

Suspended Life

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DE QUINCEY WROTE HIS *CONFESSIONS*, as he later claimed, to illustrate ‘the grandeur which belongs *potentially* to human dreams’. The ‘faculty of dreaming splendidly’, so splendidly displayed in that memoir, had been developed in De Quincey by the combined agencies of habitual solitude and habitual opium-use, acting upon ‘a constitutional determination to reverie’.¹ It is the capacity to dream, rather than the eloquence of his prose or even his intellectual prowess, that De Quincey names as his special talent. More precisely, De Quincey conceives of dreams as models of fully autonomous aesthetic experience, peculiar to the dreamer. Un beholden to mimetic fidelity and untethered to matter—paint, marble, paper, or instruments—the dream ideally exemplifies ‘purposiveness without purpose’, Kant’s definition of artistic form.² But the phrase ‘aesthetic experience’ describes the dream better than the term ‘work of art’ does, because, as Coleridge averred of his dream-poem ‘Kubla Khan’, ‘all the images r[i]se up before’ the dreamer ‘*as things*’, accompanied by ‘a parallel production of the correspondent expressions’, but ‘without any sensation or consciousness of effort’.³ Produced by and for the same consciousness, with no expenditure of labor and without taint from the marketplace, the dream bypasses the subject-object dialectic inherent in both artistic contemplation and commodity exchange. Perhaps this is why Coleridge regarded ‘the state of the mind in Dreams’ as the best analogue for the ‘suspension of disbelief for the moment’ which he defined as ‘poetic faith’—the state in which literary art is appreciated (*BL* II 6n, 6). Dreams offer a best-case analogy for literary immersion, understood as a state of heightened consciousness that is at the same time a mode of *unconsciousness*. Like great works of literary art, they intimate an alternate reality that suspends the laws of reality-as-usual.

But while Coleridge insists—at least nominally—on the willingness of our suspended disbelief, De Quincey dreams of compulsion. This is the constant theme of his *Confessions*, from the ‘tyranny of the human face’ under which his ‘mind tossed’ (*Works* II 70); to the ‘Asiatic’ dreams of being priest, worshipper, and victim (*Works* II 71); to the ‘day of crisis’ which he ‘had the power, and yet had not the power’, to decide (*Works* II 73). The compulsory quality of his visions is most vividly illustrated in his account of Giambattista Piranesi’s *Dreams*,⁴ engravings which depicted ‘vast Gothic halls’ containing ‘wheels, cables, pulleys, levers, [and] catapults’. In the obscure depths of those halls,

¹ *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, gen. ed. Grevel Lindop, 21 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2003), XV 129–30; hereafter cited parenthetically as *Works*.

² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. and intro. J. H. Bernhard (New York: Hafner, 1951), 55.

³ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Coleridge’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson, and Raimonda Modiano (New York: Norton, 2004), 180.

⁴ De Quincey misnames the engravings, titled by Piranesi *Carceri d’Invenzione*.

Giovanni Battista Piranesi, The Drawbridge⁵

you perceived a staircase; and upon it, groping his way upwards, was Piranesi himself: follow the stairs a little further, and you perceive it come to a sudden abrupt termination, without any balustrade, and allowing no step onwards to him who had reached the extremity, except into the depths below. Whatever is to become of poor Piranesi, you suppose, at least, that his labours must in some way terminate here. But raise your eyes, and behold a second flight of stairs still higher: on which again Piranesi is perceived, but this time standing on the very brink of the abyss. Again elevate your eye, and a still more aerial flight of stairs is beheld: and again is poor Piranesi busy on his aspiring labours; and so on, until the unfinished stairs and Piranesi both are lost in the upper gloom of the hall. (*Works* II 68)

⁵ Giovanni Battista Piranesi, The Drawbridge, pl. VII, *Carceri d'invenzione* (c. 1761), Wikimedia Commons.

Repeatedly arrested on the brink of destruction, 'Piranesi' (as De Quincey calls him) is suspended between 'aspiring labors' and eternity—a self-evident figure for the artist, for the writer captivated by the artwork, and for the reader lured into identification with both. The grammar of the passage gradually erases temporal and modal distinctions, beginning as simple ekphrasis, then modulating into exhortation, and finally into commands. Thus De Quincey emphasizes his mediation of the scene, while producing an illusion of immediacy through direct address. The reader conjured to 'elevate your eye' does not merely witness Piranesi's helplessness, but participates in it: to 'behold' the Sisyphean Piranesi is tantamount to dreaming another's dream. By the end of the passage, the reader is no longer a disinterested spectator. Situated rhetorically within a three-dimensional space, 'inside' the representation De Quincey purports merely to describe, the reader has become a participant or even a player of the never-ending game called 'Piranesi's Dreams'. In this way De Quincey's both allegorizes and induces the effect described by contemporary game designers and media theorists as 'immersiveness'.

The word immersiveness, more often associated with electronic than print media, evokes the quality of experience that occurs when 'the presentation of an artificial environment . . . replaces users' real-world surroundings convincingly enough that they are able to suspend disbelief and fully engage with the created environment'.⁶ Felicitously (if also circularly) defined as a mode of suspended disbelief—hence, explicitly linked with the Coleridgean account of literary experience—immersiveness has less to do with 'faith' than with 'engagement'—the user or player's sensation of being and taking part in an alternate world. This effect is produced by formal features that typically include 'continuity of surroundings' ('the user must be able to look around in all directions'), 'conformance to human vision', and 'narrative engagement' ('the user should have the ability to decide the flow of the narrative' based on 'cues that lead the user to create interesting developments').⁷ By means of these and other devices, which—if successfully implemented—register as qualities of experience rather than objective conditions, the immersive environment exemplifies the 'double logic of remediation' according to which, as Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin have argued, the effect of immediacy is produced by hypermediation.⁸ Immersion in virtual reality requires the use of a headset and other prosthetics as well as a computer; Piranesi's *Dreams*, based on engraved architectural renderings, are mediated, by De Quincey, 'only from memory of Mr. Coleridge's account' (*Works* II 68)—transcribed from a spoken description of a visual artifact. It is important to note that immediacy is not synonymous with verisimilitude; like dreams, immersive environments often flout the laws of reality in subtle or hyperbolic ways. And while some of the

⁶ Ivy Wigmore, 'Immersive virtual reality (Immersive VR)', *WhatIs.com*, <https://www.techtarget.com/whatis/definition/immersive-virtual-reality-immersive-VR>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, 'Remediation', *Configurations* 4 (1996): 313 (311–58).

features (e.g., ‘haptic feedback’) now linked with the feeling of immersion are specific to electronic environments, the descriptor ‘immersive’ differs connotatively rather than categorically from the ‘suspension of disbelief’ associated with Coleridgean aesthetics. Indeed, dreams exemplify suspended disbelief because they are the most immersive artificial environments yet devised.

De Quincey’s dreams are not just featured highlights of his *Confessions*; they also furnish a formal analogue for the *Confessions* and his later autobiographical writings. Like dreams, De Quincey’s allusive, ornate prose both amplifies and foreshortens the proportions of the known world—cultivating experiential immediacy, even while parading its own artifice. It elicits, as it describes, a ‘creative state of the eye’. It revives ‘the minutest incidents of childhood’ and magnifies them into ‘deep deep tragedies’ (*Works* II 66–67, XV 176). In De Quincey’s narratives, as in his dreams, ‘the sense of space, and . . . the sense of time, [a]re powerfully affected’; years pass without mention, while ‘minutest incidents’ are ‘amplified to an extent of unutterable infinity’ (*Works* II 67). Time loops and creases into what De Quincey calls ‘involutees’, ‘compound experiences incapable of being disentangled’ (*Works* XV 142). Real places are transmogrified: London, with its ‘mighty labyrinths’, ‘knotty problems of alleys’, ‘enigmatical entries’, and ‘sphinx’s riddles of streets without thoroughfares’ (*Works* II 36, 50), evokes the abyssal spaces of a video game (*Works* II 36), while Liverpool becomes an emblem for the state of ‘reverie’ itself, in which the dreamer stands ‘at a distance, and aloof from the uproar of life, as if the tumult, the fever, and the strife, were suspended’ (*Works* II 51).⁹ Chronology is subordinated to formal iteration, as when De Quincey titles one composition a ‘dream-fugue’ (*Works* XVI 429). This is not to say that the worlds of the *Confessions*, *Suspiria de Profundis*, and *The English Mail-Coach* bear no resemblance to empirical reality. Indeed, if De Quincey’s compositions resemble fugues, then like dreams they must ‘observe conventions’; they must obey their own logic.¹⁰ But the difficulty of discerning beginning from middle or end contributes to their immersive quality. We are most captivated by our dreams when we do not perceive them as formed—that is, as dreams.

Thus the dream furnishes an alibi for prose narrative that is fictive without being exactly fictional. The burden of reference is suspended by the elision of formal generic classification. Just as the dream can be defined both as an exception to consciousness and as a ‘form of thinking’,¹¹ De Quincey’s prose stands ‘aloof from the uproar of life’, to which it also gives form. Like a dream, and like an opium trance, it is both a mode of quotidian experience and a ‘recess’ in the structure of reality. I call De Quincey’s prose ‘immersive’—not his word—rather than ‘dreamlike’ in order to stress how De Quincey shifts the problematic of suspension out of aesthetic discourse per se, toward the large

⁹ This is the only occurrence of the word ‘suspend’ or its cognates in the *Confessions*; by contrast, it appears five times within three pages of the *Macbeth* essay.

¹⁰ Adam Phillips, ‘The Dream Horizon’, *Raritan* 26 (2006) 99 (92–108).

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, gen. ed. James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Vintage, 2001), V 506n.

and varied class of activities that Coleridge derided as ‘*kill-time[s]*’, and which include ‘gaming, swinging . . . smoking, snuff-taking’ (*BL* I 49n) and, presumably, the consumption of opium. For Coleridge, such pastimes were not merely sub-aesthetic but subconscious—even though he used the same word, ‘suspension’, to describe both ‘poetic faith’ and the artificially induced ‘daydreaming . . . manufactured at the printing office, which . . . fixes, reflects and transmits the moving phantasms of one man’s delirium, so as to people the barrenness of an hundred other brains afflicted with the same trance or suspension of all common sense and definite purpose’ (*BL* I 48n). While intended as dismissal, Coleridge’s description captures the peculiar technique of the Piranesi passage, while presciently linking it with the contemporary pastime of ‘gaming’. Both Coleridge and De Quincey recognize how drugs, dreams, and drama problematize the concept of reality; but it is De Quincey who goes furthest in developing an interactive form of literary ‘daydreaming’. It is also De Quincey who theorizes the relationship between consensual reality and that other world of chemically- or technologically-induced immediacy that Coleridge calls the ‘suspension of all common sense’ and contemporary technophiles call ‘virtual reality’.

II

The suspension of common sense is the topic of De Quincey’s essay ‘On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*’, where he returns to Coleridge’s favorite instance of suspended disbelief, the spectator’s experience of ‘Stage Illusion’, during which ‘images . . . work by their own force, without either affirmation or denial of their real existence by the judgment’ (*BL* II 6n–7n). De Quincey unravels this enigma by focusing on a limit-case of the ‘force’ exerted by representations upon the will of the reader or spectator. The instance in question is Act II, scene II, in which Macbeth reports on his murder of Duncan; the dialogue with his wife is interrupted by a knock at the castle gate.¹² De Quincey contends that the effect of the scene depends upon the spectator’s ‘sympathy’ (temporary identification) with Macbeth the murderer rather than Duncan the victim; this sympathy is only possible when habitual beliefs and judgments are suspended. Both the murderer and the spectator must be ‘taken out of the region of human things, human purposes, human desires’ (*Works* III 153). The playwright achieves this effect by introducing a ‘gulph’ into the ‘ordinary tide and succession of human affairs’:

We must be made sensible that the world of ordinary life is suddenly arrested—laid asleep—tranced—racked into a dread armistice: time must be annihilated; relation to things without abolished; and all must pass self-withdrawn into a deep syncope and suspension of earthly passion. (*Works* III 153)

¹² Joel Black reads the *Macbeth* essay in terms mostly congruent with my own but focuses on De Quincey’s relation to Kant rather than Coleridge (*The Aesthetics of Murder* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991], 46–72).

Mundane reality is temporarily replaced by ‘another world’ in which moral judgments do not apply: a world conceptualized by De Quincey as temporal ‘arrest’ and spatial sequestration. That is to say, the murder takes place in what De Quincey elsewhere calls ‘*virtual time*’.¹³ Immersion in this other world is the precondition for the experience that De Quincey later—importing a term from German metaphysics—describes as an ‘aesthetic’ appreciation of murder.¹⁴ The crucial point is that the other or virtual world can only make its appearance when ordinary life is ‘laid asleep’: like a dream, the experience of aesthetic immersion suspends clock time and usurps upon chartable space. The two worlds are not merely different, but mutually exclusive. We cannot both sympathize with Macbeth and also inhabit our familiar environments, sitting in our usual seats. In this sense, aesthetic immersion can be understood as an out-of-body, or even out-of-self, experience. The point recalls John Locke’s contention that sleepers are not ‘forensically’ identical with the waking persons who occupy the same bodies.¹⁵ The waking person is not to be held responsible for the acts or desires of the dreamer, however excessive or violent they may be.

De Quincey’s sympathy with Macbeth has been persuasively explained as an aspect of his abiding fascination with violence and sensational crime.¹⁶ Without contesting this view, I focus here on the sacrificial logic of suspension itself. In order to experience the ‘insufferable splendour’ (*Works* II 66) of virtual reality, ‘the world of ordinary life’ must, De Quincey avers, ‘be . . . arrested—laid asleep—tranced—racked into a dread armistice: time must be annihilated—relation to things without abolished’ (*Works* III 153). The escalating metaphors, from arrest to military truce to annihilation, emphasize the utter incompatibility of ‘this world’ and the virtual world; the price of immersion in one is the abolition of the other. To press home this point, De Quincey adduces two analogies. ‘If the reader has ever witnessed a wife, a daughter, or sister, in a fainting fit, he may chance to have observed that the most affecting moment in such a spectacle, is that in which a sigh and a stirring announce the recommencement of suspended life’ (*Works* III 152). It is the woman’s life that has been ‘suspended’ by a temporary or mock-death, but the spectator, too, is suspended—in horror, awe, or even rapture—during that interval. To take another case,

if the reader has ever been present in a vast metropolis on the day when some great national idol was carried in funeral pomp to his grave, and . . . has felt powerfully, in the silence and desertion of the streets and in the

¹³ Thomas De Quincey, *Suspiria de Profundis*, in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater and Other Writings*, ed. Grevel Lindop (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 106. See also *Works* XV 145, where the word ‘virtual’ is not italicized.

¹⁴ See Thomas De Quincey (1827), ‘On Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts’, quoted in Black, *Aesthetics of Murder*, 2. Black notes that De Quincey is the first English writer to use the word adverbially, although the *Oxford English Dictionary* lists a few prior appearances of the noun (*OED*, ‘aesthetic’, 1–2).

¹⁵ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Alexander Campbell Fraser, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), I 457–64.

¹⁶ This is Black’s thesis, adapted by Frances Wilson in *Guilty Thing: A Life of Thomas De Quincey* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, 2016).

stagnation of ordinary business, the deep interest which at that moment was possessing the heart of man,—if all at once he should hear the death-like stillness broken up by the sound of wheels rattling away from the scene . . . he will be aware that at no moment was the sense of the complete suspension and pause in ordinary human concerns so full and affecting as at that moment when the suspension ceases, and the goings-on of human life are suddenly resumed. (*Works* II 152–53)

The ‘death-like stillness’ of the city is in fact the consequence of a death, although unlike Macbeth, the spectator has not actually murdered the ‘great national idol’. A death, or something like a death; the fainting-fit might exemplify the ‘deep syncope and suspension of earthly passion’ (*Works* III 153) that inaugurates virtual time. ‘Syncope’, as I learned from the *OED*, is a medical term designating ‘failure of the heart’s action, resulting in loss of consciousness, and sometimes in death’, though it can also refer, like ‘suspension’, to a ‘sudden cessation or interruption’.¹⁷ Reality must die that virtual reality may live. Only with the punctual knock—or footfall, or sigh, or rattling of wheels—do ‘the pulses of life . . . begin[] to beat again’, this token of mediation announcing ‘the reestablishment of the goings-on of the world in which we live’ (*Works* III 153).

Whatever the duration of this ‘awful parenthesis’ (*Works* III 153), it is characterized not just by heightened sensory impressions, but by what Coleridge describes as a paralysis of both ‘will’ and ‘the Judgment or Understanding’.¹⁸ The paradox of a will that voluntarily (that is, willfully) ‘suspend[s] . . . one of its own operations’ (*BL* II 7n) presents an obvious parallel with the phenomenology of addiction as De Quincey describes it. With his recourse to Kantian terminology, Coleridge evokes an abrogation of the categorical imperative that might be instantiated either by the culpable passivity of the Opium-Eater or by the criminal action of Macbeth—or by their synthesis, the spectator’s ‘sympathy’ with the commission of a murder. In other words, the spectator’s response to a represented murder furnishes an extreme instance of the will’s irrelevance to the enjoyment of fiction. At the same time, murder offers a convenient, if lurid, figure for that ‘strength / Of usurpation’ when ‘the light of sense / Goes out in flashes that have shewn to us / The invisible world’.¹⁹

III

Macbeth, usurper and murderer, may be among those who have glimpsed this invisible world. Joel Black glosses the ‘Macbeth’ essay by proposing that the knocking at the gate interrupts the ‘subjective, dream-like rapture’ experienced

¹⁷ *OED*, ‘syncope’, 1, 4.

¹⁸ Coleridge, Letter to Daniel Stuart, 13 May 1816, quoted *BL* II 6n.

¹⁹ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. M. H. Abrams and Stephen Gill (New York: Norton, 1979), 216 (VI: 532–36).

by the murderer immediately upon commission of his crime.²⁰ But if Macbeth experiences a state of ‘rapture’, this occurs *before* the murder, not afterward. It is the earlier encounter with the weird sisters that leaves him ‘rapt’—a word used for Macbeth three times in Act I (twice by Banquo, once by Macbeth himself) but never thereafter.²¹ His reverie is brought on by the prediction that he will succeed to Duncan as King of Scotland, a prophecy which leads him, first, to ‘horrible imaginings’, then to the vision of ‘a dagger . . . before me, / The handle toward my hand’ (II.i.33–34), and finally to the murder itself. This sequence suggests a progression from spectacle to mental image to outright hallucination—or to full immersion in the virtual world conjured by the weird sisters. The witches, who may either be ‘fantastical, or that indeed / Which outwardly [they] show’ (I.iii.53–54), present a masque or pageant that programs Macbeth for the spectacle of a virtual murder: a bloody dagger, pointing the way toward Duncan’s bedchamber. Having once seen, and even tried to grasp, a murder-weapon that corresponds with the ‘instrument [he] was to use’, Macbeth can ‘perform’ the murder himself. At this point, Macbeth marks the ‘suspension and pause in ordinary human concerns’ by observing how ‘now o’er the one half-world / Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse the curtained sleep’. He himself, abstracted into ‘withered murder’, moves ‘towards his design / . . . like a ghost’ (I.iii.49–56). A ‘ghost’ who performs real actions in an unreal world, Macbeth has ruptured the boundary between Nature and the virtual. Immediately after stabbing Duncan, in the dialogue interrupted by the knocking at the gate, he guiltily relates how, as he ‘[d]id the deed’, he heard a voice crying ‘Sleep no more! / Macbeth does murder sleep’ (II.ii.34–35).

Macbeth’s trance, or what Black calls his state of ‘aesthetic suspension’,²² occurs not in the commission of his crime but as a precondition for it. De Quincey points out, along these lines, that Macbeth is an unusually suggestible character, whose ‘feelings [are] caught chiefly by contagion’ (*Works* III 152). No longer able to distinguish between things seen and things imagined, he regards himself as another of the ‘wicked dreams’ that disturb natural sleep. The clinical term for states like this is ‘dissociation’, and it manifests not just in the confusion of spectacle and reality, but in a perception of the self as fictive. This phenomenon has been linked in our own time with hypermediated electronic communication. John Suler’s hypothesis of an ‘online disinhibition effect’ explains ‘why people behave so much worse on the internet than in real life’ by positing that ‘they think of what they say and do as “not actually me”’.²³ Macbeth, like this notional internet user, has become unreal to himself. To make the point in more properly psychoanalytic terms, he no longer believes in

²⁰ Black, *Aesthetics of Murder*, 50.

²¹ Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, ed. Sylvan Barnet (New York: Signet, 1963), I.iii.57, I.iii.143, I.v.7 (II.ii 34–42); hereafter cited parenthetically.

²² Black, *Aesthetics of Murder*, 53.

²³ John Suler, ‘The Online Disinhibition Effect’, *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 7, quoted in Eleanor Cummins, ‘Our Screens Are Making Us Dissociate’, *OneZero* March 3, 2020. <https://onezero.medium.com/our-digital-devices-have-sparked-a-dissociation-pandemic-46cc18ae0b5b>

himself as an autonomous individual but as an effect of mediation. This is what Lacan might call the 'kernel of truth' in Macbeth's delusion. Macbeth's murder of Duncan signifies the ontological gap between the 'deep recess' of virtual reality and the world of political and ethical accountability. Yet the opposite is also true; his act of violence, and the knocking at the gate which marks its apprehension, reinstates the order of things he thought to have abolished.

IV

De Quincey announces his own sympathy with Macbeth—less as a murderer than as a fellow-traveler in hyperreality—when, in the *Confessions*, he twice vows to 'sleep no more' (*Works* II 74; also II 40), lest he never awake from his terrifying dreams. But his susceptibility to visions began long before his experimentation with opium. His first intimation of 'virtual time' occurred when, as a very young child, he fell into reverie while contemplating the corpse of his adored older sister Elizabeth.

Instantly, when my ear caught this vast Aeolian intonation, when my eye filled with the golden fullness of life, the pomps and glory of the heavens outside, and turning when it settled upon the front which overspread my sister's face, instantly a trance fell upon me. A vault seemed to open in the zenith of the far blue sky; a shaft which ran up for ever. I in spirit rose as if on billows that also ran up the shaft for ever; and the billows seemed to pursue the throne of God; but *that* also ran before us and fled away continually. The flight and the pursuit seemed to go on for ever and ever. Frost, gathering frost, some Sarsar wind of death, seemed to repel me; I slept—for how long I cannot say; slowly I recovered my self-possession, and found myself standing, as before, close to my sister's bed. (*Works* XV 144)

Like the spectator of *Macbeth*, the bereaved child is 'tranced' or 'laid asleep' (*Works* III 153) by a spectacle that abolishes the dimensions of the known world; a 'vault' opens in space, and time expands into eternity. The child's trance is *like* sleep, his vision like a dream; but when he recovers his 'self-possession', he finds that he was not sleeping, just temporarily immersed in another reality. He is recalled to the ordinary world by a faint sound, 'a foot (or I fancied so) on the stairs' (*Works* XV 145), much as the spectator of *Macbeth* is returned to moral sanity by the knocking at the gate.

This trance differs in at least one respect from the dreams related in De Quincey's *Confessions*. In those dreams, and in his opium reveries, the dimensions of time and space are 'amplifie[d] by degrees that are sometimes terrific' (*Works* XV 144). Time, especially,

becomes infinitely elastic, stretching out to such immeasurable and vanishing termini, that it seems ridiculous to compare the sense of it on

waking by expressions commensurate to human life. As in starry fields one computes by diameters of the earth's orbit, or of Jupiter's, so in valuing the virtual time lived during some dreams, the measurement by generations is ridiculous—by millennia is ridiculous: by aeons, I should say, if aeons were more determinate, would be also ridiculous. On this single occasion, however . . . the very inverse phenomenon occurred . . . Instead of a short interval expanding into a vast one, upon this occasion a long one had contracted into a minute. I have reason to believe that a very long one had elapsed during this wandering or suspension of my perfect mind. (*Works* XV 144–45)

The contraction of clock time during the child's 'suspension' resembles the expansion of time in dreams because they are contrary instances of the same phenomenon, the elasticity or even 'annihilation' of temporal measurements that occurs when 'relation to things without [is] abolished' (*Works* III 153). Both are manifestations of the 'power' that De Quincey defines, in distinguishing between books of information and literature proper, as a 'startled . . . feeling of the infinity of the world within me' (*Works* II 171). We glimpse infinitude when we are moved by great literature (De Quincey's favorite example is *Paradise Lost*); when absorbed by stage illusion; in dreams and through the consumption of opium; when fascinated by acts of violence; and when overwhelmed by the 'deep deep tragedies of infancy' (*Works* XV 176). These apparently disparate experiences, each a version of Coleridgean 'suspension', are all conceived in terms of temporary access to another world, 'self-withdrawn' (*Works* III 153) from the laws of finite reality. De Quincey's 'virtual time' is an early instance of virtual reality, understood broadly as a mediated experience of immediacy. The key point is a glimpse of infinitude, or an intimation of consciousness released from empirical limits.

De Quincey's mixed rapture and horror at his own experiences of suspension—the major preoccupation of his autobiographical writings—rhymes with the ambivalence evoked by new media in our own cultural moment, in large part because we, like De Quincey, associate immersion with the phenomenology of addiction. Immersion is at once the purest state of freedom (from everyday appetites and annoyances, as well as moral obligations) and also a 'fascinating enthrallment', even an 'accursed chain' (*Works* II 10). De Quincey's writings insist that addiction, immersion, and aesthetic suspension be understood as modalities of the same phenomenon—a point he emphasizes, in part, through his use of the Coleridgean word 'suspension' and its cognates to evoke an alternate or altered reality. The 'fearful realities' (*Works* XV 131) of De Quincey's opium dreams, like what he calls the 'literature of power', open a portal to the *hyper*-real world of suspended time and limitless space. Not willing, this experience is also not one of 'poetic faith', the capacity to enjoy reading about people and events in whom we disbelieve. De Quincey recognizes, as Coleridge prefers not to do, that we can literally get lost in that other world.

Getting lost in virtual reality might, as Ivy Wigmore blandly observes, 'have unpredictable psychological effects'.²⁴ When, for instance, De Quincey 'sympathizes with the pleasures of the poor' (*Works* II 49) in his flaneuristic Saturday-night debauches, he also suspends his capacity to grasp the exigencies of hunger and privation which he casually measures in high prices and low wages. Or, to give a less polemically freighted example, when he sits motionless, 'from sun-set to sun-rise', contemplating the 'great town of L—', what he sees is not the real city but an allegorical 'scene', in which

L— represented the earth, with its sorrows and its graves left behind, yet not out of sight, nor wholly forgotten. The ocean, in everlasting but gentle agitation, and brooded over by a dove-like calm, might not unfitly typify the mind and the mood which then swayed it. For it seemed to me as if then first I stood at a distance, and aloof from the uproar of life; as if the tumult, the fever, and the strife, were suspended; a respite granted from the secret burthens of the heart; a sabbath of repose; a resting from human labours. (*Works* II 51)

Liverpool, explicitly fictionalized into a 'picture of the mind',²⁵ becomes a spectacle for aesthetic contemplation rather than a place where actual people live, move, and have their being. The point, not one explored by Coleridge, is that the price of suspending our disbelief in the fictional world may be the suspension of our *belief* in the 'uproar of life' that daily encompasses us. Ordinary life may then seem less unimpeachably real than moralists and materialists generally assume.

By untethering the dialectic of belief and disbelief from literature as such, De Quincey brings aesthetic concerns into the purview of the social sciences. Once disbelief can be turned on and off, we may lose conviction—as Macbeth exemplifies, and as many contemporary authorities worry—in the immediacy of our own environments, or even personhood. The DSM has a name for this phenomenon: 'Depersonalization-Derealization Disorder' [DDD], which has been linked by a number of researchers with media saturation as well as childhood trauma and drug use.²⁶ This line of research extends a long critical tradition, dating at least from William Wordsworth's 'Preface' to the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads*, of blaming ethical indifference on the 'outrageous stimulation' provided by the 'rapid communication of intelligence' in modern life.²⁷ And once detached from reality—as the narrative goes—we may be capable of

²⁴ Wigmore, 'immersive virtual reality'.

²⁵ William Wordsworth, 'Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey', in *Lyrical Ballads 1798 and 1800*, ed. Michael Gamer and Dahlia Porter (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2008), 144 (line 62).

²⁶ *DSM-5* 300.6(F48.1). See Anna Ciaunica et al., 'Zoomed out: digital media use and depersonalization experiences during the COVID-19 lockdown', *Scientific Reports* 12 (10 March 2022), <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-022-07657-8>; Cummins, 'Our Screens Are Making Us Dissociate'; and Anushruti Nagajaran, 'Social Media is promoting derealization', *The Epitaph* 2021, <https://hhsepitaph.com/12328/arts-culture/social-media-is-promoting-derealization/>. Cummins notes that 'VR may offer a . . . legal portal into a dissociative state', contrasting this form of mediation with the use of narcotics.

²⁷ *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. Gamer and Porter, 177.

anything. To put the point in less psychologistic terms, once we have experienced an *alternate* world, we come perilously close to acknowledging the consensual, or even merely conventional, basis of real life.

Understood as the affective traces of his experiments in virtual reality, De Quincey's flaneurism, his propensity for allegory, and indeed his opium addiction look less like individual idiosyncrasies than like symptomatic extensions of Romantic doctrine. For Coleridge, De Quincey's most important interlocutor, the 'suspension of disbelief for the moment' constitutes a form of ethical discipline: a way of combating the forces of indoctrination that have cast a 'film of familiarity' upon the beauties and terrors of the real world, such that 'we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand' (*BL* II 6–7). The reader or spectator's sympathy with fictive, even delusional agents both attenuates and reinforces the normal functioning of the reality principle. That is, to suspend *dis*belief—to entertain the possibility of worlds other than our own—is to practice questioning our reflexive *belief* in the mediated, ideologically saturated world that constitutes our consensual reality.²⁸ De Quincey's aesthetics intimate the darker side of suspended disbelief—the possibility that, once we succumb to virtuality, we might never re-engage with the real world of beauty, terror, privation, and death. This may be the fear De Quincey expresses when, echoing Macbeth, he vows to 'sleep no more' (*Works* II 74; also II 40). De Quincey's horrific dreams have not so much 'murdered sleep' as they have usurped upon the sovereignty of wakefulness, or reality.

V

If Macbeth's murder of Duncan takes place in virtual reality, the knocking at the gate brings reality crashing back, reinstating a boundary that has already been breached and will never again be secure. For the rhetorical antithesis of virtual and mundane reality belies De Quincey's own account of how opium turned marketplaces into 'spectacle[s]' (*Works* II 49) and Liverpool into an allegory; of how 'a sympathy seemed to arise between the waking and the dreaming states of the brain', so 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' (*Works* II 66); and of how, upon waking from his nightly descents into 'chasms and sunless abysses', he was unable to convince himself that he really '*had* reascended' (*Works* II 66) back into the known world. Virtual reality may indeed be defined as a world 'locked up and sequestered' (*Works* III 153) from ordinary life, but De Quincey reluctantly discovers that the two realms contaminate one another: his dreams are fearful realities, while his waking reality is estranged.²⁹ The supreme fiction is not that virtual reality is 'only'

²⁸ I have argued this point in two linked essays: 'Refraction, Reflection, Revolution: The "Colouring of Imagination"', *The Wordsworth Circle* 51 (2020): 259–80; and 'Gothic Coleridge, Ballad Coleridge', *The New Cambridge Companion to Coleridge*, ed. Tim Fulford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 80–95.

²⁹ I borrow the neologism 'enstrangement' from Alexandra Berlina's translation of Viktor Shklovsky, 'Art, as Device' (*Poetics Today* 36 [2015]: 151–74). Berlina adopts the term from Benjamin Sher's earlier translation of the same essay.

fictive, but that real life was ever purely real. Thus the 'awful parenthesis' of immersion in a sealed-off *other* world is experienced only in retrospect—when 'the pulses of life are beginning to beat again' (*Works* III 153)—as the deferred effect of that world's incursion into quotidian life.

The return of mundanity takes the allegorical form of a resurrection: the fainting woman stirs; the city's 'death-like stillness' gives way to 'the goings on of human life' (*Works* III 153); the lost Ann reappears, more beautiful than before, in De Quincey's dream of Easter Sunday (*Works* II 73); his mother is rescued from 'the very verge of death', but also from a vision of 'her whole life, in its minutest incidents, arrayed before her simultaneously as in a mirror' (*Works* II 67; see also II 257n); his sister Jane dies in infancy, but his faith that 'she would come again' (*Works* XV 139) turns out to be justified when the next girl to be born is also named Jane.³⁰ De Quincey's late essay 'The Vision of Sudden Death' spells out the relationship between aesthetic suspension, violence—or its dialectical counterpart, the 'atrocious criminality' (*Works* XVI 432) of passivity in the face of crisis—and the simultaneous death-resurrection that punctuates the interlude of virtual time. Late on one midsummer night in his youth, De Quincey was traveling from Manchester to Kendal on the mail-coach, when he realized that the coachman had fallen asleep and the horses were running out of control. Though 'slightly alive to the possibilities of peril', De Quincey 'sink[s] into a profound reverie', from which he is only awakened by 'the far-off sound of a wheel' (*Works* XVI 437). Aware now that his coach will collide with a smaller vehicle up ahead, De Quincey perceives 'the stage where the collision must be accomplished', in the form of a gig containing a courting couple (*Works* XVI 439). 'Death the crowned phantom' is once again narrowly defeated; the two young people are saved, 'but the lady—'

But the lady! Oh heavens! Will that spectacle ever depart from my dreams, as she rose and sank upon her seat, sank and rose, threw up her arms wildly to heaven, clutched at some visionary object in the air, fainting, praying, raving, despairing! (*Works* XVI 442).

De Quincey himself has not saved her, being 'shamefully deficient' in the capacity for timely moral action, so much so that he 'is self-denounced as a murderer' (*Works* XVI 438, 432). As passive a spectator to the couple's near-death as he is to a performance of *Macbeth*, he is recalled from his reverie only at the moment when the real young woman becomes a 'visionary object'. His state of aesthetic suspension is not so much ended as announced by the near-death that marks the transfiguration of reality into spectacle.

If murder figures a breach in reality—even the 'death' of reality as such—then resurrection is the master-trope of De Quincey's impassioned prose. This is a point made explicit in his fantasia on the palimpsest, itself an elaboration on the story of his mother's near-drowning. Commenting on the 'mighty

³⁰ See Russett, *De Quincey's Romanticism: Canonical Minority and the Forms of Transmission* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 37–51.

theater [that] expanded within her brain', in which 'every act—every design of her past life lived again', De Quincey notes that the simultaneity of these memories was less remarkable than 'the resurrection itself, and the possibility of resurrection, for what had so long slept in the dust' (*Works* XV 176). Like the successive impressions on the palimpsest, which only seem to have been effaced, these memories were 'not dead, but sleeping' (*Works* XV 176). They are revived 'at the hour of death', by opium, and by writing. De Quincey's impassioned prose, his name for what I have called 'virtual' or 'hyper' reality, resurrects the dead by perpetually reinscribing that aboriginal moment when the spectacle of death elicited a 'trance', and when finite time opened out to infinity (*Works* XV 144). Literary mediation, as De Quincey observes, makes 'verdant, and gay with the life of flowers, murderous spears and halberds—things that express death in their origin' (*Works* XV 135). Its model is the palimpsest, which exists only because one 'generation kill[ed], but so that a subsequent generation . . . call[ed] back into life; bur[ied], but so that posterity [could] command to rise again' (*Works* XV 173).

VI

The palimpsest's virtual resurrection of an effaced or even 'dead' earlier manuscript suggests how De Quincey's autobiographical writing aspires, like the latest improvements on VR technology, to transcend representation and achieve presence for the user—the goal of immersive media both in our time and in his own.³¹ Although this daydream is, as Derrida has shown, at least as old as writing, the formal techniques by which De Quincey simulated presence are worthy of note for how closely they anticipate the characteristic devices of electronic media. Thus the concepts of virtual reality, and of a digital 'web' traversed by links, offer more resonant and precise analogies for De Quincey's imaginative writing than does the dream, although dreaming is De Quincey's favorite instance of virtual reality.

De Quincey's notion of the 'involute' might, for instance, be understood as a prevision of the digital hyperlink. Involute is 'perplexed combinations of concrete objects' (*Works* XV 142) in which 'the materials of future thought or feeling are carried as imperceptibly into the mind as vegetable seeds are carried variously combined through the atmosphere, or by means of rivers . . . into remote countries' (*Works* XIX 73). Involute merges the sensory components of temporally and spatially disparate experiences with the literary intertexts through which these experiences are interpreted, to form image-clusters with densely layered meanings. The corpse of Elizabeth, for example, is associated with the passion of Christ by the involute of summer sunshine, palms, 'Oriental climates', and Bible stories told in the nursery (*Works* XV 143). This involute then connects Elizabeth with the transfiguration of Ann the prostitute, whom De Quincey envisions 'shaded by Judean palms' amidst 'the

³¹ See, for example, Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 325–26, but also Wordsworth's ideal of language as 'incarnation'.

domes and cupolas of a great city—an image or faint abstraction, caught perhaps in childhood from some picture of Jerusalem' (*Works* II 73). Thus the involute creates a shortcut between two or more discrete memories, somewhat as though a paleologist busily deciphering the inscriptions on that 'natural and mighty palimpsest', the 'human brain', were to cut straight through the layers of 'knightly romance' and 'monkish legend' to reach the 'Grecian tragedy' of infantile loss buried beneath them (*Works* XV 173–76). The palimpsest itself, often compared with Freud's mystic writing pad, more closely approximates electronic hypertext, or even the structure of the Web. Simply click on the involute to access the linked document.

Indeed, the involute may function as a switch-point for what game designers and interactive novelists call 'branching narratives'. De Quincey's most characteristic form of branching narrative is the digression, whether embedded in the visual plane of the essay proper or demoted to the status of footnote, but he hints at a more radically contingent view of narrative structure—and, indeed, of the structure of reality—when he observes in the revised 1856 *Confessions* that

every intricate and untried path in life, where it was from the first a matter of arbitrary choice to enter upon it or avoid it, is effectually a path through a vast Hercynian forest, unexplored and unmapped, where each several turn in your advance leaves you open to new anticipations of what is next to be expected, and consequently open to altered valuations of all that has been already traversed. Even the character of your own absolute experience, past and gone, which (if anything in this world) you might surely answer for as sealed and settled for ever—even this you must submit to hold in suspense, as a thing conditional and contingent upon what is yet to come. (*Works* II 169–70)

Although the reader cannot choose her way through the forest, as she might in a game like *Myst*, De Quincey's metaphor of the untried path rhymes with his treatment of human characters who behave like avatars, appearing or disappearing with scant regard to chronology or context. De Quincey even coins his own name for the avatar who, although 'originally a mere reflex of my inner nature', sometimes 'swerves out of my orbit, and mixes a little with alien natures'. Encountered in dreams, the Dark Interpreter may not be recognizable as De Quincey's 'own parhelion' (*Works* XV 184–85) because, like those of an online alias, 'his words . . . do not always seem such as I have used, or *could* use' (*Works* XV 185). (As Suler suggests, people will say anything online because their personae are as tenuously connected to the 'real' person as the unconscious is to the ego.) De Quincey even flirts with interactivity when he invites the reader of his *Confessions* to 'paint me, if at all, according to your own fancy' (*Works* II 61).

Such devices both attenuate the confessing subject and draw the reader into De Quincey's virtual world. This world is characterized by hyperbole and

distortion, not only in its content (dreams, fantasies, visions) but also in terms of prose technique. The account of the young De Quincey's bedside trance, for instance, expands and ramifies like the trance itself into four everlasting pages, including an 'almost necessary' (*Works* XV 143) multi-paragraph digression. Like the prompts to the reader that animate his Piranesian *Dreams*, De Quincey's rhetorical amplifications mimetically induce the trance-like suspension they describe. De Quincey does not call such compositions 'immersive', but the word seems justified by the imagery of his dreams: when, for example, he mentions his 'dreams of lakes—and silvery expanses of water', he speculates that some 'tendency of the brain might . . . be making itself (to use a metaphysical word) *objective*, and the sentient organ *project* itself as its own object' (*Works* II 69)—an apparently fanciful suggestion which morphs into a conceptual pun when he goes on to tell how his 'mind tossed—and surged with the ocean' (*Works* II 70). De Quincey purports to be describing 'the tyranny of the human face' (*Works* II 70) in his dreams, but he is also describing the sublimely immersive effect of his own prose style.³²

VII

More even than most writers, De Quincey lived a virtual life, at least after the age of thirty-six when he published his *Confessions* and became 'the Opium-Eater'. The presumptively real life memorialized in his writings ceased then; none of his impassioned prose compositions—the *Confessions*, the *Suspiria*, or *The English Mail-Coach*—mentions an incident that occurred after that fall. Indeed, De Quincey's latest writings 'wheel[ed] back into the earliest elementary stage' (*Works* XV 176) of his life, mining his childhood in increasingly minute increments, first for the *Suspiria* and then for the *Autobiographic Sketches*. Even the revised *Confessions* achieved its much greater length by amplifying the earlier account of his juvenile wanderings. In this way the materials of De Quincey's writing literalized his own figure of the palimpsest, right down to the layers of proof-sheets and manuscripts that gradually displaced the living spaces from which he was so often forced to abscond.

Nightly murdering sleep to resurrect his adolescence, De Quincey was the ghost of his own usurping design. Through his autobiographical writings, he eked out his precarious real existence by replaying his virtual one. In this sense, he was a martyr not just to opium, but to the intimations of virtuality that were also the subject of his most original critical essays. De Quincey may not have been the first writer ever to recognize how aesthetic suspension contaminates reality, but he is, as far as I know, the first to theorize this recognition and make it the central preoccupation of his work. He is also, or so I believe, the

³² On 'immersion' and the Romantic sublime, see a series of articles by J. Jennifer Jones, particularly 'Absorbing Hesitation: Wordsworth and the Theory of the Panorama', *Studies in Romanticism* 45 (2006): 357–75.

first to understand his own writing as the portal into a virtual world from which there may be no reascension. Did De Quincey simply retreat from real life into fantasy? No, he allegorized the suspension of the referent which is one inflection of Coleridgean aesthetics, and a condition of reality in the post-Romantic world.