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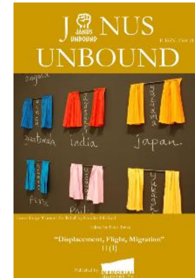

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The Gift of Drugs: Oriental Geographies and Decolonizing Space in Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*

Mohammed Hamdan

Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821) marks a spatial turn in the 19th century history of cartographic romantic fiction. This autobiographical text, which expounds De Quincey's addiction to drugs from youth to maturity, and the effects of this practice on his life, celebrates the power of opium dreaming and its vast potential to grant the human mind easy access to an infinite imagination. De Quincey states that in this world of infinity one realizes other dimensions of identity, subjectivity, and space, ungraspable realms resisting exact definition. These dimensions reflect and reinforce the dreamer's changing perception of self-spatiality within a denationalized or decolonial setting. In such a setting, De Quincey's subjective national identity dissolves "into chasms and sunless abysses, depths into depths from which it seemed hopeless that I could ever re-ascend" (119). In order to demonstrate the opium-eater's terrifying descent into unknown spaces—here oriental geographies—and their unrecognizable meaning(s) during the process of dreaming, imagination, or hallucination, De Quincey employs an oriental arabesque language that subverts his imperial national discourse. Here, I contend that the employment of various elements of the oriental and arabesque in De Quincey's narrative expels traditional and idealized constructions of un-English spaces as alien, marginal, and *othered* in a stereotypical colonial fashion. Through the use of opium as a point of access into a wild, imaginative, or oriental space, De Quincey invites us, albeit unwillingly, to rethink the colonial hermeneutics of spatial otherness by means of non-referential arabesque-ness. The inability to outline and dominate space by following a certain English system of geographic mapping frustrates the inferior representation of distant oriental places, which are traditionally portrayed as uncanny and dangerous because they perpetually escape the cartographic manipulations of the regime of the English compass or map. De Quincey's introduction of "chasms" and "abysses" as uncharted or unfamiliar spaces offers an alternative arabesque geography that does not conform to conventional ways of English imperial mapping, either mentally or materially.

Carsten Strathausen defines the arabesque in romance fiction as "abstract depictions of various motifs and patterns such as flowers, geometrical figures

or other non-referential forms of ornamentation" (1999 374-75). The designation of these objects as arabesque originates in the old Arab industry of illustrative or decorative art which must not represent natural phenomena because it is non-mimetic. The fact that art should depart from mimetic expression, as noted in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, implies that artistic objects cannot have direct references to certain concepts or notions. The arabesque "presupposes no concept of that which the object should be" (Kant 1976, 97). Hence, Kant associates the arabesque with non-representation or non-referentiality. Kant's view of the arabesque as a non-representational textual force transforms it into an excessive form of beauty that attracts Western writers because it opens up free and authentic possibilities of radical imagination. The arabesque, in Kant's terminology, signifies nothing in the human conceptual system that tends to fix and outline images in their totality. The human inability to define and perceive a totalizing meaning of the oriental arabesque in fiction is inherently rooted in its movement and changeability, which issues from human "attention [that] oscillates, movement [that] appears as an alternation of perception between various elements" (Behnke 1993, 103). Therefore, the arabesque always points to a state of aesthetic idealism or equivocal absolutism that cannot signify or materialize itself before our eyes as a real conceptual object. This idealistic state can clearly be seen in De Quincey's documentation of his experience of both urban wandering and spatial disorientation in the complex, intertwining streets of London. Even though De Quincey never chose the name arabesque for his autobiographical writings such as *Confessions*, he consciously employs arabesque qualities and fashions oriental imageries at various intersections of his imaginative, opium-fueled, and adventurous mapping of London, Wales, and the English countryside between the years of 1802 and 1804. If actual maps mean structural fixity, self-subjectivity, and colonial identity in highly nationalized literature, then the oriental arabesque in De Quincey's narrative adds other dimensions of space in which objects become fluid and relational, not absolute. Thus the arabesque characteristics in De Quincey's *Confessions* create what Maurice Blanchot calls the "imaginary space [where] things are *transformed* into that which cannot be grasped … where no longer is anything present, where in the midst of absence everything speaks" (1982 141). The transformation of London into an "imagiSnary space" in the eyes of the wandering opium-eater, De Quincey, creates other possibilities of meaning of the English colonial and national map which becomes de-hierarchized and mobile due to the constant shifting or reconfiguration of the walker's experience of space.

Locating London in its real or physical geographic sense on De Quincey's hyperactive, virtual, and psychological map seems to be an impossible mission because he frequently witnesses a drastic transformation of its material structures or a sudden change of his charted tour. After taking a dose of opium on a Saturday night, De Quincey

> came suddenly upon such knotty problems of alleys, such enigmatical entries, and such sphynx's riddles of streets without thoroughfares, as must, I conceive,

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> baffle the audacity of porters, and confound the intellects of hackney-coachmen. I could almost have believed, at times, that I must be the first discoverer of some of these *terrae incognitae*, and doubted, whether they had yet been laid down in the modern charts of London. (98)

De Quincey's careful spatial description of London seems to assert his strong national pride and attachment to its structure and geographic significance, which predominate the most crucial moments of his life in that "the first important event in De Quincey's life was the roaming life on the hillside of North Wales; the second, the wanderings in 'stoney-hearted Oxford Street' " (Rickett 1906, 9). In his writing, however, London always emerges as "*terrae incognitae*," a place that seems to violate modern mapping technologies. To De Quincey, the labyrinthine geographical structure of London presents itself repeatedly before his eyes as a rejuvenating experience. The multiple rebirths of London as new, irregular, or unprocessed cartographic adventures threaten the rational integrity of the wandering De Quincey who is haunted by fears, anxieties, and "the perplexities of my steps" (99). London, therefore, is reinvented as an *othered* space that is continually constructed as a non-absolute reality or simply a fleeting metaphor of space (Rogoff 2000, 24). The otherization of London is an effect of the extreme consumption of opium, which is "of Oriental earth." In *East End Opium Tales*, Thomas Burke suggests that opium not only comes from Oriental lands but also "works upon brain and eye in Oriental imagery" (Roth 2002, 88). The association between opium and De Quincey's feeling of spatial, moral, and psychological alienation in his *Confessions* inculcates an image of the Orient or the Eastern and its culture of arabesque-ness as vicious, perilous, and menacing. Despite the profits of ecstatic imagination De Quincey gains from opium during his urban wanderings, he underlines the perils that accompany this behavior as a consequence of inviting the *other* into secure imperial spaces.

In fact, De Quincey's fear of opium consumption emanates from the possible dissolution of his walking experience "into a dehistoricized, detemporalized, and despatialized idea" (Partridge 2018, 52). The unbearable horror of opium dreams, in other words, is directly associated with the invention of altered spatial states where the English eater/walker may possibly witness the conflation of all cultures, historical periods, and human societies in one location. The notion of bringing "together all creatures, birds, beasts, reptiles, all trees and plants, usages and appearance, that are found in all tropical regions, and assembled … in China or Indostan," as stated by De Quincey (73), provides an alternative decontextualized vision that threatens the imperial construction of the English sublime and national subjectivity. These alien cultural signifiers such as birds, reptiles, trees, and other oriental or arabesque topographies destabilize the imperial ideal representation of place, time, nationalism, and unique cultural experience (Makdisi 1998, 195-6). De Quincey points out that East Indian or Turkish opium is easily attainable, but "if you eat a good deal of it, most probably you must—do what is particularly disagreeable to any man of regular habits" (90). Here, the consumption of East Indian and Turkish

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opium alienates De Quincey socially and morally since this product forces him to behave disagreeably to the standard system of English habits. The economic trafficking of drugs from East to West and the cultural connection of opium-eating with Easterners, which "was deeply implicated in British colonial activities in the East" (Milligan 1995, 5), reinforced the image of the Orient as a negative culture that supplied infections, ills, and immoralities. De Quincey highlights that his consumption of "dusky brown" opium intensifies his degradation and contempt toward the alien Oriental other (90). Yet, he perpetually relies on the *otherized* oriental arabesque-ness to reach a state of sublimity and ideal beauty, which implies that his sense of national and colonial pride and his attempt at creating a unique imperial discourse via his spatial mobilities in London are continually denied and challenged. Oriental materials such as opium, in other words, do not function as sources of cultural contamination as they turn into rich sites of self-identification inseparable from their Oriental origins. If De Quincey's opium dreams are indeed spatially tortuous, it is only because "they erode the desired division between self and other even in the otherwise presumably inviolate sanctum of individual consciousness" (Milligan 47).

Despite his acclaimed delights of eating, De Quincey also experiences an unpleasant removal from pleasure through the awfulness of the terror of eating opium. This terror issues from the persistent return of the exotic otherness of the Orient: a return which reminds the eater/walker that distances between East and West, self and other, past and future, or subject and object can always dissolve in the process of opium eating. Barry Milligan even goes as far as to suggest that eating opium and the accompanying oriental imagery prove "to be a kind of infernal archaeological tool that uncovers the not-so-deeply buried Oriental within the English" (12). De Quincey's opium-eating experience embodies a crisis of self-identity, and the difficulty of mapping and *re*-mapping London transforms into a metaphor of finding his *own* true self in a world that seems too open and intertwined in a chasm-like sense only when he assumes it is divided by irremovable barriers. Geographical barriers signify nothing on a globe where Arabs, Persians, and Chinese may emerge as Spaniards, Frenchmen, and Oriental English subjects, respectively, in De Quincey's opium dreams.

Accordingly, the oriental arabesque elements used in De Quincey's *Confessions* as a result of his practice of eating opium bring him into full conversation with the oriental *other* and challenge his colonial views of the oriental culture as inferior. In fact, Oriental arabesque imagery transforms into a powerful psychological technology of decolonizing both the national cultivations of De Quincey's text and the production of London as a distinct imperial space, which is constantly *re*-configured as a shifty or mobile territory by means of a regenerative arabesque-ness. The presumption that the arabesque is an effect of opium-eating and is, therefore, an *othered* entity or concept that lies outside the contours of the English imperial text is deeply problematic. The arabesque geography produced through Western correspondence with the Oriental material world proves that the Orient is not self-consciously invited or introduced

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to emphasize and outline De Quincey's national aspirations and discursive colonial mapping. Milligan, in this regard, holds that the East and Orient "did not ever actually enter his [De Quincey's] body, consciousness, or even his country, but was instead always there to begin with" (48). Within this experience, opium provides De Quincey with a different, abstract form of self-perception by which he willingly decolonizes his continued reception of oriental spaces and cultures as uncivilized and peripheral. Hence his spatial experience remains too "exalted, spiritualized, and sublimed" (De Quincey 96), a host of epithets which are characteristic of abstract oriental geographies that substitute our material understanding of English scientific colonial mapping of other unknown cultures, objects, and places that have always posed a direct threat to all that De Quincey holds to be sacred.

Biography

Mohammed Hamdan is an associate professor of Anglo-American literary studies at An-Najah National University, Palestine. His main research interests include 19th century transatlantic literary relations, Victorian fiction, and gender studies. Currently, he is interested in literary translation and comparative studies on exile, landscape, and national identity in modern Palestinian, Arab, and Israeli fiction.

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