

Negotiating ‘Felicitous Space’: De Quincey at his Sister’s Bedside

Markus Poetzsch

FOR ALL THE IDIOSYNCRASIES THAT Frances Wilson attributes to Thomas De Quincey¹ in her 2016 biography, the claim that ‘He was intensely aware of the spaces he occupied . . . the positions of windows, the number of steps on a staircase’ ranks at first glance among the less illuminating observations in an otherwise vivid and sensitive treatment. Indeed, she seems almost to regret this bit of puzzling mundanity the moment the ink has dried on the page, for, rather than elaborating, she turns her focus mid-sentence in a more auspicious direction by asking, ‘but what were De Quincey’s own dimensions?’² The answer here is notoriously short: four foot, eleven inches to be precise, with a preternaturally large head and piercing blue eyes. It obviously helps a biographer to draw such a portrait, to give height and breadth and flesh to an assemblage of words, to bring forth a man from the fragments of history, but once the image arranges itself, its power to sustain the reader’s attention invariably wanes and, before long, one’s thoughts may circle back to that earlier comment about De Quincey’s spatial awareness. If nothing else, its incompleteness is intriguing. Why only windows and stairs, these threshold sites, liminal at best, neither fully here nor there, and why dwell on domestic architecture at all when dealing with a writer who was, to use Coleridge’s self-description, so ‘habituated to the Vast’ (CL I 354)?

Vast spaces are indeed more definitively De Quinceyan than any other, whether conjured by the arias of Josephina Grassini, the sleeping port of Liverpool, or the etchings of Piranesi, each as it were metamorphosing under the influence of opium, unfolding like a scroll into amplitudes of ‘unutterable infinity’.³ The work of Piranesi, notably, was introduced to De Quincey by Coleridge himself, who was struck by the artist’s visionary architecture, in particular the ‘vast Gothic halls: on the floor of which stood all sorts of engines and machinery, wheels, cables, pulleys, levers, catapults &c. &c. expressive of enormous power put forth, and resistance overcome’.⁴ That Coleridge was here describing to De Quincey (from memory, no less) a collection of plates entitled *Carceri d’invenzione*—or ‘imaginary prisons’—is suggestive of the analogical power of such images. As David Anton Spurr suggests, ‘What Piranesi, Coleridge and De Quincey have in common is a highly architecturalized conception of the inner world of the imagination’, one that tends invariably to scenes of vastness.⁵ Yet vastness thus conceived is not a fixed state ready-made for contemplation, the product of a static universe; it is rather in De Quincey’s articulation a process

¹ A version of this article was originally presented at the ‘De Quincey at 200’ conference in Grasmere, 2022, and formed in conversation with the papers there, a select number of which featured in volume 62 of the *Coleridge Bulletin* (2023).

² Frances Wilson, *Guilty Thing: A Life of Thomas De Quincey* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), 10.

³ Thomas De Quincey, ‘Confessions of an English Opium-Eater: The Original Version of 1822’, in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater, In Both the Revised and the Original Texts, With Its Sequels ‘Suspiria de Profundis’ and ‘The English Mail-Coach’*, ed. Malcolm Elwin (Macdonald, 1956), 420.

⁴ De Quincey, ‘Confessions’, 422.

⁵ David Anton Spurr, *Architecture and Modern Literature* (University of Michigan Press, 2003), 32.

by which the world of his sensorium alters itself seemingly *through* contemplation. He describes in the *Confessions* a dynamic process of visuospatial perception—charged by ‘the creative state of the eye’—whereby ‘Space swell[s]’ and yields proportions ‘so vast as the bodily eye is not fitted to receive’.⁶ Unsurprisingly, De Quincey attributes these visual effects to the influence of opium, which in his experience swells both space and time. Yet John Barrell also traces in his work the rhetorical influence of the discourse of the sublime, in particular the masculine sublime of Edmund Burke, with its ‘phallic grandeur’ counterpoised by fearful chasms and abysses.⁷ Indeed, the dominant or default emotion that Barrell isolates in De Quincey’s psychological makeup is terror, designated as ‘the ruling principle of the sublime’.⁸ The subjectivity that thus emerges in Barrell’s study is shaped even before the fateful ingestion of opium by ‘the *co-operation* of internal and external terrors, each disguised as the other . . . mak[ing] De Quincey’s world such a terrifying place’.⁹ However wretched the psychological reality of such a condition may appear to the reader, the mediating effects of De Quincey’s writing through which that terror is expressed (and indeed felt) are ironically fructifying insofar as they conjure the sublime and thus elevate the subject to positions of ecstatic wonder. Elizabeth Fay describes the vast (if unruly) theater of De Quincey’s imaginings as ‘mind-expanding’ and argues that they yield, even in their Piranesian complexity, ‘moments of transcendent vision and understanding’.¹⁰ Vastness is thus the space in which De Quincey has become memorialized, the space he inhabits and in which he articulates himself most distinctively, perhaps the only space sufficiently elastic to accommodate his flights of rhapsodic prose.

Even comparatively limited spatial geographies take on in De Quincey’s literary renderings a sense of the vast; they dilate, multiply by endless division, and register depths beyond depths. I mean here particularly the spaces of Asiatic alterity, some of them oneiric and some of them conceptual or metaphoric, spaces like the ‘narrow chambers at the heart of eternal pyramids’ or what De Quincey would later identify in his Opium War essays as the ‘massy concentration’ of the Chinese empire.¹¹ As Barrell points out, the oriental becomes a byword in De Quincey’s prose not so much for a region or a people as for a ‘process of endless multiplication’ whereby smallness unfolds under the scrutiny of the careful observer into a layered and labyrinthine expansiveness.¹² This is an echo of what Mohammed Hamdan characterizes as the oriental arabesque—namely, a configuration of space ‘in which objects become fluid and

⁶ De Quincey, ‘Confessions’, 419, 420.

⁷ John Barrell, *The Infection of Thomas De Quincey: A Psychopathology of Imperialism* (Yale University Press, 1991), 120.

⁸ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, edited by Adam Phillips (Oxford University Press, 1990), 54.

⁹ Barrell, *The Infection of Thomas De Quincey*, 187.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Fay, ‘Hallucinogenesis: Thomas De Quincey’s Mind Trips’, *Studies in Romanticism* 49.2 (2010): 295, 310 (293–312).

¹¹ De Quincey, ‘Confessions’, 426; Thomas De Quincey, ‘The Opium Question with China in 1840’, in *The Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. David Masson, vol. 14 (AMS Press, 1968), 180.

¹² Barrell, *The Infection of Thomas De Quincey*, 19.

relational, not absolute'.¹³ The arabesque thus functions as a counterpoint to the conventional sublime of magnitude and grandeur. Burke himself, notably, considers the power of such space (in an often overlooked addendum to his discussion of sublimity) as 'the infinite divisibility of matter'—the sense, in short, that the world within material reality, expanding unseen, is every bit as vast as that without.¹⁴ For De Quincey, these concentrated spaces tend to elicit fear rather than exaltation; they betray uncertainties about the stabilizing framework of Western epistemology; they disorient personally, socially, and politically, planting within his colonial imagination the seeds of what I have elsewhere described as 'sino-anginophobia'.¹⁵ Simply put, these spaces pull him down and under in what Barrell describes as his 'spiral' way of thinking, not up or out.¹⁶

The stairs and windows described in Wilson's biography of De Quincey, on the other hand, do rather different work. They gesture to what is yet above, beyond, and teasingly out of reach. We might in fact think of them as the aspirational elements of domestic architecture. For if a house, as Gaston Bachelard proposes in *The Poetics of Space*, is 'imagined as a vertical being . . . ris[ing] upward [out of the ground] . . . [and thus] appeal[ing] to our consciousness of verticality', then stairs and windows work cooperatively to facilitate our very motions or trajectories of ascent; they invite us to look up, to go up (perhaps even to *grow* up) by altering our perspective and allowing us to chart a path from here to there—a path whereon the egoic subject cannot but change.¹⁷ I find the work of Bachelard particularly helpful in coming to grips with certain qualities of De Quinceyan space that scholars have tended to pass over in their fascination with vastness. Like Wilson, we are unsure what to do with isolated snapshots of stairs and windows, especially when the more absorbing scenes of De Quincey's mindscape await, shifting as they do with the seamless fascination of a film. Cue for example the Easter Sunday dream, the way it sets Cumbrian valleys against towering Alpine mountains, with Middle Eastern domes and cupolas in the distance, all before dissolving, after an interval of vapours, into an English streetscape bathed in lamplight. This is the fluid geography of De Quincey's opium reveries, yet Bachelard's work reminds us that his forked existence also grounded itself in the fixed realities of domesticity. Commenting on a passage in Baudelaire's *Les Paradis Artificiels* where the author imagines De Quincey reading Kant in a Welsh cottage in mid-winter, Bachelard writes,

If I were asked to make an expert evaluation of the oneirism in De Quincey's cottage, as relived by Baudelaire, I should say that there lingers about it the insipid odor of opium, an atmosphere of drowsiness. But we

¹³ Mohammed Hamdan, 'The Gift of Drugs: Oriental Geographies and Decolonizing Space in Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*', *Janus Unbound: Journal of Critical Studies* 2.1 (2022): 63 (63–68).

¹⁴ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 66.

¹⁵ Markus Poetzsch, 'Fearful Spaces: Thomas De Quincey's Sino-Anginophobia', *English Studies in Canada* 41.2–3 (2015): 37 (27–42).

¹⁶ Barrell, *The Infection of Thomas De Quincey*, 21.

¹⁷ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Beacon Press, 1969), 17.

are told nothing about the strength of the walls, or the fortitude of the roof. The house puts up no struggle [against winter].¹⁸

The absence or lacuna that Bachelard identifies here, which he attributes to Baudelaire rather than De Quincey, has to do not only with the physicality of domestic space but also with its emotional resonance. Strong walls and a fortified roof protect against the elements, but they also nurture something within—something that gathers imperceptibly in the spaces of a home, on every level from cellar to garret, secreting itself in cupboards, drawers, chests and wardrobes. Bachelard calls it ‘felicitous space . . . [the] space that may be grasped, that may be defended against adverse forces, the space we love’.¹⁹

Felicitous space operates not so much in opposition as in counterbalance to the vastness of sublimity. As Bachelard suggests, ‘it concentrates being within limits that protect’ and thus grounds the sublime thrill-seeker in the dependable realities of *terra firma*.²⁰ Felicitous space is above all fruitful or fructifying, entwining in its adjectival form the Latin and Sanskrit roots of the verb ‘to suck’ or ‘suckle’. The felicitous, as such, is nurturing female space and in the life of Thomas De Quincey it had a name: Greenhay. This was the country house outside Manchester designed by his mother and built by his father that became De Quincey’s childhood home from 1791 until 1797.



Fig. 1. Greenhay: Early Abode of Thomas De Quincey
Courtesy of Manchester Libraries, Information and Archives, Image m31789

¹⁸ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 40.

¹⁹ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, xxxv.

²⁰ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, xxxvi.

Situated on a three-acre plot, with ample gardens and a stream running by the front gate, Greenhay was a substantial two-storied mansion that featured three tall chimneys, large principal rooms hung with Italian landscapes, a cavernous conservatory, and views of the surrounding fields from nearly every window. And it was, as I have suggested, predominantly female space—a 'female world', as Grevel Lindop points out—ruled by Thomas's mother, enlivened by his sisters Elizabeth and Mary, and ordered in its quotidian rhythms by an assortment of nursemaids.²¹ When De Quincey writes in *Suspiria de Profundis* that 'We, the children of the house, stood in fact upon the very happiest tier in the scaffolding of society', he had the architecture and the concentrated joys of Greenhay in mind.²²

The irony, of course, is that Greenhay was also the site of De Quincey's most poignant childhood loss and trauma. The sudden death of his beloved sister Elizabeth on June 2, 1792 had a bewildering and disorientating effect on the young De Quincey that bears little resemblance to the mature grief of someone like Wordsworth, who, in the aftermath of his brother John's passing, could claim with some consoling equanimity that 'A deep distress hath humanis'd my Soul'.²³ De Quincey, rather than registering the touch of distress as something metaphysical, proceeded to inhabit his trauma and the emotions it elicited. As Wilson puts it, 'he lived inside his sense of loss', which is another architectural metaphor, albeit one that calls into question the dependable solidity of walls and roof.²⁴ Felicitous space does not keep the common tragedies of human life at bay. As Bachelard reminds us, the felicitous is always already 'eulogized space', suggesting that its powers of attraction are tinged with and perhaps indivisible from experiences of ephemerality and loss.²⁵ In De Quincey's case, his loss and the consequent grief that he inhabits are themselves enclosed—secured, we might say—within the sheltering space of Greenhay. And it is that nexus of entwined and indwelling emotions that gives the account of his sister's death such extraordinary power.

The scene of De Quincey's final moments with Elizabeth as described in *Suspiria de Profundis* is central to Wilson's entire biographical framework and indeed familiar enough to most readers that one need not belabour its details—with the exception of certain architectural elements that, as I will suggest, make the experience both relatable and resonant. These qualities are important because, as Bachelard observes in explaining his phenomenology of the imagination, literary images and the compelling spaces they create have an essential 'transsubjectivity', which is to say that they have the power to 'react on other minds and in other hearts'.²⁶ Unique or unusual images, he suggests, invite

²¹ Grevel Lindop, *The Opium-Eater: A Life of Thomas De Quincey* (Taplinger, 1981), 6.

²² Thomas De Quincey, 'Suspiria de Profundis', in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater, In Both the Revised and the Original Texts, With Its Sequels 'Suspiria de Profundis' and 'The English Mail-Coach'*, ed. Malcolm Elwin (Macdonald, 1956), 457.

²³ William Wordsworth, 'Elegiac Stanzas, Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle, in a Storm, Painted by Sir George Beaumont', in *The Poems of William Wordsworth, Collected Reading Texts from the Cornell Wordsworth Series*, edited by Jared Curtis, vol. 1 (Humanities-Ebooks, 2011), 710.

²⁴ Wilson, *Guilty Thing*, 14.

²⁵ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, xxxv.

²⁶ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, xviii–xix.

the reader ‘to consider [the] image not as an object and even less as the substitute for an object, but to seize its specific reality’.²⁷ Certain images, in other words, take one beyond the precincts of conceptualization and directly to the felt reality—the tangible thingliness—of what is being represented. De Quincey’s work is full of unique and unusual images but the advantage of those centered on felicitous space is that they make it easier for the reader to enter into their reality, to participate in their unfolding. After all, the language of stairs and windows, walls and roof, is almost universal even if the human stories that these elements tell are so distinctive and particular.

De Quincey, interestingly, begins his account with a determined resistance to the act of recollection necessary for the images to coalesce. ‘I wish’, he writes, ‘not to recall the circumstances of that time, when *my* agony was at its height, and hers in another sense was approaching’.²⁸ The particular circumstances he alludes to here center on the moment of death itself, a moment, as he relates, ‘swallowed up in its own chaos’.²⁹ It is another metaphor of embodiment or, we might say, habitation, a dwelling inside of but again without secure or dependable boundaries—and above all without windows, for De Quincey in after-years cannot look in upon the experience and gather from it any clarity. One night, however, makes all the difference, for the next morning he resolves to see his sister again and that hoped-for reunion is narrated with an unswerving focus on the felicitous space of Greenhay that makes his ‘scheme’, as he calls it, possible.³⁰ One can almost imagine the young boy, after a miserably restless night or perhaps one in which sleep eventually fell upon him like a smothering weight, rousing himself the next day with a plan, a resolution, an eager, avid, upward look. Greenhay offered two avenues to satisfy his aspiration, two means of ascent to his sister’s bedroom: the grand staircase at the front of the house or the smaller servants’ staircase at the back. Eager to hide his grief, which, as he notes, ‘even in a child hates the light’, De Quincey takes the back staircase at noon, when the house is known to be quiet, and (in an echo of Wordsworth on Ullswater) he ‘steal[s]’ up the stairs undetected.³¹ This first phase of his scheme conveys so succinctly what Bachelard designates as ‘the heroism of stair climbing’—the exhilarating physicality of it, which sometimes expresses itself in taking two or three steps at a time, or, in De Quincey’s case, with a youthful lightness of foot that betrays no sound, an almost ghostly ascent that is (already) as much spiritual as physical.³² Stairs can raise us above the squalor of our fears and apprehensions and set us on the threshold of new possibilities. In De Quincey’s case, that threshold is the door of Elizabeth’s bedroom, ‘locked’, as he relates, ‘but [with] the key . . . not taken away’.³³ The sequencing of this sentence suggests that De Quincey probably tried the door before actually seeing

²⁷ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, xix.

²⁸ De Quincey, ‘*Suspiria de Profundis*’, 464.

²⁹ De Quincey, ‘*Suspiria de Profundis*’, 464.

³⁰ De Quincey, ‘*Suspiria de Profundis*’, 464.

³¹ De Quincey, ‘*Suspiria de Profundis*’, 465.

³² Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 27.

³³ De Quincey, ‘*Suspiria de Profundis*’, 465.

the key in the lock or hanging beside the door, that he experienced a momentary flash of horror and disappointment in finding his plan upended only for that flash to extinguish itself in a great outpouring of relief. Doors are like that; they are unpredictable, capricious portals, open one day and locked (as De Quincey will discover) the next. As such, they signal the illusory distinction between outside and inside, the way 'they are always ready to be reversed'.³⁴ This idea, which Barrell also addresses as a distinctively De Quinceyan feature of 'displacement', with one geography or environment suddenly giving way to another in a sequence of substitutions, is pregnant with possibilities that far exceed the scope of my paper, but perhaps it is enough to suggest that at the door of his sister's bedroom, this permeable barrier both locked and unlocked, closed and open, leading inside and out, De Quincey is already being prepared for the next conceptual dissolution, the absorption of the physical into the spiritual, the temporal into the eternal—with all that there is in both aspects to exacerbate his grief and to soothe it utterly.³⁵

Like the door that initially keeps him out only to admit him, the room is unexpected and surprising—in a word, felicitous. He enters expecting to see his sister on her bed but instead sees the window towards which the bed has been turned. It is presumably another small shock of disappointment that serves once again as a prelude to greater insight:

Nothing met my eyes but one large window open, through which the sun of midsummer at noonday was showering down torrents of splendour. The weather was dry, the sky was cloudless, the blue depths seemed the express types of infinity; and it was not possible for eye to behold or for heart to conceive any symbols more pathetic of life and the glory of life.³⁶

Whether it is the child or the reflecting adult in later years who is consoled by this scene and its 'symbols' seems inconsequential. When death is set directly beside 'the glory of life', it disappears from view—is already overcome, swallowed up. De Quincey, in a long digression that amplifies this rapturous moment and keeps him, as it were, from looking down at Elizabeth, roots the erasure of death in a series of scriptural associations that entangle the leafy warmth of Palm Sunday with the abyssal darkness of the crucifixion and the eventual 'ris[ing] of Christ' . . . on wings from the grave'.³⁷ The ultimate end of this sequence is inarguably consoling, yet De Quincey also reminds the reader that we do not always see comprehensively or reason while in command of all the facts. An isolated moment in this trajectory, like a glimpse of death before the resurrection, with 'the divine . . . swallowed up by the abyss', will appear all the more hope-destroying.³⁸ De Quincey himself registers the impact of that glimpse when he turns at last from the open window to the closed and 'frozen

³⁴ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 217–18.

³⁵ Barrell, *The Infection of Thomas De Quincey*, 8.

³⁶ De Quincey, 'Suspiria de Profundis', 465.

³⁷ De Quincey, 'Suspiria de Profundis', 467.

³⁸ De Quincey, 'Suspiria de Profundis', 467.

eyelids' of his sister—again, a portal—'the darkness seem[ing] to steal from beneath them'.³⁹ It is yet another keen disappointment of his expectations, this one the most harrowing of all, for he had been led to believe, as he notes, presumably by the nurse who first communicated to him the news of Elizabeth's death, 'that no features [of hers] had suffered any change'.⁴⁰ 'But so it was *no!*' is the short, stuttering sentence that follows, an acknowledgment of betrayal, a final rupture of that veil of euphemisms and lies to which the grieving child is subject.⁴¹

We might expect this to be the end, but in a narrative that is 'part-memory, part-midsummer daydream, part opium reverie', it is the felicitous, not the abject, that prevails.⁴² From within the nurturing enclosure of Greenhay, from the sanctum of Elizabeth's bedchamber, from the very locus of grief itself—the mind of a child coming to grips with mortality—another vision is born, another aspirational ascent, this one not on stairs but on their metaphysical equivalent, 'billows' running up to 'the zenith of the far blue sky', with De Quincey, cherub-like, rising up in quest of God's throne.⁴³ The temptation for generations of readers has been to assign a psychological rationale to this 'flight and pursuit', as De Quincey designates it, yet Bachelard reminds us that 'psychoanalysis', for all its investment in oneiric dream-spaces (stairs, in particular), 'has paid little attention to the complexity of mixed reverie and memory'.⁴⁴ Poetic daydreams, such as De Quincey's, 'confer[] upon our intimate moments an activity that is poly-symbolic'—which is not quite to say that they are impenetrable but the accretion or concatenation of symbolic meanings, like a palimpsest constantly receiving new marks while recovering the old, takes on the very quality of De Quincey's ascent: it can seem 'to go on for ever and ever'.⁴⁵ One way to address the quandary of poly-symbolism is to take guidance from De Quincey himself in returning to what is yet dependably clear and secure in this welter of experience. As he writes in closing his account, 'slowly I recovered my self-possession, and found myself standing, as before, close to my sister's bed'.⁴⁶ This calm, almost serene reawakening in and reattunement to the felicitous is rightly framed as a discovery; the boy *finds himself* standing beside his sister, his 'being', in the words of Bachelard, again 'concentrate[d] . . . within limits that protect', not obliterated, as before, by the 'thunderbolt' of grief or sublimated by its 'rapture', but reconstituted in the ordinariness of the domestic.⁴⁷ If we bear in the mind the feminine character of felicitous space, we might even cast his return to 'self-possession' as a rebirth, a coming into existence anew, having been made fit by death to enter into life.

³⁹ De Quincey, 'Suspria de Profundis', 467.

⁴⁰ De Quincey, 'Suspria de Profundis', 467.

⁴¹ De Quincey, 'Suspria de Profundis', 467.

⁴² Wilson, *Guilty Thing*, 15.

⁴³ De Quincey, 'Suspria de Profundis', 468.

⁴⁴ De Quincey, 'Suspria de Profundis', 468; Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 26.

⁴⁵ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 26; De Quincey, 'Suspria de Profundis', 468.

⁴⁶ De Quincey, 'Suspria de Profundis', 468.

⁴⁷ De Quincey, 'Suspria de Profundis', 464, 468.