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“Founding Its Empire on Spells of Pleasure”: Brunonian Excitability, the Invigorated English Opium- Eater, and De Quincey’s “China Question”

Menglu Gao

Twenty-one years after the first publication of his notorious *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821), Thomas De Quincey received news that his son Horace had died in China.¹ Horace had sailed to China to fight for Britain in the First Opium War (1839–42), a war triggered by China’s resistance to opium and the opium trade, later ironically named for the drug itself. Although De Quincey might have warned Horace not to go to China,² he acted as an avid supporter of an Anglo-Chinese war in his periodical writings. In “The Opium and the China Question,” an article published in *Blackwood’s* in June 1840, De Quincey drew a comparison between the British and Chinese empires, describing the war as a competition between Britain’s “indomitable energy” and China’s “lazy, torpid body.”³

De Quincey’s representation of both China and Britain as bodies with a certain quantity of energy could be positioned in a longstanding European tradition of the body as a metonym of state or empire in political discourse. The tradition dates to seventeenth-century political philosophy, with perhaps the frontispiece of Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (1651) as its most famous illustration (fig. 1). Composed of numerous smaller individuals in a well-organized way, the crowned giant, the symbol of an undivided state, is described as the strongest power in the world—“there is no power on earth to be compared to him”



Figure 1. Abraham Bosse. Frontispiece of *Leviathan* by Thomas Hobbes (1651). Courtesy of Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

("Non est potestas Super Terram quae Comparetur ei"). If a unified state should be represented as a giant human being, a less unified one could be compared to a shapeless body, even a monster. For instance, when commenting on a loose collection of independent powers, the German jurist Samuel von Pufendorf referred to the Holy Roman Empire as an ugly, deformed body—a "monster, shapeless, huge, and horrifying."⁴ Similar to a machine-like body, an empire works better when its different parts constitute a coherent whole.

Yet De Quincey's body metaphor, either brimming with energy or distinctly lacking it, engages the empires in more than a mechanistic discussion of how the parts compose the whole.⁵ In his writings the energies of an empire are always in a state of flux, exposed to the influence of external powers.⁶ In "Kant's Idea of a Universal History" (1824), De Quincey refers to military conflict as "dedicat[ing] all national energies and resources to war."⁷ In "Joan of Arc" (1847), the prospect of France being annexed and turned into a province of England is considered ruinous also to Britain, since "dreadful pecuniary exhaustion caused the English energy to droop."⁸ In "The Logic of Political Economy" (1859), colonization is compared to retarding or intercepting the colonies' "expansive energies."⁹ Bolstering De Quincey's sense that each empire has its own "national energies," from the late eighteenth century on the popularity of psychoactive substances such as opium made bodily energy an effective motif in metaphorical representations of the British Empire.¹⁰

The presence of opium differentiated this new emblem of a nation from the earlier Leviathan-like bodily composition. In the caricaturist James Gillray's political cartoons during the Anglo-French Wars (1793–1815), Britain is often embodied as a bedridden lady, Britannia, with sedatives or stimulants around her. In *The Nursery;—with, Britannia Reposing in Peace* (1802), Britannia is sleeping, probably under the sedating influence of the "opiate pills" and "composing draft," an opiate draft that can be seen above the fireplace (fig. 2).¹¹ In Gillray's 1804 cartoon *Britannia between Death and the Doctors* as well, the prime minister Henry Addington, with the opiate draft dropping from his hand, seems to be scared by the skeletal Napoleon's arrow, making it difficult for the viewer to decide whether the draft is a remedy or poison (fig. 3). The introduction of energy—which opium would either sedate or stimulate in this bodily metonymy of the early nineteenth century—offered a different way to imagine the British national self in the new world system: opium use exposes the self to "exciting powers" that are more intangible and unlocatable than ever.¹²

Apart from Gillray's opium-sedated Britannia and De Quincey's energetic British Empire in his articles on opium and China, "energy" became a word frequently linked with the nationalist imagining in British journalism in the 1830s and 1840s: although what the word specifically signified varied from policy to labor, capital, productivity, or commerce, these periodical writings usually assigned "energies" to an imagined community or nation-state rather than to any specific in-



Figure 2. James Gillray. *The Nursery;—with, Britannia Reposing in Peace* (1802). The Art Institute of Chicago.



Figure 3. James Gillray. *Britannia between Death and the Doctors* (1804). The Art Institute of Chicago.

dividual.¹³ This intimacy between bodily energy and national power, I contend, originated from a tendency in the beginning of the nineteenth century simultaneously to medicalize and to nationalize the interface between body and psychoactive substances.

Although scholarship about De Quincey and Romanticism has incorporated medical theories and life sciences,¹⁴ how Romantic texts engaged the medical body with the emerging imperial identity remains largely unexplored. Focusing on De Quincey, this essay argues that the idea of national energies in De Quincey's later political writings in fact dates back to his *Confessions*, a text that nationalizes the single case of the opium-eater by transforming mental exceptionalism into a medical body's generalizable connection with internal energies and external stimuli from China and "the Orient." The political and medical discourses here do not just converge on a similar metaphorical form regarding how the body/self connects with the outside/colonized, which can also be found in Victorian anticontagionism in both germ theory and imperialist anxieties.¹⁵ The two discourses also lead to the departicularization of the individual, who is thereafter marked by either a nationality or a physiological category.¹⁶

I begin by showing how the use of opium was medicinally justified in Britain at the time. I look specifically at the Brunonian mechanism of excitement proposed by the Scottish physician John Brown (1735–1788). After charting how Brunonian medicine offers a physiological language to position the human body within a world of exciting powers, this essay focuses on how De Quincey's *Confessions* develops Brown's statement on opium's universal invigorating effects and uses the Brunonian language to medicalize and "nationalize" its opium-eating protagonist. This medicalizing and nationalizing process requires China, one of the remotest time-spaces, to provide the external stimuli to the opium-eater and a national opposite of the British Empire. As the represented interface between opium and body problematized the border of a physiological body, it also helped redefine a national self by reconfiguring the complex connection between self and other, which, as my reading of De Quincey's *Confessions* will show, constitutes the central problematic of the imperial identity.

What, then, marks this identity? In *Romantic Englishness*, David Higgins refers to the making of English identity in the Romantic era as "a process that requires alterity even when it seeks to reject it." I read Higgins's alterity as both local and foreign otherness. Whereas the former, in Higgins's words, constructs a "porous and heterogeneous identity" under the umbrella of Englishness or Britishness, the latter

reinforces the unity of the national community, making its identity unique and exclusive.¹⁷ To return to De Quincey's *Confessions*, while the English opium-eater holds a national character peculiar to what De Quincey would call "Englishmen," his extraordinary intellectual energies, as well as his active connection with opium and the imagined Orient, also seem to distance him from a common Englishman.

I view this dual and oscillating identity of the opium-eater as owing to a clash between imperial and medical discourses. Although both discourses serve to generalize the narrator, making him an emblem of either "Englishmen" or opium-users, their respective claims—British exceptionalism and opium's universal invigorating effects—expose the self to different scales of departicularization. Consequently, I read *Confessions* as a text that struggles with fascinating intensity over the conflict between particularity and generalization: written before the Victorian era, it adopts opium's effects on bodily energy to help advance a generalizable modern British self, relative to not only the external world but also the opium-eater's exceptionality. While expansive Englishness has an extraordinary and invigorated individual as its synecdoche in *Confessions*, the work also gives rise to a replicable medical case according to which anyone could be strengthened by opium, a drug easily attainable in early nineteenth-century Britain.

Excitability and Bodily Energy: John Brown's *Elements of Medicine*

Published in the 1820s, *Confessions* drew British readers' attention to the growing popularity of opium-eating. Despite the controversy over the short- and longer-term effects of opium use, which gathered steam in later decades, medical treatises at the start of the century had not yet associated opium-eating with addiction or overdose.¹⁸ The medical use of opium in the early nineteenth century drew much of its theoretical support from Brunonianism, a system of medicine initiated by Brown's *Elements of Medicine*. First published in Latin as *Elementa Medicinae* in 1780, the book was later translated into English by Brown himself and went to press in 1788. Though a medical treatise, the book turned many influential European intellectuals into Brown's adherents, among them Immanuel Kant and Friedrich von Schelling in Germany, and Samuel Coleridge, Erasmus Darwin, John Thelwall, and Thomas Beddoes in Britain.¹⁹ De Quincey was also among the latter. For him, the authority of Brown's theory lasted for such a long period that, even in the 1840s, De Quincey still referred to "Brunonian Philosophy"

as a theoretical source when he mentioned the Chinese scholar Koo King-shan's statement about opium's poisonous effects.²⁰ In order to understand the role of opium in Brunonianism, however, we must first recapitulate how Brown explains the human body.

According to Brown's theory, what distinguishes life from death can be boiled down to a single property of living organisms: "they can be affected by external agents, as well as by certain functions peculiar to themselves, in such a manner, that the phenomena peculiar to the living state can be produced."²¹ Brown calls this property "excitability"; the forces that may act on it, including both the external agents and the internal functions, he designates as "exciting powers" (89). Perhaps having realized that "excitability" could sound incorporeal and conceptually unstable, Brown is not sure here whether to treat excitability as a "quality" or a "substance" (90). On the one hand, his definition of excitability as a susceptibility to being affected equates the concept with a quality that already includes the interface between body and stimulus. On the other hand, this quality, Brown makes clear, also shares the characteristics of a quantifiable substance. He states that there is a certain amount of excitability whose "quantity" varies and fluctuates—"the quantity, or energy, is different in different animals, and in the same animal at different times" (90). Modifying the concept by adjectives such as "abundant," "worn out," "exhausted," and "consumed," Brown seems to suggest that excitability is measurable or at least can be evaluated based on its quantity (90).

As it is both qualitative and quantitative, abstract and material, the ambiguous concept "excitability" defines life by its connection with the forces influencing it and therefore positions the human body within a world of internal and external exciting powers. Brown's theory understands health as a state in which "the stimulus has neither been applied in excess nor defect"—in other words, as an appropriate degree of what he calls "excitement." Correspondingly, he then divides unhealthy states into two categories: "sthenic" disease arising from excessive excitement, and "asthenic" diseases originating from deficient excitement (112). Built on this binary explanation of illness, the nature of medical treatment for Brown is to adjust the interaction between the patient's excitability and stimuli. By increasing or decreasing the stimuli, the physician can restore the exciting powers to a more stable and suitable level. As we can see from the "Table of Excitement and Excitability," which summarizes Brown's account of different diseases in *Elements of Medicine*, most diseases belong to

the asthenic, which require the application of powerful stimuli, such as electricity or psychoactive substances, either to support or increase the excitement (fig. 4).

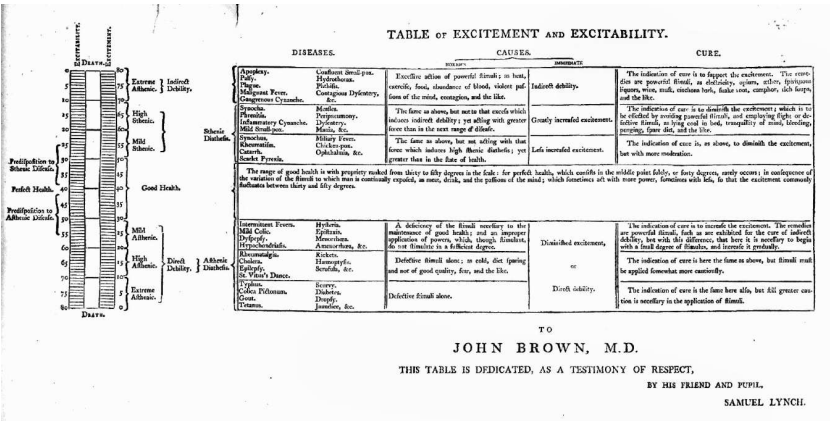


Figure 4. Samuel Lynch. “Table of Excitement and Excitability” (1795), dedicated to John Brown. Credit: Wellcome Collection. Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0).

Due to the favorable reception of Brown’s theory, the Brunonian system of medicine replaced bloodletting, the popular cure grounded in humoralism in early nineteenth-century Britain. Since the 1830s, British doctors had often prescribed stimulants such as alcohol and opiates, especially in the latter’s liquid form as laudanum.²² The reason Brown’s theory rejects bloodletting is not that blood, as a bodily fluid, is excluded from a medical system that prioritizes stimulation. Unlike earlier physicians who regarded blood as the most significant part of life, Brown classifies blood as a source of ordinary stimuli, whose function is similar to the effects of other exciting powers (90–91).²³ No, the main problem of bloodletting, according to Brown, is that decreasing the quantity of blood only produces an insufficient stimulus, often with harmful effects (150–2). To cure asthenic diseases, in short, patients needed stronger stimulants.

Opium, for Brown, undoubtedly is one such stimulant. Arguing against physicians who maintained that opium is only a sedative, he represents opium’s sedative effects as a lower degree of excitement and calls opium the “most powerful agent” among all stimulants (93, 219, 244). If we compare how Brown writes about opium’s effects with accounts in an earlier treatise mentioned in *Confessions*, William

Buchan's *Domestic Medicine* (1769), we find that opium, a pain-killer acting on the nervous system in Buchan's work, has become a crucial remedy restoring bodily energy in Brown's. Opium is thus no longer just a palliative for problems such as toothache and stomach cramp.²⁴ Instead, it is a key medication stimulating the essence of life—the body's excitability—in Brown's "stimulant plan of cure" (417). Effective against all kinds of asthenic diseases, such as insomnia, tetanus, hysteria, and tabes dorsalis, opium is, Brown claims, the best way to invigorate the body and diminish weakness caused by difficult physical labor. "Opium should be administered," he writes, "when the labour proves more difficult, and threatens to be tedious" (454).

Opium Use and Invigorated Energy:
Confessions of an English Opium-Eater

The narrator of *Confessions* confirms opium's invigorating effects. Like Brown, who classifies opium only as a stimulant, the narrator of *Confessions* distinguishes its effects from "intoxication" and "inebriation." De Quincey's narrator even reinforces the uniqueness of opium, contrasting its effects with those of other stimulants such as wine. Unlike wine, which "robs a man of his self-possession," "opium greatly invigorates it."²⁵ While wine-induced inebriation puts a man in a condition that calls up the "brutal . . . part of his nature," opium-eating allegedly activates the "diviner part" of it—"the moral affections are in a state of cloudless serenity; and over all is the great light of the majestic intellect" (41).

Though named as a series of "confessions," *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* is not so much an opium-eater's acknowledgment of sinfulness as a firsthand account of the short-term feeling and long-term experience of opium-eating. One might assume that a first-person narrative of opium's invigorating effects could hardly be a locus for medical terms, since physiological vigorousness, similar to wellness in Kant's discussion of feeling in medical judgment, often extends beyond how one actually feels.²⁶ Yet it is notable that the narrator combines this autobiographic form with a "scientific" language indebted to Brown's medical system. Using Brunonian terms such as "system," "(nervous) excitement," "excite," and "stimulate," the narrator's description of opium's invigorating effects communicates mechanisms and concerns similar to those in Brown's *Elements*.

For instance, the narrator agrees with Brown's claim that opium is the most effective stimulant, arguing, "the primary effects of opium are always, in the highest degree, to excite and stimulate the system" (44). He even describes the rationale behind invigorating effects as a Brunonian balance between external stimuli and internal faculties: opium introduces a balancing force, "communicat[ing] . . . equipoise to all the faculties, active or passive" (40). Like Brown, the narrator also notices the limitation of language for different "modes of nervous excitement": for example, the word "intoxication" is used "with too great latitude" in medical treatises and should accordingly be restricted "as the expression for a specific sort of excitement" (43).

If, as Brown acknowledges, it is always difficult to write about excitement due to "the poverty of language," De Quincey's *Confessions*, by recounting what opium-eating feels like, engages actively with how language can communicate a sense of euphoria and invigorated energy (90). In particular, the text offers two models for opium's bracing effects: *concentration*, which symbolizes the "flow" of the opium-eater's internal energies, and *expansion*, which suggests an enlarged perception of the world.

The model of concentration can be drawn from the way the narrator differentiates opium's effects from those of wine: a certain amount of wine is "sure to volatilize and disperse the intellectual energies"; opium, on the contrary, to "concentrate what had been distracted" (41). The dynamic picture of opium collating a person's energies from different parts of the body in one specific location materializes the Brunonian excitement, making it a centripetal, compressive movement as opposed to the apparently diffusive energies involved in inebriation.

While concentration raises questions about the body's relation to itself, expansion, the other way to communicate opium's invigorating effects, reframes how the self interfaces with the external world. By "expansion," that is, the narrator is not referencing an enlargement of the opium-eater's body, but rather the expansion of space and time that he perceives. The invigorating effects expose the opium-eater to a "swelled," "amplified" perception of space and time that surpasses his usual perceptual ability or experience (68). The narcotic imparts vigor to the opium-eater by expanding what he perceives to an "unutterable," limitless extent (68). In this sense, this opium-enhanced perception does feel like an expansion of the self. As he continues to hallucinate, the opium-eater gradually adapts to this drastically different interface with the world and incorporates it into his own bodily space.²⁷

Expansion and the Exciting Powers from "China"

If the model of concentration assigns a bodily space for the internal energies, expansion offers a possibility of spatializing the invigorating effects. The loss of situated subjectivity when facing the expanded scope of world becomes a rhetorical device in *Confessions* to present the opium-eater's physical state.²⁸ If, as the narrator states, space is "amplified to an extent of unutterable infinity," the name of a remote place can serve as an effective embodiment of such endless expansiveness (68). In fact, *Confessions* mentions various non-English elements, mostly Oriental: Turkish opium-eaters in contemporaneous travelogues, the Malay wearing a turban who visits the opium-eater unexpectedly, and Egyptian gods in his fantasy, among others.

Still, the only foreign space the narrator depicts in any detail is what he calls "China," a space that does not seem to have a clear boundary and is sometimes intermingled with "Indostan," "southern Asia," "the Ganges," and "the Euphrates" (72–73).²⁹ In the opium dreams that have haunted him for months, the opium-eater is "transported" to China every night and repetitively tortured by the "monstrous scenery" (74). Like the immaterial, mysterious "exciting powers" in the Brunonian system, what "terrifie[s]" the opium-eater in China is mostly intangible and "spiritual," with few exceptions of actual contacts with the opium-eater's body when he is "buried" or "kissed" (73).

Scholarship about *Confessions* has long focused on the colonial and imperialist implications of the opium dreams, interpreting them as an effect Gayatri Spivak would call "making home uncanny." Referring to the Freudian *Heimlich/Unheimlich* oscillation—the defamiliarization of familiar space—Spivak points out that colonialism and imperialism "involved special kinds of traffic with people deemed 'other'—the familiarity of a presumed common humanity defamiliarized, as it were."³⁰ Postcolonial readings of *Confessions* have thus tended to associate the dreams with the interfusion between East and West: John Barrell argues that there is a fear in De Quincey's writings that "runs back and forth" between his "most private space" and "the most public terrain of the British Empire in the East";³¹ Nigel Leask, that the object of this fear is a blend of West and East;³² Barry Milligan, that the opium dreams reveal the narrator's trauma in which "every attempt to separate English and Oriental, self and other, only further illustrates how unified they are, always have been, and apparently always will be."³³

What I add to such emphases is a more basic question about how the singular opium-eater becomes an emblem of the plural "Englishmen" or the "West." I ask this for good reason, since although De Quincey marks his protagonist as "English," the opium-eater's early life and opium habit might well remind an early nineteenth-century reader of an escaped slave or a colonial subject in contemporaneous slave narratives and travel writings.³⁴ In particular, I ask how the narrator presents the expansion of time and space as an opium-stimulated excitement specific to an English opium-eater.

In order to answer this question, we need to ask first to whom opium's invigorating effects applies. Do the effects only apply to English users? Brown thinks not. In *Elements of Medicine*, he describes excitement as a mechanism that applies to "all the states of life," including human beings, "other animals," even "vegetables" (88). Under this universal rule, opium's stimulating effects do not vary greatly when they manifest themselves in different people. Significantly, Brown supports the universality of opium's stimulant power by introducing a foreign example, the Turks. He asks: "How can there be any uncertainty as to the stimulant power of opium? Has it not the same effect upon the Turks . . . ? Or, are we to suppose, that the troops of that people, on their march to battle, chew opium, to check their natural alacrity, and to depress their courage?" (218).

While Brown references the Oriental other to buttress opium's invigorating effect and argue against the popular belief that classifies the drug as a sedative, the "Turks" appear in *Confessions* to provide an opium-induced effect inimical to bodily energy. The narrator makes clear to the reader that the "torpid state of self-involution" is an Orientalist representation "ascribed" to the Turks by British travelers. In fact, when bringing up opium's stimulating and invigorating effects, he writes: "for upon all that has been hitherto written on the subject of opium, whether by travellers in Turkey (who may plead their privilege of lying as an old immemorial right), or by professors of medicine, writing ex cathedra,—I have but one emphatic criticism to pronounce—Lies! lies! lies!" (39). The "lies" here refer to both the travelogues and the medical treatises. As the narrator attacks the popular representation of opium's damage, he also writes against a widespread depiction of the Orient.

Indeed, the opium-eater's growing knowledge of opium in *Confessions* coincides with an attempted demystification of the Orient. As the opium-eater gets more used to the drug, opium gradually becomes an approachable, specific object rather than a miraculous symbol that

he vaguely connects with the Orient at the beginning (“I had heard of [opium] as I had of manna or of ambrosia” [37]). At the same time, the process of knowing opium’s authentic effects accompanies the opium-eater’s growing access to the Orient: as he keeps using the drug, the narrator encounters a Malay and witnesses him swallowing a piece of opium, and finally lives in China and Chinese houses in his opium dreams. Combining a “study” of opium use with the expansion of the English opium-eater’s scope of the world, *Confessions* exhibits a connection between a re-investigation of the medical body and that of the Orient.

However, the two re-investigations may also compete against each other, for the former relies on a solipsistic agent in *Confessions*, while the latter requires transcending it. When the narrator communicates opium’s authentic effects by emphasizing his personal experience, the claim that “at least opium did not move me to seek . . . the torpid state of self-involution ascribed to the Turks” also confirms the singularity of his case—that his absolute certainty about opium’s invigorating effects extends only to himself. As writing in the first person provides him with no reliable access to the feelings of others, the narrator, opposing his own example to the “torpid” Turks in popular travel writings, can invoke only his own body as a specimen of Englishmen and invite the reader to “judge of the degree in which opium is likely to stupify [*sic*] the faculties of an Englishman” (44).

The compromise between nationalization and medicalization thus loosely connects the narrator only with the Englishmen. While the narrator confirms the Brunonian universality of opium’s invigorating effects by problematizing the popular representation of the Orient, his emphasis on his own national identity ambiguously differentiates the self—an English self—from the Oriental opium-eaters mediated by British travel literature. To discuss further how the Brunonian mechanism of excitement nationalizes the opium-eater, I hereby return to the dream about “China.” How does the imaginary encounter with “China” make the expansion of time and space an opium-stimulated perception particular, and not just to the opium-eater, but to any Englishman? As my reading will suggest, the collective notion of Englishmen emerges through a generalizable physiological reaction to the exciting powers derived from China, a remote country that exceeds the limits of any Englishman’s experience.

The opium-eater’s encounter with “China” is the only place in *Confessions* that exemplifies the opium-induced expansion of space and time. Here, in the narrator’s opium dreams, the notion of “China” cre-

ates an absurd space that mixes different Oriental others and obscures distinctions among human beings, animals, and even inanimate objects. Despite the opium-eater's statement about his inclusive mind, that "he thinks nothing human alien to him" ("humani nihil a se alienum putat"), "China" appears to him a completely alien space. In addition to the chaotic jumble of different Oriental locations, alternative temporal dimensions are also added to this absurd space, associating it with prehistoricity, repetition, and infinity: the narrator alludes to China as "the cradle of human race," a country with "antediluvian" citizens; like the repetitive dreams themselves, the objects and events in the dream are also "multiplied into a thousand repetitions"; and the time span the narrator experiences in the dream lasts for "centuries" or "a thousand years" (72–74).

Although it is clearly an open-ended amalgam, China in every part of the narrator's depiction fits well, and without exception, into a time-space antithetical to the opium-eater's home country. This special role of China is not random. In later political writings from the 1840s, De Quincey refers to China as "a kingdom almost belonging to another planet."³⁵ Although De Quincey's narrator questions the representations of Turkish opium-eaters, the description of his opium dreams nevertheless produces an Orientalist portrayal of China. The "China" here serves as a technique to transcend a solipsistic worldview—it is a perfect symbol of what lies "far beyond the limits of any human experience" for any Englishman (68).

It is the rhetoric of Brunonian excitement and stimulation that conveys this challenge to the shared limits of "unutterable infinity." For if, as Andrew Warren points out, Orientalism is a "network of liminally solipsistic agents," the opium dream in *Confessions* demonstrates that this English network is built on a shared excitement—a ubiquitous physiological economy—conjured up by the stimulation of a dreamlike time-space named "China."³⁶ That said, while the fact that the opium-eater is traveling to Asia in his dreams presents the result of opium's invigorating effects—the sense of expansion of time and space—the content of the dreams mimics the interface between excitability and opium in the Brunonian mechanism of excitement. If one's excitability in Brown's medical system is defined as susceptibility to exciting powers, what we see throughout the dream is that the opium-eater is affected, excited, and overstimulated by stimuli from an external source he views as "Asiatic." The dream presents the mechanism in two aspects. First, although the dream involves various types of "Asiatic scenes," such as buildings, people, animals, and furniture,

the reader never gets a chance to access these objects directly; instead, the Oriental imagery only comes from the opium-eater's mediation. The narrator invites the reader into this feeling by replacing his own reaction with that of an "Englishman." Even at the beginning of the dream, when the narrator starts to introduce the scenes, these descriptions are already mediated by an imagined Englishman's "excitement": an "Englishm[a]n" should "shudder at the mystic sublimity" and will probably "go mad" like the opium-eater, while the Oriental time-space, connected with "a dim and reverential feeling," "affect[s]" him, "overpowers the sense of youth in the individual," and gives a "further sublimity to [his] feelings" (72-73). Indeed, the whole narrative of the dream is filled with emotional shocks, and the use of "antediluvian" and "sublimity," both of which previously appear in the narrator's explanation of opium's invigorating effects, associates this seemingly generic Orientalist dream with a psychoactive stimulation.³⁷ By exposing the opium-eater's "excitability," the narrator makes the Oriental scenes Brunonian external agents that are able to affect the symbolic Englishman.

Second, the emotional shocks in the dream appear as a series of actions imposed on the narrator. The passive role of the opium-eater recalls Brown's definition of "excitability." Defining the latter by a passive sentence ("[living organisms] can be affected by external agents, as well as by certain functions peculiar to themselves, in such a manner, that the phenomena peculiar to the living state can be produced" [88]), Brown's theory renders the body vulnerable to exciting powers coming from either the inside or the outside. Significantly, as De Quincey's narrator proceeds to talk about his specific experiences, most of his verbs are in the passive voice. And even though a verb sometimes appears in the active voice, it is followed by a group of passive clauses or sentences that offsets the temporary agency assigned to the opium-eater. For example, immediately after the opium-eater assembles all the creatures and brings the Egyptian gods, the subject and object are instantly reversed: he is "stared at," "hooted at," "grinned at," and "chattered at" (73). Moreover, as the narrator arranges the passive verbs next to each other, their density highlights that the opium-eater is stimulated with high frequency to an extreme extent.

In contrast to the implied and rhetorical passivity of the opium-eater, the exciting powers transform into aggressive agents in the dream. In this hierarchical relationship between the opium-eater and the external agents, the active role of the latter reaches its peak by the

end of the opium-induced expansion. The transition from dreaming to reality captures a moment when the opium-eater is shocked—not so much by what he sees as by what apparently is looking at him. The objects in the opium-eater's perception finally look back: inanimate objects such as "tables" and "sophas" in the Chinese houses turn into crocodiles with "leering eyes . . . looking out at" the opium-eater (74). If stimulation in the earlier part of the dream still originates from the opium-eater's spectatorship, the emotional shock finally comes directly from the "leering eyes" of the perceived, which takes on the role of active observation.³⁸

Concentration, "Intellectual Energies,"
and the Opium-Eater's Stomachache

Framed within Brunonianism, the ambiguous individual agency in the dream opens up the possibility of redefining Englishness alongside the expansion of the opium-eater's scope of the world. Contrary to expansion, which exposes the self to external stimulants, concentration, another model of opium-induced vigorousness, materializes the invigorating effects as an accumulation of energies within the body. For the narrator, the unity of the self relies on the strengthening of one part (since the energies are concentrated here) accompanied by the enfeeblement of another: while the "diviner part" of one's nature is "paramount" and is "call[ed] up into supremacy," "any deep-seated irritation of pain" is removed from the mind (41). De Quincey rearticulated this point in his 1824 essay "Superficial Knowledge," published in *London Magazine*, in which he quoted Friedrich Schiller: "In no other way than by concentrating the whole energy of our spirit, and by converging our whole being, so to speak, into a single faculty, can we put wings, as it were, to the individual faculty, and carry it by this artificial flight far beyond the limits within which nature has else doomed it to walk."³⁹

This model of concentration allows *Confessions's* narrator to associate opium's invigorating effects with Romantic sublimity. As the narrator further refers to the dominance of the diviner part as "the great light of the majestic intellect," he recounts his opera nights to illustrate how opium helps him better perceive the "sublimity" of music (41, 45). For the opium-eater, taking opium "greatly increas[es] the activity of the mind" and therefore enables him to "construct out of the raw material of organic sound an elaborate intellectual pleasure" (45). This

pleasure, as he explains, depends on the removal, or the blending, of the details of music: “the detail of its incidents removed, or blended in some hazy abstraction; and its passions exalted, spiritualized, and sublimed” (46). The effect of disregarding or mixing smaller “parts” of music in the opium-eater’s pleasant experience of the sublime follows the part-whole connection in opium-induced concentration. The musical sublime, like the concentration of one’s energies, consists in the process of accumulation, condensation, and distillation, which ultimately lead to a strong sense of harmony.

The narrator’s emphasis on the intellectual energies, tied to both opium-induced concentration and sublimity, touches the Romantic tradition that gives prominence to exceptional mental power and individual talent. In his 1997 *Nerves and Narratives*, Peter Logan reads *Confessions* as a narrative that intentionally avoids the physical condition of the opium-eater. If, as Logan states, De Quincey transforms the image of a colonial opium-eater into the quintessence of “British middle-class sensibility,” it is the text’s focus on the intellectual consequences of opium use that associates the protagonist with his fellow countrymen.⁴⁰ While Logan’s reading separates intellect from the opium-eater’s physical condition, Paul Youngquist’s 1999 article “De Quincey’s Crazy Body” draws our attention to the intimacy between the two. Focusing on the theme of daily maintenance in the writings of Kant, Thomas Beddoes, and De Quincey, Youngquist suggests that *Confessions* makes the opium-eater’s transcendental mind “a matter of digestion.”⁴¹

Building on the two readings of *Confessions*’s body-mind connection, I would like to suggest that the model of concentrating energies from different intangible parts of the self further deparicularizes the opium-eater’s access to sublimity and thereby renders this exceptional specimen relatable to British readers and the nation more generally.

At the start of *Confessions*, the narrator stresses that his confessions apply to “the whole class of opium-eaters” composing British society, and thus beyond middle-class readers (2). As the narrator states, he intentionally presents the narrative as an act of confession to address the broad experience of all fellow opium-eaters. Following the attempted generalization of his case, the narrator sketches an upward curve of opium use in the British population—the growing popularity of the drug combines with the dispersion of this practice as a pastime exclusive to the elite. Drawn from his own network, the narrator recalls that opium-eating was a widespread habit some years earlier only among a small class—“men distinguished for talents, or of eminent station” (3). He even alludes to a few opium-eaters without

outing them: "the eloquent and benevolent —, the late dean of —; Lord —; Mr —, the philosopher; a late under-secretary of state . . . ; Mr —; and many others" (3). The present time (c. 1820–30s), comparatively, witnesses the rise of another larger group of opium-users, a significant component of which is working class. The cotton workers in Manchester, for instance, regularly eat the drug on weekends as a replacement for the alcohol they cannot afford. The narrator calls this new and larger group "*amateur* opium-eaters," though he never explains what differentiates them from the small class in the past (3). By presenting these plural English opium-eaters with the narrator's self-image, however, the narrator exposes himself to a conflict between individualism and consumerism. Opium is no longer just an elixir to invoke the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings—it becomes a commodity that circulates among the whole English community.

De Quincey was keenly aware of the tension between individuality and the discourse that effaces it. In "Superficial Knowledge" he comments on the marginalization of individual talent at the time by contrasting modern life in Britain with "Grecian life" from antiquity. According to him, the latter prioritized the parts or individuals who composed that whole, while the former builds on the alleged superiority of the "whole." De Quincey's *Confessions* does capture a single attempt, represented by the invigorated protagonist, to counteract "the overruling tendencies of the age."⁴² While the narrator rejects the singularity of the opium-eater's practice, his self-identification as a philosopher requires him to transcend the corporeal pleasure of opium use and embrace only the *intellectual* side of opium-eating: he is an "intellectual creature"; his pursuits and pleasures since childhood have been "intellectual in the highest sense"; and even though opium-eating can bring "sensual pleasure," he has transformed that into "self-conquest" (2).

But what makes the exceptional intellect? As I have shown, *Confessions's* model of concentration provides a physical economy for opium's invigorating effects and sublimity. The rhetoric of concentration associates mental power with the stimulation of a drug and thereby opens up a possibility of understanding, interpreting, and expressing Romantic sublimity as a movement of energies dependent on medication. This physiological version of mental power problematizes the absolute intellect in Romantic discourse. De Quincey once quoted the account of individual talent outlined in Schiller's *Aesthetic Education of Men* (1795): "extraordinary men are formed, then, by energetic and overexcited spasms, as it were, in the individual faculties."⁴³ If the amount of excitement one receives makes a great mind, then with

the aid of opium anyone has the potential to become “extraordinary” according to the Brunonian system.

Engaging with both Brunonian excitability and Schillerian exceptionalism, *Confessions* introduces a corporeal dimension to the transcendental image of opium in the Romantic literary tradition. In addition to the physical economy of the invigorated mind, De Quincey’s opium-eater notably does not start taking the drug for the “intellectual pleasure” of sublimity; he does so rather for his body, to cure stomachache (“it was not for the purpose of creating pleasure, but of mitigating pain in the severest degree, that [he] first began to use opium as an article of daily diet” [6]). Although the narrative later mainly focuses on opium-induced vigorousness, the stomach is an important organ the narrator/opium-eater keeps mentioning/sensing throughout *Confessions*. Repetitive stomachache—the “painful effects of the stomach,” “the physical anguish of hunger in various degrees of intensity,” “a most appalling irritation of the stomach,” and “a state of unutterable irritation of stomach,” to name just a few (6, 16, 52, 63)—never fails to remind the opium-eater of the existence of his body.

Is opium a remedy, then, or a magic potion? Despite the narrator’s emphasis on “intellectual energies,” there is no clear narrative transition in *Confessions* between taking opium as a remedy for stomachache and as a technology of pleasure.⁴⁴ The confusion between opium use as medication and as a technology for transcendence develops the physiological and somatic implications of Romantic sublimity and helps demystify and deparicularize the singular “English opium-eater.” Opium’s palliative effects on stomachache and hunger binds the protagonist to common patients, who take the drug to maintain the functionality of the stomach, and the poor, who can only afford opium to pacify hunger.

The coexistence of stomach and mind in *Confessions* recalls Brown’s ambiguous division of the self. Brown explains opium’s so-called “palliative” effect as the stimulation of the body’s own excitability. Due to the same properties, opium can be used to reduce weakness and support one’s energy in difficult labor (454). Brown does not indicate whether the stimulation is physical or mental, since a Cartesian distinction between body and mind is neither necessary nor possible in his medical system. The word “*body*,” according to him, should include “both the body simply so called, and also as endued with an intellectual part, a part appropriated to passion and emotion, or a soul: the usual appellation in medical writings is *system*” (89). Replacing it with “soul,” “system,” or a part relevant to “passion” and “emotion,”

Brown's hesitant diction exposes the difficulty of naming what De Quincey would call "intellect."

If, as the model of concentration suggests, opium drives distracted energies into one part or faculty and thereby wipes out the disturbing feelings, the opium-eater's stomachache does seem like one of the distractions that the drug needs to conquer in order to make the invigorated state available. The tension between mind and stomach became the target of Thomas Colley Grattan's 1823 parody, "The Confessions of an English Glutton," which captures and plays with the somatic quality of the opium-eater's intellectual energies. Replacing opium use with eating, the article burlesques *Confessions's* exaggeration of mental greatness and displays how hilarious but possible it can be to describe eating with the same language: "a fullness of brain seemed bursting through my skull—my veins seemed swelled into gigantic magnitude—I lost all reason and remembrance, and fell, in that state, fairly under the table."⁴⁵

Conclusion

The invigorated version of the English opium-eater provides a physical symbol diametrically opposite that of the intoxicated Britannia in Gillray's caricatures. The invigorating effects, which the narrator illustrates as an expansion of the scope of the world and an intense concentration of the body's scattered energies, share the seemingly contradictory characteristics of the unprecedented British Empire in De Quincey's later political writings. As mentioned at the start of this essay, a body able to gain or lose energies became an important emblem for De Quincey to communicate the clash of nations and empires after *Confessions*. Whether as the "expansive energies" of the colonies strangled by the colonizer or the drooping "English energy,"⁴⁶ the power of a nation, in ways similar to the excitability of a human body, is often imagined as a certain amount of energy susceptible to the nation's interaction with its enemies, colonies, and even itself. While "national energies" refer to a concentration of different parts or resources from a nation or people, another phrase, "expansive energies," symbolizes the nation's ability to expand and connect with the external world.

These two qualities coexist in De Quincey's description of Britain and the English people in "The Opium and the China Question" (1840). In this discussion of Anglo-Chinese relations and the incipient Opium War, De Quincey presents the British Empire as a united and

extensive entity. Like the English opium-eater's expanded, concentrated body, it is "the most scattered and exposed" nation, open to the external powers in the world and at the same time concentrated by "self-dependence." The case of the Chinese empire is, however, quite different. Even if it is "defended by massy concentration," the "stagnant state of Chinese society" does not have enough "motion" or stimulant to change, making its empire less excitable than Britain.⁴⁷

De Quincey compares what concentration and expansion respectively mean to the two empires. While the scattered Englishmen are connected with an intangible force, whether as "a reverence for laws," "constitutional energy," or "a pure religion," the Chinese Empire is only defended by a mechanical concentration: it is "compact," "continental," with no colonies or great maritime depots to extend its power (545–46). Unlike its Chinese counterpart, the British Empire is more "expansive." As De Quincey proudly states, the English condition as a people appears "scattered," "diffused," and "exposed," but also united by "indomitable energy" (545).

Confessions's representation of opium's invigorating effects, which stir up simultaneously expansive and concentrated energies, precedes De Quincey's remark on the diffused and powerful English people and British Empire in the 1840s. Contrary to the enfeebling representation of the drug in contemporaneous political and Orientalist contexts, his writing presents a counterimage of the opium-influenced body. For the De Quincey of *Confessions*, opium serves as a bridge between Romantic sublimity, in which it purportedly acted as a mysterious technology for self-strengthening, and Victorian consumerism, when the drug became a popular commodity among national and even global users. The Brunonian mechanism of excitement in the text thus furnishes an important rhetoric to communicate this transition. By transforming mental exceptionality into the Brunonian body's generalizable interface with external stimuli and internal energies, *Confessions* nationalizes and departicularizes the single case of the opium-eater, making him connected with a national community and exposed to the exciting powers from China and "the Orient."

NOTES

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1. Wilson, *Guilty Thing*, 309.
2. Lord Cranbrook, "Christopher North," 347.
3. De Quincey, "Opium and the China Question," 545–46.
4. Quoted in Pocock, "States, Republics, and Empires," 67.
5. Daniel O'Quinn has shown that Britain and China in De Quincey's periodical writings differ in their bodily compositions: the distinction is either the organic/inorganic binary, or the contrast between higher organism and lower organism. See O'Quinn, "Murder, Hospitality, Philosophy," 169.
6. Some earlier writings did use "energy" or "energies" to refer to national power—for example, Edmund Burke once wrote that "all energies of [Great Britain] were awakened" because of "a more improved domestic prosperity," but Britain's energies in these earlier texts usually did not interact with external forces or its foreign counterparts in the world (Burke, *Works of the Right Honorable Edmund Burke*, 3:227).
7. De Quincey, *Collected Writings*, 9:438.
8. De Quincey, *Collected Writings*, 5:401.
9. De Quincey, *Logic of Political Economy*, 104–5.
10. De Quincey, "Opium and the China Question," 534.
11. "Composing draft (draught)" usually referred to opiate or opium draft at this time. Leo de Colange, *American Dictionary of Commerce*, 1:204. In Thomas Haynes Bayly's 1835 poem "The Female Opium-eater! A Romantic Ballad," for example, "opium draught" and "composing draught" are used interchangeably. See *New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal*, 40.
12. I borrow the phrase "exciting powers" from John Brown's *Elements of Medicine*, which will be discussed in detail in the following section.
13. See, for example, "Nothing Could Have Been Better Timed," 524; "Some Five-and-twenty Years," 198; "Another Great Agricultural Meeting," 607; "Queen Dowager," 311.
14. See, for example, David L. Clark, "We 'Other Prussians'"; Tilottama Rajan, "Unavowable Community of Idealism"; Martin Wallen, *City of Health*; Thomas H. Schmid, "London's Immortal Druggists"; Eric Lindstrom, "Dog Sleep."
15. Otis, *Membranes*, 5, 10–11.
16. I borrow the term "departicularization" from Ana Maria Alonso, who defines it as "the process whereby historical discourses and practices are emptied of the meanings which tie them to concrete contexts, to definite localities, to distinct groups, and universalized, made the property of all and of no one" (Alonso, "Effects of Truth," 45).
17. Higgins, *Romantic Englishness*, 16, 64.
18. For the diverse understandings of opium use among British physicians in the early nineteenth century, see Virginia Berridge, *Opium and the People*.
19. See Vickers, "Coleridge, Thomas Beddoes," 48.
20. De Quincey, "War with China," 378. Nigel Leask and Barry Milligan have provided other evidence of De Quincey's interest in Brunonianism. For the use of Brunonian terms in De Quincey's sketches of contemporary men of letters such as Herder and Kant, see Leask, *British Romantic Writers*, 177–78. De Quincey also directly referred to Brown, seeing his theory as "not only . . . a great step taken for medicine, but even for the general interests of man . . . something analogous to the course which human nature has held in still more important inquiries" (De Quincey, *Works of Thomas De Quincey*, 6:83–84; quoted in Milligan, "Brunonianism, Radicalism," 53).
21. Brown, *Elements of Medicine*, 88; subsequent references to the book will be given parenthetically in the text.
22. Zieger, *Inventing the Addict*, 134.
23. For example William Harvey (1578–1657), physician and discoverer of the blood's circulation, describes blood in *Anatomical Exercitations concerning the Generation*

of *Living Creatures* (1653) as “the fountain of Life,” in which “the Life and Soule do first dawn and last set” (quoted in Flint, “Blood, Bodies,” 467).

24. Buchan, *Domestic Medicine*, 359, 438.

25. De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, 40; subsequent references to the book will be given parenthetically in the text.

26. Kant points out that one can never judge whether the wish for wellness is fulfilled, since the feeling of health is unreliable: “It is always uncertain whether man’s second natural wish, for good health, is fulfilled. He can *feel* well (to judge by his comfortable feeling of vitality), but he can never *know* that he is healthy. . . . They *felt* healthy and did not *know* they were ill; for while the cause of natural death is always illness, *causality* cannot be felt. It requires understanding, whose judgment can err” (Kant, *Conflict of the Faculties*, 181).

27. I borrow this idea from Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*. Merleau-Ponty interprets habit as a crucial procedure by which a human body takes up residence in external space and incorporates the latter as bodily space. See Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 145–46.

28. For instance, his temporary powerlessness is compared to bearing “the weight of twenty Atlantics” upon him (77).

29. A similar mixture can also be seen in the opium-eater’s pseudo-communication with the Malay. Knowing just two words in Arabic and Turkish, the opium-eater finally chooses to address the Malay in Greek, for the ridiculous reason that the language is “geographically nearest to an Oriental one” (57).

30. Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, 76–77.

31. Barrell, *Infection of Thomas de Quincey*, vii.

32. Leask, *British Romantic Writers*, 209.

33. Milligan, *Pleasures and Pains*, 68.

34. For the similarity between the opium-eater and an escaped slave, see Logan, *Nerves and Narratives*, 80, 90–91.

35. De Quincey, “Opium and the China Question,” 544.

36. Warren, *The Orient and the Young Romantics*, 27.

37. The next section will further explain the physiological implications of De Quincey’s use of “sublimity.”

38. I prefer using the word “spectator” instead of “observer” here, if, according to a distinction Jonathan Crary makes, a “spectator” in the nineteenth-century context is “one who is a passive onlooker at a spectacle,” while an “observer” is “one who sees within a prescribed set of possibilities, one who is embedded in a system of conventions and limitations.” See Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 5–6.

39. De Quincey, *Collected Writings*, 10:453.

40. Logan, *Nerves and Narratives*, 90.

41. Youngquist, “De Quincey’s Crazy Body,” 347.

42. De Quincey, *Collected Writings*, 10:452.

43. Quoted in De Quincey, *Collected Writings*, 10:454.

44. My use of the word “technology” originates from Heidegger’s definition of “technology” as both “a means to an end” and “a human activity” that “posit[s] ends and procure[s] and utilize[s] the means to them” (Heidegger, “Question concerning Technology,” 312). The phrase “technology of pleasure” has appeared in Marcus Boon’s discussion of psychoactive substances: “we can speak of opiates as technologies of pleasure, cannabis as a technology of dreaming, anesthetics as technologies of transcendence” (Boon, *Road of Excess*, 171).

45. Grattan, “Confessions of an English Glutton,” 89.

46. De Quincey, *Logic of Political Economy*, 105; De Quincey, *Collected Writings*, 5:401.

47. De Quincey, “Opium and the China Question,” 545; subsequent references to the article will be given parenthetically in the text.

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