

Robert J.C. Young

'This, that, the other'

review of

John Barrell, *The Infection of Thomas de Quincey: A Psychopathology of Imperialism*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991.

(1992)

This is a brilliant account of De Quincey, all the more so because few critics have ever known quite how to read him. It is typical of the paradoxical nature of the man that despite being one of the architects of the idea of English Literature as a special, transcendent category, De Quincey's own powerfully imaginative writings refuse to respect the generic boundaries of literature and extend with equal confidence across the realms of history, economics, politics, and any number of other topics. Barrell's strategy is to break down the disciplinary divisions which make De Quincey so difficult to comprehend by using psychoanalysis. But he is able to avoid the reductiveness for which psychoanalytic criticism is notorious because De Quincey of all writers is already half there himself—and not merely because he wrote about his dreams. When people talk about the 'sub-conscious', they often assume that they are invoking Freud—but in fact it was De Quincey who invented the word and introduced the notion into literary criticism. Barrell puts Freud's much disputed concept of the 'primal scene' together with De Quincey's term

'involute', a symbolic narrative cluster of unspeakable but compulsive associations, to show how De Quincey's writings insistently repeat a psychic wound involving an obscure childhood scene associated with the death of his sister. As Barrell shows, the repetitions take the form of a compulsion both to close and to re-open the wound, repeating or repairing it in the masquerade of whatever material comes to hand—a Gothic novel, a real-life murder story or the Opium Wars with China will all do equally well.

This means that Barrell's book itself works on a narrative of repetition, for in a sense once the originating scene has been set up, there can be nothing new, only endless refinements in which the echoes of the duplicating scenes broaden out with ever-greater complexity. Barrell is especially good at showing not only the fertility of metaphorical substitution but also of an increasingly mobile positionality, circulating as effectively as the purloined letter in Edgar Allen Poe's story. As in Freud's analysis of 'A Child is Being Beaten', the primal scene, once translated from the mythology of De Quincey's private life into the public arena of the man of letters, can be read simultaneously in antithetical ways, repetitive or reparative, depending on how you identify the characters. Barrell as interpreter thus finds himself increasingly being drawn into and proliferating the *mise-en-abîme* that is the characteristic trope of De Quincey's own psychic fantasies.

Barrell analyses with great wit and verve the powerful but fascinating identification which De Quincey makes between his own private horrors and stereotypical images drawn from the cultural stock of Western Orientalism—hordes, pestilent multitudes, tyrannical Oriental cruelty, feminized sensuality etc. His writings enact a private psycho-geography that apparently mirrors

the forms of British colonialism. The significant historical difference, however, would be that whereas for the British government it was largely a question of demonizing the other European competitors in the 'Great Game', for De Quincey the major threat lay with the duplicitous natives over whom Britain asserted dominion. In fact in the first half of the nineteenth century the British Government was often surprisingly reluctant to become involved in colonial adventure and expansion; the cultural myths and stereotypes of cruelty and abuse were frequently elaborated in order to encourage public opinion at home to bring pressure to bear upon the government to intervene; this perhaps explains why much of imperial ideology seems to have preceded the historical phase of imperialism as such. De Quincey clearly participated in this with relish and was as gung-ho as any of his contemporaries. That said, however, his demonization of the Oriental is then complicated by his own identification with the Oriental as an English opium-eater. The psychic horrors of the self which have been displaced onto the Oriental other are thus brought home to the mind from which they came.

Despite spending the bulk of the book showing how this demonization of the Orient operated according to the protocols of De Quincey's own private fantasies and psychic wounds, Barrell is careful to distance himself from accounts which have offered the traumas of De Quincey's psyche as an explanation for the public materials which are drawn into its orbit, in other words, from the kind of reductiveness characteristic of psychoanalytic criticism, whereby the social is merely given significance through a form of psychic identification. Although De Quincey wrote of the Chinese Opium Wars and the Indian 'Mutiny' with clear traces of his own pathological obsessions guiding his recommendations for British foreign policy, Barrell also

asks to what extent the social imaginary could itself be considered to be playing out its own ideological manoeuvres through the psychic life of individuals. Here we might recall Deleuze's powerful argument that the Oedipus complex is itself a form of ideological colonization. In a brief discussion, Barrell argues that De Quincey's racism and jingoism were comparable to that of other contemporary writers of the 1840s and 1850s, such as Thackeray or Lord Lindsay, and suggests, somewhat implausibly, that it was all to do with the identity of the Victorian 'family man'.

Having demonstrated in detail De Quincey's own psychopathology of imperialism, the book therefore only momentarily broaches the larger issue of the psychopathology of colonialism and imperialism as such. In the first place this is arguably because it is, strictly speaking, an anachronism to speak of British imperialism in the context of a man who died in 1859. Historically, it seems that many writers such as Carlyle, Tennyson or Dickens were only too glad to subscribe to Victorian racial fantasies. With the question of racism, however, we encounter the social and historical limits of psychoanalytic explanation. The method of psychoanalysis, of course, is to translate material into its own terms; by the very nature of its overall explanation, sexuality, it has little to say about racism as such, rather in the same way that Marxism, with its underlying explanation of the economic, has little to say about sexuality, or race for that matter. Freud, in his only substantive discussion of racism (in the form of anti-Semitism), describes it as the narcissism of minor differences, which can hardly have helped him much in coming to terms with his own expulsion from Vienna in 1938. Barrell argues that De Quincey's psychic differentiations always operated according to a structure of

'this, that, the other' in which the initial distinction, the this from the that, is subsequently subsumed by being set against the third, the other. In psychoanalytic terms what else can this triad be enacting other than a circulation through the positions of the Oedipal romance? If De Quincey's racism is seen to work in this way, it brings us back to the habitual story that psychoanalysis tells every time, in which racism inevitably loses any specificity. The question Barrell's book raises is whether psychoanalysis can tell us anything about a fantasy that is *social* rather than individual, particularly one that, as with the fascism to which in many respects it is clearly related, now seems to us a pathological perversion. The problem for psychoanalysis is that when the social norm itself becomes perverse, then it is at a loss to continue its habitual attempt to provide an acceptable social adjustment of the neuroses of the individual psyche.

Recent emphasis on the fact that the term anti-Semitism only appeared in the 1880s, and that, like the term 'Aryan', is derived from a linguistic category can be related to an increasing awareness that racism in the nineteenth century was developed and augmented not only into so-called 'scientific racism', i.e. racial theory as opposed to mere prejudice, but also became as such the foundation for the organization of knowledge, particularly in the newly emerging academic disciplines. The researches of historical philology, which originated the myth of the pure Aryan origin and naturalized the narrative of history as a succession of brutal racial conquests, together with ethnography ('the science of races'), phrenology etc., by reference to each other produced a whole paradigm whereby race constituted the basis of language, literature, history, culture, and, of course, the nation. De Quincey himself, aside from his own

Oriental psychopathology, contributed to this movement in his essays on language in which he advocated a special place and function for English Literature so as to stem the increasing commercialization, commodification and hence degeneration of national culture. It would have been interesting to have had more particular information on De Quincey's relation to this broad movement of the racialization of knowledge, and beyond examples of his racism, to have known in detail his views on and sympathies for contemporary racial theories; did he, for example, subscribe to the monogenetic or the polygenetic theory of human origins?

This suggests that a historical account of nineteenth-century racism is likely to be more illuminating than a psychoanalytic one. It may also reveal something more, namely, that the reason why psychoanalysis has so little to say about racism is because it is itself one of the many disciplines developed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which draws on the racial organization of knowledge which we have been describing. In particular, psychoanalysis is indebted to the concept of 'survivals' first developed by E.B. Tylor to describe the persistence of 'primitive' cultural traits in advanced civilized man (a theory that was progressive in so far as it showed their common humanity). This was developed by Spencer and others into a psychological projection according to which civilized man retains vestiges of the savage, the primitive within him—threatening in the account of R.L. Stevenson, Joseph Conrad, or T.S. Eliot, redemptive for others such as D.H. Lawrence or for Freud himself who made much of the increasingly felt conundrum expressed in the title of *Civilization and its Discontents*. But Freud was more influenced by this notion than just in his essays on cultural anthropology. For what else is the idea of the crucially

determining 'primal scene' (on which Barrel rests so much of his account of De Quincey), regarded as the determining structure of childhood fantasy and subsequent adult sexuality, than a psychoanalytic translation of the anthropological notion of survivals? Thus we are determined not only by the surviving pre-civilized sexual drive of the libido, the id, which the civilized ego and super-ego vainly try to suppress, but also by the primitive wound of the primal scene which we can never escape. The very structural basis of psychoanalysis thus repeats rather exactly all those divisions between the primitive and the civilized that formed the criteria for the assertion of racial superiority in the nineteenth century. Psychoanalysis repeats them, and also, in its assertion of the continuing dominance of the primitive, reverses them, with its counter-narrative to the philological history of conquering and conquered races with which the nineteenth century began. But the survival of the notion of survival in psychoanalysis raises the question of whether psychoanalysis itself is anything more than a fascinating survival from the nineteenth century. This may make it peculiarly suitable for the analysis of nineteenth-century texts, but it means that it is unlikely to provide a reparative solution for the forms of racism whose structural basis it continues to propagate.

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