



2016

## Still Life with Opium

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### Recommended Citation

Nye, Matthew. "Still Life with Opium." *The Iowa Review* 46.2 (2016): 124-135. Web.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.7756>

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## *Still Life with Opium*

### *Leave the Apples Out*

The house would rather be remembered for the force of its boredom, for its provinciality, its quietism, its long opiate sustain of ill attention turning over its will to speak to another. The pretexts for gossip are facts. The vertical lines cored into the stump fan outward where the strikes wavered and a final blow split the log in two. A deeper cut marks the spot where the stump was struck directly, holding the ax suspended as another log was brought from the pile. Pine burns faster than hardwood, and smoke wafting from the blaze binds with the fibers of clothing and the oils of skin. The ring of mulch and mud around the chopping block is weedless.

The surrounding grounds lie flat like the sediment of an ancient lake bottom. There are no signs of footprints away from the main house toward the wood. It is as if that path travels backward in time: *pistol* to *knife* to *hammer* to *bludgeon*. Out of view, surrendering themselves to more primitive imaginings. One must have the proper constitution to dream. *A habitual determination toward reverie*, De Quincey thought. If one is boring in life, one's vision will be equally boring. If one is inclined toward a vibrant life, one's dreams will be alive. Or, like De Quincey, you can swallow daily tinctures of opium dissolved in gin.

### *Pear*

In the wood, the light filters from sky down to shadow. The curves of broadleaved oaks and heart-shaped cordata meet and turn away. The alignment of planes and pixels as thin as the horizon line constrict each aperture to nothing. The view's depth recedes to a muddy cloud and the soft indeterminacy of knowing where, if ever, the third dimension is finally dropped. Under the canopy, space flattens to gray-green like the sky's depth of blue. Spruce and oak stand separately and meld together. Unable to parse distance from farther distance, the colors swallow the viewer from within. Her insides are caulked in oakum. The throat warms and the stomach moves to jelly. The air animates in alkaline, and the gin smoke from the woodshed holds the color of pine and juniper. What is clear to the eye lights softly green as it hits the tongue. A memory, once hit upon, burns its mark there permanently. For De

Quincey, "Of this at least, I feel assured, that there is no such thing as 'forgetting' possible to the mind."

3

In his *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, De Quincey recounts his ability to dream. He is master of his opium fugues, transcending the mere *correspondence* of language to an embodied *aletheia*. The Shaker Aurelia Gay Mace defined this as *the spirit of truth*, and Heidegger more famously as *disclosure as such, unconcealment, the opening up of a whole*.

Ideas! my good sir? there is no occasion for them: all that class of ideas, which can be available in such a case, has a language of representative feelings. But this is a subject foreign to my present purposes: it is sufficient to say, that a chorus, &c. of elaborate harmony, displayed before me, as in a piece of arras work, the whole of my past life—not, as if recalled by an act of memory, but as if present and incarnated in the music: no longer painful to dwell upon: but the detail of its incidents removed, or blended in some hazy abstraction; and its passions exalted, spiritualized, and sublimed. (De Quincey)

This mastery was by his own admission only temporary, a memento mori of vision and control. Through *time frozen* and *time passing*, from *what is not forgotten* and *what cannot be recalled*, "All this," De Quincey jokes, "is to be had for five shillings!" Drip the brown liquid into the tumbler and drink. Avoid heavy sun, poverty, rupture, mental distress.

4

Outside the flatness runs unimpeded. The wood is an island edged by the county road cutting its Euclidian path like a firebreak. One can get lost in either deception. Toward the wood: it is a loss of one's sense for where the far curtain may fall. What appears wild and ancient is only the remnant of a forest, the virgin trees cut down, its edges shaped like topiary into lines just as even and uniform as the rows of adjacent corn. Toward the fields: it is less the backdrop, but the ground plane that reaches for infinity. Hiding in plain sight, extending from nothing to nothing, on the prairie there are no lines between points, no destinations, but endless anonymous rays, *a moving through*, and here, where something is missing, that perhaps is the most natural condition of all.

The dining table is set for two. The trout rest on beds of brown rice and crushed black peppercorns. Their eyes glaze over after being fried in oil on cast iron, after being gutted and deboned. The heads and tails are left on. Like Dutch *stilleben* or Egyptian hieroglyphs feeding the Ka, it is an offering of tragic hope, Guy Davenport writes, “an utterly primitive and archaic feeling that a picture of food has some sustenance.” Unattended, the plates cool and draw the attention of a fly. *Musca domestica*: to live alongside, to feed upon, a domestication but one flipped inside out, master to servant, host to parasite. The fly lands on the trout just above its rubied lateral line. It crawls from copper to obsidian scales, from one fish to the other, freely picking at the trout’s gills and exposed lidless eyes. The steam rising off the china slows to an invisible current. The room darkens and lightens again. The smell, enclosed, cycles from *sour* to *putrid* to *deathly stale*.

### *Spring*

The liquor in the cabinet is aligned in rows. An unlabeled jug in the far corner is shadowed in plum purple. A black, dust-covered Syracusan is unopened. The whiskey glows amber, and the vodka in the full sun bends light differently than does water, holding its emotions within and coating the bottle’s insides like a simple syrup. There is little order, but emotion, absence, excess. For a synthesis of feeling, there’s laudanum. Not as an analgesic, but as a way of seeing, an allowance and ability to dream:

The main distinction lies in this, that whereas wine disorders the mental faculties, opium, on the contrary (if taken in a proper manner), introduces amongst them the most exquisite order, legislation, and harmony. Wine robs a man of his self-possession: opium greatly invigorates it. (De Quincey)

De Quincey believed that death is more acutely felt in summer than in winter, because the sky holds you at a farther distance in the warmer months. When his sisters Jane and Elizabeth passed, it was summer. De Quincey was three and then nine—ten when his father, Thomas Quincey, also died—and this contrast of light and heat against their enlivened absence was crippling.

### *A Typology of Nails*

The high-back chairs in the dining room are plainly but solidly built. The floorboards through the hall and up the stairway are white pine, felled and planed by hand, notched together so as not to squeak underfoot or to scream during the night. The walls of the house's oldest sections are fastened by cut nails that date to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Their modern wire counterparts do not appear in any number until after 1860. Originally, the house was only a single room with the hearth on one side and the bedding on the other. Only later was the ground floor expanded and the second story built, the concrete foundation poured to meet the stacked stone and mortar original, and on the facades, the horizontal saw patterns ingrained in the wood shifted to meet the arching lines left by a circular blade, the marks of the sawmills moving from hand drawn to industrial force.

### *Veiled*

The pear is symbolically redemptive, though never American. Instead, the United States adopted the fruit of the fall. At once conservative, nostalgic, and cyclical—*apple pie on Thanksgiving*—it stands also for greed, passion, deception, the individual above all—*the fruit of the tree of knowledge*.

9

1834: De Quincey coins the term *subconscious* twenty-two years before Freud's birth:

The Emperor Hadrian had already taken a solitary step in the improvement of human nature; and not without some sub-conscious influence received directly or indirectly from Christianity.

This dynamic between consciousness and the forces below one's own perception spurred the further question of the relationship between dreams and waking life:

As the creative state of the eye increased, a sympathy seemed to arise between the waking and the dreaming states of the brain in one point—that whatsoever I happened to call up and to trace by a voluntary act upon the darkness was very apt to transfer itself to my dreams.

De Quincey's meditations are a central precursor to psychoanalysis. Freud later replaced the term *subconscious* (Unterbewusstsein) with the more precise *preconscious* (Vorbewusstsein) and *unconscious* (Unbewusstsein), which in turn was replaced by his system of id, ego, and superego. Continuing to refine and codify his model, Freud distanced himself from De Quincey's original use and distanced himself from what was singularly and metaphorically *underneath*. *Subconscious* was far too crude a term for any full description of the mind, and yet perhaps it was more apt when attempting to describe paradox and contradiction, the states of being when symbols run free of their ground.

10

The front bedroom is square with white wood paneling and a wool rug covering the hardwood. A brass-framed twin bed sits against the far wall with a floral-patterned duvet and white lace bed skirt. On its surface, a quilt crosses the foot of the bed and a single set of clothes is laid on top: a child's green-and-white spring dress with the hanger still on, white ruffled socks knotted into a ball, and thin, worn polka-dot underwear. A pair of rubber-toed canvas shoes sits just below the mattress on the rug.

The bureau on the opposite wall has three drawers, each with curved iron handles like door knockers. A jewelry box, a mirror with an oval face, and a ceramic figurine of the Great Sphinx line its surface. On the exterior wall, the window is wide open, and without a screen the contrast in light works as a flash. Adjusting to the dark when turned away, adjusting to the light when looking toward, the road can be seen in the distance and the near interior when focusing inside, but not both clearly at the same time. There is a change in pressure in the room like when two fronts collide, a briskness that transcends temperature marking the room as other. Outside the warm envelope of air, it exists apart, more outside than in, untethered from the atmosphere of the house. The wind travels freely in through the window, high pressure to low, dust and pollen and the scent of the fields.

### *Piranesi*

Now it was that upon the rocking waters of the ocean the human face began to appear: the sea appeared paved with innumerable faces, upturned to the heavens: faces, imploring, wrathful, despairing, surged upwards by the thousands, by myriads, by generations, by cen-

turies: —my agitation was infinite, —my mind tossed—  
and surged with the ocean. (De Quincey)

12

Through the wood, sound resonates without origin. There is no silence, but a sustained siren roll that morphs into footsteps and muted voices. It materializes into branches of tightly wound fists. The ground stretches below her feet, lengthening and foreshortening the anticipation of what may come, the smell first and whatever should follow, whether disguised as a friend or wholly unmasked for who they truly are. Knowing that the wood opens out onto the road provides little comfort. The earth turns ever inward to hold her encircled. Running with a single bearing and knowing that she should reach the forest's edge, the logic of it burns, unable to find her way out.

On the prairie, one navigates by locating oneself between the house and an endless horizon, a single buoy in an otherwise empty ocean. Within landlocked infinity, the lone benefit is sky. Inside the wood, however, there is none. From cell to permeable cell, she senses no vista or sight line in which to get lost. The heat and color of the wood bite at her heels and at the side of her neck, always from whichever direction she is not looking.

### *Sibylline Books*

The inverse of a miracle is the confirmation of rational dread. The search for a prophecy returns such logic to the spiritual realm. When Hannibal broke into Italy with his victories at Trebia and Lake Trasimene, the veil of Rome's invincibility dropped. Fear materialized into blood both worldly and metaphysical. As if it were simply not enough to say that they were afraid, there were also the manifest signs of the gods.

Thus it was reported that shields began to sweat blood, that at Antium the ripe ears of corn bled when they were cut by the reapers, that blazing red-hot stones rained down from the sky, and that at Falerii the heavens were seen to open and many tablets to fall one of which was inscribed with the words, "Mars is brandishing his weapons." (Plutarch)

The Romans in this time of necessity consulted the books whose verses foretold the future. Their prophecies were, however, always incomplete.

Only three of the twelve books had survived, the others burned as Tarquinius tried to negotiate a better price from Sibyl.

### *Convex Mirror*

The reflection cuts across the portrait to reveal what sits just outside the canvas. Out in front, upon the same plane as the viewer, there is an image of devout, solitary study, equal and opposite to the depiction of idle gossip framed within the window at the painting's upper right. The saturated colors within the mirror and its anonymous background contrast the washed faces in the window and the soft particularity of the village beyond. Its curves present a distorted projection of the values the painting appears to hold. The sun likewise warns of a heated depravity. The couple thus is positioned between polar paradoxes: overexposed vice to the left and a distorted ideal to the right.

In van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait*, the mirror instead is positioned on axis with the viewer. Rather than cutting diagonally across the canvas, its conical reflection depicts directly the backs of the painting's subjects, whose wraithlike image the viewer confronts from the very first. In the far background, two other figures appear. Whether one is the artist himself or whether they are witnesses at the couple's betrothal is a matter of debate. They are otherwise unknowns.

### *Dream*

Much has been omitted. I could not, without effort, constrain myself to the task of either recalling, or constructing into a regular narrative, the whole burthen of horrors which lies upon my brain. (De Quincey)

16

In the years of drought, the entire region became parched and dried up. The alluvial plain between the rivers turned yellow, then beige. At first dust would kick up into an eye and be slowly weeded out through tears. Soon, though, it could be seen from a distance, running between rows of crops parallel to the men like tiny devils with scythes or thunderstorms in miniature. The clouds would rise to their waists, darkening and widening, and she'd watch from the porch as the men were halved and quartered. Their legs would disappear or turn translucent. Heads would run clear of bodies, and autonomous legs would faithfully walk the cornrows, numbed by the sustained tingling pricks of sand.

In the evenings, the sun would sink low on the horizon and cut the ground with the most brilliant red. The gaseous earth would transform into soft puffs of raw color. Pinks would swirl with hues of gold and disperse in liquid astral lines. The clouds would rise like clay on a potter's wheel, dancing and shifting, and with each new form, she'd attempt to close her eyes and capture the image before it fell away or changed into another, knowing that in some way she did not fully understand, they were alive.

17

Along the seams of the interior, the antique paneling abuts smooth sheetrock, and the pine floor blurs into carpet. The vernacular cannot be said to have a style per se. It is born not out of a singular vision but the orientation of the sun and the heaviness of winter, the materials and methods of place and time juxtaposed, as in the Mannerist tradition of mixing Christian and pagan gods. With the wood to one side of the property and the fields to the others, with the original footprint anchoring its center and the layered additions built on top, the house's divisions are years won. The titles on the bookshelf: *Confessions*, *Lives*, *Objects on a Table*.

Anne

If she lived, doubtless we must have been sometimes in search of each other, at the very same moment, through the mighty labyrinths of London; perhaps, even within a few feet of each other—a barrier no wider in a London street, often amounting in the end to a separation for eternity! (De Quincey)

19

At night, the visions of the day bleed into her dreams. Faces multiply and expand. Like the sight line over the fields, her impressions appear without edges. As if churned within a kaleidoscope, a floral smell turns bitter, then metallic, then sweet. She sees with absolute clarity plots of ground being quartered off and formed into great labyrinthine earthworks, curvilinear mounds and squared, sodded terraces that mirror and recede like the *Carceri d'Invenzione*. Stones are piled to form spirals and upturned monoliths. Shimmering mosaic tiles cover the whole exterior of a massive stone arch like scales. In a land of crops and soil, they wonder where all the stone has come from, as if the farm had turned

overnight into a quarry and no longer subsisted upon the plane of the horizon. Upon waking, her visions are wholly effaced. Only an echo of clarity can be recalled, knowledge of knowledge as such, and not information to be put to any good use.

For De Quincey, bearing witness to a near death haunted his thoughts and dreams for years. As the horses of the mail coach bore down on a smaller and lighter carriage, narrative time slows into a perfect foreknowledge. Unable to give warning or to take the reins of the coach himself, what was certain to come was not his fault or responsibility, but *an accident* in the purest sense: sudden, animal, with no clear agent but several partial ones. Instead, what continues to linger is the middling space between self-forgiveness and self-conviction, disappointment and compromise, when *not guilty* is less than truly *innocent*, even when the accident is avoided.

20

Writing on the subject of sudden death, De Quincey attempts to reconcile the seemingly opposing views of Roman and Christian values: “The difference is—that the Roman by the word ‘sudden’ means an *unlingering* death: whereas the Christian litany by ‘sudden’ means a death *without warning*, consequently without any available summons to religious preparation.” It comes to the same thing: a gratitude for any decrease in suffering and a priority placed on one’s moral readiness for death.

When they found her, the doctors could not be certain whether death came suddenly or not. The wind had pulled a blanket of dust and pine needles over her body. There was no sign of violence and no apparent cause, as if in play she lay down to rest and simply did not wake up. The color and heat had drained from her skin. The sky’s high cirrus and low cumulus clouds hung over the house at an in-between height.

21

The search had expanded for miles in all directions. Speeding along the cardinal roadways and splintering outward at each neighboring town, there were whispers of ghosts and witnesses to testify how they may or may not have seen a *suspicious-looking character*. All the farmhands were interviewed one by one, those who were working that day and those who were not, along with her parents, who had reported her missing. They looked to one another for comfort and then with doubt, existentially circling within that faulty circuit of trust and mistrust, firing and misfiring, which ultimately was all for naught.

She was found not one hundred yards from the back door, curled up at the edge of the wood. Eyes turned first toward her father, who in the following days began setting out a fresh pair of clothes for her each morning, which were then mixed unworn with the rest of the laundry and placed neatly folded into her bureau. At night he'd measure out his tumbler with gin, adding drops of liquid from a vial for *clarity's sake*. With a fire burning, gray smoke could be seen for miles and the sound of chopping heard at all hours of the night—the crisp, tearing splinters of a clean break and the blunt mallet pounding of wood against wood.

As to murder, I never committed one in my life. It's a well-known thing amongst all my friends. I can get a paper to certify as much, signed by lots of people. Indeed, if you come to that, I doubt whether many people could produce as strong a certificate. Mine would be as big as a breakfast tablecloth. (De Quincey)

22

In town they talk of her death as having *never been solved*, by which they mean *she died*. In the following days, the couple was said to have tried to enlist a medium to commune with their daughter. There were rumors still of curiosities appearing outside the house, sculptures in sandstone not native to the plains shaped in abstract geometries: a cone, a pyramid, a sequence of lined cubes, none of which were ever seen. Cars, mostly full of young people from town, would drive the county road slowly, hoping for a glimpse of her *sculpture garden*. The only house for miles, it is easy to spot, its facade a patchwork of distant times and materials, variable cuts from variable angles. The upper window, which was her room, they say, is always open. Out back is where she was found in the wood—and also the woodpile, which her father is slowly burning.

Mortified things are not dead and compelled to continue in death, but can be brought back and resuscitated and vitalized by man, according to natural guidance and rule. (Paracelsus)

### *Still Life*

In the kitchen, a shallow porcelain dish of dried fruit and nuts rests on the counter. Its glassy sides catch the shadows within each interior depression and exterior rippled groove. The surface reflects where its angles meet the light directly and hold within its white china the

smooth gradations of radiant pearl and charcoal gray. A mixture of almonds, walnuts, and pecans fills one side of the dish and pitted prunes and dried golden apricots the other. The fruits' leathery peels hide the pulpy, sticky sugars within.

On a breakfast plate beside the dish, stray pretzels are scattered as the scarce remnants of a once thicker pile. Their matte surfaces exude warmth even as the room temperature dips. The toasted beige and deeper browns twist and curl into complete loops and half-broken knots. Upon one blunt edge, the bread's smooth outside reveals the coarse, brittle shards of its interior. Crumbs and salt crystals dust the edges of the plate and its sunken, ringed middle.

To the right, a bouquet of flowers sits in a bulbous metal vase. There are a good two dozen blooms: lily and chrysanthemum and violet, daisies from *Lucrece*, primroses from *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. The daffodils recall *The Winter's Tale*, and harebell, or *Campanula*, *Wuthering Heights*:

I lingered round them under that benign sky, watched  
the moths fluttering among the heath and harebells,  
listened to the soft wind breathing through the grass,  
and wondered how any one could ever imagine unquiet  
slumbers for the sleepers in that quiet earth.

On the pewter teapot, the reflection of a young woman can be seen. On its convex bowl, the image is stretched and widened but appears clearly in profile. On the thinner concave stem, the reflection is pulled vertically and flipped upside down. Fainter partial fragments appear upon its lid and smooth, circular base.

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