UIT Report Vol. 13, No. 2, pp. 475~482, 1982 연구논문집 제13권 제 2 호 pp. 475~482, 1982

Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions*

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(Received June 30, 1982)

〈**Abstract**〉

Opium was not a forbidden narcotic in De Quincey's days. Like today's aspirin, it was commonly used as a normal remedy for all kinds of aches and pains and was freely sold in the formula of tincture in every apothecary's shop. (One might remember the fact that the British opium trade and the consequent war with China happened in his life time.) Nevertheless, there had been a constant warning against the danger of its abuse, and opium addiction was obviously understood as an offense against the social decorum of the day. De Quincey, who had "fifty and two years' experience" of the drug, wrote his elaborate ***Confessions*** with a thorough modern insight into the depth of the turbulant human psyche. He often becomes discursive when he grows sensitive to the dubious reputation of the drug and digressive in reporting his youthful wanderings. As a sustained autobiographical writing, the book appears to lack control mixing reminiscences, discussions, and fantasies, but there is one unmistakable temper that runs through—the haunted vision of the suffering human soul. Abstaining from any interpretive discussion, this essay re-presents De Quincey's extraordinary experiences with a liberal borrowing from his own work.

토마스 드퀸시의 고백록

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〈**요 약**〉

드퀸시 시절에 아편은 오늘날처럼 금지된 마약이 아니었으나 그 오용에 대한 경고는 늘 있어왔고 아편중독은 물론 사회적으로 용납되는 것이 아니었다. 드퀸시의 고백록은 그의 장기적인 아편중독을 중심으로 쓰여진 자서전인데 다분히 구식투의 (전세기 바로크) 정치한 문체에도 불구하고 사람의 심층 정신세계에 대한 통찰의 철저함에 있어서 매우 현대적이다. 고백록은 경험과 토론과 환상을 섞고 일화적인 일탈이 많은 점을 앞세우면 산만한 인상을 주지만 책 전체에 관류하는 관심이 있어 서술에 통일된 분위기를 준다. 그것은 고통받는 인간 영혼에 대한 비죤이다. 이 글은 고백록의 비평이 아니라 그의 말을 되도록 많이 빌어 그의 경험을 뒤쫓아 정리한 해제로 쓰여진 것이다.

Confessions of an English Opium-Eater, the best-remembered work of Thomas De Quincey (1785—1859), was first published in the *London Magazine* with great acclaim in 1821 and came out as a volume with augmentation the next year. After his youthful privation of self-

elected wanderings and poverty as described vividly in the book, he had settled from 1809 to 1821 in the Lake District in the neighborhood of the Wordsworths. Until his case of opium addiction and marriage with a local farmer's daughter occasioned the unhappy dissociation between them, he had remained in close terms with Wordsworth whom he admired. He also associated with Coleridge intimately. In spite of his association with the Lake poets and his genius which was said to be precocious, however, his creative energy had so far lain dormant without expression. The *Confessions* marks his first publication. Now with the patrimonial sources exhausted through maladministration, he was forced to depend on his writing for periodical publications. Both his unusual width of knowledge and the recurrent financial necessity motivated him to write on a variety of subjects surpassing those of Lamb and Hazlitt in range including Greek literature and philosophy, Roman history, German literature and philosophy, modern history and literature, politics, economics, and even mathematics. It may be that most of his writings were shattered fragments of his early dream to be a leisured scholar, for the latter half of De Quincey's life as journalistic contributor was never free from constant harassments of debts, bills, and creditors, which explains his secluion from society. The *Confessions*, written at the age of thirty-six, divides the author's life in two--the former half of dreamful yearnings and wanderings and the latter half of exiled seclusion from his own past and its connections. The *Confessions* brings together reminiscences of early experiences with a motivation of apology for his opium taking. The original edition of 1821 was greatly enlarged in 1856 on the occasion when the collected works were published in 1853—60 in Edinburgh. This short essay is based on the 1856 edition.

The argument for his opium case with which the book begins is predominantly carried out by the confutation of Coleridge's publicized verdict on his case. It seems that in a letter Coleridge had drawn a distinction between his motives for taking opium and those of De Quincey's: while he had fallen into the habit excusably as a therapeutic effort against a particular malady, the other resorted to opium, according to the latter's indicting report, "in the abominable character of an adventurous voluptuary angling in all streams for variety of pleasures," because he was "charmed by fairies against pain." Against this, De Quincey emphatically declares that not only was the process of narcotic initiation the self-same in both of them but that the guilt feeling toward opium as was expressed by Coleridge was also erroneous in principle. Coleridge's affliction was a simple rheumatism, whereas De Quincey had suffered from pain in the face combined with toothache for ten years before he resorted to opium. They shared after all the same "baptismal initiation into the use of that mighty drug." Three effects of the drug are cited: to tranquilise all nervous irritations, to stimulate the capacities of enjoyment, and to sustain the otherwise drooping animal energies. Without any qualm he ascertains that if he had understood these subtle powers earlier his opium career should have been one "seeking *extra* power and enjoyment, rather than of one shrinking from *extra* torment," in such a way as to confirm Coleridge's accusation. The justification is sought in the extension of the licence of wine-drinking which no one thinks "unlawful except as an anodyne." Later in the book he minutely compares the respective merits of these two substances and assigns more positive values to opium chiefly on the ground that this, unlike alcoholic substance, has the power to stimulate without destructive intoxication. De Quincey

is not blind to the danger of excesses of the drug, but as he says, "what really calls for excuse, is not the recourse to opium, when opium had become the one sole remedy available for the malady, but those follies which had themselves produced that malady." So he finds his excuse for tracing the hardships of his early life from Manchester to London as "a key to the proper understanding of all which follows."

When De Quincey was seven years old, his father died leaving his children under the joint care of four guardians and the mother. It seems that De Quincey was not happy with the guardians. He did not think that they had performed their duty conscientiously. He goes back to the classical times of Greece and Rome and examines how the guardianship or tutorship had been susceptible to abuse and negligence, for one is not watched in his prosecution of the privately assigned duty. The degree of discordance he felt toward his guardians is shown in this observation: "There is not in human society, under whatever form of civilization, any trust or delegated duty which has more often been negligently or even perfidiously administered." This constitutes one important motif for his subsequent troubles in both Manchester and London.

At the age of eleven when the family moved to Bath, De Quincey temporarily lived with the family of an "American merchant", a trader exporting merchandise to America, and found himself very happy with the lovable people. Then he was sent to the Bath Grammar School and next to a private school in Wiltshire for three years. At the end of 1800 when the boy was fifteen, he again found himself in Manchester where he was to attend the Manchester Grammar School for two years. It was a distinguished public school founded by a bishop of Exeter in the sixteenth century and "dignified by a beneficial relation to the magnificent University of Oxford." The school was also rich and had as its headmaster the respectable Charles Lawson. The boy was excellent in his scholarship in classical languages, especially Greek, though in 1856 edition De Quincey makes some allowances for the pretensions as a "Grecian" claimed in the earlier edition. "Slender indeed was mine. Yet stop! ***What*** was slender? Simply my ***knowledge*** of Greek; for that knowledge stretches by tendency to the infinite; but not therefore my ***command of Greek...*** " In the examination given by Lawson he could impress him greatly and was transferred to "headquarters" at Lawson's house where he joined other senior boys and discussed with them classic and English literature. He also remembers the moment of interesting debate on Grotius' tract on Christianity. The proud boys were indisposed to boyish sports "by thoughtfulness and the conscious dignity of dealing largely with literature," to which may be added the "defect of a playground". The atmosphere was on the whole intellectually stimulating and rewarding. De Quincey recalls that while the frequent conversation on the Christian polemics--made against "Jew, Mahometan, Infidel, and Sceptic" --was "tolerable", their more frequent discussions in literature, especially in English literature, were of a very high quality and that he felt a deep respect for his school fellows:

> I have since known many literary men; men whose profession was literature; who were understood to have dedicated themselves to literature; and who sometimes had with some one special section or little nook of literature an acquaintance critically minute. But amongst such men I have known but three or four who had a knowledge which came as near to what I should consider a comprehensive knowledge, as really existed amongst these boys collectively. What one boy had not, another had; and thus, by continual intercourse, the fragmentary contribution of one being

> integrated by the fragmentary contributions of others, gradually the attainments of each separate individual became, in some degree, the collective attainments of the whole senior common room.

In addition to this pleasurable society, he also enjoyed the "luxuries" his mother provided for him: an admission to the Manchester Library and a pianoforte in addition to the sum required for regular lessons from a music master. Nevertheless, the seemingly favorable circumstances must have been only superficial, for the early crisis of his life was approaching. In the summer of 1802, he suddenly decided to escape from school. He did that without notice and for the following few months wandered on foot in the mountainous regions of Wales.

De Quincey ascribes three factors to his action of revolt: the apothecary's ill-advised prescription worsened his bodily ailment; Lawson's "pure zealotry of conscientiousness" was becoming a "curse" to all around him and himself; and finally he had in himself a certain "inexplicable growth of evil." The explanation is more mystifying than apologetic though the author states that it is consciously phrased so because the persons concerned or related were still surviving. He could not have the heart to "inflict mortifications upon people so circumstanced." But he believes that the incident was the "fatal error" in his life.

> Oh heavens! that it should be possible for a child not seventeen years old, by a momentary blindness, by listening to a false, false whisper from his own bewildered heart, by one erring step, by a motion this way or that, to change the currents of his destiny, to poison the foundations of a life-long repentence!

His plan to get out from the oppressive school life was realized with the ten guineas borrowed from a rich friend of his mother's, Lady Carbery. The moment of decision engaged a great exertion which bears this impassioned expression: "One fulminating word--Let there be freedom--spoken from some hidden recess in my own will, had as by an earthquake rent asunder my prison gates." First he had thought of going north to the Lake District of William Wordsworth whom he admired greatly. But his "principle of veneration" could not nourish the heart to present himself to the "saintly" poet with his pecuniary embarrassment. So he headed for the northern wales leaving behind the "pensive citadel" with tears.

On his way to Wales, he briefly stopped at Chester and saw his mother, who could not choose but let him go his way but without any monetary allowance for fear of setting up a bad example for her other sons. The Welsh wanderings were a mixture of the joy of free soul in the open air and the hardship of improper food and shelter. Country inns were usually expensive, so he was often obliged to reduce the meals and bivouac for the night on the hill slopes. Nonetheless De Quincey recalls the small incidents and experiences with great pleasure. In Bangor, the landlady of the lodging house inadvertently disclosed to him that the bishop for whom she once had been a housemaid had warned her against the possible swindlers among the lodgers. This made him leave the place immediately in anger and yet take delight in the imagined effects on the bishop if he should challenge him with a protesting letter written in Greek, the language he had confidence in. In Merionetshire, he was entertained by a family of young affectionate people. Even though the village was remote from the high road, they were able to speak English. He wrote letters for them and had a good time until on the third day the Welsh parents returned and frowned him out with the stern "Dym Sassenach" (no English). At

another juncture he delightfully records the "colloquial success" during his stay in Carnarvonshire inns. Here he associated with a group of people in the locality interested in literature including De Haren, an accomplished young German, from whom he learned some German and made his first acquaintance with German literature. He could be successful in talking because he shunned "a pestilence, Coleridge's capital error, which through life he practiced, of keeping the audience in a state of passiveness." Besides, he boasts of his "prodigious memory" and "inexhaustible fertility of topics." He had wandered through such towns as Llanrwst (read Tlanroost), Llangollen, Conway, Carnarvon, Dolgelly, Tan-y-Bwlch, Barmouth, and so on. His last halt in Wales was Oswestry, where a warm, book-loving bachelor received him with enthusiasm and loaned him, at his request, twelve guineas. In November he was leaving Wales for London, unaware of the danger of that "boundless ocean of London." He reached Shrewsbury on foot and thence took a heavy mail coach to London. The boy vaguely hoped that the scholarly attainments he had bore a money value to sustain him there.

The drifting into London brought the boy the extremity of destitution. His plan was to loan a sum of 200 on personal security, which would enable him to "withdraw from the knowledge of all my connections until I should become *mei juris* by course of law."(It is interesting that his ostensible purpose was a temporary disconnection from reality, the psychology of which parallels with his rejection of the Manchester Grammar School.) Unfortunately he could never "melt the obduracy of money-lenders." Their irritating policy of "delay" kept him expectant without any result. In the meantime, he had little to eat, nowhere to go except strolling along the street and in the park, and sometimes no shelter to spend the night. At last he found shelter in the four-storied bleak house in Greek Street near Soho Square. Brunell, the master of the house, was a dubious law agent for money lenders, but was generous toward De Quincey. A ten-year-old girl of unknown parentage who functioned as a servant to Brunell was his only companion with whom he shared human warmth. Once he ran into one of his father's friends, who sent the boy a ten-pound banknote the next day. It was of some help; yet he was so afraid to be revealed to his hated guardians that he avoided seeking possible assistance from the friends of his family. The most enduring memory is that of Ann, a sixteen-year-old street-walker, with whom he walked along Oxford Street at nights or rested on steps and under porticos. It seems that destitution and friendlessness shared by the boy and the girl kindled a mutual affection in its purest form. One night the debilitated boy fainted on the steps of a house in Soho Square, when Ann, weeping, ran to Oxford Street and returned with a bottle of port-wine and spices bought from her own poor pocket, which, working upon the empty stomach, revived the boy. De Quincey is convinced that without her generous aid he should either have died on the spot or never have returned to the normal life. After the incident, the noble-minded, angelic image of Ann never left him. He soon parted with Ann to go to Eton to obtain a signed security for his loan from a young Lord of Desert--to which the Jewish moneylender was not very responsive--but when he came back to London Ann did not appear on the appointed spot. De Quincey made a great endeavor to find her--looked into the "myriads of female faces" in the hope of meeting Ann--but she was nowhere again to be seen or heard. Only the sad memory of her last image gives him consolation: "...and her cough, which grieved me when I parted

with her, is now my consolation."

The pitiable privation in London is brought to a sudden end by reconciliation with the guardians. Now he was sent to Oxford University.

> So, then, Oxford Street, stony-hearted stepmother, thou that listenest to the sighs of orphans, and drinkest the tears of children, at length I was dismissed from thee! ... I no more should pace in anguish thy never-ending terraces; no more should wake and dream in captivity to the pangs of hunger.

Though the innumerable "inheritors of our calamities" were to "tread in the footsteps of myself and Ann," he had "outlived the storm" in his turn. The "premature sufferings" paid off as a "ransom for many years to come." The Oxford years, however, are almost completely obscured in the *Confessions*. In fact, the autobiographical narration of his process of "premature sufferings" is rounded up appropriately at this point; the remaining part of the book is a lengthy record of his opium experiences.

The first initiation into the use of opium was made by a friend in the spring or autumn of 1804 in a London street on his first vacation trip there from Oxford. He was suffering a severe case of toothache, and the tincture of opium called laudanum worked a miracle in an hour.

> O heavens! what a revulsion! what a resurrection, from its lowest depth, of the inner spirit! what an apocalypse of the world within me! That my pains had vanished, was now a trifle in my eyes; this negative effect was swallowed up in the immensity of those positive effects which had opened before me, in the abyss of divine enjoyment thus suddenly revealed.

Opium was not a forbidden narcotic in De Quincey's days. Like today's aspirin, it was commonly used as the normal remedy for all kinds of aches and pains and was freely sold in the form of tincture in every apothecary's shop. Nevertheless, there was a constant warning against the danger of abuse, and obviously opium addiction was understood as an offense against the social decorum. De Quincey argues for the positive effects of opium, thereby falsifying what he considered the popular prejudices about the drug use. For the first few years when he resorted to the drug under strict self-regulation, he ususally took it on each Tuesday and Saturday and attended the nightly performances in an elevated state of mind at the King's Theatre to hear Grassini sing. In the same enhanced spirit he walked on Saturdays directionless among the crowd, usually in the market places, to grasp the poor men's moments of weekend relaxation listening to their hopes and despairs. However, he significantly adds that markets and theaters were not the appropriate haunts of the opium-eater when he was "in the divinest state incident to his enjoyment," for "crowds become an oppression to him; music, even, too sensual and gross." He sought the crowd because his "disease" was the "deep melancholy" arising from too much meditation and too little observation. Otherwise, solitude and silence would be the proper conditions of "those trances or profoundest reveries which are the crown and consummation of what opium can do for human nature." Such an argument significantly reveals the deep-seated psychology of De Quincey as a social man which seeks escape from the inflicting reality. It is also verified by the structure of the book itself which moves from the factual world of the suffering self to the inner world of "opium-eating."

De Quincey relies solely on his own experiences in repudiating what he considered the misconceptions of opium-eating. ("Eating"seems to be either an exaggeration or a misnomer since the drug was very rarely taken in its

solid state.) His points include these observations: no amount of opium ever produced the alcoholic intoxication; the stimulated mental activity was not followed by a period of psychic depression; from the year 1813 he became a "confirmed" opium-eater and sometimes reached the dangerous excess but did not fail, nonetheless, to return to the normal state; contrary to the popular belief, his obstinate use of opium healed rather than worsened his consumptive symptoms; his "fifty-and-two years' experience of opium" did not confirm the belief that the drug use necessitates the perpetual increase in amount; and so forth.

In spite of such an advocacy of this "subtle," "mysterious," and "all-conquering" drug, De Quincey makes it a point to describe the "pains of opium" that counterbalance the "pleasures of opium." In 1818 he came across Ricardo's book, which immensely enthralled him and made him cry out with joy and wonder, "Thou art the man!" But when he drew up "Prolegomena to all Future Systems of Political Economy" in a responsive admiration of the author's "inevitable eye," he found himself quite unable to finish a preface and a dedication--the flashy exertion was only momentary. His verdict on this has these words: "The opium-eater loses none of his moral sensibilities or aspirations; he wishes and longs as earnestly as ever to realise what he believes possible, and feels to be exacted by duty; but his intellectual apprehension of what is possible infinitely outruns his power, not of execution only, but even of proposing or willing. He lies under a world's weight of incubus and nightmare..."

After all the opium-eating and its pleasures brought about its price, for the "weight of incubus and nightmare" was anything but transitory. Phantasmagoric images, both somnolent and waking, were overwhelming him persistently. The fantastic faculty of the mind invoked the dreadful images or they surged upon him voluntarily like "all sorts of phantoms painted upon the darkness by many children," or like "a theatre suddenly opened and lighted up within the brain." Those dreams were usually accompanied by "deep-seated anxiety and funereal melancholy," and the distinction between the waking and the dreaming states became blurred. Just as in all other dreams, the sense of space and time was expanded limitlessly. Space "swelled...to an extent of unutterable and self-repeating infinity," and sometimes he seemed to have lived "for seventy or a hundred years in one night" or a "duration far beyond the limits of any human experience." So the majestic characters and sounds and scenes from, for example, Livy's *Consul Romanus* or the English Paliamentary War came into his dreams with dazz ling vividness. De Quincey recalls that these dreams were becoming increasingly depressing around 1817. The most terrific dreams were those of fearful oriental images from which he had suffered for months in 1818. It was occasioned by his actual encounter with a Malay who had knocked on his door dressed in exotic costume. The images included South Asian scenes, its tropical flora and fauna, the Ganges, Hindustani religions, Chinese figures, etc., all awful and exotic. Perhaps the dreams reflect De Quincey's inner fear of things unfamiliar or unknown, and Asia represented them for him: "The mere antiquity of Asiatic things...is so impressive, that to me the vast age of the race and name overpowers the sense of youth in the individual. A young Chinese seems to me an antidiluvian man renewed."

Interestingly the adored Ann appear against the combination of the Orient and Christianity:

> The scene was an oriental one; and there also it was Easter Sunday, and very early in the morning. And at a vast distance were visible, as a stain upon the horizon,

> the domes and cupolas of a great city--an image or faint abstraction, caught perhaps in childhood from some picture of Jerusalem. And not a bowshot from me, upon a stone, shaded by Judean palms, there sat a woman; and I looked, and it was--Ann!

The dream of Ann is expanded into a separate dream piece, "The Daughter of Lebanon," which closes the book. There is no editorial indication that the woman here is Ann and neither the narrating "I" nor any specifiable names intrude the scene. It reads like an independent short story with much apocalyptic sublimity. All the same the memory of the angelic Ann is the underlying motif. An evangelist comes to Damascus, the "first-born of cities," and finds there a "woman of loveliness so transcendent," forlorn and forsaken. The evangelist is "learned in the afflictions of man" and "wise alike to take counsel for the suffering spirit or for the suffering body," and the woman is the daughter of the prince of Lebanon banished there after suffering from a "churlish father and a wicked lover." The woman wishes to return to her father's house. The evangelist, being the messenger of God, takes her ardent wishes and leads her to where she ultimately belongs--the Father in heaven, his pastoral staff removing for her the earthly masks that are in the way, clouds of delirium and even the fair blue sky. The armies of Christ muster to receive "some dear human blossom." As she dies, the Daughter of Lebanon fervently promises the evangelist to "suffer that God should give by seeming to refuse." This is certainly the image of suffering Ann, whose beautiful soul is received by God through her acceptance of the parodox of His ways.

The issue of opium remains unsolved. When the depressing dreams develop to unbearable extremity with resounding "everlasting farewells" and cries of "Death!" he awoke in struggles and cried aloud, "I will sleep no more!" After this, it seem that he had returned to a more normal state. All the same he confesses that "the dread swell and agitation of the storm have not wholly subsided." The suffering soul has escaped into opium-eating, but opium could not solve the ultimate problem of suffering. There is no ultimate forgetting, and opium could not cut off the world of experience. Past suffering is relived in seclusion in memories and dreams. And the enduring image of Ann is the acute point, for, apart from the memory of love, De Quincey is projecting his own troubled soul into her image. The Apocalyptic metaphor of "The Daughter of Lebanon" understands the suffering of an innocent soul as a paradox of God's ways. However, it is not so clear as it seems whether the Christian solution was meant to be final or not, for those parts of the book which advocate the opium-eating and deal with its pleasures do not bear on the Christian otherworldliness so much as on the fantastic indulgence in more or less pure sensations. Yet the theme of suffering constitutes the constant concern of the book, whose status as a factual autobiography seems to be overweighed by the aching visions of the suffering human soul larger than De Quincey's particular experiences.