

IN THE NAME OF  
THE “INCESTUOUS MOTHER”:  
Islam and Excremental Protestantism  
in De Quincey’s Infidel Book

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ABSTRACT

*Resisting most postcolonial readings of Confessions of an English Opium-Eater, this essay argues that Thomas De Quincey’s experience of Asiatic idolatry as excrement—the moment of radical abjection during the Malay encounter—is a crucial symbolic register for the failure to convert the pagan or infidel to the ways of Anglican Christianity. This disruption of the Trinitarian-imperialist ethos is uniquely Protestant in that the narrator’s Lutheran-iconoclastic fascination with the power of the demonic “Other” requires the smashing of the dark idol, a series of psychotic parodies of the Christian resurrection that results (at the unconscious level) in Islamic abjection: the negation of the idolatrous Trinity (the paternal metaphor) in the name of the “incestuous (M)other.” As a result, Confessions undercuts the paternal law of the Trinitarian mythos. An oriental-matrilin-eal narrative depicting maternal incest replaces the Christian Oedipal narrative, in which the son is reborn once he “murders” his father. I propose that De Quincey’s ambivalent view of Islam calls into question essentialized notions of Romantic Orientalism and xenophobia as well as the psychoanalytic frameworks through which critics, since Freud, traditionally have interpreted the history of prophetic monotheism.*



The fact has often been overlooked that the schizo indeed participates in history; he hallucinates and raves universal history, and proliferates the races. . . . All delirium possesses a world-historical, political, and racial content, mixing and sweeping along races, cultures, continents, and kingdoms; some wonder whether this long drift merely constitutes a derivative

of Oedipus. The familial order explodes, families are challenged, son, father, mother, sister—

— (Deleuze, *Delirium* 116, 120)

And from where did these 3 incorrigibly filthy accomplices of the father, the son, the holy ghost (the father, mother and son), come to equal 1 and not 3?

— (Artaud, *Letter Against the Kabbala* 114)

In one of the fragments that were never included in the publication of *Suspiria De Profundis: Being a Sequel to the Confessions*, Thomas De Quincey relates a story about a sick author who “confesses” his sin to a “kind-hearted father”:

I remember at this moment with laughter the case of a man on a sick bed, who was deploring to his Confessor the awful mischief likely to affect his own and future generations from an infidel book that he had published. But the kind-hearted father entreated him to take comfort upon the ground that . . . except for a stray trunk-maker or so, and a few vagabond pastry-cooks, no man to his own certain knowledge had ever bought a copy. Whereupon the sinner leaped out of bed; and, being [a] member of the ‘fancy’, he . . . floored the Confessor as the . . . proper reward for his insulting consolations. (*Suspiria* drafts, notes, and fragments, 549)

The author of this “infidel book” does not atone for his sin; instead, he subverts the religious sacrament of the confession. As a comic expression of anger and disbelief, the “flooring” of the fatherly confessor symbolizes an ironic wish to scandalize a religious and paternal authority. In that same fragment, De Quincey interprets the allegorical significance of this story:

I cannot in a strict literal sense appropriate the benefit of the good father’s suggestion. First, [it] is past all denying that [o]n 1822 very many people (trunk-makers not included) did procure copies, and cause copies to be multiplied, of the Opium confessions. But I have yet to learn that any one of them . . . was inoculated by me, or could have been, with a . . . first love for a drug so notorious as opium. (549)

If the confessional mode fails to absolve the blasphemy of the infidel writer, then De Quincey’s “inoculation” against opium addiction fails to restore the English body to its proper national health. Consequently, the “inoculation” of *Confessions* is not potent enough to cure the dangerous social contagion—a radical religious enthusiasm that overthrows civil and ecclesiastical law. This metaphorical understanding of disease, intoxication, and mad-

ness draws attention to the political discourse of “enthusiasm” that began with the English Civil War of the mid seventeenth century and became a defining feature of British Romantic aesthetics in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> In this regard, *Confessions* was written by “a crazy enthusiast or visionary,” a fanatic who supersedes the biblical laws of previous patriarchs (De Quincey 47).

De Quincey’s allegorical story tells us something important about his use of parody in *Confessions*: the St. Augustinian narrative of Christian “confession” that his autobiography appears to model itself after is nothing more than a humorous farce. In conflating the sublime romantic visions of the opium-eater with the mad ravings of a vulgar enthusiast, *Confessions* may strike its readers as a political handbook on how to be a Jacobin infidel rather than (as De Quincey intended it to be read) a self-help manual on how not to become an unrestrained opium addict. This peculiar ambivalence appears in De Quincey’s address to his readers: he exposes his “confessions” to the public in the hope that they will prove “useful and instructive,” even though he knows, “Nothing, indeed, is more revolting to English feelings, than the spectacle of a human being obtruding on our notice his moral ulcers or scars, and tearing away that ‘decent drapery,’ which time, or indulgence to human frailty, may have drawn over them” (9). The tearing off of the “decent drapery” is an allusion to the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), in which Edmund Burke states that with the coming of the French Revolution, “All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off” (239). In writing and publishing his “confessions,” De Quincey commits a *revolutionary* act that exposes his moral and political “ulcer,” even as he downplays this threatening “Jacobin” gesture by insisting on its long-term didactic value.

Despite his outspoken commitment to conservative, Tory principles and his deep-seated distaste of French Revolutionary principles, De Quincey’s “Christian” confessional narrative could be read as a failure to articulate an orthodox Anglican stance on the biblical tradition of prophecy—an inability to see Christ as the final culmination of divine revelation, the fulfillment of Mosaic law. Within this context, De Quincey’s “infidel” writings stem from a larger tradition of English radicalism that began with the political and religious upheavals of the English Civil War. Unlike today’s literary critics, early nineteenth-century reviewers tended to read *Confessions* primarily as a heterodox work that sought to turn the world upside down.<sup>2</sup> Shortly after its publication, *Confessions* was labeled a “Journal of fits of delirium” (*Monthly Censor* 350–51), which, according to another critic, was

written by a radical “lunatic” who presents vulgar “curiosities” full of “physical and metaphysical wonder” (*The Album* 177–78, 207). A reviewer from *The Eclectic Review* was especially appalled by De Quincey’s “profane” use of biblical language (368). There were also reviewers who saw a direct link between De Quincey’s opium addiction and “oriental” enthusiasm.<sup>3</sup> James Montgomery, for instance, compares De Quincey’s opium-induced visions to “the maddening potions of radicalism” and to an “Asiatic demon” offering comforting yet false revelations (243–46). Even though De Quincey is a self-proclaimed Church-of-England man, *Confessions* is an “infidel book” whose narrative development entails a visionary rewriting of the Judeo-Christian story of atonement and salvation—a biblical *topos* that has been studied at length by critics such as Charles J. Rzepka (88–89) and V. A. De Luca (*xi*). In “flooring” his Christian father, De Quincey portrays himself as the prophet of a new “oriental” religion who seeks to establish “the True Church” of opium (*Confessions* 44).

De Quincey possesses two voices that participate equally in an ongoing dialectical tension: the clean-cut, Tory Anglican who espouses a conservative view on almost every subject, frequently making racist comments and displaying pro-British, pro-imperialistic sympathies (the De Quincey we know all too well); and a “Dark Interpreter” who models himself after the literary-prophetic persona of Mahomet, a religious fanatic who introduced the Judeo-Christian world to enthusiastic revelations via his own “confessions,” the Koran. Of course, I am not suggesting that De Quincey embraces Islam wholeheartedly. In his *Greece Under the Romans* (1844), a review of George Finlay’s book by the same title, De Quincey states that Mahometan civilization, unlike Roman civilization, has “barbarized backwards” and that its institutions are prone to “decay and decomposition.” As such, the radical implementation of Mahomet’s false religion throughout the Arab and Near Eastern world has introduced a “sensual” and “emasculating” disease that is responsible for the deadly “ulcer” found in the oriental (male) body politic:

Within a very few years, every public servant is usually *emasculated* by that unlimited voluptuousness which equally the Moslem princes and the common Prophet of all Moslems countenance as the proper object of human pursuit. Here is the *moral ulcer* of Islamism, which can never cleanse itself from death and the odour of death. A *political ulcer* would or might have found restoration for itself; but this ulcer is higher and deeper: —it lies in the religion, which is incapable of reform: it is an ulcer reaching as high as the paradise which Islamism promises, and deep as

the hell which it creates. We repeat, that Mahomet could not effectually have neutralized a poison which he himself had introduced into the circulation and life-blood of his Moslem economy. The false prophet was forced to reap as he had sown. (99–100, emphasis added)

Mahomet is a false impostor who has perverted the teachings of Judaism and Christianity for the purpose of spreading an incurable social poison—a symbolic form of male castration resulting from excessive *jouissance*. De Quincey’s understanding of Islam incorporates the negative stereotypes found in the discourse of religious enthusiasm: Mahomet is an effeminate, Christian heretic (De Quincey compares him to Nestorius, Marcian, Arius, and Pelagius) who establishes a misguided, Cromwellian-like government based on an infectious “fanaticism” that excludes the “rational” basis of a sexually restrained Anglicanism (101).<sup>4</sup> Ironically, the authorial narrator of *Confessions* (the “infidel” prophet) shares the same *moral* and *political* “ulcer” that De Quincey ascribes to Islam. Caught within the sensual snare of an opium addiction, De Quincey is always on the brink of mutating into that which he most strongly disavows—the unmanly Turk, the intoxicated Malay, or the “Mahometan dog.”

As a way of exploring the psychology of colonization, literary critics have interpreted De Quincey’s phobic fascination with an infectious orient as an exhumation of the repressed history of British imperialism (Leask 170–228).<sup>5</sup> Although these postcolonial-psychoanalytic inflected readings provide an insightful analysis of the underlying imperialist and racist assumptions that inform De Quincey’s anxieties about the East, I want to situate the orientalism of his *Confessions* in relation to De Quincey’s complex theological views on Protestantism, Islam, and other non-biblical religions. Tracing a strand of Behmenist thought that interprets Islam as the true prophetic faith, the following sections probe into the symbiotic relationship among radical orientalism, excremental Protestantism, and the “incestuous mother.” Overall, I argue that in *Confessions* maternal incest embodies what Gilles Deleuze sees as a “world-historical” delirium that undercuts the familial-colonialist ethos of Trinitarian Christianity: the Freudian interpretation of the Oedipal-castration narrative, in which the son is spiritually reborn once he “murders” his father, is replaced by a non-patrilineal, oriental narrative depicting maternal incest. In this regard, De Quincey’s “monstrous mother”<sup>6</sup> is Protestant excrement, that which “explodes” the familial model of the spiritual sublime *via* the Islamic abjection of the Christian paternal metaphor. Indeed, the Islamic ethos of *Confessions* is a stark reminder that the master trope of universal-

prophetic history is not the (colonial) law of the dead father but the incestuous demand of the forbidden (m)other.

### ORIENTAL JACOBINISM OR JACOBIN ORIENTALISM?

Even though De Quincey claims to be sympathetic to the interests of the working class, *Confessions* tells an implicit story about Jacobin fear and oriental enthusiasm. For the opium eater, the spectacle of a mass society of the working poor, the “Crowds,” is a form of fearful “oppression” to be reckoned with, in much the same way that he must protect himself from the multiplication of Malays that run “a’ muck” (50, 58). In his later writings, the dread of Jacobinism and the working class is explicitly linked with the terror of mass society in the shape of fearful Orientals. For instance, De Quincey admires the virtuous Charlemagne for defeating the Saracens, whereas he sees Napoleon, the leader of “the Armies of Jacobinism,” as deserving no credit for defeating the evil infidels at Jaffa, since, for De Quincey, Napoleon’s revolutionary and egalitarian principles are already Islamic by nature (De Quincey, “Charlemagne” 140, 144–145). Jacobinism is a code word for Islamic infidelity. As John Barrell points out, De Quincey’s depiction of the orient is the location of a displaced politics of class (4). However, De Quincey’s obsession with Jacobins, the working class, and fearful Orientals is not as eccentric as it may first appear; it can be directly traced back to the Republican politics of the mid seventeenth century and to the religious controversies of the 1790s. I will argue that, as a result of De Quincey’s affiliation with a Behmenist prophetic tradition, the tropes of oriental mysticism are half-consciously reinscribed in *Confessions*, readapting the polemical rhetoric of Jacobinism as a compensatory means of supplanting a conservative view of paternal-religious authority.

In the first part of *Confessions*, De Quincey’s literary persona is cast in the mold of a visionary prophet who preaches the revealed “doctrines” of opium. His goal is to restore the sinful body to the “constitution of primeval or antediluvian health.” These teachings of the “True Church” will help purge the “fallen” body from the divine curse by consuming a sacred opium substance, a miraculous and mystical drug that promises the possibility of returning to a pristine, “antediluvian” state prior to the human transgression against the Father’s covenant. As “the Alpha and the Omega,” De Quincey is the new-chosen prophet of a cult of salvation that exalts an oriental commodity—opium (44–45). He is part of a long prophetic tradition that began with the Greek oracles, likened to the mythic persona who entered the “cave of Trophonius” at Leb-

adea, the sacred place of the Greek oracular god. Moreover, he perceives himself as the prophetic culmination of a Protestant mystical tradition popularized by Jacob Boehme, a German mystic who wrote a number of esoteric prophecies in the mid-seventeenth century. De Quincey also compares his mysticism to the “philosophical works” of Sir Henry Vane, the younger—a Parliamentary leader in the English Civil War whose mystical philosophy probably was influenced by Boehme (50–51). In associating himself with oriental intoxication, divine prophecy, and “Behmenism,” *Confessions* adopts the language of Cromwellian enthusiasts and republicans.

De Quincey is not afraid to “be charged with mysticism” and “Behmenism” when providing lengthy descriptions of his opium visions among the working-class poor in the streets of London. His plebeian form of mysticism is imbued with a strong political resonance: for Boehme, the book of Revelation marks the apocalyptic destruction of a politically and religiously corrupt modern world, the “New Babel”; his prophecies predict the end of covetousness and money (“evil ammunition”), and the coming of a popular revolution among the world’s wretched poor against the wealthy classes (48). Likewise, Sir Henry Vane the younger sees the fulfillment of dark prophecies in the eventual overthrow of all worldly churches and monarchies, culminating in the rise of a republican utopia modeled after a “primitive” Christianity. Following in the footsteps of Vane, De Quincey, the prophet of opium, preaches the radical, Behmenist doctrine of socio-economic leveling. In *Confessions*, De Quincey reveals to his readers that in his early youth he lived the life of a street enthusiast and drug addict who spends his Saturday nights (“a Sabbath of repose”) resting with poor laborers, a “hostile” sect whose ideals are based on Christian “brotherhood.” They take gratification in consuming opium after being released from the “yoke of labour” (49–50). De Quincey strongly sympathizes with working class interests, asserting that “the poor are far more philosophic than the rich” and that as a “philosopher” he saw no difference between “high” and “low,” educated or uneducated (25). Nevertheless, these mystical visions of social egalitarianism are translated into a nightmarish recollection of “the period of the Parliamentary War” in the “pains of opium” section; the beheading of Charles I symbolizes an irrational fear of royal patricide—a vivid reminder of a bloody, English radicalism that the Tory De Quincey desperately seeks to repress in spite of his youthful “enthusiasm” for Jacobin street politics (68).

De Quincey’s fascination with the legacy of Behmenist mysticism can be traced to his earlier exposure to prophetic writings. Certainly, De Quincey’s

greatest influence was his own mother, a stern, evangelical disciplinarian whose political principles were high Tory. Nonetheless, since his childhood, De Quincey was closely acquainted with John Clowes, an Anglican clergy and Swedenborgian preacher who was a good friend and a frequent visitor in the De Quincey household. Clowes was a Manchester intellectual and mystic who was devoted to translating the prophetic works of Emanuel Swedenborg, a Swedish scientist and mystic who died in London in 1772. Clowes was also committed to the study of English mystics such as William Law and Boehme—two thinkers who were subjects of conversation between Clowes and the young Thomas. Clowes even lent copies of Swedenborg’s works to De Quincey, who was much more enthusiastic about Boehme’s mysticism than Swedenborg’s revelations. In fact, De Quincey is known to have given Coleridge the works of Boehme as a gift years later.<sup>7</sup> First translated into English in the 1640s and the 1650s, the prophetic writings of Boehme were read as political tracts against institutional religion; the outward life of the whole universe is a macrocosm of the inward spiritual self, which does not require the intervention of church and state authorities. From the 1790s onward, this mystical form of religious enthusiasm became popular among the working class poor, most of whom were heavily drawn to “Jacobin” prophecies that foretell the apocalyptic destruction of the English monarchy (Harrison 19–22; Thompson). Through Clowes’s influence, the works of Boehme were widely distributed among the lower classes, directly fueling a growing public resentment against institutional and state power.

This form of radical mysticism sparked a series of heated polemical debates over the issue of religious and political loyalty. In his *Letters to a Member of Parliament on the Character and Writings of Baron Swedenborg*, Clowes had to vindicate Swedenborg’s prophecies before the British parliament against the charges of Jacobinism leveled by Abbé Barruel. In the English translation of the *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism*, an extremely popular work among English conservatives that went through several editions, Barruel argued that the French Revolution and the rise of Jacobinism are part of a large international conspiracy among millennial prophets, Rosicrucians, and freemason societies throughout Europe. Swedenborg’s prophecies and the agenda of New Jerusalem Church coincide with “the occult lodges, aiming at the overthrow of every religious and civil law, and at the downfall of every throne” (142). The members of the Swedenborgian congregation are deeply implicated in the radical conspiracy of “Illuminizing Jerusalemites” by promoting and spreading what Barruel sees as a corrupt, oriental doctrine:



Swedenborg tells us, that his doctrines are all of the highest antiquity, and similar to those of the Egyptians, the Magi, and the Greeks; he even asserts them to be anterior to the deluge. . . . Should any person be tempted to seek [Swedenborg's revelation] elsewhere, he must go in quest of it among those clans where Christianity and Political laws are not known. (141-42)

Swedenborg's doctrines are politically suspect since they challenge the orthodox biblical chronology, in which the creation of the world is dated at 4004 BC; in other words, his prophecies invalidate the Mosaic account of history in tracing divine revelation back to prediluvian cultures. According to Barruel, Swedenborg's blasphemous teachings exclusively locate the pure monotheism of apostolic Christianity in a non-Christian orient where the Jacobin ideas of "Equality, Liberty and independence" were first taught and propagated (142). Clowes refuted Barruel's charges, arguing in his letters that Swedenborg is not insane, and that his ideas on liberty, equality, and the rights of man should not be read as revolutionary propaganda or as evidence of his association with "Illuminizing lodges" but as spiritual statements of divine peace and stability on earth—and nothing else. Any mention of Swedenborg's biblical orientalism is strictly avoided (280, 314). Although Clowes disavows any radical leanings in Swedenborg's teachings (and Clowes himself was a firm supporter of the English monarchy and remained loyal to the Anglican Church even after being removed from his clerical post<sup>8</sup>), the Jacobin undertow of Swedenborg's "oriental" revelations was popular among the working class poor and well documented by British political authorities.

The Barruel-Clowes controversy provides the immediate backdrop to De Quincey's two conflicting voices: the sober-minded, Tory De Quincey who maintains a conservative position on theological matters, denying the legitimacy of a more radical and mystical view of biblical history; and the transgressive voice of the opium-eater, who undergoes a Behmenist religious experience while under the sway of an oriental drug. In his translation of Immanuel Kant's *Abstract of Swedenborgianism*, De Quincey found the Kantian framework for interpreting mystical dreams and divine states compelling enough to translate and publish. Kant argues that Swedenborg's prophecies are a product of a disorder in the faculty of sensibility; and that in communicating with spirits, Swedenborg is simply echoing his inner ideas within himself, projecting what is in the mind outward. For Kant, these mystical visions are therefore a form of madness (160). Assuming that De Quincey adopts a similar view (and De Quincey does consider himself to be a Kantian philosopher), this psychological explanation of prophetic madness is in strict accord with Barruel's charges:

Swedenborg's mysticism is the work of insane enthusiasm. De Quincey takes a more definitive stance against esoteric mysticism and Illuminary societies in his condensed translation of Johann Gottlieb Buhle's *Historico-Critical Inquiry into the origin of the Rosicrucians and the Free-Masons*, a critical work on the history of Rosicrucianism and Masonry that resists their mythical narratives and is not in support of their "oriental," quasi-Islamic religion (1, 7).<sup>9</sup> The "scholarly" De Quincey adopts a very conservative view when writing about Masonic lodges, and yet, in *Confessions*, he is displaced by "the opium-eater," a prophetic persona who embraces other monotheistic faiths as intrinsic to the Protestant narrative of salvation.

In its implicit endorsement of a "radical" orientalism, the English mysticism of *Confessions* compensates for the "scholarly" De Quincey's inability to see Islam, or other quasi-oriental monotheisms such as freemasonry and Rosicrucianism, as part of a large iconoclastic movement that does not have its beginning or ending in the Protestant Reformation. In Swedenborg's prophetic scheme, for instance, the "science of Correspondence and Representation" (the study of the divine images-signs prior to the corruption of idolatry) is well known among the "People of the East" but lost in Christian Europe; in this context, the divine purpose of the Mahometan teachings is to spread a "primitive," monotheistic Christianity among the idolatrous nations of the world, even though the Mahometans must eventually be converted to Christianity (*Concerning the White Horse* 50–51). This providentially sanctioned mission could potentially include the conversion of the Trinitarian Christians, whose mysterious doctrines the Mahometans mistakenly assume to be a form of vulgar idolatry (*True Christian Religion* 702–03). Likewise, Boehme condemns the whole of "titular Christendom" for defiling Christ's teachings, falling into sectarian wars, and practicing idolatry. In this regard, the Turks are more exemplary Christians than the followers of Western Christendom:

[the Turks and Christians] have been but one People (before God in holiness and righteousness) with different names. . . . And they are the Two Sonnes; to one whereof the Father Said, *Go, and do this; and he said, yea; but did it not; and to the other also do this; and he said, no; but did it;* which does so highly advance [and magnifie] the Turkes in the Kingdome of Nature; which the blinde Christian world doth not understand. (38)

With the aim of converting idolatrous religions and corrupt Christians, the Turks propagate a doctrine of "reason" in the form of a divinely sanctioned Koran, a prophetic book that negates (says no to) the paternal authority of the Godhead. Although deprived of Christian salvation, Mahomet's

pure monotheistic faith will eventually lead to the revelation of Christ among the Turks. The “titular Christians,” on the other hand, will not receive Christ since their acceptance of the Father is hypocritical, an underhanded betrayal of his sacred laws (Boehme 36–37). In this ecumenical view of history, Islam takes the iconoclastic mission of Protestantism to its radical conclusion: to dispense with the paternal law of an idolatrous trinitarianism.

De Quincey never espouses these radical views of Islam explicitly, and yet, unlike his “scholarly” writings, his *Confessions* indulges in a form of oriental mysticism that seeks—as I shall argue shortly—to compensate for the paternal ethos of a “corrupt” trinitarian Anglicanism. Thus, the orientalism of De Quincey’s “infidel book” reinscribes a mystical interpretation of the prophetic tradition for the sake of reimagining a Protestant self that is more sympathetic toward other iconoclastic monotheisms such as Islam. Considering that Boehme is a central figure within a larger, if diffuse, seventeenth-century iconoclastic movement that was rethinking the biblical tradition, De Quincey’s fascination with “Behmenist” prophecy exemplifies, at an unconscious level, his ideological commitment to the political and religious upheavals of the English Revolutionary decades—a period when discussion about “Islam” was not only calling the biblical tradition into question but also reconfiguring the Protestant self as a radical political subject.<sup>10</sup> Within this historical trajectory, the orientalism of *Confessions* appropriates the language of “Jacobin” infidelity with the dialectical aim of both negating and affirming De Quincey’s ambivalent political desire: to smash the idol of civil and ecclesiastical law (which does not logically exclude Anglicanism from his overall contempt for Paganism, Judaism, and Catholicism), so as to take its place as the new paternal authority, the reformed Protestant Muslim.

## THE MUSLIM MALAY MEETS THE ENGLISH IDOL

In *Confessions*, opium is both the oriental “subject” (“the true hero of the tale” [74]) and the taboo “object/object” (“slimy things” and “Nilotic mud” [71]). It is likened to manna, or divine food miraculously provided for the Israelites in the wilderness, and ambrosia, the food of the Greek gods. On the other hand, opium is also a disease that leaves men impotent, “powerless as an infant.” De Quincey looks upon this oriental drug as a mixed blessing: it is “the key to Paradise” as well as his “dark idol” (42–43, 65, 51; *Suspiria De Profundis* 132). From a Freudian perspective, opium is equivalent to the taboo food ob-

ject of primitive religions; it is an ambivalent “magic power” that reminds humans of their forbidden wishes and the punishments of transgression. However, the power of the taboo also possesses a “contagion” that tempts humans into violating its prohibition (Freud, *Totem and Taboo* 47). As Steven Blakemore has argued, opium metaphorically takes the place of the Christian Eucharist in *Confessions*, introducing an ambivalence akin to that of the taboo object: opium is both a “manna” representative of a prelapsarian state and the “forbidden” apple of Eden in the appearance of bread and wine (33, 36–38).

De Quincey’s encounter with the Malay at the famous Dove Cottage is a moment where the Christian transubstantiation of opium fails, when the forbidden taboo food does not transform into manna. Instead, the consumption of the opium Eucharist by the Malay completely backfires, since the fatherly Protestant priest, De Quincey, has violated the taboo against “murder” in this unholy conversion narrative. In an ironic reversal of situation, it is De Quincey who converts to the Malay’s religion; trinitarian Christianity is metaphorically figured as the “English idol” that the Muslim Malay threatens to destroy, vanquish, and abject in the name of the true Protestant faith.

This ironic reversal problematizes the role of the Christian master who seeks to convert the weak infidel. The colonial context is strangely inverted: the Malay is the Protestant missionary who is in a position to “convert” the idolatrous De Quincey. As a result of this transvaluation, the “turbaned” Malay in “Asiatic dress” represents an exotic, Eastern religion that threatens to colonize Protestant England. Although this could be read as a misrecognition of British colonial power, it reveals a form of English Protestant insecurity that De Quincey desperately seeks to master:

He *worshipped* me in a most *devout manner*, and replied in what I suppose was Malay. In this way I saved my reputation with my neighbors: for the Malay had no means of betraying the secret. He lay down upon the floor for about an hour, and then pursued his journey. On his departure, I presented him with a piece of opium. To him, as an Orientalist, I concluded that opium must be familiar; and the expression of his face convinced me that it was. Nevertheless, I was struck with some little consternation when I saw him suddenly raise his hands to his mouth, and (in the school-boy phrase) bolt the whole, divided into three pieces, at one mouthful. The quantity was enough to *kill* three dragoons and their horses: and I felt some alarm for the poor creature: but what could be done? I had given him the opium in compassion for his solitary life. . . . I could not think of violating the laws of hospitality, by having him seized and drenched with

an emetic, and thus frightening him into a notion that we were going to sacrifice him to some *English idol*. (57, emphasis added)

After speaking in Greek—the language that “came geographically nearest to an Oriental one”—De Quincey takes on the form of a semi-divine figure in the eyes of the Malay (14). As De Quincey makes clear in earlier parts of his narrative, his fluency in the Greek language provides him with a sense of personal security and English identity—but that is not enough (19). De Quincey also needs to convert the Malay through the medium of opium, the life-giving sacrament of the Eucharist that is central to the practice of Trinitarian Christianity (Blakemore 34). In this case, the opium-Eucharist that the Malay consumes in “three pieces” is a symbolic allusion to his acceptance of the holy Trinity. In the transubstantiation of the opium-Eucharist, this conversion scene represents a blasphemous moment—and yet, even more subversive is the failure of the Christian conversion narrative. De Quincey’s mastery over an exotic religion does not result in “saving” the infidel but in “killing” him. Paradoxically, taking on the role of the Protestant priest exposes the anxieties of Trinitarian Christianity; first of all, the offering of the opium Eucharist leads to the violation of the murder taboo, and secondly, the Christian God is metaphorically transformed into an English idol to whom the Malay will be sacrificed.

In other words, the encounter with the Malay reveals that the Christian sacrament of the Eucharist is a resurfacing of what Freud saw as an idolatrous totem festival, in which the son tries to atone for his sinful murder of the father by consuming his body in the form of a sacred substance. For Freud, all religions are attempts to compensate for the crime of violating the taboo against patricide. Due to this sense of original guilt against the injured father, the totem festival presents an opportunity for the community (the progeny of the murderous sons) to purge their sins by eating their idol (God)—a new type of patricide, a new triumph over the father, but one that is now sanctioned by sacred law (*Totem and Taboo* 187). In the consumption of the Eucharist, Trinitarian Christianity purifies the act of patricide, but unlike totem religions, it is now the son’s body that must be sacrificed and consumed instead (198–99). For Freud, Christianity, unlike the Mosaic religion, is a Son religion, and yet that does not erase the fact that Trinitarian Christianity repeats the death of the Father (*Moses and Monotheism* 111–12). Accordingly, Christ’s “sacrifice” appears to seek forgiveness from the Father when in fact it is a renewed attempt to displace (murder) the Father’s privileged authority. The Malay episode is a reenactment of the Christian “sacrifice” (the Malay subjects himself to De

Quincey's paternal guidance), calling attention to the murder taboo that the Eucharist is supposed to absolve.

But there is one crucial discrepancy: blood guilt continues to exist *after* De Quincey has administered the opium-Eucharist. Although De Quincey is deliberately providing his readers with a parody of the ritual of the sacrament, he is not conscious of the extent to which the Muslim Malay represents a structural reconfiguration of the Christian totem feast. In other words, De Quincey does not fully comprehend that his blasphemous transversal of the Eucharist ritual entails a radical reinterpretation of Christian patricide. To begin with, there is no act of patricide that needs to be "forgiven," since the Malay never atones for his sins. He does not replace De Quincey's paternal authority in his Christian sacrifice. Moreover, his mysterious disappearance after spending an hour in Dove Cottage signifies a gap in this conversion narrative, which De Quincey hastily glosses over with a contrived cover story about his own anxieties. As a result, the Christian sacrament of the Eucharist not only fails to "convert" the Malay, but, in a way that escapes De Quincey's ken, it fails to atone for the act of patricide and blood guilt. That is ultimately why De Quincey cannot force the Malay to stay (hence, violating "the Laws of Hospitality"), since this act of hospitable "communion" with a member of a non-Christian religion (presumably Muslim) would reveal that Trinitarian Christianity is nothing more than a new totem religion. In this scenario, the Malay would have been vainly sacrificed to an English Idol. Hence, the Malay, if fully allowed to take communion in Dove Cottage, would have taught De Quincey that the Christian transubstantiation of a pagan substance, opium, is an idolatrous practice, nothing more than a repetition of the Son's empty "sacrifice."

Consequently, De Quincey's attempt to subject the Malay to his own priestly and fatherly authority translates into an unsuccessful effort to hide the pagan subtext of the Christian totem narrative: that the Son's attempt to displace the paternal law through a "sacrifice" introduces an obscene supplement—the Father as excremental abjection. While under the spell of opium, De Quincey harbors an "unimaginable horror" over the vast regions and religions of Asia:

Under the connecting feeling of tropical heat and vertical sun-lights, I brought together all creatures, birds, beasts, reptiles, all trees and plants, usages and appearances, that are found in all tropical regions, and assembled them together in China or Indostan. From kindred feelings, I soon brought Egypt and all her gods under the same law. I was stared at, hooted at, grinned at, chattered at, by monkeys, by paroquets, by cockatoos. I ran

into pagodas: and fixed, for centuries, at the summit, or in secret rooms; *I was the idol; I was the priest; I was worshipped; I was sacrificed*. I fled from the wrath of Brama through all the forests of Asia: Vishnu hated me: Seeva laid wait for me. I came suddenly upon Isis and Osiris: *I had done a deed*, they say, which the ibis and the crocodile trembled at. *I was buried*, for a thousand years, in stone coffins, with mummies and sphynxes, in narrow chambers at the heart of eternal pyramids. I was kissed, with cancerous kisses, by crocodiles; and laid, confounded with all unutterable slimy things, amongst reeds and Nilotic mud. (71, emphasis added)

It is tempting to read the “law” under which De Quincey places all of the orient as an imperialist gesture, and yet it is much more than that. The law is a taboo that prohibits contact with oriental abjection and gross idolatry. However, this taboo law inevitably introduces its own transgression. As an ironic restaging of the Christian crucifixion, De Quincey takes on the role of the sacrificed Son, who is a substitute for both the totem idol and the community of believers (the priest)—a new act of transgression against the Father that reintroduces blood guilt and patricide, “a deed” that has no name. He is reliving the persecution, the passion, and the burial of Christ in the vain attempt to smash the “idol” and usurp the authoritative position of the Father/God (Rzepka 233). However, this moment of Christian abjection before the Asiatic other does not absolve blood guilt. As both Freud and Slavoj Žižek point out, Christianity is very different from Judaism in that it is a religion of “radical de-sublimation,” a regression to the abject condition of pagan polytheism (*Moses and Monotheism* 112; Žižek 89–90).<sup>11</sup> Christian abjection marks the return of the Brama, Vishnu, Sheeva, Isis, and Osiris that De Quincey dreads but cannot escape. In this regard, De Quincey’s Christ-like burial is a repetition of an idolatrous, Egyptian ritual in which the sublime Father is replaced by an excremental vision of “slimy things” and “Nilotic mud.” There is no absolution of original sin. Thus, the “law” under which De Quincey subjects the orient is a desperate and futile gesture; it is not necessarily a sublime moment of Christian colonial domination over the exotic orient.

In De Quincey’s oriental nightmares, trinitarianism and transubstantiation are reduced to an idolatrous paganism, an abjected religion that undercuts the iconoclastic sublimity of orthodox Protestantism. In this case, gross idolatry is incompatible with sublime iconoclasm, since the spiritual act of smashing the father-idol is ultimately replaced with a profane reverence for the son-idol. Or, to put it another way, the Christian sublime *is* the excremental: sin, imperfection, and abjection are themselves symbolic of the very kernel of

the Protestant Reformation, beginning with Martin Luther's discovery of God while defecating on the privy (Brown, *Life Against Death* 202–33). The horror and abjection associated with pagan idolatry possess the same semiotic function as Protestant negation: they “evacuate” the holy icon of its sacred content so as to replace it with excrement, a demonic icon that reveals the repressed anal-sadistic drive behind worldly sublimations. Hence, the failure to convert the Malay and the mockery of the Christian sacrifice signify a form of iconoclastic abjection at the demonic level, what I would prefer to call (from a Zizekian viewpoint) the “radical desublimation” of shit: the attempt to negate the sacred negative of the Christian Trinity (the son's assumed role as the Father) reduces the “sublime beyond” to the level of the mundane, in which case there is no effort to conceal the lack or impotence (the excrement) of the Father.<sup>12</sup>

At any rate, this orientalized and abjected form of radical Protestantism does not simply repeat the patricide of the old totem religion; thus, it can be distinguished from the iconoclastic sublimity of Trinitarian Protestantism. In other words, the radical Protestantism of *Confessions* introduces pure abjection into the Christian equation *without attempting to compensate for blood guilt*. The entombment of the De Quincey-Christ figure impels the “cancerous kisses” of the crocodile. From a Freudian perspective, De Quincey's phobia over the infected crocodile (as well as other Asiatic animals) symbolizes a fear of the father that is displaced onto an animal; in this case, the prohibition against violating the totem animal is a product of the Oedipal complex. Rivalry with the father over the mother introduces a wish to murder the father that is eventually displaced onto the animal totem, establishing the taboo against patricide and prohibiting incest with the mother (or other totem family members) (Freud, *Totem and Taboo* 165–67, 44). The law of the father maintains a “pure” separation between the son and the mother. However, kissing the “cursed” crocodile does not signify an acceptance of the father's law but an unlawful incestuous relationship resulting in the birth of monstrous “abortions.” According to Grevel Lindop's reading, De Quincey's crocodile is symbolic of an incest in which “all other categories of political or moral significance may be breached” (137–38).<sup>13</sup> After his Christian resurrection, De Quincey commits a radical religious act: he fully embraces abjection in the form of the pregnant mother/sister, who reproduces the “innocent” children whom he kisses in exchange for the “cancerous kisses” of the crocodile. Unlike Trinitarian Christianity, the radical Protestantism of *Confessions* glorifies the horror of abjection, without any attempt to absolve blood guilt or to forgive incestuous sins.



Ultimately, the Malay episode invokes an Islamicized, “Protestant” polemic against Trinitarianism and transubstantiation: the Christian endeavor to place the Son (Christ) in the place of the Father (God) so as to absolve the original sin of the community (the Holy Ghost) is futile since it is doomed to repeat an idolatrous totem festival (the Eucharist), a duplicitous initiation rite according to Freud. Thus, De Quincey’s desire to subsume the role of the Father is an excremental experience that reveals the emptiness of his desire and the impotence of God. The Muslim Malay has successfully converted the idolatrous De Quincey. But two key questions remain unanswered: Why does De Quincey, according to my reading, sleep with his mother in the name of an antitrinitarian Protestantism? And what are oriental men doing in between his incestuous bed sheets?

### THE PALIMPSEST OF MATERNAL INCEST

In the “pains of opium” section, De Quincey shares a story about a “near relative” who had a mystical and apocalyptic vision while drowning in a river:

I was once told by a near relative of mine, that having in her childhood fallen into a river, and being on the very verge of death but for the critical assistance which reached her, she saw in a moment her whole life, in its minutest incidents, arrayed before her simultaneously as in a mirror; and she had a faculty developed as suddenly for comprehending the whole and every part. This, from some opium experiences of mine, I can believe; I have, indeed, seen the same thing asserted twice in modern books, and accompanied by a remark which I am convinced is true; viz. that the dread book of account, which the scriptures speak of, is, in fact, the mind itself of each individual. (67)

This “near relative” is none other than De Quincey’s own mother, a shadowy figure who remains unnamed in *Confessions* but whose mysterious presence lingers at the margins. For De Quincey, his mother’s near-death experience signifies a mystical, opiate-like state of apocalyptic revelation in which the whole of life is reflected in a “mirror”; this private state of consciousness resembles the modern books of mysticism, like those of Swedenborg and Boehme, and the “dread book” of Revelation. In this case, the maternal is that which provides access into the private, mystical revelation of the Protestant mind, the golden road to the Christian unconscious.

In *Suspiria De Profundis*, De Quincey retells the story of his drowning mother, but this time as a way of illuminating the “mysterious handwritings”

of what he calls “the Palimpsest.” The maternal is the site where De Quincey locates the secret “writings” of the unconscious, where the “deep deep tragedies of infancy” reveal the moment “when the child’s hands were unlinked for ever from his mother’s neck, or his lips for ever from his sister’s kisses” (176). In a Lacanian scheme, the palimpsest uncovers the life-long process of reflective “mirroring” that is entailed in the precarious nature of the child’s imaginary identification with the omnipotent phallic mother, prior to the symbolic. As such, the palimpsest registers the psychotic collapse of the symbolic order (the nurturing mother) into the real of the imaginary (the devouring mother); the unconscious is not defined through an Oedipal struggle against the father but through mystical incest with the mother/sister. In what follows, I will argue that De Quincey’s “oriental” version of antitrinitarian Protestantism entails the following analogy: the explicit equation between opium-prophecies and the palimpsest of the unconscious corresponds to an uneasy (psychotic) equation between apocalyptic revelation and maternal death/incest.

According to De Quincey’s mystical philosophy, the palimpsest is an unconscious record of the human mind that spans huge historical epochs and crosses various cultures and religions. It represents a circular trajectory in Judeo-Christian history where each epoch is covered over by successive epochs, accumulating a vast number of layers that erases past historical moments while still preserving them, only to be gradually “called back.” Thus, “each succession has seemed to bury all that went before. And yet in reality not one has been extinguished.” The harmonious, unconscious script full of incoherent signifiers (“epitaphs” of “forgotten alphabet under forgotten alphabet”) and “secret inscriptions” cannot be forgotten forever (*Suspiria* drafts, 546; *Suspiria* 174–76; *Confessions* 67). Displacement is central to re-writing the memory traces of the palimpsest, and yet the historical unconscious always returns to a repressed moment in the primitive history of humankind. De Quincey’s understanding of the unconscious as the “Palimpsest” of history is akin to the Freudian notion of the “return of the repressed,” a term that Freud uses to describe the historical resurfacing of an unacknowledged pagan polytheism latent within Judeo-Christian monotheism (*Moses and Monotheism* 120–21).<sup>14</sup> However, De Quincey’s mystical interpretation of a universal-historical unconscious finds a more adequate analogue in Carl Jung’s theory of the collective unconscious. Like De Quincey, Jung locates the repressed content of memory traces in a religious, quasi-mystical history that transcends individual psychology (May 75–83). In this Jungian sense, the palimpsest is like “the mirrors of the sleeping

mind” (*Suspiria* 130) or “the Agrippa’s mirror of the unseen universe” that provides access to the childhood of human history (151). My characterization of De Quincey as a proto-Jungian mystic has serious implications for an understanding of religious experience at the unconscious level: the “collective unconscious” of the palimpsest is not constrained by a patrilineal-historical interpretation of the Oedipal conflict, being instead more open to a matrilineal understanding of human developmental history.

Thus, it is not unusual or coincidental that De Quincey’s notion of the palimpsest is associated with his drowning mother; as Freud points out, Egyptian polytheism and paganism resurface in Christianity as the return of the repressed memory traces of maternal idolatry in Judaism. Freud argues that Christianity directly borrows its symbolic rites from Egyptian and polytheistic cults, reestablishing the idolatrous religion of the “great mother goddess” that Moses had eliminated from Judaic practice. In other words, Christianity loses the iconoclastic sublimity of Judaism, since, as Freud sadly bemoans, Christianity exposes itself to the mystical elements of the vulgar matrilineal cults of antiquity (*Moses and Monotheism* 112). This argument about the monotheistic faiths rests upon the following two premises: Judaism is the pure and sublime religion of the Father, since iconoclasm represents the divine law; and Christianity is the defiled and abjected religion of the Mother, since idolatry represents maternal incest. As Jean-Joseph Goux argues in *Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud*, Freud’s account of Moses and iconoclasm is based on the tacit presumption that the Judaic prohibition against worshipping idols is the same as the prohibition against incest with the mother, so that the shift from sensory gratification to sublime ideals is really a shift from matriarchy to patriarchy. To make an image of God is to create an image of the Mother, whereas to search for the unrepresentable God is to embrace the sublime law of the Father. Goux strongly resists this Freudian logic by arguing that Freud’s search for iconoclastic sublimity is not a direct product of the Oedipal drama *per se* but of his Judaic intellectual background. In this way, Goux reframes our understanding of the Judeo-Christian obsession with representational impossibility. As with De Quincey’s fascination with maternal “revelation,” Goux argues (contra Freud) that the bare essentials of the Oedipal drama cannot be reduced to a Judaic-patrilineal narrative, since it is the untold story of the dead Mother that occupies the place of sacred sublimity (136–37).<sup>15</sup>

However, De Quincey’s views on Protestantism significantly depart from Goux’s theoretical intervention. According to Goux, Christianity al-

lows feminine and maternal incest to coexist in the imaginary but not in the social symbolic, which clearly marks a division between mother and woman. Unlike Judaism, Christianity allows a place for maternal incest in religious experience on the condition that it does not violate the law of the father: “What Christianity really exalts . . . is a sublimation of maternal incest under the authority of the father, rather than a blind prohibition of it” (*Symbolic Economies* 148–49). De Quincey, on the other hand, does *not* interpret Christian salvation as the sublimation of maternal incest under paternal authority. Unlike either Freud or Goux, *Confessions* portrays a radical Protestant iconoclasm as first and foremost an act of incestuous abjection that supplants the desire for absolution before the law of the Father. Indulging in guilt and remorse, De Quincey’s radical Protestantism basks in the spirit of dangerous enthusiasm, vulgar prophecies, oriental infection, and excremental love. The “cursed” crocodile of a paganized Egypt is the symbolic core of an incestuous Protestant religion, the child-mother dyad of the palimpsest brought to the surface in De Quincey’s radically blasphemous text.

In collapsing the symbolic into the imaginary order, De Quincey’s Protestant narrative is always on the verge of conflating religious desire for the maternal with sensual love for the woman. Before departing from the private quarters of his headmaster’s house, De Quincey has a moment of spiritual connection with the picture of a saintly lady (a seventeenth-century portrait of the Duchess of Somerset). In his “pensive citadel”—a Wordsworthian allusion to the life of nuns in their convent—De Quincey describes the last object of his parting gaze: a beautiful lady “so radiant with benignity” and “divine tranquillity.” He is the “devotee” of this “patron saint,” a holy icon that he kisses and then leaves behind forever (16). This divine lady has strong Catholic associations that are more prominent in the 1856 edition of *Confessions*; De Quincey claims to do his “service” before the “sweet Madonna Countenance” of the Lady, a symbol of the Virgin Mary (157). The semi-erotic kissing of this Catholic idol anticipates the “cancerous kisses” of the crocodile, a moment where the spiritual mother transforms into the incestuous mother. Indeed, the moment after De Quincey leaves his spiritual abode, his connection with matrilineal religious worship is severed and corrupted; he describes himself as a “fallen,” orphan child in the lonely streets of London. He is now haunted by the “ghastly phantoms” that persecuted Orestes for having killed his primordial mother (40). After abandoning his maternal goddess, the crime of matricide threatens to intrude upon De Quincey’s guilt-ridden narrative.

During his moment of intense despair and loneliness, Ann steps in as the abjected female figure who metaphorically stands in for the virgin mother. De Quincey idealizes Ann as a “holy” London prostitute and claims that he never had a sexual relationship with her; although he is highly aware of the way his readers will eroticize his encounter with a prostitute, he insists that it was not an “impure one.” Instead, he asks his readers to remember a Latin proverb, which states, “without bread and wine love freezes” (24–25). Bread and wine are an allusion to the Christian Eucharist, but in the context of his encounter with Ann, they are also a reference to the love of the nutritive mother. In other words, Ann is the “saving hand” that performs a “noble act”: while De Quincey was leaning against her bosom, he sunk backwards due to excessive hunger and exhaustion. During this urgent moment, Ann restored him back to life with a glass of “port wine and spices.” After completing this Eucharist ritual, Ann becomes “the saviour of my life”—an amalgam of Christ and Mary whom he loved “as affectionately as if she had been my sister” (26, 30). Like the “cursed” crocodile, Ann is symbolic of incestuous abjection, and yet De Quincey represses this aspect of her personality in his use of a conditional “as if” qualifier. All he sees in Ann is the sacred aura of the virgin mother. Unbeknownst to himself, De Quincey bestows incestuous kisses on her innocent cheek.

Ann symbolizes both Mary Magdalene, the prostitute who repents before Christ for her sensual sins, and the Virgin Mary, who gave immaculate (illegitimate) birth to Christ. In the former case, she represents an impure woman who poses an immediate danger to the patriarchal order, whereas, in the latter case, she represents a sublime mother who represses the vile associations attached to the idea of a supposedly “virgin” birth. In both cases, the overdetermined figure of Ann introduces feminine abjection into the Protestant notion of salvation, yielding a fear of the incestuous mother at the imaginary level, which, nonetheless, threatens to disturb the symbolic order. Although separated from Ann for “eternity,” De Quincey sees her looks in “myriad” female faces that he now “fears to see” and “think[s] of her, more gladly, as one since laid in the grave; in the grave, I would hope, of a Magdalen” (36). Since every woman can be potentially tainted with the maternal abject, the act of matricide has not been successfully displaced onto the strange disappearance of Ann in much the same way that the act of patricide has not been successfully displaced onto the mysterious departure of the Malay. Embodying the horror of the maternal abject, Ann’s myriad forms anticipate the fear of incest that underlies the Protestant phobia over an overwhelming orient; the Malays who

run “a muck” and the Egyptian crocodile whose “leering eyes . . . multiplied into a thousand repetitions” (58, 71). In failing to contain the threat of maternal abjection and oriental defilement at the symbolic level, De Quincey’s Protestant narrative deconstructs the distinction between the Virgin Mary (the sublime mother) and Mary Magdalene (the defiled woman).

As a result, *Confessions* seriously disrupts the biblical semiotic codes that subordinate the power of the nutritive and defiled mother to the symbolic order of patriarchy. In the *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva argues that the purpose of Christianity is to overcome the incest taboo of the Old Testament, allowing for the subject to seek reconciliation with maternal abjection, sin, and evil without fear of the paternal law. Hence, Christian salvation returns to the archaic space of the mother-child dyad (primary narcissus) to bridge the gap between the subject and the *ab-ject* (that which is “other” prior to becoming an external object). Christ openly accommodates those who are sinful, diseased, and polluted, as demonstrated in his salvation of Mary Magdalene (115–16, 127–28). Likewise, De Quincey exults the power of feminine abjection over and above all the paternal taboos of Judeo-Christianity. His Protestant narrative spiritualizes sin into the desublimated experience of mystical incest, displacing the Christian patrilineal account of the Son who seeks forgiveness from the Father.

The fearful obsession with incest and death uncovers the secret oriental hieroglyph buried in the palimpsest of Protestant history. In his opium-induced vision of Christian resurrection, De Quincey walks out into an English graveyard on Easter Sunday, from where he witnesses the coming of the New Jerusalem. Since this scene is an “oriental one,” the sacred city recalls images of the arabesque architecture of “domes and cupolas” that De Quincey claims to have seen in childhood from pictures of Jerusalem. But instead of depicting the second coming of Christ, this apocalyptic scene records the second coming of Ann. Hiding behind “Judean palms,” Ann emerges as a symbolic figure of a sublime, oriental landscape, and De Quincey “kisse[s] her lips” that “were not polluted.” Suddenly, there is a dark gulf that once again separates him from the object (*ab-ject*) of his incestuous love (72–73). This apocalyptic dream-vision reveals the antitrinitarian, matrilineal basis of radical Protestantism: in De Quincey’s “oriental” rewriting of the New Testament, the Son’s (Christ’s) sacrifice for his Father is always in the process of being replaced by the Mother’s (Ann’s) forbidden love.

In *Suspiria De Profundis*, De Quincey recounts his experience on Easter Sunday, but this time he describes his Christian experience as oscillating be-

tween the sublime and the excremental. He claims that the oriental associations of the New Jerusalem were learned in childhood, when he looked at pictures of Palestine and Syria with his sister, who in his vision is conflated with the character of his beloved prostitute, Ann. In the passage that follows, his quasi-mystical rhetoric—a bizarre overlap between sexual and moral language—renders Oriental Jerusalem as a displaced image of maternal incest:

what then was Jerusalem? Did I fancy it to be the *omphalos* (navel) of the earth? . . . but if not of the earth's tenant Jerusalem was the *omphalos* of morality. Yet how? these on the contrary it was, as we infants understood, that morality had been trampled under foot. True; but for that very reason there it was that morality had opened its very gloomiest crater. There it was indeed that the human had risen on wings from the grave; but for that reason there also it was that the divine had been swallowed up by the abyss: the lesser star could not rise, before the greater would submit to eclipse. Summer, therefore, had connected itself with death not merely as a mode of antagonism, but also through intricate relations to Scriptural scenery and events. (143, emphasis in original)

Jerusalem, the syncretic site of Judeo-Christian-Islamic morality, is at once a metaphor for the “navel” through which the child and the mother were first linked and a displaced symbol of the “gloomiest crater” through which the infant first experiences defecation and urination. Christian morality is maternal abjection: the life (an oriental summer) and death (feces and urine) of Christ is the moment when “morality had been trampled under foot,” since the Son is “(re)born” once the Phallic Father is defiled in maternal and excremental copulation (“swallowed up in the abyss”). For De Quincey, the Christian mythos marks a return to the dirty, orientalized history of matriarchy.

The patriarchal ethos of the Holy Trinity gives way to the maternal “evacuating” of the empty icon of the crucifix, the *negation* of the sacred negative. At the height of his apocalyptic vision, De Quincey is alarmed by the various “female forms” that he must eternally avoid—the “everlasting farewells” that recall his last moment with Ann but are now transmuted into the womb-like “cave of hell” where “the incestuous mother uttered the abhorred name of death” (*Confessions* 74). The apocalypse disrupts the patriarchal sublime by insisting on the uncanny repetition of the moment of separation from the omnipotent phallic mother. This repetition results in displacing the narcissistic tragedy of the mother-child dyad onto a chain of signifiers: the saintly lady, Ann, the Malay, and the crocodile. At the end of this semiotic process, the apocalypse negates the second coming of Christ, hollows out the sacred content of

the Son's sacrifice, and forecloses the paternal millennium. Protestant prophetic revelation is ultimately proclaimed in the name of the "incestuous mother."

To put it bluntly, De Quincey solves the riddle of the Egyptian sphinx where Oedipus and Freud failed: the palimpsest of universal history is not based on paternal law and patricide but on maternal incest and matricide. As Goux argued at length in *Oedipus, Philosopher*, Freud fails to see that matricide, not patricide, constitutes the heart of the Greek heroic narrative. In comparison with other Greek myths, the Oedipus myth is really an anomaly, since Oedipus does not kill the dark and dangerous female monster, an essential prerequisite to marrying a woman who is not the mother (2–3, 23–24). Being "drawn from times before Oedipus or Priam—before Tyre—before Memphis" (*Confessions* 66), De Quincey's visionary stories pre-date the myths of patriarchy. The sacred mysteries that uncover "the minutest incidents of childhood" are buried in a pre-Oedipal, oriental past. Within this context, radical Protestant orientalism reveals that the tragic flaw of Oedipus is not that he kills his father and marries his mother, but that he does not kill the maternal monster and marry a woman. Thus, the inability to commit matricide, or rather, the inability to separate from the Mother and repress the abject in woman, perpetuates the endless cycle of patricide and atonement. This is the oriental mystery that De Quincey's palimpsest "reveals" and the enigmatic riddle that Freudian psychoanalysis never solves.

### THE "FINAL RECONCILIATION"

De Quincey displays utter abhorrence for the way in which Arabian and Islamic imagery translates the infinite into the finite, diminishing the power of the imagination and the religious sublime (*Notes from the Pocket Book* 178). However, *that* is precisely what *Confessions* glorifies in the Protestant experience of radical abjection. The material (maternal) embodiment of the infinite Father in the finite Son is a perfect example of Arabian and Islamic imagery at work. Indeed, De Quincey is fascinated with a "religion of the Book" that is saturated in Christian ideals. In a footnote to his essay *On Christianity, as an Organ of Political Movement*, De Quincey confesses his Islamic infidelity in a moment of intense sarcasm:

Translators there have been, English, French, German, of Mahometan books, who have so colored the whole vein of thinking with sentiments peculiar to Christianity, as to draw from a reflecting reader the exclamation, 'If this can be indeed the product of Islamism, wherefore



should Christianity exist?' If thoughts so divine can, indeed, belong to a false religion, what more could we gain from a true one? (98)

This is an ironic revelation given the political thrust of De Quincey's pro-imperialistic essay on Christianity; De Quincey argues that although Christianity and Islam propagate an "ethical" monotheism (whereas the idolatrous polytheism of Hinduism and paganism lacks morality), Judeo-Christianity represents a higher form of civilization necessary to the growth of benevolent British rule in India and Bengal (96). But if Islam threatens to eclipse the moral vision of Western monotheism, as De Quincey's footnote suggests, it must then follow that British imperialism loses its theological imperative. Unbeknownst to himself, De Quincey has converted to the Malay's radical religion. Turkish opium has transformed him into a mad Turk.

De Quincey's two voices—the conservative Anglican and the infidel Mahometan—are engaged in an on-going dialectical struggle, of mutually constitutive disavowals of the Father's sublime law and the embracing of the excremental excess of the abject mother. In the long run, this dialectical struggle aims at the "final reconciliation" between Islamic Protestantism and maternal spirituality. Indeed, De Quincey's mysticism is the heir of a Behmenist prophetic tradition that celebrates this reconciliatory process. For Boehme, the Turks follow the true path of Christianity, the return to "the Mother's wombe," whereas European Christians follow the decadent religion of the Father. In returning to the core of the prophetic tradition, Islam captures the spiritual totality of the maternal principle, eliminating the corrupt patrilineal history of an idolatrous Trinitarianism (37). Since there is no Son that needs to appease the sublime wrath of the Father, the Islamic prophetic tradition transcends the obsession with blood guilt (original sin) that is characteristic of the Trinitarian-Oedipal drama (Brown, "The Prophetic Tradition" 373). Islam *is* radical Protestant abjection.

From De Quincey's and Boehme's perspective, Islamic iconoclasm is not, as Freud claims, a neurotic "regression" to the primeval father of Judaism (*Moses and Monotheism* 118); nor, as Žižek speculates, a religion that encapsulates the superego injunction of both Judaism and Christianity (165); nor, as Goux argues, a further repression of the feminine and the maternal (*Symbolic Economies* 146, 148). Instead, Islam is characterized as a form of spiritual psychosis whose primary condition is (to put it in Lacanian terms) the foreclosure of the "Name-of-the-Father" in the place of the maternal Other (Lacan 215). For De Quincey, Islam is a "false" Christianity—a blasphemous imitation of the infinite Father who becomes finite—and yet this

imitation in itself reveals that the Son's assumed role as the Father is nothing else but a "false" imitation. In De Quincey's (sub)text Islam introduces an obscene supplement in which the maternal abject negates the paternal Trinity. Islam, in this context, does not appropriate the Judaic prohibition against the maternal idol, since it undermines the paternal metaphor that underwrites this prohibition. Therefore, the Islamism of the infidel "confessions" subscribes to a form of radical iconoclasm that exposes the excremental *excess* (lack/impotence) behind the paternal ethos of trinitarian Christianity.

To deny that *Confessions* is a part of a seventeenth-century radical Protestant tradition is to believe that De Quincey's orient will always remain the "fixed" Other of Protestant England, even when the permeability of this self-other boundary is taken into consideration, and that his stock of Protestantism is a pure breed, to be conveniently secured under the colonial law of the English father. This essay proposes that De Quincey's xenophobic attitude toward the orient is much more complex than most literary critics are willing to concede. Infection, madness, intoxication, and excrement become extended metaphors for a nineteenth-century British empire that has "penetrated" the feminine orient, resulting in what Gilles Deleuze diagnoses as a cultural psychosis that "possesses a world-historical, political, and racial content" (120)—the impossibility of reading history's master signifier as the dead (colonial) father of the Oedipal family. In this regard, *Confessions* conveys a valuable lesson about English colonial history: when the empire writes back, it uses the excremental ink of the Protestant (m)other.

#### NOTES

1. For more information on "enthusiasm" as seventeenth-century political discourse metaphorically associated with disease, intoxication, and mental disorder, see Tucker 93–106, 144–46. Also see Mee for a thorough analysis on how Romantic visionary aesthetics attempts to distinguish itself from a dangerous form of "infectious" religious fanaticism by coating its message as a "regulated" piece of enthusiasm (*Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation* 1–19). According to my reading of *Confessions*, De Quincey "unregulated" Romantic enthusiasm, allowing for the re-emergence of a dangerous radical, dissenting politics associated with plebeian street prophets. Fulford presents a similar argument in his work on Robert Southey and Oriental enthusiasm ("Pagodas" 121–38).

2. Accepting De Quincey's Tory conservatism at face value, literary critics have not situated his writings within the much-ignored tradition of heterodox Protestant thought. Although not directly concerned with De Quincey, Morton and Smith, among others, have done groundbreaking work on the cultural impact of an older, English radicalism on the literature and rhetoric of the Romantic period. For a more

informed discussion on the vexed problem of defining orthodoxy in the long eighteenth century, see Lund.

3. For a list of reviews that mention De Quincey's opium intoxication in relation to oriental madness, see North 12.

4. Since the mid seventeenth century, enthusiastic subversion was strongly associated with the character of Mahomet. Cromwell and other radical Protestants were often seen as successors of Mahomet's enthusiastic religion (Tucker 95–96).

5. For more information on the metaphorical use of oriental infection and colonial "inoculation," see Barrell 15–16; Sudan explores the space of the exotic orient within domestic England in *Confessions* via an analysis of De Quincey's phobia over race and skin color (*Fair Exotics* 67–74). Also see Sudan, "Englishness" 377–94. For an interesting cultural analysis on the impact of nineteenth-century opium dens on English national identity, within the context of colonial trade relations, see Milligan 93–100.

6. There has been a considerable amount of work done on the theme of maternal incest in eighteenth-century English culture. Francus's work on the motif of the "monstrous mother" in the writings of Swift and Pope is especially noteworthy. She argues that in the early eighteenth century anxiety over female sexuality, as understood within the theological framework of sin and corruption, evolved into the image of the abject mother who takes on the physical form of grotesque animals (826–51). Working against a Freudian understanding of the Oedipal family, Marcie's essay on Horace Walpole's *Mysterious Mother*—a tragedy whose plot revolves around the theme of mother-son incest—discusses Walpole's representation of incest in relation to the genre of romance in his eighteenth-century Gothic novels. For a broader treatment of early modern incest narratives as central to seventeenth and eighteenth-century discourses on gender, class, and sexuality, see Pollak.

7. For more details on De Quincey's exposure to mystical prophecies via Clowes's influence, see Lindop, *Opium Eater* 50–51 and Tomkinson 179–80.

8. Several pamphlets were written against Clowes, which eventually led to an appeal to his Bishop, Dr. Beilby, in 1783. With this appeal, Clowes was quietly dismissed from the clergy, continuing to preach Swedenborgianism thereafter while remaining loyal to the Church of England (Mee, "John Clowes").

9. In De Quincey's translation of the "Historico-Critical Inquiry into the origin of the Rosicrucians and the Free-Masons" it is noted that admitting a Jew or a Mahometan would be no problem since the Masons only require a profession of monotheism from its members (1, 7).

10. For more information on Jacob Boehme and the role of Islam in the seventeenth-century rethinking of biblical prophecy, see Hill 230. In exploring the impact of the Behmenist legacy on eighteenth-century theodicean views of redemption, John argues that the constitutive nature of Protestant salvation was significantly broadened so as to allow for a radical transformation of a religious (and political) subject that is capable of achieving deification (86–100).

11. Although Freud and Žižek share a similar interpretation of Christianity, they have different views about its ethical politics: for Freud, the Christian "regression" to Egyptian and pagan rites is to blame for bringing about two thousand years of "darkness" in Western Europe (*Moses and Monotheism* 112); Žižek characterizes

this Christian “regression” as an act of faith that cuts the Gordian knot of the law and its transgression in a politically liberating manner (106–51).

12. In the context of Christianity, Brown and Žižek talk about “radical desublimation” as revealing the anality hidden within sublimations. However, Brown reduces the Christian excremental motif to the experience of the demonic in Lutheran Protestantism, whereas Žižek locates it in the very heart of the Christian experience of faith. Although my understanding of excremental Protestantism is indebted to Brown’s seminal work, my psychoanalytic framework is informed by a Žižekian understanding of excrement: an externalized self—a “thing-in-itself”—exposes the lack behind the desire for a lost primordial object, which, in turn, symbolizes a failure to conceal the impotence of the big Other (56–105). To gain a broader perspective on the role of divine defecation in shaping human subjectivity, see Laporte 109–13.

13. Following Freud’s essay on “the Uncanny,” Maniquis was the first to argue that De Quincey’s crocodile is symbolic of an incestuous oedipal desire for the mother or for a sexual relation between brother and sister (Osiris and Isis) (101–02).

14. On De Quincey’s “discovery” of the unconscious, see Whyte 141.

15. According to Goux, Freud’s understanding of Moses and his wrath against the idolaters reduces the bare essentials of the Oedipal drama to a patrilineal narrative, overlooking the narrative subtext of matricide and maternal incest in Oedipus’s quest. For a more thorough account of Freud’s misinterpretation of the Oedipus myth, see Goux, *Oedipus, Philosopher*.

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