

‘Arrayed for Mutual Slaughter’: Warfare and Moral Action in De Quincey’s Later Essays

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IN ONE OF THE MOST SUGGESTIVE paragraphs of Thomas De Quincey’s ‘The English Mail-Coach’ (1849), the writer proffers what V. A. De Luca rightly calls ‘a radical redefinition of the Fall’.¹ Whereas in Protestant theology, sin originates in an impious surplus of will, De Quincey traces the ‘dreadful ulcer’ to a deficit. In moments of great peril, De Quincey writes, we discover in ourselves a congenital ‘languishing in hope and vital energy’, a ‘luxury of ruin’.² Such moral paralysis, so familiar across De Quincey’s canon, has generated a good deal of critical discussion. And yet it gestures, albeit in negative, at a species of heroic exertion that was commensurately real to the author, as the ‘The English Mail-Coach’ makes clear several pages later in the celebrated account of a carriage accident in which a quick-witted lover—a man who emphatically rises above our fallen inheritance—saves his female passenger from what looks like certain death.

Critics have hardly been blind to what we might call the volitional De Quincey, a topic variously connected to the writer’s residual Evangelicalism, his imperialism, or his self-fashioning as the darkly-embattled Opium-Eater. Joseph Hillis Miller’s foundational study noted that for De Quincey a man’s life hinges on ‘certain crucial acts or choices’ and that he ‘can never know when he may be standing at one of these crossroads, where a wrong step will lead into an endless labyrinth of suffering’.³ More recently, Robert Morrison has discussed the ‘terrible loss of agency’ featured in gothic tales like *Klosterheim* (1832) and ‘The Avenger’ (1838), in which depictions of invasion evoke the harrowing logic of opium dependency.⁴ As these examples suggest, scholars have mainly been drawn to suggestions of abortive, mismanaged, or otherwise tragic action.

The current paper shares more in the spirit of John Whale, who highlights De Quincey’s construction of a masculinity based upon ‘competition’ and ‘conflict’, and expressed through ‘metaphors of the physical and corporeal in what are otherwise purely intellectual activities’.⁵ Here, I focus on moments of successful, even triumphant masculine activity, examining De Quincey’s model of moral action in light of period representations of Napoleonic warfare, as shaped by texts from Walter Scott’s *The Field of Waterloo* (1815) to William Siborne’s *History of the War in France and Belgium* (1844). Displays of conspicuous physical courage may seem more suited to Pierce Egan’s *Boxiana* (1813–1829)

¹ V. A. De Luca, *The Prose of Vision* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 106.

² T. De Quincey, ‘The English Mail-Coach’, *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. Grevel Lindop (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2000–2003) XVI 432. All De Quincey citations, save those for ‘On War’, come from the standard Lindop-edited *Works*.

³ J. Hillis Miller, *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), 60.

⁴ Robert Morrison, ‘De Quincey’s Addiction’, *Romanticism: The Journal of Romantic Culture and Criticism* 17 (2011): 275 (270–77).

⁵ John Whale, ‘De Quincey and Men (of Letters)’, in *Thomas De Quincey: New Theoretical and Critical Directions*, ed. Robert Morrison and Daniel Sanjiv Roberts 81–97 (New York: Routledge, 2007), 93.

or the naval adventures of Frederick Marryat, than to De Quincey's self-consciously learned, dilatory prose. However, late essays like 'Mail-Coach' and 'War' are punctuated by spasms of heroic will, a will indistinguishable from a special kind of executive rationality that the author would explore under the familiar expression 'presence of mind'. For De Quincey, I argue, the split-second battlefield decision became an important paradigm case for all moral action, with interesting consequences for a writer who confesses himself 'cursed with the gift of thought' and for essays whose structures favor the dialectical, diachronic, and sublimely palimpsestic.

The carriage collision, climaxing in its 'vision of sudden death', readers of 'The English Mail-Coach' should remember well. De Quincey tells us how as a young man he once took the London and Glasgow Mail at night—with dire consequences. The trouble begins outside of Preston when the author, who has taken a dose of laudanum, suddenly finds himself in charge of a coach now hurtling along at 13 mph on the wrong side of the way. The 'Cyclops' of a one-eyed coachman is fast asleep, as is the guard. Hearing a faint noise in the distance, De Quincey experiences a terrifying premonition of disaster, yet for several long minutes fails to do anything more than catalogue the obstacles to action. The slumbering driver's reins are irretrievably 'viced' between his thighs, and De Quincey's path to the guard obstructed.⁶ When a 'light, reedy gig' appears around the bend, therefore, its driver absorbed in the attentions of his female companion, death seems all but certain.

Of course, remembering the battle cry of Achilles, De Quincey finally manages to call out in warning, and thus commences a great test of masculine decision, the stakes of which could not be higher. As De Quincey writes, 'If, said I, the stranger is a brave man, and if, indeed, he loves the young girl at his side—or, loving her not, if he feels the obligation pressing upon every man worthy to be called a man, of doing his utmost for a woman confided to his protection—he will at least make some effort to save her'. Hopeless as the situation seems, De Quincey reflects that the driver must resist the temptation to 'make no effort, shrinking, without a struggle, from his duty'.⁷ To his admiration, the man hurls himself into the strenuous—and complex—task of steering his equipage out of harm's way. Although the gig is struck a terrible glancing blow, and although the writhing of the man's beloved, wrenched from her romantic daydream by 'Death the crownèd phantom',⁸ sears itself into De Quincey's memory, the nameless gentleman has acquitted himself honorably.

The passage's show-stopping final image of a woman 'fainting, praying, raving, despairing' may explain, in part, why scholars have so often fixated on her at the expense of her trusty escort.⁹ True, the lady returns emphatically in

⁶ *Works* XVI 439.

⁷ *Works* XVI 440.

⁸ *Works* XVI 442.

⁹ In Frances Wilson's recent analysis, the driver drops out entirely. He also largely disappears from John Plotz's otherwise fascinating discussion of the passage's 'perpetual present progressive tense'. See Wilson, *Guilty Thing: A Life of Thomas De Quincey* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), 322–23, and Plotz, *The Crowd: British Literature and Public Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 114–17.

the concluding 'Dream-Fugue', seemingly fused with De Quincey's lost sister, Lady Britannia, and even 'the victims of war' at large.¹⁰ But the gig-driver and the militant principle he represents also returns, while here, on the darkened roadway itself, his responses are arguably more painstakingly realized than hers. Readers generally assume that the 'vision' of De Quincey's chapter title 'The Vision of Sudden Death' refers to either the lady's helpless intimations of demise or else De Quincey's passive apprehension of the spectacle. Reorienting the scene from the perspective of the driver, it may just as easily denote a positive agency, a perceptual faculty activated during mortal crisis: the *vision* of sudden death. In a moment I hope to make the case that this justly famous scene should be read as a cavalry charge, and the maneuverings of the gig-driver an exhibition of the warlike 'presence of mind' that De Quincey found indisputably noble and spiritually definitive, but also troublingly alien to his own philosophical and writerly ethos.

No one would dispute that war, and specifically the Napoleonic Wars, are central to 'The English Mail-Coach'. It was the news from Trafalgar, Salamanca, and Waterloo, as an early chapter emphasizes, that sanctified the institution of the mail-coach, its horse and driver completing a galvanic circuit linking battlefield to hamlets across Britain.¹¹ These storied victories resurface in the 'Dream-Fugue' as part of a full-dress allegory designed, in Robert Hopkins's words, to 'justify war, sacrifice, and even death'.¹² By now, numerous scholars have studied the essay's strenuous, yet oddly reluctant militarism, informed by De Quincey's reading of Kant and in response to mid-century debates about pacifism and industrialization. However, the Napoleonic Wars emerge as something more than an occasion for patriotic bonding or as evidence in an argument concerning Britain's role in Providential history. As critics like Timothy Ziegenhagen and Philip Shaw have begun to show, De Quincey often invites us to think about those far-flung, bygone campaigns with disturbing immediacy.¹³

In one of the most moving passages in 'Mail-Coach', the author revives the memory of the 23rd Dragoons, whose bloody sacrifice stemmed the tide at Talavera. A woman whose son is fighting abroad has approached the mail-coach, desperate for news of her son. When De Quincey learns that the boy was with the 23rd, he tells us his 'heart sank', and rather than lay bare 'the bloody trench in which horse and rider lay mangled together', he ravishes the mother with the splendors of the charge.¹⁴ Earlier, and more cuttingly, De

¹⁰ Robert Hopkins, 'De Quincey on War and the Pastoral Design of *The English Mail-Coach*', *Studies in Romanticism* 6 (1967): 149 (129–51).

¹¹ *Works* XVI 417.

¹² Hopkins, 149. Hopkins's essay may still offer the most comprehensive treatment of the essay's historical context and intellectual underpinnings.

¹³ See Philip Shaw, "'On War': De Quincey's Martial Sublime", *Romanticism* 19 (2013): 19–30 and Timothy Ziegenhagen, 'War Addiction in Thomas De Quincey's *The English Mail-Coach*', *The Wordsworth Circle* 35 (2004): 93–98. Ziegenhagen argues that 'Mail-Coach' wrestles with a guilty addiction to the vicarious thrill of war news. Shaw's 'Martial Sublime' discusses both 'Mail-Coach' and the essay 'On War' as participants in a long tradition identifying warfare with sublimity. In Shaw's view, the 'martial sublime' is always vulnerable to the deflationary realities of battlefield carnage.

¹⁴ *Works* XVI 428.

Quincey alluded to the humiliation of Marshal Soult in Portugal and the sinking of *Le Vengeur*, the latter an example of Frankish fantasy, since, as the author insinuates, the ship's crew did *not* in fact shout 'Vive la République!' as their vessel splintered to pieces.¹⁵ Granted that these latter examples lurk beneath the essay, so to speak, in footnotes, before we arrive at the carriage wreck the text has prepared us to think about *combat*, soldiers and sailors performing or not performing heroic actions; declaring themselves or failing to declare themselves in extremis.

It was in an essay titled 'War' (1848), revised and republished some six years later as 'On War',¹⁶ that De Quincey would approvingly quote the Wordsworth lines that form part of my title.

God's most perfect instrument
In working out a pure intent
Is Man arrayed for mutual slaughter:
Yea, Carnage is His daughter.¹⁷

The infamous passage derives from Wordsworth's 'Ode 1815' (1816), penned in thanksgiving for the allied victory at Waterloo. In 'War', the lines become conscripted into a conservative argument mainly about the practical inevitability, even fitness, of warfare given mixed conditions on Earth, and in light of historical processes that have tended to mitigate its horrors. But De Quincey's 1854 revision presses the case further. There, Wordsworth appears as part of a final cadenza in which the writer asserts (with cautious rapture) that in rare instances war offers a '*positive* good': 'The great phenomenon of war, it is, this and only this, that keeps open in man a spiracle—an organ of respiration—for breathing a transcendent atmosphere, and dealing with an idea that would otherwise perish: viz, the idea of mixed crusade and martyrdom, doing and suffering, that finds its realisation in a battle such as that of Waterloo . . .'¹⁸ The prose may appear to fix us at the abstract level of world-historical consciousness: war generates an atmosphere, an ideal. But sentences earlier, De Quincey gloried in what it meant to 'execute judgments of retribution upon outrages to human rights, to vindicate the sanctities of the altar and the sanctities of the hearth', as if direct experience of the 'dreaded field', or at least its excruciatingly concrete example, is indispensable to a nation's spiritual education.

¹⁵ *Works* XVI fn. 423 and fn. 415.

¹⁶ 'War' initially appeared in *Macphail's Edinburgh Ecclesiastical Journal and Literary Review*. Its revision 'On War', together with a postscript, appeared in the author's *Selections Grave and Gay*.

¹⁷ These are the lines as they appeared in De Quincey's 1854 revision (XVI 708). The lines appear somewhat differently in the 1848 essay, both, however, misquoting Wordsworth's original, which read: 'But Thy most dreaded instrument, / In working out a pure intent, / Is Man arrayed for mutual slaughter,— / Yea, Carnage is Thy daughter'. For a history of Wordsworth's scandalous lines, together with an account of how they figure into De Quincey's work, see Shaw's 'De Quincey's Martial Sublime'.

¹⁸ *Works* XVI 708.



Thomas Jones Barker, The Battle of Waterloo¹⁹

By the time De Quincey published ‘Mail-Coach’, variations on this thesis had become axiomatic in imperial discourse, most vividly in the adventure tradition that emerged with Captain Marryat’s naval novels of the 1830s and 40s, whose gamely violent plots are, as Patrick Brantlinger put it, ‘informed by a spirit of “altruistic suicide”—of an ultimate self-sacrifice ending in silence’.²⁰ Like Marryat, De Quincey looks backward to the good wars against Napoleon, when, not coincidentally, a nationalistic ‘cult of heroism’ had first solidified.²¹ Yet as the conclusion of ‘On War’ suggests, De Quincey was uniquely obsessed with that Armageddon of his youth, Waterloo. There is no space to investigate the voluminous literature inspired by the events of 18 June 1815. Suffice to say that representations of the fighting itself had been remarkably consistent over the decades, whether in dispatches, poems, regimental histories, or texts like Siborne’s definitive *History of the War in France and Belgium in 1815*. Interestingly, the most celebrated acts of British heroism at Waterloo entailed not feats of arms, per se, but stern resolve before the enemy onslaught. One thinks of regiments like the 27th, which maintained their

¹⁹ Thomas Jones Barker, The Battle of Waterloo, private collection (before 1882). Oil on canvas, 102 x 135 cm (40 3/16 x 53 1/8 in). Wikimedia Commons.

²⁰ Patrick Brantlinger, *The Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830–1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 54.

²¹ See Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 164–93.

position despite murderous French artillery fire.²² Or, more iconically, of the Anglo-Dutch infantry squares that stood fast against the intimidations of Napoleon's steel-clad Cuirassiers.²³ In his masterful 1976 reassessment of Waterloo, John Keegan noted that for British officers, in particular, 'It was the receipt of wounds, not the infliction of death, which demonstrated an officer's courage', a courage best confirmed by the officer's 'refusal to leave his post even when wounded, or by his insistence on returning as soon as his wounds had been dressed'.²⁴ To this extent, battlefield heroism was about keeping the body still: staying put on the altar of national sacrifice: 'altruistic suicide'.²⁵

But the Duke of Wellington's example complicates this picture. As what Siborne calls the personification of 'the pure ideal of the British soldier',²⁶ Wellington came to stand for careful, methodical focus in the face of death. At Waterloo, the English commander was reported to have always sought out the thick of the action, assessing the field from atop his favorite charger, Copenhagen, and calmly issuing orders while his aides-de-camp dropped dead around him. In Walter Scott's encomium, 'Where danger fiercest swept the field', he 'Came like a beam of light, / In action prompt, in sentence brief—"Soldiers, stand firm", exclaimed the Chief, / "England shall tell the fight"'²⁷ Siborne sums Wellington up as an officer 'Resolute, yet cool, cautious and calculating in his proceedings; possessing a natural courage unshaken even under the most appalling dangers and difficulties . . .'.²⁸ For both writers, Britain's champion bravely roots himself to the spot in order to engage in lucid, disciplined, and above all timely calculation. When such calculation translates itself into words, it does so with extreme parsimony: in 'sentence brief', as Scott puts it—language distilled into pure fiat.

All of this, I suggest, we must keep in mind when considering the fine print of the carriage accident in 'Mail-Coach'. Here is De Quincey's heroic gig-driver in the moment of truth:

. . . craven he was not: sudden had been the call upon him, and sudden was his answer to the call. He saw, he heard, he comprehended, the ruin that was coming down: already its gloomy shadow darkened above him;

²² See Martin Cassidy, *Marching with Wellington: With the Inniskillings in the Napoleonic Wars* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Leo Copper, 2003), 173–74. Cassidy includes eyewitness reports of the Inniskillings' valour. I'm grateful to Martin Grehen's *Voices from the Past: Waterloo 1815* (South Yorkshire: Frontline Books, 2015) for reference to Cassidy, as well as for its extraordinary digest of eyewitness and journalistic accounts of the battle.

²³ Alison's *History of Europe*, which according to Hopkins (145) De Quincey knew well, describes the famous stand as follows: 'The Belgians were driven back in dismay . . . but the British and Brunswickers, in spite of the storm of shot and shells sent through their squares, and the incessant headlong charges of the cuirassiers, whose enthusiastic valour was excited almost to madness, stood as if rooted in the earth . . .' (Archibald Alison, *Epitome of Alison's History of Europe from the Commencement of the French Revolution in 1789 to the Restoration of the Bourbons in 1815*, second edition [Edinburgh: Blackwood and Sons, 1848], 555).

²⁴ John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (London: Penguin, 1976), 191.

²⁵ To flinch from sacrifice, as Colonel Hake did at Waterloo, was to risk everlasting shame. Writing of Hake's retreat, Siborne makes no effort to disguise his contempt: 'for Colonel Hake, on finding the shot flying about him a little took himself and his Regiment out of the Field' (William Siborne, *History of the War in France and Belgium in 1815*, third edition. [T. and W. Boone, 1848], 298).

²⁶ Siborne, *History of the War in France and Belgium*, 13.

²⁷ Walter Scott, *The Field of Waterloo* (Edinburgh: James Ballantyne & Co., 1815), X.14–18, p. 21.

²⁸ Siborne, 13

and already he was measuring his strength to deal with it. Ah! what a vulgar thing does courage seem, when we see nations buying it and selling it for a shilling a-day: ah! what a sublime thing does courage seem, when some fearful crisis on the great deeps of life carries a man, as if running before a hurricane, up to the giddy crest of some mountainous wave, from which, accordingly as he chooses his course, he descries two courses . . .²⁹

It is not just the looming violence, the rush of horses, or the heroic register in which men must [measure] their strength’ that suggests the killing fields of Waterloo. Nor is it De Quincey’s defensive move in contrasting true courage with a market-debased sort purchasable for a shilling a day, recruit’s wages in His Majesty’s army.³⁰ Nor even is it De Quincey’s style of committing distances, times, and topography to paper, in the manner of the dispatches, letters, and eyewitness accounts that in the aftermath of Waterloo captivated readers of the *London Gazette* or *Liverpool Mercury*.³¹ More telling, I suggest, is the scene’s graphing of a masculine cognition that is simultaneously instinctive and methodical. On one hand, the gig-driver’s decision is ‘sudden’. In this paragraph, for the only time in ‘Mail-Coach’, the adjective is applied to human agency rather than death. On the other hand, there is a procedure at work, a disciplined sequence, that can be charted against the passing seconds:

For seven seconds, it might be, of his seventy, the stranger settled his countenance steadfastly upon us, as if to search and value every element in the conflict before him. For five seconds more he sate immovably, like one that mused upon some great purpose. For five he sate with eyes upraised, like one that prayed in sorrow, under some extremity of doubt, for wisdom to guide him towards the better choice. Then suddenly he rose; stood upright; and, by a sudden strain upon the reins, raising his horse’s forefeet from the ground, he slewed him round on the pivot of his hind legs . . .³²

Scholars have put various constructions on the way De Quincey’s lingering play-by-play distends time or proves, in Zenoan fashion, its infinite divisibility.³³ But De Quincey’s narrative may demonstrate less a distension of time, and more an extraordinary compaction and regimentation of intelligence. Look at how much bracingly clear *thinking* gets done in so short a space. Confronted with death, the gig-driver apprehends the scene in a single,

²⁹ *Works* XVI 440.

³⁰ De Quincey seems to be referring to the ‘King’s Shilling’. See ‘The King’s Shilling’, *History Trails: Wars and Conflicts*, https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/wars_conflict/soldiers/soldier_trade_in_world_fact_file.shtml#2.

³¹ See, for example, Wellington’s original dispatch from Waterloo, which appeared in *The London Gazette* just four days after the conflict (‘Waterloo, June 19, 1815’, *London Gazette*, no. 17028 [22 June 1815]: 1213–16).

³² *Works* XVI 441.

³³ See, for example, Ian Balfour, ‘On the Language of the Sublime and the Sublime Nation in De Quincey: Toward a Reading of “The English Mail-Coach”’, in *Thomas De Quincey: New Theoretical Directions* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 165–86. Also see Frederick Burwick, ‘Motion and Paralysis in *The English Mail-Coach*’, *The Wordsworth Circle* 26 (1995): 66–77.

comprehensive reflex: 'He saw, he heard, he comprehended', De Quincey tells us, in a subtle echo of Caesar's '*Veni, vidi, vici*',³⁴ following which ratiocination unspools, length by length, as an expression of Wordsworth's 'pure intent'. In a sense, the man's battlefield concentration unites the murderous seconds into a single spasm of time, the unblinking present of heroic will in which thought achieves an otherwise unattainable unanimity.

De Quincey's preferred label for this capacity was 'presence of mind'. Such was the phrase he had employed some pages earlier at the start of his coach-top ordeal. There, he referred to presence of mind as part of a candid admission that he *had* none:

The palsy of doubt and distraction hangs like some guilty weight of dark unfathomed remembrances upon my energies, when the signal is flying for *action*. But, on the other hand, this accursed gift I have, as regards *thought*, that in the first step towards the possibility of a misfortune, I see its total evolution: in the radix, I see too certainly and too instantly its entire expansion; in the first syllable of the dreadful sentence, I read already the last.³⁵

It's the *presence* in 'presence of mind' that De Quincey cannot sustain. As a thinking man, he either toils in a past of 'unfathomed remembrances' or vaults onward into a future of 'total evolution'.

When De Quincey wrote, *presence of mind* as 'the ability to remain calm and take quick, sensible action, esp. in an emergency or in a difficult situation'³⁶ was hardly an exotic locution. Nonetheless, to grasp its finer implications, as well as to comprehend the chasm between the swift-thinking battlefield soldier and the essayist cursed with thought, it helps to look at an essay by that title, 'Presence of Mind: A Fragment' (1850), that De Quincey published only a year after 'Mail-Coach' and which reads like a gloss on the earlier text.³⁷ Here, the Julius Caesar of '*Veni, vidi, vici*' returns explicitly as De Quincey's premier exhibit of martial cognition. In specific, De Quincey's essay adduces Caesar's generalship—particularly, his ingenious cavalry maneuvers—at the distant Battle of Pharsalia (48 BC), an engagement that determined 'the final distribution of the ground, and the relations amongst the whole family of man through a thousand generations'.³⁸ Pharsalia, in other words, was the Waterloo of its age and Caesar its Wellington.

And how did Caesar prevail over his militarily superior rival, Pompey? By meeting 'the sudden danger (sudden but never unlooked-for) by counter resources of evasion. He showed a new front, as often as his situation exposed a new peril'.³⁹ That is, by the preeminent attention, anticipation, and

³⁴ I'm grateful to Margaret Russett for pointing this out to me.

³⁵ *Works* XVI 438.

³⁶ 'presence of mind', *Oxford English Dictionary*.

³⁷ The essay first appeared in the *Instructor*.

³⁸ *Works* XVII 52.

³⁹ *Works* XVII 53.

nimbleness of thought native to a tactical genius like Caesar—even if, as De Quincey hints, such adroitness lies, at least potentially, within reach of any disciplined soldier. The opening paragraph of 'Presence of Mind' had linked Roman prowess to modern military drill:

The Roman *formula* for summoning an earnest concentration of the faculties upon any object whatever, that happened to be critically urgent, was *Hoc age*, 'Mind *this!*' or, in other words, do not mind *that*—*non illud age*. The antithetic formula was '*aliud* agere', to mind something alien, or remote from the interest then clamouring for attention. Our modern military orders of '*Attention!*' and '*Eyes strait!*' were both included in the *Hoc age*. . . .⁴⁰

Hoc age was a resonant term for De Quincey, appearing also in 'The Nautico-Military Nun of Spain' (1847), where the titular heroine boasts a 'sagacious head, never drawn aside from the *boc age* (from the instant question of the hour) by any weakness of imagination'.⁴¹ Presence of mind may be compatible with a certain austere creativity, as Caesar's clever maneuvering at Pharsalia shows, but it shouldn't be confused with 'imagination', which in 'Military Nun' takes on the debilitating implications we might expect in Samuel Johnson, not De Quincey. In the heat of combat, soaring invention poses a dangerous distraction, compromising the rigid attention of the *boc age*.

Interestingly, 'Presence of Mind: A Fragment' goes on to argue that its signature quality is often activated when men find themselves, due to betrayal, thrown back on their own resources.⁴² While betrayal 'crushes the feeble mind', it 'rouses a terrific reaction of haughty self-assertion in that order of spirits which matches and measures itself against difficulty and danger'.⁴³ Presumably, the reaction that spurred Caesar to victory at Pharsalia set in over time, but in the main De Quincey seems to be picturing the kind of split-second crisis dramatized in 'The Vision of Sudden Death'. All three of his examples he draws from combat: 'A sword that breaks in the very crisis of a duel, a horse killed by a flash of lightning in the moment of collision with the enemy, a bridge carried away by an avalanche at the instant of commencing retreat'. Such 'affect the feelings like dramatic incidents emanating from a human will'.⁴⁴ Putting aside the risible improbability of lightning taking down a charging horse (as opposed, say, to a musket ball), De Quincey means to highlight that even in cases of blind accident the warrior will personalize and personify each obstacle, meeting it as an insult. As with the gig-driver, instinct

⁴⁰ *Works* XVII 49.

⁴¹ *Works* XVI 97. The essay concerns Catalina de Erauso (1592–1650), the gender-bending adventurer and soldier. The example hints that for De Quincey presence of mind was not exclusive to men. Nor, of course, was it exclusive to soldiers. Ann of Oxford Street, civilian heroine of the *Confessions*, displays it in the famous moment when she fetches De Quincey a lifesaving dram.

⁴² In addition to 'Mail-Coach', 'Presence of Mind: A Fragment' is also in strong dialogue with John Foster's *Essay on Decision of Character* (1826), which it cites.

⁴³ *Works* XVII 50.

⁴⁴ *Works* XVII 50.

seamlessly modulates into tactics. The Pierce Egan of *Boxiana* (1818), conjuring up the misty origins of that peculiarly British blood-sport, pugilism, described something of the same progression: 'wounded *feelings* brought manly *resentment* to its aid—and *coolness*, checking fiery passion and rage, reduced it to perfect science'.⁴⁵

This blistering vengefulness may account for the ferocity of the present-minded, as well as for the fact that although De Quincey clearly admires their power, he recognizes it to be inimical to his own. For the reverse of presence of mind is not always or only the feeble mind. Positively, as 'Presence of Mind' emphasizes, it is the 'speculative' mind, and perhaps the *imaginative* mind, which claims the liberty to patiently elaborate itself, un-straitened by present contingencies or passional imperatives. In fact, presence of mind has its drawbacks, as we discover when De Quincey proclaims that the warlike Romans were incapable of metaphysics: for them, 'nothing was real that was not practical'.⁴⁶ Philosophy requires not just a mind unshackled from the present, but one abroad in search of general principles, spiritual laws, the nature of Being and perception itself.

And here, as in 'Mail-Coach', we sense that De Quincey is not merely setting up a contrast between warlike cognition and philosophical contemplation in general, but between warlike cognition and his own unique approach as an essayist and thinker. He hinted as much when describing the *failure* of presence of mind as an attraction to 'something alien, or remote from the interest then clamouring for attention'. Is this not a fair characterization not only of the easy experimentalism of the *essai*, that Montaignean formal inheritance, but of De Quincey's own self-consciously roaming, parenthetical style? For the Opium-Eater, a kind of happy inattention is crucial for any writing, as well as thinking, that would centrifugally discover new terrain, that would grow its connections as it proceeds. Such writing, he implies here, must also give up the Roman habit of policing its borders. It cannot stand spring-loaded in preparation for its own defense. To put it in terms provided by *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, the essayist must be a 'Catholic creature', evincing the ready and portable sympathies of the true philosopher.⁴⁷

De Quincey's conception clearly owes something to Coleridge, who in the *Biographia Literaria* (1817) distinguished between the 'absolute genius' of the great poets and philosophers and the 'commanding genius' that animated history's supreme builders and destroyers. Like Coleridge, De Quincey ultimately preferred the undisciplined play of speculation over the narrow,

⁴⁵ Pierce Egan, *Boxiana, or Sketches of Ancient and Modern Pugilism, from the Days of the Renowned Broughton and Slack, to the Championship of Cribb* (Elibron, 2006), vol. 1, 2.

⁴⁶ *Works* XVII 49.

⁴⁷ *Works* II 25.

peremptory fiat of the battlefield.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, De Quincey’s late essays are more equivocal, often venerating ‘commanding genius’—presence of mind—as the supreme measure of grace, or else as a question of world-historical necessity. Indeed, across De Quincey’s oeuvre moral action, no matter how quotidian, enjoys a close association with the ‘dreaded field’. De Quincey’s two-part ‘Casuistry’ (1839–40), for example, anchors its discussion in Napoleon’s butchery of the garrison at Jaffa, but the essay’s subsequent consideration of matters like usury and servant misconduct, together with reflections on the physiological foundations of the will, make it clear that wartime decisions are broadly representative.⁴⁹ In modern times, this is what moral judgment looks like: an already fallen, beleaguered conscience exercised under the threat of violence, or as De Quincey puts it, in ‘a vortex of preternatural tumult, a rush and frenzy of excitement’.⁵⁰ I take it that part of De Quincey’s purpose in ‘The Vision of Sudden Death’ is to recover the battlefield stakes, and slashing percipience, requisite to a heroic *civilian* masculinity.⁵¹

But how, structurally and thematically speaking, do De Quincey’s essays accommodate these eruptions of instantaneous aggression, of inflexible decision? Is not presence of mind, by De Quincey’s own admission, alien to his work? Perhaps. But strangely, De Quincey’s essays sometimes hint that presence of mind and essayistic speculation are interdependent, rather than mutually exclusive. There is no space to pursue this possibility in detail. I would only point to *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845) and the well-known caduceus that De Quincey employs as a metaphor for his autobiographical writings. In the earlier *Confessions*, he tells us, the bare facts of opium use were analogous to the ‘ugly pole’ at the caduceus’s center. What mattered more were the ‘parasitical thoughts, feelings, [and] digressions’ flowering around it, and possessing a power to redeem ‘things that express death in their origin . . . things that express ruin in their use’.⁵² Tellingly, this ugly but seemingly necessary pole, this deathly support to luxuriating thought, is subsequently described in terms of weaponry. It is ‘the murderous spear, the halbert’. Violence, in other words, is central to De Quincey’s method. Formally and conceptually, moments of mortal strife—spots of military time, so to speak—set the cadence for De Quincey’s thought.

⁴⁸ My thanks to the reviewer who alerted me to this connection. Of course, in the paragraph of the *Biographia* where Coleridge offers his suggestive nomenclature, he is not primarily concerned with the moral and volitional questions that exercise De Quincey. There, as part of a defense of the temperament of great thinkers and poets, he instead focuses on the imaginative plentitude and self-sufficiency of different mental constitutions. It is on this measure that the ‘absolute genius’ of the great thinkers proves superior to the ‘commanding genius’ of their more worldly cousins. Whereas minds of ‘absolute *Genius*’ can sustain a consistent, self-sealing thought-world, the second-order minds of ‘commanding genius’ are driven to ‘impress their preconceptions on the world without, in order to present them back to their own view with the satisfying degree of clearness, distinctness, and individuality’ (BL I 32).

⁴⁹ *Works* XI 351–56.

⁵⁰ *Works* XI 368. Here, De Quincey specifically addresses metropolitan experience, where ‘modes of life and business’ deplete the constitution.

⁵¹ Here, I follow Mary Favre, who makes the case that early nineteenth-century representations of the home front often bear traces of a conflict that, in the psyche of a nation, was never very distant. See *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁵² *Works* XV 135.