Thomas De Quincey and the Cognitive Unconscious

Markus Iseli

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Abbreviations

Thomas De Quincey

'A'	'Appendix' to the *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1822). Ed. Grevel Lindop. *WTDQ*. Vol. 2. 80–87.
'AM'	'Animal Magnetism' (1834). Eds. Grevel Lindop, Robert Morrison, and Barry Symonds. *WTDQ*. Vol. 9. 358–79.
C	*Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821). Ed. Grevel Lindop. *WTDQ*. Vol. 2. 1–76.
'K'	'On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth' (1823). Ed. Frederick Burwick. *WTDQ*. Vol. 3. 150–54.
Life	Japp, Alexander Hay, ed. *Thomas De Quincey: His Life and Writings*. London: Hogg, 1890.
Memorials	Japp, Alexander Hay, ed. *De Quincey Memorials*. London: Heinemann, 1891.
S	*Suspiria de Profundis* (1845). Ed. Frederick Burwick. *WTDQ*. Vol. 15. 126–204.
'Sketches'	'Sketches of Life and Manners; from the Autobiography of an English Opium-Eater' (1834–38). Ed. Alina Clej. *WTDQ*. Vol. 10. 3–233.
'Style'	'Style [No. I–IV]' (1840–41). Ed. Grevel Lindop. *WTDQ*. Vol. 12. 3–84.
WTDQ	*The Works of Thomas De Quincey*. Gen. ed. Grevel Lindop. 21 vols. London: Pickering and Chatto, 2000–03.

Introduction

> The fact that only few spots on the great *map* of our mind are *illuminated*, can inspire us with admiration about our own nature.[1]
>
> Immanuel Kant
> *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*

Having lunch with a senior academic a few years ago, I briefly explained my project. Upon hearing that I was working on a nineteenth-century author's notion of the unconscious, she interjected in anticipatory conclusion that my approach must be philosophical, and that I must be applying Freud's psychoanalytical theories. Her comment nicely illustrates two points that are relevant in contrast to my work. First, it shows how common it still is to think about the unconscious in exclusively psychoanalytic terms, which is lamentable. Second, psychoanalysis was as a matter of course portrayed as a philosophical concept of mind, which in turn is reassuring. The point is that Freud's theories often are still considered to be psychological tools – in the scientific sense – to understand the mind. They are, however, indeed more philosophical than scientific constructs. Taking this as my point of departure, the aim of my research is to show what science has to tell us about the unconscious, how it can help us to understand literature,

and how literature partakes in scientific discourses. So I tried my best to explain to my lunchtime collocutor that I am not approaching De Quincey from a philosophical but from a scientific perspective, and that my tool is not psychoanalysis but cognitive science, which she then accepted with the hesitation and scepticism that such approaches at times still foster in the humanities.

Despite its waning relevance in the scientific discourse since the 1970s, the psychoanalytic concept of the repressive and instinct driven unconscious as it was postulated by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and significantly adapted and expanded by Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961), Alfred Adler (1870–1937), and Jacques Lacan (1901–1981), is still the most readily available understanding of the unconscious today to the general public, in popular culture, and in the humanities, in particular literary criticism. A lack of an alternative theory, together with psychoanalysis' rather literal sex appeal due to its ability to answer the question of our innermost secrets and its tantalizing comprehensiveness have allowed psychoanalysis to pervade our thought and culture. The frequent capitalisation of *unconscious* or the italics used for the definite article to refer to the Freudian concept indicate the hegemony this theory has exerted, which also underlies many histories of the unconscious.

Most historical accounts of unconscious mentation are teleological. They purpose to trace the historical line that finally and logically leads to the wisdom of the grand master, Freud's psychoanalysis. Some titles indicate this endpoint more or less overtly: *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry* (Ellenberger, 1970), *The Unconscious before Freud* (Whyte, 1979), *'Dieses wahre innere Afrika': Texte zur Entdeckung des Unbewußten vor Freud* (Lütkehaus, 1989).[2] Robert Maniquis thinks that, due to their teleological orientation, these works are 'not of much help' ('Dark' 136n3). I argue that they are nevertheless useful for an investigation that seeks to unravel the history of the unconscious; they point the reader to discourses, authors, and texts that dealt with the unconscious before it became a generally acknowledged idea. However, in their ideological

endeavour, these authors' perspectives are often biased by the assumption that any mention of the unconscious conforms to or at least foreshadows what Freud began to theorize at the end of the nineteenth century. More recent work that engages with historical notions of the unconscious is more carefully balanced in this respect. Elke Völmicke, for example, is aware of this problem in her *Das Unbewußte im Deutschen Idealismus* (2005).[3] She argues that the hunt for 'psychoanalytical seeds' (11) distorts a historical analysis because it predefines the meaning of the subject under discussion.[4] Similarly Angus Nicholls and Martin Liebscher draw attention to this issue in the introduction to their recent collection of essays *Thinking the Unconscious: Nineteenth-Century German Thought* (2010). My argument is based on the same scepticism in regard to such a teleological understanding of the unconscious and the almost unquestioned authority of psychoanalysis.

The Romantic Unconscious?

De Quincey lived in a time of radical change concerning the notion of subjectivity, consciousness, and the unconscious. This discourse was taking place in literature, philosophy and science. Jean-Jacques Rousseau is considered one of the most influential writers in terms of a new 'subjectivism of modern moral understanding' (Taylor, *Sources* 361) during the Romantic period. Due to his writings a more internal apprehension of the individual became the norm. The two most influential philosophers who discussed the problem of the unconscious before it became more generally acknowledged, were Gottfried Willhelm von Leibniz and Immanuel Kant, who opposed John Locke's scepticism about the existence of mental processes that elude awareness.[5] Around the same time, science and in particular physiology provided a functional map of the nervous system and the brain that suggested an active and unconsciously operating mind. While literature and philosophy have been widely accepted as major influences on Romantic thought, it is necessary to emphasize that the 'scientific culture' no less 'seeped readily into the philosophical and literary discourses of the age' (Richardson, 'Unconscious'

350). These three strands contributed to the emerging notion of the unconscious, which became one of the major topoi in Romantic literature.

This more acute awareness of the individual and the questionings about the formation of the self, which were arising and needed answers, have long been considered a vital aspect of Romantic literature. Georges Poulet notes that 'Romanticism is first of all a rediscovery of the mysteries of the world, a more vivid sentiment of the wonders of nature, a more acute consciousness of the enigmas of the self' (3). Around the same time as Poulet, Morse Peckham argues that with this heightened awareness of the self, the idea of an unconscious mental realm developed. He lists 'the unconscious mind' as a 'profoundly important idea' (13) to any theory of Romanticism. In his view, 'Romantic subjectivism, the artist watching his powers develop and novelty emerging from his unconscious mind' (14) is central to this literary movement. In other words, 'truth can only be apprehended intuitively, imaginatively, spontaneously, with the whole personality, from the deep sources of the fountains that are within' (13). Romantic thought has become indelibly linked with these ideas and is generally conceived of as the birthplace of a more acute sense of the self and the notion of an unconscious mental realm. Charles Taylor argues that identity moved away from the notion of providence and away from a Cartesian sense of selfhood. His notion of 'expressivism' challenges the primacy of reason and emphasizes the creative faculty, leaving room for an 'inner impulse of nature' (*Sources* 411). Similarly, Henri F. Ellenberger locates an 'interest … for all manifestations of the unconscious' (200) during the Romantic period, and Catherine Belsey adds that 'in some of the texts of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries … the unconscious is *for the first time* produced in discourse' (58).

In keeping with these claims concerning the Romantic movement in literature, critics have established the relevance of the unconscious in De Quincey, who was involved in the same endeavour of self-analysis and disclosure of the unconscious as other Romantic writers, most notably his early idols William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Like Coleridge and

Wordsworth, De Quincey was interested in psychological issues such as memory, the effects of opium on mentation, dreams, different states of consciousness, and, of course, the unconscious. Jonathan Bate argues that 'De Quincey's most characteristic work represents an extension and intensification of the Wordsworthian and Coleridgean quest into the dark inward "hiding places" of the imagination' (137). Similarly, Jonathan Wordsworth writes that 'Few writers have been more preoccupied by the inner depths of the mind than De Quincey and Wordsworth' (228). '[B]oth would agree', he continues, 'that the power was dark, unaccountable in its working' and 'both have the wish to track the power of association back to its source' (231). De Quincey, Wordsworth, and Coleridge shared similar views about the hidden processes of the mind and tried to trace the interior sources of memories, feelings and emotions.

This said, the critical reception of the Romantic notion of the unconscious is steeped in psychoanalysis. On the one hand, Romantic authors are analysed through a psychoanalytic lens and, on the other hand, they are viewed as forerunners of Freudian ideas. Ellenberger, for example, believes that 'many of the concepts that are considered characteristic of Freud's psychoanalysis and Jung's analytic psychology permeated the work of Romantic psychiatrists' (887). The section entitled 'Models of the Mind: The Romantic Unconscious' in Joel Black's essay 'Scientific Models' is representative of this psychoanalytical approach towards Romantic literature. He generally asserts that 'during the Romantic period … the role and range of unconscious operations in human life and artistic creation became widely recognized' (130) and that 'the most significant human science inaugurated by Romantic writers may well have been psychology' (129). It is clear from his examples and the numerous references to Freud, Jung, and Lacan that he specifically has psychoanalysis in mind when he refers to 'psychology' (129) and to 'the mind's dark side' (130). Black finally states explicitly that 'Some of the most striking insights into the unconscious that were later developed in psychoanalytic theory can be found in the Romantics' imaginative writings' (132). Black also points out that Romantic

authors served as examples to the founders of psychoanalysis. All three analysts named above refer to Romantic texts in order to prove or exemplify the validity of their theories. While this is certainly true, it is a false conclusion to take it as a confirmation that the work of authors such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, and De Quincey is representative of psychoanalytic theories.

De Quincey is a prime example for this attribution of Freudian elements. His notion of the unconscious has received abundant attention from literary scholars, mostly in Freudian terms. In fact, his works (and De Quincey himself) have so often been psychoanalysed, as it were, that one could easily think that there is not much left to say about his dreams and his notion of the unconscious. His childhood, the relationship to his sister and his mother, his memories, and his dreams have frequently been pathologized. The focus on psychoanalytical moments in De Quincey's oeuvre, in particular the *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821, rev. 1856) and *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845), is arguably due to two main factors. First, his writing lends itself to psychoanalytical readings because his opium addiction distorted out of measure everything that was happening in his mind, which renders his childhood memories abnormal in a way. Second, the relevance he attributes to his childhood experience in terms of personal development, as well as his abundant dream narratives, chime with Freudian themes. De Quincey has been considered a forerunner of Freud for decades now. Charles L. Proudfit provides one of the earliest detailed accounts of the similarities between their writings. In 'Thomas De Quincey and Sigmund Freud: Sons, Fathers, Dreamers – Precursors of Psychoanalytic Developmental Psychology' (1985), he argues that De Quincey is 'among the important contributors to the knowledge of human psychology in the light of contemporary psychoanalytic understanding of dreams and early childhood development' (88–89). After tracing analogies between the lives of the opium-eater and the founder of psychoanalysis, Proudfit considers similarities of thought in their notions of the impossibility of forgetting, the ongoing influence of developmental stages in childhood, and, of course, dreams.

This idea of De Quincey being a precursor of Freud has

become a commonplace. David Ellis argues, for example, that De Quincey's description how forgotten incidents of his childhood are revived in dreams, 'take[s] us straight into the early world of Freudian analysis' in that it 'allude[s] to the phenomenon of repression (why is it that De Quincey could not remember these incidents when he was awake?), and at least glance[s] at the famous problem of how we can possibly be asked to remember, for therapeutic purposes, episodes of which we were unaware when they took place' (xvi).[6] Commenting on the same passage, Daniel O'Quinn comments that De Quincey's explanation 'resonates which [sic] Freud's theorization of trauma in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" ' (O'Quinn). Similarly, Barry Milligan believes that De Quincey 'anticipated some of the most influential insights of Sigmund Freud, who argued several generations later that recurrent patterns in dreams originate in unresolved conflicts from the individual's early development' (*Confessions* xviii). Finally, Frederick Burwick argues along the same line that in *Suspiria*, De Quincey uses a similar model as Freud's gatekeeper, which represses ideas and stops them from moving from the id to the ego: 'De Quincey … becomes dedicated to exposing the selves lurking in the shadows beyond the light of waking consciousness, the keepers of memories that he has ceased consciously to remember, of fears or desires that his conscious mind cannot, or will not, admit' (*Knowledge* 18). These extracts show that De Quincey's observations on memories and dreams have often been associated with psychoanalysis and have been considered as early instances of Freudian theories.

Joel Faflak adds a more thorough and more radical discussion of De Quincey in the light of psychoanalysis in his recent study *Romantic Psychoanalysis: The Burden of the Mystery* (2008). Arguing that criticism is always 'implicitly psychoanalytical, always engaged in the (im)possible task of remembering, repeating, and working through to some understanding of a past' (5), he endeavours to provide 'a psychological history of psychoanalysis as it emerges in Romanticism' (4) unrelated to the historical, scientific, and cultural background of the time. Faflak reads De Quincey's (as well as Wordsworth's, Coleridge's, and Keats's) work as

instances of psychoanalysis (not theories of the unconscious), the search for the traumatic instantiation of identity. The dream section of the *Confessions*, for example, is a case of 'narrative free-association' in Faflak's view, who supports his argument with De Quincey's explanatory note saying that he jotted down these dreams as they came to his mind without channelling them in any way.[7] De Quincey is eventually not able to '*theorize* the unconscious' but 'remains the unwilling spectator of its determinism' (164). *Suspiria* also 'resituates the dream, the unconscious, repetition, trauma and the primal scene within an aesthetic metapsychology, an interpretation of dreams … that is literary and aesthetic rather than scientific' (174). 'The telling of the unconscious' Faflak argues, 'becomes the alpha and the omega of his project in a way that De Quincey does not entirely anticipate' (168). The *Confessions* and *Suspiria* are thus considered De Quincey's own talking-cure, which eventually fails because he cannot overcome the separation between analyst and analysand.

In another strand of psychoanalytic criticism De Quincey is put on the couch and psychoanalysed. The main target of this approach is the recurrence of his sister Elizabeth's death and the loss of other young female figures, such as Catharine Wordsworth and Ann of Oxford Street, in his writings. The insistence with which memories of them return in the *Confessions* and *Suspiria* supposedly reveals De Quincey's repressed sexual and incestuous desires and his guilt, which latently manifest themselves in his dreams. Charles Rzepka, for example, argues that 'Young Thomas's guilt and fear', described in the scene of his intrusion into the room where Elizabeth is lying on her deathbed, 'seem clearly related to what Freud would call the child's "latent" desire for sexual possession of the mother-surrogate'. The kiss at the end of this scene 'then, seems to be motivated by the desire to take sexual possession of the girl' (*Sacramental* 117). Melissa Knox finds such sexual and incestuous allusions everywhere. Like Rzepka, she argues that they stem from the conflict produced by 'his feelings for his mother and sister' (317). The 'worm' that is 'gnawing' at De Quincey's 'heart' (*S*, 145) after he sneaked into the bedchamber

with his dead sister represents 'an image of an excited phallus' (318). Knox further suggests that – in allusion to 'The Daughter of Lebanon', in which the evangelist touches the head of a young prostitute – De Quincey 'may have wanted to touch' Elizabeth's head. It 'is not inconceivable' she continues unerringly, 'that such a conscious desire could have fronted an unconscious wish to touch her genitals, the "head" indicating a displacement upwards' (323). In the same hypothetical and oblique way, De Quincey's description of his problems sleeping when he and a young orphaned girl found shelter in a lawyer's house in London supposedly contains implicit sexual content. Such Freudian readings are often led by conjectures and assumptions, as is the Freudian interpretation of dreams.

John Barrell's *The Infection of Thomas De Quincey: A Psychopathology of Imperialism* (1991) has been the most influential reading of De Quincey from a psychoanalytic perspective. He also explores De Quincey's writings from the viewpoint of his sister's death, which he considers as a Freudian primal scene, 'with this crucial difference, that it is the body of the dead Elizabeth or her surrogates which seems to occupy the mother's sexual place' (35). Barrell argues that a vast range of De Quincey's oeuvre – not only his autobiographical writings but also his fiction, as well as the historical, political, and scientific essays – contain 'developments and mutations of two related stories … concerning the death of Elizabeth' (87). The author's inability to save Elizabeth from death and an incestuous desire for her fill his writing with guilt. In his reconstruction of De Quincey's 'myth of his own childhood' Barrell distinguishes 'narratives of trauma and narratives of reparation' (22), though the latter are never successful. In a historicist fashion, he then extends this source of De Quincey's guilt and anxieties to the power structures of society and the imperialist attitude towards the Orient to depict a psychobiography full of repressed guilt, anxieties, racial paranoia, violence, and incestuous desires.

While some similarities between De Quincey's and Freud's works doubtlessly exist, the explanations of the phenomena they share do not always overlap in such a crystal clear way as psychoanalytic criticism suggests. Reading De Quincey, I

realized that pathological states are not as widely sown as they have been harvested by critics and that, on the contrary, he has a lot to say about the way the mind works in terms of information processing rather than repression, displacement, or trauma. More recently, critics have drawn attention to the flaws and short-sightedness of Freudian readings. Daniel Sanjiv Roberts regrets that psychoanalysis persists in De Quincey criticism because 'attempts to pathologize De Quincey as an incest-ridden or paedophilic writer … tend only to distance his work from those of his contemporaries' ('Mix(ing)' 36). Similarly, Megan Vaughan observes that 'those working with psychoanalytic theory often have ready-made answers for many of the questions we might like to ask … and run the risk of closing off as much as they illuminate' (54).[8] The focus on psychoanalysis in criticism over several decades, in my view, has prevented literary analysis from advancing to more sound psychological readings of De Quincey. Frank Tallis's assertion that the 'upper mind was considered rational while the lower mind was considered irrational' (11) by the opium-eater and his contemporaries reflects the ruling assumption of psychoanalytic critics, which is restrictive if not plainly wrong. De Quincey's 1845 lament, in his role as a literary critic, that 'we must have a good psychology; whereas, at present, we have none at all' (*WTDQ* 15: 224) is of concern to the literary critic today. De Quincey's time provided 'a good psychology' and he applied it in his discussion of Wordsworth's poetry. Similarly, we have such 'a good psychology' available today and we would do well to use it.

The Cognitive Unconscious and Cognitive Historicism

This 'good psychology' has its beginning in the cognitive revolution, which has strongly and unchangeably affected the way in which we conceive of the brain and the mind. Amongst many other things, the cognitive revolution has changed the discourse about the unconscious. Today, psychologists are looking for alternative routes to investigate that mental realm, which seemed unapproachable by experimental psychology for such a long time. George A. Miller, who was influential in

bringing cognitive research into psychology, remembers that before psychology could take part in the cognitive revolution, it had to be freed from the shackles of behaviourism, which denied the mind and hence the unconscious in general. In 1913, John B. Watson wrote in his behaviourism manifesto that the 'consideration of the mind-body problem affects neither the type of problem selected nor the formulation of the solution of that problem' and further urged 'never [to] use the terms consciousness, mental states, mind, content, introspectively verifiable, imagery, and the like' (166). He defined psychology as the study of behaviour and could therefore eliminate states of mind as the objects of investigation. As James S. Uleman puts it in the introduction to the collection of essays *The New Unconscious*, behaviourists were 'avoiding analyses of internal processes altogether and treating the mind in some ways as a black box' (5). In other words, 'consciousness was non-existent, epiphenomenal, or irrelevant to behavior' (Kihlstrom, 'Cognitive' 1445). Accordingly, Miller describes the 'cognitive revolution in psychology' as 'a counter-revolution' that sought to bring 'cognition' and 'the mind back into experimental psychology' (141). Thanks to advances in the various fields of cognitive science, psychologists have found new ways to conceptualize the mind and later the unconscious.

After decades during which behaviourism ruled psychological research, the major paradigm shift brought about by the cognitive revolution thus created renewed interest in the unconscious mental activities outside the field of psychoanalysis. The unconscious today is no longer reduced to a source of pathological contents, but has the status of an active and positively productive mental realm. Scientists still have a long way before explaining all the mental processes of which one is not aware, not to mention those of which one actually is aware. However, important steps have been taken to move on from the behaviourist denial and the misleading psychoanalytic notion of unconscious mentation to a more sound scientific analysis of the mind. This new cognitive notion of the unconscious has developed from a 'marginal theme' to a 'legitimate and important object of research' (Mies 204). Relevant for this study is that it enabled the conception of the

unconscious as something very different than what Freud led us to believe for over a century.

The beginning of the new, non-Freudian unconscious dates back to 1987, when John F. Kihlstrom published the seminal essay, 'The Cognitive Unconscious'. For the first time, research from different areas within cognitive psychology was gathered and evaluated in order to explain what is now variously called the cognitive, psychological, productive, or the new unconscious.[9] Kihlstrom's first definition of this concept proposes 'mental structures and processes that, operating outside phenomenal awareness, nevertheless influence conscious experience, thought, and action' (1445). The main feature of the cognitive unconscious – which also is the capital difference from the psychoanalytic – is the productive nature of unconscious contents and processes; in this view consciousness, though still an important aspect of the human personality, 'is not necessary for complex psychological functioning' (1450). Kihlstrom's theory has since been adopted and elaborated by many scientists. Uleman states that 'Unconscious processes seem to be capable of doing many things that were, not so long ago, thought of as requiring mental resources and conscious processes' (3). Perrig, Wippich, and Perrig-Chiello more specifically maintain that unconscious mentation plays a crucial role 'in each form of information processing, which includes so-called higher forms of dealing with the external and the internal world (such as thought, imagination, and memory)' (218).[10] Scott Barry Kaufman more emphatically asserts that a 'great deal of research has demonstrated the sophisticated and intelligent nature of the cognitive unconscious' (444). In a nutshell, for Freud the unconscious is an abyss, for the cognitive psychologist it is a well.[11]

Although many unresolved questions remain regarding the unconscious, it has switched positions with consciousness. The latter used to be taken for granted from the moment philosophers began to ponder these questions, whereas over the former always loomed a big question mark. The great split occurred with Descartes, who thought that nothing could exist outside of consciousness. The concept of the unconscious was

for him wholly inconceivable. Even when it had gained acknowledgment in psychological circles and become a common idea in popular culture, the unconscious, even that of Freud, was still a mystery to solve in comparison to consciousness, which in turn was simply taken for granted. Today, neuroscientists assume that similar brain activities take place in conscious and unconscious mental processes; the brain is active even when that activity is not consciously registered. Even scientists of consciousness, such as Antonio Damasio, admit that the largest part of mental activity consists of 'nonconscious, internal and unrevealed' processes and consciousness only is a 'narrow window' (177). Damasio defines all contents within the 'dispositional space' as implicit: 'The *dispositional* space is that in which dispositions hold the knowledge base as well as the devices for the reconstruction of that knowledge in recall. It is the source of images in the process of imagination and reasoning and is also used to generate movement' (143). Dispositions are 'abstract records of potentialities': 'Our memories of things, of properties of things, of people and places, of events and relationships, of skills, of life-management processes – in short, all of our memories, inherited from evolution and available at birth or acquired through learning thereafter – exist in our brains in dispositional form, waiting to become explicit images or actions. *Our knowledge base is implicit, encrypted, and unconscious*' (144). There is general agreement today that 'the "unconscious mind" is the rule, not the exception' (Bargh and Morsella, 78).[12]

There have been attempts to reconcile this modern notion of the unconscious with Freudian theories.[13] Kihlstrom, Barnhard, and Tataryn explain that 'much contemporary research on unconscious mental life is dismissed on the grounds that Freud had said it all before and that our carefully designed and painstakingly executed experimental work is either trivial or merely a gloss on the clinical insights of the Master' (789). Psychologists resist this reconciliation for two reasons. First, the cognitive unconscious is based on entirely different premises than Freud's theories. As Kihlstrom says, 'this is not your psychoanalyst's unconscious' ('Psychological' 595). Cognitive psychologists emphasize that 'much of this research would

social, or economical contexts have been used in historicist studies. The cognitive historicist approach to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature allows a change of focus and makes possible new readings of texts without taking them out of their historical and social contexts. On the contrary, it considers historical and social contexts that have previously been neglected and thus adds a valuable new dimension.

The cognitive historicist approach is particularly well suited to investigate nineteenth-century notions of the unconscious. The change of perspective brought about by cognitive research indeed calls for a revaluation of the unconscious in literature. In 2005, Uleman correctly observed that the 'psychoanalytic unconscious is, to most laypeople and those in the arts and humanities, the only unconscious' (2). Freud even continues to cast his shadow on scientists. Psychologists who research the unconscious often still feel obliged to distance themselves from the psychoanalytic unconscious, which illustrates the juggernaut they are opposing. This difficulty of promoting an unconscious other than the psychoanalytic in the arts and humanities, and especially in literary studies, is considerably bigger. The cognitive unconscious offers a fascinating alternative and I hope that this book will make a contribution to its acceptance in literary studies.

By using the cognitive concept of unconscious mentation, the aim is not to apply it in the same teleological fashion typical of psychoanalytic readings, which leads to a conclusion that is rather imposed than deducted. The aim is, on the contrary, to use it as a foil in order to understand and analyse historical notions and implications from a novel point of view. Research on the cognitive unconscious takes us back in time in some ways precisely because its insights are not completely new.[15] The nineteenth-century unconscious, much like the cognitive unconscious, is one of productivity and of high complexity. The modern theory of the productive unconscious can help us detect, explain, and understand notions of unconscious thought and behaviour during the nineteenth century, even if the parallels remain necessarily imperfect and partial at times; it enables us to draw these qualities to the fore and tell an old story in a new way, or maybe even to turn them into a new

story.

In 'Romanticism, the Unconscious, and the Brain', Richardson provides a wide-ranging overview of the unconsciously active brain. Taking into account the works of Romantic literary figures and scientists in Britain, France, and Germany, he convincingly shows how they 'participate … in a nascent neuroscientific approach to unconscious mental life currently enjoying a major revival' (361). In *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind*, he repeatedly returns to unconscious mental action in discussions of Romantic brain scientists, Wordsworth's notion of language, unconscious behaviour in Austen, and Keats's remarks on the imagination, for example. In Chapter 2 he displays in a more detailed fashion how this cognitive notion of the unconscious informs Coleridge's dream account of 'Kubla Khan', even though the latter repeatedly stresses the primacy of the mind over the body. At the heart of Richardson's research is the embodied and brain-based notion of the active mind, an idea that was rapidly gaining acceptance in the early nineteenth century. Overall, he points to a rich and varied pre-Freudian tradition that shares many assumptions with modern cognitive science. Vanessa L. Ryan's recent book, *Thinking without Thinking in the Victorian Novel*, engages with theories of mind that proclaim productive unconscious processes in the mutual exchange between science and literature in the second half of the nineteenth century. She makes extensive use of the physiologist William B. Carpenter's theory of unconscious cerebration. He similarly to but more explicitly than the earlier scientists discussed by Richardson engages with unconscious mental processes, akin to the modern cognitive unconscious. Richardson's and Ryan's works show that these early instances of the productive unconscious considerably shape nineteenth-century literature and thus need to be taken seriously. My work on De Quincey, who defies the classical definition as a Romantic or a Victorian author, follows in these footsteps. It covers the time of transition between the two periods and refers more explicitly to modern theories of cognitive science.

Even though over the last decade cognitive historicism has successfully staked its claim in literary criticism, it still meets considerable resistance from some scholars who dismiss

cognitive science as reductionist with nothing to offer to literary criticism. They usually view the cognitive approach to literature with the 'suspicion, hostility, or (perhaps worst) indifference that a novel critical field may sometimes provoke' (Richardson and Steen, 'Reframing' 151). Many a humanistic mind feels the threat of reductionism without seeing the manifold possibilities of new connections of understanding that are opening up if we allow scientific knowledge to interact with literary and historical interpretation. Using a scientific approach does not necessarily yield reductionist results. It depends on how a critical approach is applied rather than on the approach *per se*. Elaborating 'the relationship between cognitive literary theory and criticism and the larger theoretical issues of the relationship of literary texts to their cultural and historical contexts' (162), Ellen Spolsky convincingly shows how insights from the cognitive sciences enrich our notion of literary texts and historical periods. Far from providing reductionist readings, cognitive historicism has the potential to broaden our understanding of literary works and periods by inserting 'the universals of human cognitive processing' (168) into the equation. The resistance is even more adamant when one attempts to discuss what has long been seen as Freudian territory without recourse to Freud. Although the cognitive unconscious has little to nothing in common with psychoanalytic theories, some scholars believe that it is impossible to reach an understanding of the unconscious without integrating Freud's theories. Yet a large number of scientists over the last three decades have shown that not only is it possible but that doing so provides more plausible theories of the unconscious; there is no reason why the same should not apply to literary studies.

The proposition that De Quincey's 'psychological insights … anticipate several of Freud's major discoveries' (Proudfit 89) has, on the one hand, turned into something of a commonplace assertion and, on the other hand, still leaves many questions – such as the historical context – unanswered. The restriction to psychoanalysis in De Quincey criticism until the turn of the millennium may come from the lack of an alternative psychological approach in literary criticism. With the cognitive revolution in literary criticism, however, it is somewhat surprising

that the Freudian hegemony has persisted over the last decade. Looking at De Quincey's writings from a perspective that is historicist and that engages with modern cognitive theories of mental processes opens up new vistas. In the case of the English opium-eater, probably one of the most frequently pathologized authors of his day, this means revaluating his major autobiographical writings as well as situating his notion of language and his literary criticism, for example, within a psychological framework that accounts for complex, productive, and beneficial unconscious processes.

De Quincey's Cognitive Unconscious

Elizabeth Quincey's death at age eight is generally considered the primal scene that accounts for her brother's repressed sexual, incestuous, and racist attitudes in psychoanalytic readings. Rather than giving another psychological interpretation of the events in 1792, I would like to show how De Quincey's literary rendition of them can invite the critic to perform a cognitive reading of his work. Remembering these events, De Quincey lays particular stress on the qualities of Elizabeth's cranium and her brain in relation to her mental powers. He remembers, for example, that 'my sister was noticed as a prodigy', which 'showed itself in an extraordinary expansion of the understanding; her grasp of intellect was large and comprehensive, in a degree which astonished people in a child of eight years old'. This effect stemmed from the 'child's brain', which Dr Charles White described after a post-mortem examination as ' "the most beautiful" he had ever seen' ('Sketches' 11). De Quincey cherishes 'the sweet temple of her brain' (*S* 142) in *Suspiria* and declares that 'the premature expansion of the intellect' stands in connection with the changes in the brain brought about by Elizabeth's presumed cause of death, hydrocephalus.[16] These elements are constitutive of the apostrophe to his dead sister: 'For thou, dear, noble Elizabeth, around whose ample brow, as often as thy sweet countenance rises upon the darkness, I fancy a tiara of light or a gleaming aureola in token of thy premature intellectual grandeur – thou whose head, for its superb developments, was the

astonishment of science' (*S* 139). In cognitive terms, the narration of this fateful episode in De Quincey's life – rather than the events themselves – can arguably be read as a sign of his curiosity about the possible interactions between the body/brain and the mind, which was a major issue in scientific treatises at the time he composed *Suspiria*. I do not think of it as an 'anti-sentimental substance of morbid anatomy' intruding on an otherwise 'sentimental account' (Burwick, *Knowledge* 18), but as an attempt to understand the scene in cognitive terms and as a sign of his interest in the brain and its physiology. I suggest, in an admittedly playful inversion of psychoanalytic jargon, that his accounts of Elizabeth's death constitute a cognitive primal scene for the literary critic.

This study explores De Quincey's role in and contribution to the evolution of the idea of the cognitive unconscious. He did not discover or invent it. Any such claims would be acutely reductive and oversimplify the unconscious's complex history. However, he is interesting in several respects. For one, he lived and wrote during the period when the unconscious turned from a vague notion into an explicit concept. De Quincey is at the very centre of a movement that was carried out in various fields – literature, philosophy, medicine, physiology, and the so-called pseudo-sciences – and eventually resulted in the general recognition of automatic, unconscious mental action explained by physical laws. During his career as a writer, he addressed this again and again, explicitly or implicitly, until it became a regular motif. By the 1860s, the concept of the unconscious was a popular, common place idea (Klein 22; Whyte 169–70), to which De Quincey had considerably contributed. Hence, this is not an attempt to rewrite his (inner) life but to analyse his notion of the unconscious with the help of modern cognitive theories, to lay open connections to other nineteenth-century discourses (cultural, medical, and scientific), and to consider his originality of expression in this area.

The theories of unconscious processes produced in De Quincey's intellectual environment bear conceptual similarities to the modern cognitive unconscious. Rather than presenting the historical development of the notion of the unconscious, this study gives a detailed snapshot of a nineteenth-century writer


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very same lines as physiologists and even applies this line of thought in his literary criticism, the effects of art, and the way readers respond to poetry, which takes us back to his coinage of *subconscious*.


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