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‘Memories of Old Sins’: Opium Addiction in Narratives of Nineteenth-Century London

> While Nature is a chaos of unconscious forces, a city is a chaos of conscious ones. The narrowest street possesses, in every crook and twist of its intention, the soul of the man who built it, perhaps long in his grave. Every brick has as human a hieroglyph as if it were a graven brick of Babylon, every slate on the roof is as educational a document as if it were a slate covered with addition and subtraction sums.
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> G. K. Chesterton

> London is the only real place in the world. The cities turn toward London as young partridges turn to their mothers. The cities know that they are not real. They are only houses and wharves, and bricks and stucco; only outside. The minds of all men in them, merchants, artists, thinkers, are bent on London. Thither they go as soon as they can. San Francisco thinks London; so does St Petersburg.
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> Richard Jefferies

> And one thing is clear, that amidst such bitter self-reproaches as are now extorted from me by the anguish of my recollections, it cannot be with any purpose of weaving plausible excuses, or of evading blame, that I trace the origin of my confirmed opium-eating to a necessity growing out of my early sufferings in the streets of London.
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> Thomas De Quincey

This paper will suggest that throughout a number of English texts written in the nineteenth century, particularly during the second half of the century, the city is represented as a labyrinth at the centre of which lie dark secrets. It is also, connectedly, portrayed as both initiator and metaphor of addiction. Disguise, dissimulation, and deception are at the centre of numerous

images controlling the dynamics of the novel is 'the pervasive figure of the city of secrets...The city in *Franklin Evans*...is unconditionally the malevolent city of secrets.'[15] The city, secrets, and addiction, to either alcohol or opium, are all subsumed within the most pervasive of the tropes that dominate these texts. The most ubiquitous image used in the literature of the period, in both England and America, to conflate secrecy, the city and addiction, is that of the city as labyrinth. Charles Dickens writes in *The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit*: 'Nobody had ever found Todgers on a verbal direction, though given within a minute's walk of it…Todger's was in a labyrinth, whereof the mystery was known but to a chosen few.'[16] De Quincey, in *The Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, refers to 'the mighty labyrinths of London'[17], while in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dorian tells Lord Henry of the way in which he found Sibyl Vane at work in a London theatre: '"I don't know what I expected, but I went out and wandered eastward, soon losing my way in a labyrinth of grimy streets and black, grassless squares."'[18] Wyn Kelley notes the way in which inevitability is inscribed within labyrinthine literature: 'The hero has only limited power to choose his path or control the journey once it has started. The labyrinth works to fulfill the logic of his initial choice for redemption or error and bring him to the logical consequences of that choice. The hero may choose, then, whether to enter the labyrinth or not, but once inside he finds all paths leading to the inevitable conclusion.'[19] Nothing is more inevitable in these texts than addiction.

Despite his claim at the end of the *Confessions* that he had freed himself from opium, De Quincey took opium every day from 1812 to his death: 'During certain periods (1813-1815, 1817, 1828, 1844), his dosage rose as high as 12,000 drops of laudanum a day with accompanying derangement of his sleep and waking hours. At other times he was apparently able to reduce his dose to a maintenance level (50-1,000 drops a day) at which he could function

> confused mind has been projected onto the landscape of London, which becomes as alien as the undiscovered world.[23]

When De Quincey describes his fruitless attempts to find the prostitute Ann again, he writes:

> If she lived, doubtless we must have been sometimes in search of each other, at the very same moment, through the mighty labyrinths of London; perhaps even within a few feet of each other – a barrier no wider, in a London street, often amounting in the end to separation for eternity!...I may say that on my different visits to London, I have looked into many, myriads of female faces, in the hope of meeting her…[24]

Wolfreys notes of this passage: 'This passage, more than any other, makes clear the effect which London can have. The figures of the labyrinth and eternity suggest the double abyss of endless space and unending time, spaces beyond mapping and temporality which cannot be registered.

> druggist (unconscious minister of celestial pleasures!), as if in sympathy with the rainy Sunday, looked dull and stupid, just as any mortal druggist might be expected to look on a rainy London Sunday.[27]

Wolfreys writes of this episode: 'It is London which, because of its threatening, engulfing aspect causes De Quincey to turn to opium. Here we see the city erasing identity by imprinting itself in all its banality onto the individual.'[28]

Lehan writes of portrayals of the city throughout Dickens's work: 'Dickens's city was both lure and trap: a lure to those who are called to it as if by a magnet, because only the city offers the means of realizing a heightened conception of self; a trap in its workings, which lead to human destruction.'[29] Just as the city offers 'the means to realize a heightened conception of self', so too do drugs and alcohol, most prominently on offer in the city. Although most of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* is set in Cloisterham, Dickens's fictionalized Rochester, the novel

> past, concealed at each subsequent turn, is made continually unusable. The labyrinthine city draws the spellbound passenger into progressively meaner streets: the "looker-on" becomes a participant, the participant becomes an enthusiast, the enthusiast becomes habituated, debilitated, and finally a corpse - the last word in worthless simulacra.[31]

Opium is shown to confuse the demarcation between objective and subjective, between the real city and the city of dreams, far more strikingly, and much more persistently, than alcohol. *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* opens *in media res*, immediately establishing a blurred conflation between a London opium den, Cloisterham, and the exotic East:

> An ancient English Cathedral Town? How can the ancient English Cathedral town be here? The well-known massive grey square tower of its old Cathedral? How can that be here! There is no spike of rusty iron in the air, between the eye and it, from any point of the real prospect. What is the spike that intervenes, and who has set it up? ... Stay! Is the spike so low a thing as the rusty spike on the top of a post of an old bedstead that has tumbled all awry? Some vague period of drowsy laughter must be devoted to the consideration of this possibility.[32]

De Quincey writes in *Confessions*, using similar exotic Oriental imagery:

> O just and righteous opium! that to the chancery of dreams summonest, for the triumphs of despairing innocence, false witnesses; and confoundest perjury; and dost reverse the sentences of unrighteous judges; - thou buildest upon the bosom of darkness, out of the fantastic imagery of the brain, cities and temples, beyond the art of Phidias and Praxiteles - beyond the splendours of Babylon and Hekatompylos.[33]

McDonagh also notes the exoticism of his terminology:

> In the description of his nightly excursions in the streets of London...he indicates how opium also has the capacity to elide temporal and cultural difference, for it expands his sense of time and space. However, as he describes a landscape that is as opaque as an impenetrable text, comprised of 'problems of alleys', 'enigmatic entries', and 'sphynx's riddles of streets', it is as though his own confused mind has been projected onto the landscape of London, which becomes as alien as the undiscovered world.[34]

In the confused mind of the urban alcoholic or opium addict, nothing can be taken for granted, nothing is ever quite as it seems.

> As earlier noted, the city, addiction, and the theatre are invariably intertwined. De

considered the 'worse' of the two vices, opium addiction was hardly socially acceptable. In a similar vein to Sedgwick, referring to Ann in *Confessions*, Wolfreys writes: '...the figure of the woman, like the opium found in the city, is merely one more addictive trace offered by London and serving as a metonymic figure or signature for the Capital, which fuels simultaneously both desire and anxiety'.[40] However, a woman is not 'addictive' in any way that is comparable to opium addiction. Both writers, it seems to me, overlook the possibility that, sometimes, 'a cigar is just a cigar'.

In an interesting reworking of the convention that has the protagonist discover the

flight of steps leading down to a black gap like the mouth of a cave, I found the den of which I was in search.'[43] In both cases, the 'mouth' symbolizes ingestion of a substance which is being criticized within the main body of the narrative. Crane's 'yellow glare' adds a further human image, actually intimating the saloon's treacherous and hostile intent to the patrons who are so easily lured inside. The stress upon dissimilitude: 'imitation leather;' 'counterfeit massiveness;' and 'mahogany-appearing' further the novel's drive to reveal the epistemological errors inseparable from drunkenness.

Like the streets that all seem to converge on a saloon in *Maggie*, and like the unavoidable saloons in *Franklin Evans*, the topography of the city itself reduces the options available to the protagonists. Wolfreys writes:

> De Quincey is never at home with his presence in London, even at the remove afforded

Wilde's imagery dramatizes the novel's persistent distrust of opium. A simile links the moon with death, and a 'misshapen' cloud is anthropomorphically represented, thereby emphasizing the perverted nature of Gray's quest, while the 'narrow' streets are themselves transformed through simile into an image unequivocal in its sinister malevolence. The English opium narratives construct a London landscape that restricts choice once the journey has begun. Here, topography is destiny.

Opium dens are always situated in the East End of London and the imagery surrounding them is always that of the exotic, dangerous East. De Quincey writes in *Confessions*:

> In China, over and above what it has in common with the rest of Southern Asia, I am terrified by the modes of life, by the manners, by the barrier of utter abhorrence placed between myself and *them*, by counter-sympathies deeper than I can analyze. I could sooner live with lunatics, with vermin, with crocodiles or snak

narrative, in disguise: 'Upper Swandam Lane is a vile alley lurking behind the high wharves which line the north side of the river to the east of London Bridge.'[50] It is not only opium, however, which is associated with the East. In *Franklin Evans*, Evans, now sober, describes a final encounter with an old friend: 'As I was passing one day along a street on the eastern side of the city, my course was impeded by a crowd, gathered around a tipsy loafer, who was cutting up his antics in the street...It was Colby, my early intimate, the tempter who had led me aside from the paths of soberness.'[51] Further geographical connections between the opium and the alcohol narratives can be seen in the images of spatialisation which occur throughout all the texts.

The streets in all these narratives are, invariably, narrow and the protagonists are always hemmed in by their surroundings, thereby emphasizing their reduction of choice and their loss of free will. In The *Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Dickens writes that 'the streets of Cloisterham city are little more than one narrow-street by which you get into it and get out of it.'[52] As Dorian Gray makes his interminable journey to the East End opium den the streets become 'more narrow and gloomy.'[53] Once inside, the interiors of opium dens are also often described as oppressive and claustrophobic: 'I walked down the narrow passage between the double row of sleepers, holding my breath to keep out the vile, stupefying fumes of the drug',[54] Watson informs us, while in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood,* the opium den is described as containing 'the meanest and closest of small rooms.'[55]

In *Franklin Evans*, the East, alcoholism, and narrowness are linked twice. In desperation, Evans joins a gang of criminals, who meet on the east side: 'Starting at one of the eastern wharves, is a street running up from the river - a narrow, dirty street, with many wooden houses, occupied as taverns for seamen and abiding places for degraded women.'[56] Similarly, recovering from a five-day bender, Evans considers begging: 'There seemed to be no better plan than to

walk down the wide handsome street, leading to the east from where I stood, and knock at every house.'[57] On both occasions, Evans begins his degraded alcoholic descent from the narrow and stunted east; it is significant that the street of affluence is described as 'wide', implying within the labyrinthine context of the novel, choice and freedom of will. Conan Doyle, too, employs precisely the same dichotomy: as Holmes and Watson leave the opium den for the suburbs the city's topography is transformed: 'we dashed away through the endless succession of sombre and deserted streets, which widened gradually, until we were flying across a broad balustraded bridge, with the murky river flowing sluggishly beneath us.'[58] Such spatialisation reinforces the epistemological concerns shared by this body of texts; it is not only that the east is depraved, which is a moral anxiety, but also that it is wrong, an epistemological concern.

As Holmes leaves the befuddling smoke of the opium den for the wide streets of the suburbs, he begins to apply his mind to the question of truth - what 'really' happened in the opium den. The 'sluggish' water which flows under the bridge parallels Holmes' befuddled thinking; the further he is removed from the opium den, the sharper and more accurate his thinking becomes. When they return to London, Holmes having solved the puzzle during the night, through thought alone, their trip back into the city is equally symbolic: 'In town the earliest risers were just beginning to look sleepily from their windows as we drove through the streets of the Surrey side. Passing down the Waterloo Bridge Road we crossed over the river, and dashing up Wellington Street wheeled sharply to the right and found ourselves in Bow Street.'[59] Through the sequence of active verbs the pace of their journey is brisk, both street names are indicative of victory, and they turn to the 'right'. Even the somewhat inappropriate passive construction 'we found ourselves' works to imply that Truth itself has brought them there; something which is wholly beneficial and not totally outside human agency. At the conclusion of

Franklin Evans, the concept of width of the street is also used to indicate freedom and liberation from illusion and deceit. Evans, now sober and very respectable, encounters a triumphant Temperance procession: 'I had wandered to and fro for an hour or more, when I came out in a wide street, to the sides of which I saw the people flocking from every corner.'[60]

The American alcohol novels are strikingly more optimistic than the English opium narratives. Maggie is not killed by alcohol, although clearly it plays a large part in her downfall, and Franklin Evans becomes an abstainer. However, De Quincey spares his readers none of the horrors of a decade-long opium addiction, while Isa Whitney, who is the reason Watson is in the opium den, and who became addicted to opium at university after reading De Quincey, is abandoned to his miserable fate as a slave to opium, once Watson encounters Holmes. Jaspers, in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, would surely have been punished for the murder (we assume) he committed, and yet, perhaps surprisingly, Wilde is no less stern a moralist than Dickens. Wilde writes as Gray leaves the opium den, articulating the earlier noted 'inevitability' of urban, labyrinthine narratives of nineteenth-century London:

> There are moments, psychologists tell us, when the passion for sin, or for what the world calls sin, so dominates a nature, that every fibre of the body, as every cell of the brain, seems to be instinct with fearful impulses. Men and women at such moments lose the freedom of their will. They move to their terrible end as automatons move.[61]

Evaluating the different effects of wine and opium, De Quincey argues 'But the main distinction lies in this – that whereas wine disorders the mental faculties, opium, on the contrary (if taken in a proper manner), introduces amongst them the most exquisite order, legislation and harmony.