Literature and Intoxication
Also by Russell Williams

Autour de l’extrême littéraire (co-edited with Alastair Hemmens)
Literature and Intoxication

Writing, Politics and the Experience of Excess

Edited by

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Thomas De Quincey first bought opium from a druggist on Oxford Street on a Sunday afternoon in early October in 1804. He had been suffering the agonies of toothache for about three weeks and on the advice of a friend bought a tincture of opium for the pain. The analgesic effect of the drug was the least important part of what happened next. ‘That my pains had vanished was now a trifle in my eye,’ he wrote. ‘In an hour, here was the secret of happiness, bought for a penny and carried in the waistcoat pocket.’

Amongst the most popular named brands available to De Quincey were Kendal Black Drop, Godfrey’s Cordial, Dover’s Powder, Dalby’s Carminative, McMunn’s Elixir, Batley’s Sedative Solution and Mother Bailey’s Quieting Syrup. Sticks of raw opium were also available. It was sold everywhere – as well as chemists and pharmacists, it was on offer in bakers, grocers, pubs, tailors and hawked by rent collectors and street vendors. By the time that De Quincey took the drug, morphine had already been isolated as the active ingredient in opium. In the 1850s, with the invention of the hypodermic syringe, the ‘morphia solution’ became common in medicine and for relaxation at home. This was the precursor to the twentieth-century heroin habit.

By the end of the nineteenth century opium had appeared in all the major literature of the period – in George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Elizabeth Gaskell, Bram Stoker, Wilkie Collins, Oscar Wilde. Best of all – as usual – is Dickens, who describes opium dens in the East End in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* and who, in *The Pickwick Papers*, has Sam Weller declare: ‘There’s nothin’ so refreshin’ as sleep, sir, as the servant-girl said afore she drank the egg-cupful of laudanum.’

For De Quincey the most important aspect of the effect of opium was the way in which it enhanced reality rather than, as was the case with alcohol, obliterating it. Opium gave him at once a distance from the world, and allowed him to wander through cities, cultivating a deliberate alienation. In Everton, a suburb of Liverpool, he gave himself a dose of laudanum and spent nights gazing out at the point where the River Mersey meets the sea. ‘I shall be charged
with mysticism,’ he wrote, describing ‘the great town’ of Liverpool ‘as representing the earth, with its sorrows left behind, yet not out of sight, nor wholly forgotten’. Opium ‘transfigured all into harmony’.

For obvious reasons De Quincey is regarded as the father of the modern literature of intoxication. This includes all literature which has at its core a preoccupation with the state of intoxication. Of course the drugs do matter: alcohol is not the same as opium, heroin is not the same as skunk weed, acid is not the same as cocaine, and so on.

There is then, as we read artists and writers who have been intoxicated, a pathology at work. It is debatable whether drugs do make writers more creative, but what is certain is that the work has to be, or have been, shaped by the influence of the drug on the body and mind. The literature of intoxication is then inseparable from the still nascent science of neurology. It is the endless interplay between the drug and the mind which creates the art.

You can hear this two-fold process at work in the 1967 song ‘Heroin’ by the Velvet Underground. In this piece of music the central droning effect of viola, guitar and feedback rises and falls, rising to a crescendo and almost chaos before falling back into the same two-chord drone. Ultimately, the music goes nowhere; there is no key change, no harmony, and no resolution. This was achieved with two simple effects. Firstly the viola played by John Cale had guitar strings and mandolin strings, both of them tightly wound. Cale played one droning note, adjusting the speed, attack and power of the sound by varying the notes. The guitar that Lou Reed played matched Cale’s intensity: Reed tuned all the strings to the same note, giving a dense, sheet-metal effect to the sound. The producer of the track Norman Dolph, who was more accustomed to folk and rhythm and blues, recalled his shock at the sound they were producing, comparing it, as did Cale, to the sound of an aeroplane engine. He was also shocked when he heard Lou Reed sing the lyrics to the track: it was clear that this was not just a song about heroin but actually drawn from first-hand experience.

The Velvet Underground knew very well what they were doing when they put this piece together. Some of the members of the group (Cale and an early drummer called Angus Maclise) had already been involved with the sound experiments of the minimalist composer La Monte Young, who was known for his use of long tones and very high volume and distortion. A piece from 1964, called ‘Pre-Tortoise
Dream Music’ (which almost certainly featured Cale) sounds very like ‘Heroin’, with its unwavering drone. La Monte Young had a belief that his music could create altered states, and this technique was meant to induce a mental space for mysticism and revelation. The Velvet Underground borrowed Young’s technique but their intent was the opposite: they set out to create an aural landscape that told the listener what it felt like to be on heroin – claustrophobic, suicidal, ecstatic, obsessive, all in the same song.

‘We wanted to hypnotize the audience’, explained John Cale, ‘we thought that the solution to everything lay in providing hard drugs for everyone.’ This was also the philosophy of William S. Burroughs whose book Naked Lunch (1959) made heroin the defining point of his work. In his first book Junky (1954) Burroughs gave an account of how he came to be a heroin addict. He was not a victim of poverty or social misfortune – he was educated at Harvard and born into a family fortune – but chose to become an addict as a form of existential revolt. To be a junky, as Burroughs describes it, was like being a secret agent, working undercover to oppose all social systems of control, replacing slavery to false social values with the purity of addiction to a drug.

This is a deliberately deviant position. The long-term use of heroin is inseparable from addiction and it is indeed the addiction to the drug which changes the brain function of the user as much as the initial rush of euphoria experienced during the initial honeymoon period. There is still relatively little known about the science of addiction, but what is clear to the addict is that when the drug is taken away after a prolonged period of use the body goes into crisis. This usually happens about twelve hours after the last shot and takes the form of fevers, cramps, flu-like symptoms, vomiting, anxiety, diarrhoea. The symptoms fade away after four to eight days but the craving remains. It is as if the brain retains an imprint of the delicious pleasures that heroin provides to the mind and body. This is why Burroughs frequently compares heroin cravings to lust, love and romance. This perverse memory of the love affair with heroin is inscribed into all of his work.

It is addiction which shapes the style and content of Naked Lunch. The best way to read the book is as a series of sketches or skits written as the author was grappling with heroin withdrawal and possible insanity in Tangier. There is, as Burroughs put it, ‘no real plot, no
beginning, no ending’. From this point of view, *Naked Lunch* is not really a novel at all but rather a compendium of nightmares. The book begins with the breathless voice of a junky on the run: ‘I can feel the heat closing in, feel them out there making their moves, setting up their devil doll stool pigeons’. There then follows a whirlwind of disconnected scenes, all of them obscene, funny and appalling. A recurring motif in the North African dystopia called ‘Interzone’, where most of the book is set, is one of scenes of hanged men, their erect penises ejaculating at the point of death.

You don’t have to take heroin to get Burroughs – his work is mostly a kind of frightening science-fiction – but he himself had to take heroin to get deeper into his own fears and his own obsessions. He famously disdained any belief in the unconscious mind whilst bringing it all to the surface in his fictions. He has his literary heirs (Denis Johnson, J.G. Ballard, Will Self), but has also had a massive extra-literary impact. From David Bowie to Kurt Cobain, from David Lynch to Gus Van Sant, it is impossible to imagine modernity without the language that Burroughs invented to describe a world of grotesquerie forged in the heroin experience.

He ended his career not as a writer but as a painter. He was obsessed with guns as well as drugs. In 1951 Burroughs had shot and killed his wife, Joan Vollmer, during a drunken game. He described this horrific incident as the event that turned him into a writer – remorse, pain and self-hatred are all played out in his writing. Towards the end of his life he would make paintings by shooting at cans of spray paint suspended over a canvas. The act of shooting was related to the act of shooting-up; in both cases, Burroughs claimed the results, either of a shot of heroin, or of a shot at a target, as a terrifying but also deeply creative act.

Inspired by De Quincey, the novelist Anna Kavan took up heroin in the 1920s, when she herself was in her twenties. She described her syringe as her ‘bazooka’. When, in 1968, she died at home with a syringe in her arm, the policeman who found her said that she had enough heroin in stock ‘to kill the whole street’. Kavan could be funny, friendly, welcoming – she enjoyed pubs, gambling and sex. But she also thought of herself as ‘post-human’ and a ‘stranger on earth’. Kavan’s London, depicted in her paintings and the nightmarish prose of her books, can be every bit as grotesque as the dreamscapes of William Burroughs.
She is also the ancestor of every other English heroin user since then – from the writers Mary Butts and Will Self, to the musicians Keith Richards and Lee Mavers, the photographer Michael Cooper, artists Sebastian Horsley, and others – for whom taking heroin was a choice. To this extent they all belong to the visionary tradition of English Romanticism. And this really is the point of hard drugs: it begins with De Quincey and the unleashing of a transcendental subjectivity which breaks with the classical tradition and gives birth to a new form of modernity, defined by what Wordsworth called the ‘inward gaze’.

In this foreword I have obviously privileged the use of opiates and especially heroin, partly because this family of drugs is still seen as the most taboo. It is still the most powerful chemical force that an artist can reckon with; a direct existential challenge. You can see this in the life and work of Mick Head, a songwriter from Birkenhead whose album *The Magical World of the Strands* is a beautiful and delicate homage to heroin. He has often been described by critics on both sides of the Atlantic as one of the great ‘lost’ musicians of his generation; his critical stock has always been high but his career has mostly been a disaster. In conversation, Head has recalled that he wanted to be a poet in the lineage of De Quincey and Coleridge. He says that he can remember the precise moment when he decided to start taking heroin. ‘I was looking out of a window in London,’ he says without emotion, ‘and I saw two bottle banks outside. One said “brown” and one said “clear”. I chose “brown”’.

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