whether any Turk, of all that ever entered the Paradise of opium-eaters, can have had half the pleasure I had. But, indeed, I honour the Barbarians too much by supposing them capable of any pleasures approaching to the intellectual ones of an Englishman (De Quincey 50).

This passage contains many important binaries to note. The first to consider is the metaphor that compares Grassini with Andromache. Metaphor is a dualistic comparison where meaning is conjured through deference. In the passage, De Quincey compares the passionate and painful mourning of Andromache at the tomb of her late husband, Hector, to an opera singer. It is a metaphor that is constructed by a Englishman, whose Western culture connects nineteenth century England and Ancient Greek mythology with the development of Western Europe. As such, this metaphor is one that De Quincey would not expect the “Turk” (his projection of a racialized Other) to understand. Given the Turk’s assumed lack of knowledge of Greek mythology, how could he possibly understand the enlightening dimension of opium? The inability to appreciate opera and epic Greek poetry parallels the Turks inability to appreciate opium like De Quincey does. However, De Quincey also plays with the realms of the literary and the real through this metaphor because Andromache and Hector are Trojan, i.e. Turkish. The metaphor defers both meaning and identity by effacing the mythological signification of the Turk.

Of course, the addition of this racist remark reveals De Quincey's own inability to represent his opium experience *in unto itself*. He must defer through a metaphor. He must defer

further by belittling the Turk, his racialized Other, to a Barbarian. Here, once more, a binary, a Subject/Object relationship, must be established in order for De Quincey to show how opium enlightens. And it is because of this binary that the writing itself is once more destabilized.

De Quincey claims that opium is able to bring one into a higher state of enlightenment. And yet, within this passage, De Quincey suggests limitations: one must be English if they are to reach enlightenment. Furthermore, one would probably also have to be a man, literate, and familiar with Classical literary studies in the West. Then, and only then, can opium enlighten the individual. However, this is inherently contradictory because it places a limitation on opium's ability to enlighten. *Which means that opium cannot be a basis for enlightenment in the first place.* Enlightenment suggests a movement from darkness to light, from ignorance to knowledge. De Quincey assumes that opium is a substance that induces this movement. If perimeters are placed upon this movement, a movement falsely presumed to be universal, then it can also be assumed that opium can also move in any other direction: from darkness-to-darkness, light-to-light, light-to-darkness, etc. In other words, opium can also *not* enlighten the Subject, which means that it is *both* an enlightening and un-enlightening agent at the same time. The movement towards enlightenment or un-enlightenment only occurs when the opium experience is written, when the experience is crushed into the Subject/Object binary of language and made definitive. De Quincey is therefore correct and *incorrect* in regards to opium's ability to enlighten. He is correct because, through metaphor and racist assumption, he writes how opium heightens his experience of operatic music. He is correct because he is able to represent opium as an enlightening force through the lens of a racist white Englishman in the nineteenth century. But he is incorrect because he struggles to universalize an experience that only he may attest to. He is

incorrect because he assumes that opium, as a substance, only prefers to enlighten white men and not Turkish people, that opium is a universal gateway to enlightenment, but only via exception.

Zhang is also unable to portray enlightenment through opium because of language's limitations to represent the experience of opium addiction and highs. At the start of Passage 21, he writes,

鴉片實爲世間不可少之物, 其鼓興提神, 固精止瀉, 一切奇功速效, 斷非藥草所能及者, 而人每指爲惡物, 何哉? 由于食之者不節耳.

Truly, opium is something the world cannot do without. Its ability to rouse the spirit, stir energy, solidify seminal essence, and cure dysentery, plus all its other swift and marvelous effects---absolutely none of the herbal drugs can do. But people constantly revile it as an evil thing. Why? Because those who take it do not control themselves (Zhang 201).

Opium here is represented as an absolute good. It cures diseases and improves the body. The problem, according to Zhang, is not opium but the people who consume it. It is the excessive consumption of opium that is harmful. The passage also represents a strange contradiction, however. Opium cannot be the seemingly perfect substance that Zhang claims that it is because it is prone to human fallibility. It should be assumed however that a substance that “the world cannot do without” should negate human imperfection. And yet, it does not. It can be assumed then that the certainties that Zhang illustrates are not totalizing, that opium is not the seemingly perfect substance he claims it is.

Later in Passage 21, Zhang writes, “故西人嘗曰 ‘我國以烟爲藥品, 而用僅毫釐; 中國以烟爲食物, 而日常數餐.’ 可知非烟之害人, 人自害於烟也.” “Thus a Westerner once said: ‘In our country opium is a medical drug that we only use sparingly. In China people take it as if it were food and consume it daily in several meals.’ It is clear that it is

not opium that harm people but people who harm themselves from opium” (Zhang 201). The thesis of this verse lies in the last sentence: that opium, in unto itself, is not harmful. The harm and danger of opium lies in human error. This is the enlightened conclusion that Zhang has reached through his addiction to opium. He has the vantage point, the overhead view that allows him to see opium as a complex entity. And yet, opium *has* harmed Zhang. Opium has alienated him from his wealth and family. He has harmed himself from opium, yet he has gained enlightenment from loss. It is as if in order for Zhang to realize the subjectivity of the experience of opium addiction, he had to become addicted himself, in order to reach enlightenment in regards to opium he had to enter a dark realms of the opium dens and private smoking rooms.

Additionally, Zhang formulates the West, within this passage, as an object of study. Through this objectification of the West, Zhang is able to better understand the characteristics of opium. He occidentalizes the West, displaying it as a unified monolithic culture. By objectifying the West, Zhang is able to compare how opium is regarded in China and the West. Structurally, this is the same argument that De Quincey presents when he compares his opium experience with that of the Turk. An Other, stable and immoveable, is needed once more to realize and describe enlightenment. By Other-ing the West, Zhang is able to argue that the mass opium addiction ravaging China is the fault of Chinese people themselves, that opium has nothing to do with the fall of the Qing court. The reality, of course, is much more complicated.

As a note, this analysis does not equate the phenomenon of orientalism and occidentalism, for the West occidentalizes itself. Zhang does not orientalize, for he is unable to see China as a part of a homogenous “East.” De Quincey, however, views England to be part of the cultural lineage that began with Ancient Greece. The occidentalization of the “West” is the

clumping of these geographies and cultures (that of nineteenth century England, Ancient Greece, and pre-institutional Christianity) into one, naturalizing these heterogeneous cultures as one.

Both Zhang and De Quincey claim authority over their knowledge of opium. It has been shown how opium is both an enlightening and un-enlightening substance. The premises of this enlightenment are questionable *not* because the authors are addicts but because they must rely on a constant stream of metaphors and binaries to prove to the reader (and also themselves as the readers of their own life narratives) that their addiction fundamentally differentiates them intellectually and ontologically. In other words, they must construct a model, based on language, that *allows* for enlightenment. It has been shown that enlightenment, like everything formulated in the realm of language, is susceptible to the slippage of meanings and definitions. It is therefore an unreliable enlightenment. And because the authors rely on this enlightenment for their authority, that authority itself becomes unreliable.

Returning once more to the “Pleasures of Opium” section of De Quincey’s *Confessions*, De Quincey makes his claim to be the supreme authority over opium. After comparing and analyzing the experience of inebriation versus being high on opium, De Quincey concludes that inebriation is “a condition which calls up into supremacy the merely human, too often the brutal, part of his nature” (De Quincey 47). Here, De Quincey once more falls into the trap of binaries in constructing his position of authority. Alcohol brings out the more brutal, ignorant half of the individual. The opium-eater, however, “feels that the diviner part of his nature is paramount” (De Quincey 47). De Quincey places the foundation of his authority of opium knowledge on his ability to distinguish the characteristics associated with alcohol and opium. According to De Quincey, someone who consumes alcohol is striving to experience the more primal side of

humanity. The opium-eater, however, is an intellectual firstly because of his choice to consume opium over alcohol. Once more, substances become signifiers for characteristics, pointing away from the substance towards a divinity or a primitiveness. Through the establishment of this binary, the possibility of slippage in meaning is also established. What defines divinity is that which is primitive, what defines primitiveness is that which is divine. Within the realm of language, all definitions and signifiers slip into one another. Therefore, deferring divinity and primitiveness into consumable substances is a second order of the same phenomenon.

Representations of opium and alcohol within writing define one another, denying once more the definitive claims that De Quincey makes.

De Quincey finally proclaims his authority, writing,

This is the doctrine of the true church on the subject of opium: of which church I acknowledge myself to be the only member---the alpha and the omega: but then it is to be recollected, that I speak from the ground of a large and profound personal experience: whereas most of the unscientific authors who have at all treated of opium, and even of those who have written expressly on the *materia medica*, make it evident, from the horror they express of it, that their experimental knowledge of its action is none at all (De Quincey 47-48).

De Quincey is the alpha and omega of the church of opium. Not only is he the sole member of the church of opium but he is its god, the beginning and the end. This is a very odd claim to make, however. Superficially, it is a direct comparison between De Quincey and God. However, as the church of opium's sole member, De Quincey is also his own only worshipper. Within the Christian tradition, God is a force outside of world, unaffected by the world but holding supreme authority and power over the world. The Church is the community that has come together to worship God. God does not worship Itself, nor is there a need for it. God exists outside of time, outside of Being. It does not require an Other to define Itself. Therefore, to be the alpha and

omega over the church of opium *while simultaneously* being the church's only member is a contradiction. But it is a contradiction that De Quincey constructs for himself in order to construct his authority. It is a construction that is always already falling apart, unstable and destructive within its own structure.

It is here that De Quincey's claim to authority, vis-à-vis opium as a vehicle for entering a divine, atemporal space, falls apart. If the divine is beyond the realm of the human, beyond the realm of the temporal, then De Quincey cannot make the claim to enter the divine, to be the alpha and omega of the church of opium, *through language*. A comparison with Catholicism will suffice to show why it is impossible to reach divine space through language. Though the Bible is the primary text for Christianity as a whole, the practice of worship *is* the actualization of faith. It is the physical structure of the cathedral, with walls and ceilings full of representations of the divine, with stone and marble arches to represent an inaccessible Heaven, full of solemn parishioners every Sunday; it is this field of representations that help conjure the divine into a worldly space. The divine enters through the spreading of incense, the presentation of the Eucharist, the incantations, the hymns, i.e. *the divine and the atemporal is only accessible via the lived experience*.

The language used by De Quincey in describing opium forever alludes to the more socially acceptable divinity of Christianity. In other words, a language for Christianity developed throughout the centuries in order to represent the practices, the beliefs, the lived experience of the Christian worshipping God. Opium does not have a divine language. Opium does not have community of worshippers that share the same language. If De Quincey does hold any authority over the church of opium, it is only *his* church. He is the only member of this church because this

church can only belong to him. And yet, contradictorily, a church by definition assumes a community. Language has failed De Quincey once more. To be the god of the church of opium, while being its only member, doesn't make it a church at all. Even metaphor is insufficient. De Quincey is striving once more to represent the divinity of opium within language, but divinity is not only beyond the human experience: *it is beyond literary representation.*

Unlike De Quincey, Zhang's claim to authority arrives through a series of deferences. The claim of authority starts in the beginning of the text, within the preface. However, it must be noted that the preface is not written by Zhang but by a "Mr. Most Uninhibited of the Cloudlands," who appears to be an anonymous figure. Already here, there are two levels of deference: the writer is not Zhang and the authority is announced within a preface. The preface is a form of paratext that is not the main body of the work, yet heavily influences the manner in which the reader approaches the text. The preface opens with an anonymous opium addict alone in the dark:

The darkness settles silently as the sleepless sea creature lights the lone lamp. Suffering the melancholy of distant parting, he is like a dreaming mite that grieves over the vast cosmos, with nowhere to bury his worries. Alone he embraces a wounded heart, having lost all hope of finding a sympathetic companion. Wishing to dispel this solitary frustration, he happens upon a marvelous book. With untrammelled talent, the author Mr. Zhang Changjia weaves thoughts serene and profound! With nothing to his name, he sings golden-jeweled songs. He handles his pen as if riding the wind (Zhang, Preface).

Zhang's authority comes not from above but from below. The addict is compared to a sea creature and a mite, mysterious and subterranean creatures that are meant to stay hidden.

Likewise, the rightful place of the addict seems to be in the dark as well, alone and desolate. But it is the *acknowledgment*, the hailing towards the opium addict, towards the subterranean creature, towards the subhuman, that gives credence to what is to be written in the following

pages. Legitimacy to Zhang's authority on the subject of opium does not come from the traditional spaces of the literati class. Legitimacy to Zhang's authority is based on his incredible talent of writing, capturing and reflecting the experience of opium addiction through words.

However, this form of authority via the democratization and generalization of the opium experience is fundamentally a facade. The preface, and the reading of Zhang's text is general, requires the text to be supplemented by a reader. In other words, it is assumed that the experience of opium addiction *is* literary, that it can be condensed and fulfilled through reading and writing. The power and authority that Zhang assumes is summoned only through the literary. Authority becomes the ability to manage (re)presentations and images that are supplemented through the reading experience. In the passage above, Zhang "handles his pen as if riding the wind." The content of his writing can be profound and insightful, but Zhang's authority is truly manifested through his mastery of writing. This immediately disregards the supposed democratization that the passage alludes to by presenting the opium addict as the legitimizing force for Zhang's authority. The opium addict can *only* legitimize Zhang's authority if they are literate, if they can confirm the various cosmological, geopolitical, and literary references that Zhang utilizes throughout his life narrative. This therefore places Zhang's authority in a position of simultaneous presence and absence. The authority is present because, once the opium addict engages with the text, they are able to acknowledge the wisdom through writing. It should be acknowledged as well that the literate opium addict stems from a similar socioeconomic position as Zhang. On the other hand, the authority is absent because it is absent within the lived (illiterate, pre-literary) experience. Zhang's authority is never completely realized because it

requires a reader, it necessitates the Other to hail this authority and for the Other to be subjected to it. If the interaction is not established, then the authority begins to unravel and fall apart.

By the end of their texts, both De Quincey and Zhang seem to have resigned themselves to their inability to express their experiences through writing. In the final section of the *Confessions*, titled “The Pains of Opium,” De Quincey shares the negative aspects of his opium habit. He discusses his dreams excessively, specifically how much they have changed since he began consuming opium regularly. “For this, and all other changes in my dreams, were accompanied by deep-seated anxiety and gloomy melancholy, such as are wholly incommunicable by words. I seemed every night to descend, not metaphorically, but literally descend, into chasms and sunless abysses, depths below depths, from which it seemed hopeless that I could ever re-ascend. Nor did I, by waking, feel that I *had* re-ascended” (De Quincey 76). De Quincey claims that he is writing from a sunken place, a depth that is inescapable. But when one regards the text as a whole, there is an obvious discrepancy between the pleasures and pains of opium. In the previous section, De Quincey portrayed the divinity of opium. As it has been discussed thus far, he is unable to transmit that experience through language. Similarly here, De Quincey is unable to transmit the oppression that opium has brought to his life. He writes that he has literally descended, but writing does not allow for any sense of literalness. All writing is metaphor, all writing is deference. As he notes that words cannot capture his experience he *continues* to write. And we as readers, even after this revelation, continue to read. It is an irreconcilable contradiction that somehow exists in the pages before us.

Furthermore, in the last paragraph of the *Confessions*, De Quincey writes that “[his] dreams are not yet perfectly calm: the dread swell and agitation of the storm have not wholly

subsided: the legions that encamped in them are drawing off, but not all departed: my sleep is still tumultuous, and, like the gates of Paradise to our first parents when looking back from afar, it is still (in the tremendous line of Milton) - ‘With dreadful faces throng’d and fiery arms’” (De Quincey 88). As if it were a last-ditch effort, De Quincey enumerates metaphor upon metaphor, image upon image, but *it will simply never suffice*. The metaphors and images only allow for the reader to imagine, to represent within the reader’s mind, the pain and agitation that De Quincey feels but writing will never capture it. The text is forever inundated in meaning, while De Quincey struggles to draw breath from it. The blessing of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* is insufficient. The representations continually point away from De Quincey, and ultimately, effaces De Quincey as well. By surrounding himself with language, by crushing his experience into representations, the representations themselves invade De Quincey’s lived experience. In other words, by writing, De Quincey manifests himself as an Object that can be assessed. Yet, as a Self as well, this Object is constantly shifting and changing. The text, like De Quincey, sinks into itself, falling into a chaotic abyss of simultaneous meaning and meaningless.

A similar resignation occurs towards the end of *Opium Talk*. In Passage 63, Zhang writes

余嘗作鴉片烟賦，為友人刊烟管，中有一聯云：“若到黑甜鄉裏，/ 喚他為引睡之媒；/ 倘逢紅粉樓中，/ 藉爾作探花之使。”極為許淞漁孝廉所賞，謂於此道已三折肱矣。然自今思之，猶是皮相語也。

I once wrote a rhyme prose on opium that I had inscribed on an opium pipe for a friend. In it there was the following set of couplets: “If you go to the land of black sweetness/ call out to it to be your go-between for summoning sleep./ If you meet it in the tower of painted women,/ then let it be your ambassador for visiting the flowers.” Mr. Xu Songyu liked these lines a great deal, saying that they showed true experience. But as I look at these lines today, I see them as nothing more than superficial words (Zhang 213-214).

The passage begins with a deference through poetry. The poem itself is a metaphor for an opium high, describing it in terms of space (“land of black sweetness”) and time (“go-between for summoning sleep”). Moreover, Zhang’s inability to appreciate these descriptions suggests that his own words have become foreign to him. Once he forces his experiences into the concrete blocks of language, it is always already in a state of effacement. Opium within the poem is an arbiter between worlds, a familiar guide through the land of black sweetness and the tower of painted women. However, opium is much more than this, for the entire task of *Opium Talk* had been to capture the experience of opium addiction and consumption. But Zhang resigns himself: these words, his own words, have become superficial. They no longer suffice to express this experience. From this, it can be extrapolated that no word, or combination of words, will suffice in capturing opium.

It should also be noted that Zhang’s poem was written upon an opium pipe, the most important tool in the consumption of opium in China. The opium pipe holds the closest proximity to the land of black sweetness: it is the vehicle for its manifestation. To write on the pipe is to almost equate both technologies in their role in the realization of the opium high. But all words become superficial once one is made aware of the impossibility to capture the opium experience in language. The pipe, though wordless, and therefore incommunicable, holds an infinitely closer proximity to the experience of opium than any word within any script.

Once more writing reveals its inability to truly capture the experience of opium addiction and opium consumption. There are basic assumptions, which both authors allude to throughout their memoirs, that allow for glimpses into the opium experience. Namely, Zhang and De Quincey know that their experiences with opium reconfigure their experience with the divine,

time, and ontology. Conceptualizations of Being, temporality, and spirituality are all spun into chaos once their addiction is solidified. They know that what they experience is unique and incommunicable. Yet, as members of the educated classes of their respective nations, they are familiar with the power of writing. They know how black lines ordered on a white background can cause people to feel anger, fear, sadness, happiness, etc. Writing, however, is the illusion of transference. To read is to decipher, not to understand. This analysis has shown time and time again how both Zhang and De Quincey, though they are from different historical, social, and even scriptive backgrounds, never fully write in a way that can fully encapsulate their experiences. Writing's inability to capture the most intimate moments of their experiences places the entire system of transferring meanings in jeopardy. The moment the individual opium experience is crushed into words it is *already always moving away from the lived experience of the writer*.

If we are not to stop writing (or reading) representations of the lived experience, then how should one write the unwritable, speak the unspeakable experience that is opium addiction? For a possible solution, interestingly enough, we must turn to early Christian theology and the problem of representing the unrepresentable: God.

Speaking of the unspeakable is a central problem within Christian theology. How can one speak or describe God when he holds a place that is beyond the realm of the lived experience? It is this problem that Dionysius the Areopagite, an Athenian Christian from the 1st Century CE, describes in his treatise *On the Divine Names*. Though the text is comprehensive, a possible negotiation of this problem of naming the unnamable is found in the fifth verse of the first chapter:

But if It [God] is greater than all Reason and all knowledge, and hath Its firm abode altogether beyond Mind and Being, and circumscribes, compacts, embraces and anticipates all things while Itself is altogether beyond the grasp of them all, and cannot be reached by any perception, imagination, conjecture, name, discourse, apprehension, or understanding, how then is our Discourse concerning the Divine Names to be accomplished, since we see that the Super-Essential Godhead is unutterable and nameless?...It is both the central Force of all things, and also their final Purpose, and is Itself before them all, and they all subsist in It; and through the fact of Its existence the world is brought into being and maintained; and It is that which all things desire—those which have intuitive or discursive Reason seeking It through knowledge, the next rank of beings through perception, and the rest through vital movement, or the property of mere existence belonging to their state. Conscious of this, the Sacred Writers celebrate It by every Name while yet they call It Nameless (Dionysius 1.5)

The passage culminates into the final sentence cited. God is a being beyond any signifier that language can provide. Even the word “God” itself is incapable (as is It, Yahweh, Allah, Nirvāṇa, etc.). Language is finite and enclosed. Given this, Biblical writers sought to list as many attributes of God as possible. Yet, even an infinite number of words is insufficient not only because God is beyond the realm of language but because language itself is beyond itself. *Language is always already moving away from itself.* To describe language is impossible without falling infinitely into its movement of deference. Language is not only unsuitable to speak of God, but it is also unsuitable for the human experience as well. And so, the only way to name God is to name It Nameless.

De Quincey and Zhang’s struggle to represent the experience of opium consumption and addiction in writing parallels the struggle for theologians to represent God. Apophatic theology is a method used by Dionysius the Areopagite and other theologians to approach this problem. As defined by *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, apophatic theology “refers to the practice of describing God by negating particular attributes of God” (McFarland 25). To read

Biblical texts, to read *any* text at all, one must never hope to reach the Subject/Self on the other side of that text. The Subject/Self of the text, i.e. the Origin of the text, will forever be unreachable. Language is only able to *point towards the origin*. One should therefore move away from seeking originary meaning(s) within the text but realize the infinite traces of meaning that stem from every text. As McFarland later states, “while we can be confident that such perfections exist in God, we remain ignorant of how they exist in God” (McFarland 26). In other words, the reader can only know the descriptions of the Subject/Self but never the Subject/Self *unto itself*.

The writings of addicts must therefore be approached like Biblical texts: full of truths and forever inconclusive. Like the God of the Bible, the descriptions, feelings, scenarios, allegories, metaphors, narratives, dialogues are, in a sense, all true. But we must move away from viewing truth as a static state. If one says, “God is Truth,” one must understand this sentence to be false because nothing in the realm of God may be equivalent to the signifier of “truth.” But the sentence still stands because it is, in the simplest of terms, a quality of God that can be conceptualized within language. Likewise, when De Quincey claims to be in the realm of the divine, when Zhang says that the gods could have never imagined the pleasure of opium, what it shown is language’s inability to capture a reality beyond its scope *and* its efficiency in holding the infinite traces of meaning. Writing can therefore never capture the experience of opium addiction. It’s simply impossible. Writing can also never capture God, and yet, the Bible is a text which exists. But more importantly, *it is a text that is believed*. The reader must therefore perform a contradictory act: they must *believe* and *doubt* the life narrative of opium addicts *at the same time*, just as the theologian must believe and doubt the sentence “God is Truth” at the same

time. When De Quincey claims that opium enhances his appreciation of music, when Zhang claims that opium is not destructive, *they are speaking from a space and time beyond the text*. But the text is all there is. The text is the house of mirrors we all must enter, in which we must decipher the distorted images that surround us. The text is the abysmal room we enter when we read. It is like the opium den, full of shifting shadows, and yet remaining the same, still room. The only conclusion that can be trusted is that of the inconclusive, infinite number of meanings held between the pages of any and every book.

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