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**TITLE: JUNK WINS BY DEFAULT: AN EXAMINATION OF OPIATES ON THE
CREATIVE MIND IN FOUR KEY TEXTS**

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ABSTRACT

In 1821, Thomas De Quincey's seminal text on opium addiction, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, was published. The book combined a narrative driven by the squalor and desperation of addiction with a sense of psychological insight that shed new light on the relations of drug use, effectively redefining the way a formerly tabooed topic could be written about and examined in the public eye. Since then, many other artists have portrayed their fondness for opium and its derivatives in a similar way, highlighting some striking parallels and some fundamental differences that portray the drug and addiction as an unbelievably complex affliction. Using De Quincey's work and three other texts – *Artificial Paradises* (1860) by Charles Baudelaire, *Opium: The Diary of his Cure* (1930) by Jean Cocteau and *Junky* (1953) by William S Burroughs – as a jump-off point, this thesis examines the effects of opiates on the lives and creativity of four major artists. Examining the treatment of the drug in these four texts provides a greater insight into the working minds of these artists, but also arouses a better understanding of addiction and what drew them to continued use of opiates in the first place. It also sheds light on their work in a broader context, where the influence of opiates is much more recognisable in their artistic output.

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Introduction

Or Preliminary Confessions

„He felt the indolence and despair, the detested craving, the reproach of vital tasks unperformed, the disgusts and indignities of withdrawal periods; he lived with chaotic rooms, disordered clothes, hunger, homelessness and dirt.“ – Alethea Hayter, on Thomas De Quincey.

In the increasingly large canon of literature concerning opiates and heroin, none is more important as a watershed than Thomas De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, first published in 1821. This work, which surmised the transcendent and tragic qualities of opium and addiction, was the first significant text about the topic to capture the public imagination. At a time when opium was as commonplace as any other intoxicant, when scientific knowledge wasn’t advanced enough to demystify the drug, De Quincey revealed a hidden world to a society that had easy access to it—a world that was both repellent in its portrayal of hopeless dependency, but also richly seductive in its suggestion of what opium could provide to a potential user. This premise proved to be infinitely attractive to people, perhaps because of the implied danger. Crucially, it also proved to be attractive to artists.

In examining the interwoven relationship between opium and the arts, one finds that De Quincey was one of many artists that have sought to expand their capacities—of both thought and creativity—through the use of illicit substances. Even in De Quincey’s time, this was not uncommon. Look no further than his close friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a lifelong addict of the drug, or even John Keats, who sought out opium as a respite to his increasingly worsening tuberculosis. It could be said that De Quincey provided a blueprint by which many other writers have abided since—he made it acceptable to write about a debilitating addiction, even when it

wasn't considered one, and he proved that in doing so, one could produce a work of huge artistic merit. Since De Quincey's time, there have been plenty of other portrayals of addiction in literature—some are fictional, some are in the form of diaries or memoirs, some are a hybrid of the two. Some focus on personal revelation through a derangement of the senses, to quote Rimbaud. Some focus on drug addiction from a social angle. And just as trends in literature have changed over the years, so have drugs and intoxicants—look at the stigma around alcohol and writers in the twentieth century, particularly American ones, both Hemingway and Fitzgerald were known for their alcoholism, Faulkner claimed he couldn't write without a tumbler of whiskey, Norman Mailer happily flaunted his drunkenness on television. Other writers, like Huxley, pondered the changes of perception whilst dabbling in amphetamines. Potential intoxicants are everywhere, but De Quincey was the first and most notable advocate of articulating his experiences and translating them into art.

When considering which of the many texts of addiction to focus on for this thesis, digression was paramount. For a start, it had to contain works that dealt specifically with opium, heroin or similar derivatives of opiates. The reason for this is simple—even in the long history of drugs and alcohol being tied into creativity and insight; no other drug seems to carry the same gravity, the same visionary fervour, the same ability to delight and enrapture the user the way opiates do.

With this in mind, I chose four texts, all similar in their outlook, each one written in a different period and revelatory in their own way. Apart from De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, there is Charles Baudelaire's *Artificial Paradises*, a study of wine, hashish and opium on the artistic mind. The sections on opium are mainly a response to De Quincey's work, which Baudelaire was working on when he was ironically informed that De Quincey had died in Edinburgh in December 1859. Some seventy years later, in 1930, French artist Jean Cocteau

published *Opium: the Diary of His Cure*, a fragmented document that relates his time spent weaning himself off the drug in a hospital outside Paris. Finally, I included *Junky* by William S Burroughs, published in 1953. In a sense, *Junky* could have been written today, given its deadpan tone and portrayal of an addict in a large, modernised city—it is the book we would recognise the most.

These four texts are crucial in the sense that they are all written in the first person by artists with a profound interest in opium. They are all ruminations, and are mostly factual, except for Burroughs, who states that although *Junky* is partially fiction in the preface of the book, it is still inspired by his real life experiences. This is ultimately the thread between the four—they all give personalized accounts of the drug use, and they all add a philosophical weight to the discussion on opiate addiction. While in-depth analysis would be limited to these four texts, I decided to explore the other work these artists, and to read other drug literature, both fiction and non-fiction.

Of course, it's worth noting that to refer to these books as 'drug literature' is to miss a point. These are simply not tales of wild debauchery and misadventure. These writers were deep thinkers and sublime artists, capable of rendering their experiences into art through the prism of opiates. There is an undercurrent of intellectual and philosophical thought running through each text, as indeed, there usually is with any serious book containing subject matter similar to this. So many people read Hunter S Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971), to use a famous cult example, and overlook the political subtext and Thompson's vicious denouncement of the American drug culture, in favour of revelling in the self-celebratory scenes of drug abuse and mayhem. This is an unfortunate misinterpretation.

It's hard to revel in the portrayals of addiction here. To enter the world of opiates, as will be seen, is to enter a sombre world, one wrought with discord and moments of elation that are seldom experienced with any other intoxicant. Opiates provoke many reactions, not just soaring ecstasy, but also deep melancholy, and a renewed capacity for insightful thought. The downside, of course, is that they also have an unlimited capacity to destroy the user. This thesis is an examination of artists who dared to thread that line, and somehow lived long enough to write about it.

First Experiences

„That's what the stuff does. It's the most seductive bitch in the world.“— Keith Richards.

One of the more profound quotes about drug addiction comes from *Junky* by William S Burroughs. ‘You become a narcotics addict because you do not have strong devotions in any other direction,’¹ he wrote. ‘Junk wins by default.’² This observation makes sense for Burroughs, a Harvard graduate who came from wealth, who needlessly worked odd jobs instead of pursuing a career, who was undoubtedly smart but reluctant to embrace the more sensible aspects of adulthood. His interest in writing only developed in his thirties, much later than his Beat Generation peers Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, and even then he needed to be coaxed into writing with their begrudging encouragement. That nothing in his life before the entrance of heroin had enthralled him as much reveals a huge amount about these men—similarly, Jean Cocteau, Thomas De Quincey and Charles Baudelaire were capable men, imbued with artistic intelligence and the disposition to hone their talent. Even the protagonists of *Skagboys* (2012) and *Trainspotting* (1993), despite coming from an environment of destitution primarily instigated by the economic downturn in Scotland during the Thatcher years, still have some stable family background. That they negate careers and friendships and various other things in life to indulge in heroin shows just how detrimental the drug can be—it would be hard to accept that these people, even with their respective hardships, had no inclination to do anything else, but it would make sense to say these men did have devotions in life at some point, but these interests were swiftly put aside when they unearthed the ethereal effects of heroin.

Perhaps because of its long standing status as a social taboo, general knowledge about opiate use can be hopelessly incorrect, and many people are therefore misinformed. In this instance, the

age-old assumption that a user is hooked upon first using the drug is plain wrong. Of the examples found in the texts examined here, only De Quincey equates his first experience with the drug to an overwhelming turning point in his life. Given his romantic temperament, we could even assume that his rose-tinted view was an extension of his outlook on his life and art in general. In all other cases, the first experiences these people had with opiates seemed underwhelming compared to the sensations they would later encounter. Burroughs recalls being violently ill afterwards. Even in fiction, Renton, the main subject of Irvine Welsh's trilogy of *Skagboys*, *Trainspotting* and *Porno* (2002) recalls the euphoria wearing off, and fails to immediately be enslaved to the drug, only occasionally going back to it before really making a habit of it. Baudelaire gives us plenty of philosophical discussion about it, but he rarely delves into his own personal encounters. Cocteau's work doesn't even regale us with stories of his first bout with opium—perhaps it wasn't as necessary to him as the long stretches when he was truly enamoured with it.

De Quincey relates that 'nothing, indeed, is more revolting to English feelings, than the spectacle of a human being obtruding on our notice his moral ulcers and scars.'³ Still, he states that his confessions do 'not amount to a confession of guilt.'⁴ In the opening pages of *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, he even highlights the fact that at several points in his life, he has come across a large cross section of people who have been regular opium users. In this section, he also talks about the factors that caused his addiction in kernel form—he lost his father when he was young, and though a bright, intelligent young man, his academic life was far from successful. He also suffered from a stomach ailment that caused misery through most of his adolescent. 'This affection had originally been caused by extremities of hunger, suffered in my boyish days'⁵ he says, which is a fair reflection of the poverty he suffered whilst being juggled

around guardians. Crucially, this ailment led him to opium; ‘it was not for the purpose of creating pleasure, but of mitigating pain in the severest degree, that I first began to use opium as an article of daily diet.’⁶

Though it was the stomach ailment that led him to prolonged use of opium, he traces his first experience with the drug to a severe cold in autumn 1804. After three weeks, the rheumatic pains had failed to cease, and during a walk down Oxford Street in the rain, De Quincey met ‘a college acquaintance who recommended opium.’⁷ The suggestion immediately intrigued him. ‘I had heard of it as I had of manna or of ambrosia, but no further: how unmeaning a sound was it at that time! What solemn chords does it now strike upon my heart! What heart-quaking vibrations of sad and happy remembrances!’⁸ He even feels ‘a mystic importance attached to the minutest circumstances connected with the place and the time, and the man (if man he was) that first laid open to me the Paradise of Opium-eaters.’⁹ These details are surprisingly trivial—he evokes the drabness of a random Sunday evening in London, replete with a druggist who ‘looked dull and stupid, just as any mortal druggist might be expected to look on a Sunday.’¹⁰ Though De Quincey held his first experience with the ‘celestial drug’ in the highest regard, the reality was quite commonplace given the time and the availability of opium—he simply walked into a chemist and bought some.

What wasn’t common to De Quincey was the immediacy and euphoria of opium. ‘I took it: and in an hour, oh! Heavens! What a revulsion! What an upheaving, from it’s lowest depths, of the inner spirit! What an apocalypse of the world within me.’¹¹ He now revelled in the ‘abyss of divine enjoyment thus suddenly revealed.’¹² De Quincey’s outlook had immediately changed. When he inevitably strayed back to the drug, he did so knowing that it eradicated the melancholic yearnings that plagued his life of pain and poverty.

In comparison to De Quincey, William S Burroughs grew up in relative wealth in St Louis. In the original preface of *Junky*, he describes his childhood home as having ‘a lawn in front, a back yard with a garden, a fish pond and a high wooden fence all around.’¹³ So in essence, he had a childhood with all the trappings of a well off American family, or as he put it in hindsight, ‘all the props of a safe, comfortable way of life that is now gone forever.’¹⁴

Indeed, he had material comfort, as he would for most of his life—when he spent years wandering Europe and North Africa as an adult, his income was always supplemented by an allowance from his aging parents. But the discontent that trailed Burroughs was definitely emotional, and his interest in opium was instilled from an early age, when a maid informed him that opium induces good dreams. It warded off nightmares, but it also represented a way of life with no correlation to the repressed stagnation of pre-war America. His sense of rebellion against that society was awoken after reading ‘an autobiography of a burglar, called *You Can’t Win* (1926). The author claimed to have spent a good part of his life in jail. It sounded good to me compared with the dullness of a Midwest suburb where all contact with life was shut out.’¹⁵

Following several small dalliances in petty crime, the realisation that he was a homosexual, and a bizarre bout of mental illness that led to both his rejection from the army, and an incident where he cut off one of his fingers in an attempt to impress a potential love interest, Burroughs finally made his way towards one of the most lethal taboos of all—drug use.

Initially, Burroughs obtained heroin—or junk, as he was obviously fond of calling it—from a contact he knew in New York City, specifically in the bars around 42nd Street. This area has since been transformed into Times Square, as upmarket and tourist friendly as anywhere in the city, but in the 1940’s, the district was renowned for its strip clubs, back-alley ambience, shady

bars and rough characters. Coming into contact with the drug, Burroughs originally intended to sell it on to a mutual friend, but inevitably ended up trying some before the deal went through. He noted that the drug ‘hits the back of the legs first, then the back of the neck, a spreading wave of relaxation slackening the muscles away from the bones so that you seem to float without outlines, like lying in warm salt water.’¹⁶ From there, his experience became a kaleidoscopic mixture of fear and paranoia and moving transcendence. ‘I had the feeling that some horrible image was just beyond the field of vision, moving, as I turned my head, so I never quite saw it. I felt nauseous; I lay down and closed my eyes. A series of pictures passed, like watching a movie: A huge, neon-lighted cocktail bar that larger and larger until streets, traffic, and street repairs were included in it; a waitress carrying a skull on a tray; stars in a clear sky.’¹⁷ These fantastic images were coupled with very real physical sensations; ‘the fear of death; the shutting off of breath; the stopping of blood.’¹⁸ Burroughs was impressed enough by this experience to continue using at random intervals, but he stresses; ‘I was taking a shot from time to time, but I was a long way from having a habit.’¹⁹

Perhaps coupled with the fact that he was homosexual at a time when sexual orientation was a hugely dubious watermark in American culture, and when sodomy acts were still normal across the country, Burroughs may well have seen his heroin use as another exploration into a subculture that revolted the public that already effectively shunned him. Like Cocteau, it was a form of rebellion to live that kind of life and the fact that heroin supplied him with the base material for his art was a further excuse to continue using.

Margaret Crosland’s introduction to *Opium: the Diary of His Cure* supports this notion, concluding that ‘addiction to opium or to any drug may seem like a vice, or a sign of moral weakness, but in fact it is a form of extremism.’²⁰ That Cocteau was a brilliantly subversive

talent in various fields—such as writing, filmmaking, sketching—shows that his temperament was suited to the extreme hazards and elations of opium use. He was always prolific as an artist, and his renewal through opium prevented what he described as ‘the death of the heart.’²¹

Unlike the works by Burroughs and De Quincey, *Opium* doesn’t cover Cocteau’s first experiences in detail. It is essentially a diary from his time spent in a clinic where he was attempting to wean himself away from the drug. Many Cocteau biographers trace his first experiences with the drug to time spent in Marseille as a young man, but his first prolonged bout came after the death of his friend and lover Raymond Radiguet in 1923. Radiguet died ‘a futile, unnecessary death due to neglected typhoid fever caused by a bad oyster and aggravated by the lowering effects of too much alcohol.’²² This loss traumatized him, and at his lowest ebb, Cocteau renounced literature and tried opium several times to assuage his pain. Initially, it did very little, and he later commented that the substance ‘doesn’t like to be rushed... It was only after a long trial that it helped me.’²³ It did eventually manifest itself in his habits, and his enthusiasm for artistic endeavour returned. The downside now was, of course, he was an addict, and he struggled to break his usage of the drug. *Opium* is full of grave insights about his mental state and his thoughts on addiction—‘opium remains unique and the euphoria it induces superior to that of health. I owe it my perfect hours.’²⁴

Because Radiguet’s death had triggered both heartbreak and a creative block, opium was all the more appealing, seemingly fuelling Cocteau’s temporarily dormant creativity back to potency, and removing the need for self-approval that many artists crave. ‘Opium was a new, artificial form of existence for Cocteau that seemed to relieve him of his constant need to be brilliant and loved. By creating a neutral and atemporal state, opium appeared to stem the void and offer a buffer against the world.’²⁵

Cocteau's compatriot Charles Baudelaire was another example of an extremist artist, ready to explore the effects of opium on his artistic temperament. Stories of his early life portray him as an individualist libertine, happy to sample carnal and narcotic delights, but also sternly serious about poetry, art and philosophy. His first experiences with opium are not documented, but his unruly nature was apparent enough, that by the age of twenty-one, his stepfather offered to send him to India, a trip undoubtedly designed to shape the young man's character and distance him from the wealth of excesses he could access in Paris. This adventure lasted ten months, and Baudelaire's friend and biographer Theophile Gautier would later note that the trip failed to deter Baudelaire from renouncing his ways. It did, however, solidify his intention to become a poet and artist, and he even drew upon his experiences in India in his later work. 'In his verses he was frequently led from the mists and mud of Paris to the countries of light, azure and perfume. Between the lines of the most sombre of his poems, a window is opened through which can be seen, instead of the black chimneys and smoky roofs, the blue Indian seas, or a beach or golden sand on which the slender figure of a Malabarise, half naked, carrying an amphora on the head, is running.'²⁶

Upon returning to France, Baudelaire reached his twenty-first birthday, which allowed him to claim an inheritance set aside for him by his parents. That this lucrative inheritance had a profound impact on him is evident. It gave him free reign to run up debts on extravagances like clothing—he was very much a dandy—and to indulge himself in the cafes and salons of Paris for days on end. These salons were frequented by the literary alumni of the day, and were also used for prolonged binges on wine, hashish and opium. 'It was in this salon, also,' Gautier writes 'that the séances of the club of hashish-eaters took place, a club to which we belonged, the ecstasies, dreams, hallucinations of which, followed by the deepest dejection, we have described.'²⁷

When examining Baudelaire's initiation into intoxicants, there seems to be an apparent joyful quality in his willingness to partake in these binges. Unlike Cocteau, who was in mourning, or De Quincey, who was in severe physical pain, or Burroughs, who was clearly nursing deep rooted mental health issues, Baudelaire seemed to have no such misgivings. Indeed, he embraced this lifestyle with all the relish of an expeditionary exploring uncharted territory, very much conscious of how it would shape his literary output. That he was an extremist is clear from his work, particularly the acclaimed collection *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Upon its publication in 1857, the poems within were condemned as an insult to public decency. It's easy to see why—the opening dedication to the reader contains the immortal verse:

If poison, rape, dagger and eager flame

Have failed, as yet, with plans to decorate

The tawdry canvas of our sorry fate,

*Alas! Only our panic is to blame.*²⁸

Baudelaire's *Artificial Paradises* would later convey his fondness for wine, his disdain for hashish, and his appreciation for De Quincey's *Confessions*, a book that surmised the opium experience so well for him that he happily extended his commentary on it into a full length book that quoted at length from *Confessions*. He must surely have felt akin to De Quincey, even though his own route to opium was not marked by the same poverty and desperation.

With this in mind, it's clear that the reasons why people use opiates are manifold, as are the reasons why they eventually fail to stop. None of these reasons come any closer to the truth than

the evaluation Burroughs made in the early fifties: 'Junk is not, like alcohol or weed, a means to increased enjoyment of life. Junk is not a kick. It is a way of life.'²⁹

Love and Marriage

„He was falling between glacial walls, he didn't know how anyone could fall so far away from everyone else in the world. So far to fall, so cold all the way, so steep and dark between those morphine-coloured walls...“ – Nelson Algren, *The Man With The Golden Arm*.

There have always been dangers associated with opiates. Even in the days of De Quincey, when the drug was legal, when it was thought of as an antidote for common illnesses, usage of the drug for prolonged periods was still enough to afford the user pariah status in society. Once enamoured with the drug, it's an exceedingly hard habit to hide. In *Junky*, Burroughs relates stories of selling heroin to support his own habit in New York, of evading police in the streets, of trying to pickpocket targets on the subway. One recurring detail are the distorted features of junk addicts walking the streets—they can be spotted easily, and the difference between when they use and when they don't is noticeable; 'the effect was uncanny. You would see him one time a fresh-faced kid. A week or so later he would turn up so thin, sallow and old-looking, you would have to look twice to recognise him.'¹ Even in hindsight, in a deposition at the end of *Naked Lunch* (1959), he noted that once clean he still had 'the look of borrowed flesh common to all who survive The Sickness.'²

Similarly, Cocteau also juggled the burden of being a fully fledged opium addict and a renowned and acclaimed artist. Even in his self-portraits from the time, one sees a man defined by his illness, the same way Van Gogh's self-portraits knowingly express his depression and madness. By 1925, two years after the death of Raymond Radiguet, 'the effects of Cocteau's opium-taking were all too plain to see. His face had caved in and harsh lines were chiselled into his skin in stark, geometrical formation.'³ One saving grace for Cocteau may well have been that

he was fortunate enough to become an addict after his first initial successes. This accorded him with some financial standing to support the habit, but it also left him on a public platform where he had no sense of anonymity.

Considering the very obvious physical and mental side effects, it's possible to wonder why anyone would ever continue taking the drug, in effect courting disaster and the erosion of their faculties. It appears that once the pattern of addiction has set in, it sets off a chain of events that are incredibly difficult to break. De Quincey refuses to even dwell on his initial submersion in opium; 'This then, let me repeat, I postulate – that, at the time I began to take opium daily, I could not have done otherwise. Whether, indeed, afterwards I might not have succeeded in breaking off the habit, even when it seemed to me that all efforts would be unavailing, and whether many of the innumerable efforts which I *did* make might not have been carried much further, and my gradual re-conquests of ground lost might not have been followed up much more energetically – these are questions which I must decline.'⁴

Indeed, the life of a drug addict is difficult, despite the euphoric highs that come with it. As previously discussed, the motivations behind trying opiates are numerous, but the will to continue using is harder to define. Firstly, there is the very nature of addiction—undergoing the cure, either through cold turkey or with the assistance of methadone, is gravely undesirable experience. 'From junk sickness there seems to be no escape. The kick of junk *is* that you have to have it.' Burroughs wrote, 'Junkies run on junk time and junk metabolism. They are subject to junk climate. They are warmed and chilled by junk. The kick of junk is living under junk conditions. You cannot escape from junk sickness any more than you can escape from junk kick after a shot.'⁵ The evocation of time is not unique to Burroughs; Cocteau also acknowledged that opium suspends the user in a different place; 'everything one achieves in life, even love, occurs

in an express train racing towards death. To smoke opium is to get out of the train while it is still moving. It is to concern oneself with something other than life or death.’⁶ It seems that despite the heightened sense of perception, in a way opiates really lobotomise the user, leaving them in a climate they have trouble leaving.

This womb-like climate may help to explain why each of the four writers seemed utterly transfixed with their childhoods once they became acquainted with opiates. In *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, De Quincey writes extensively about his childhood and the strange visions and fantasies he associates with it. His close bond to his three sisters after the death of his father is a telling early example of his later temperament—he was nourished emotionally by his siblings, even though he often faced poverty. Baudelaire notes that De Quincey would have developed ‘a mind constitutionally tender, delicate’⁷ and ‘a type of androgyny’⁸—sensibilities that would later be evoked in him by opium. He was always acutely aware of ‘the maternal caress, the gentle ways of sisters, especially older sisters... from his earliest infancy, [he] was bathed in the soft atmosphere of woman.’⁹ That De Quincey would want to recapture the emotions he felt under the tutelage of his sisters makes perfect sense—his life forever marred by tragedy, he saw two of them die at a young age. Both losses devastated him, but the second death—that of his sister Elizabeth—was particularly painful for him. Her death gave rise to several of the more mystical moments in *Confessions*, moments that show De Quincey’s preoccupation with summer and the horror of death in the summer months, when everything else is supposedly in bloom. ‘The weather was dry, the sky was cloudless, and the blue depths seemed to express a type of perfect infinity; and it was not possible for the eye to behold, or for the heart to conceive, any more pathetic symbol of life and the glory of life.’¹⁰

De Quincey resolved to privately see his sister's body lying in repose. Standing over the body with the window in the room open, he writes that he was struck by an extraordinary seer-like vision, one that contrasted the immaculate sunlight with the pale face of his sister. 'A vault seemed to open in the zenith of the far blue sky, a shaft which ran up forever. He rose in spirit on those azure billows; and the billows and his spirit seemed to pursue the throne of God, but that also ran before him and fled away continually.'¹¹ Assessing this vision in *Artificial Paradises*, Baudelaire equates De Quincey's experience to an encounter, or at least a desired encounter, with a celestial presence. 'The solitary child, overwhelmed by his first grief, flew towards God, that consummate solitary. Thus instinct, superior to all philosophy, allowed him to find in this celestial vision a fleeting instant of comfort.'¹² In his search for solitude, one can see just how ripe De Quincey was to be seduced by opium. It brought back those sun-kissed days of childhood, and that retreat to the 'zenith of the far blue sky.'

In its ability to re-appropriate childhood memories back to the user, it must be recognised that opiates do have huge potency. Despite its premise, *Junky* has some surprisingly tender moments, particularly the moment Burroughs believes he has re-experienced the exuberance of his childhood. 'I remembered a long time ago when I lay in bed beside my mother, watching lights from the street move across the ceiling and down the walls. I felt the sharp nostalgia of train whistles, piano music down a city street, burning leaves.' He concurs that 'a mild degree of junk sickness always brought me the magic of childhood.'¹³

Perhaps it is moments like this, repeated again and again in the haze of decreasing moments of clarity, that induce addicts to continue using. The sense of childhood wonderment and awe is not unique to Burroughs and De Quincey either. 'One more thing still delights me and takes me back instantaneously to childhood: thunder.' Cocteau wrote, remembering the intimacy of his

childhood days spent indoors, ‘barely does it rumble, barely does a vast mauve flash of lightning follow than a softness, a feeling of relaxation overwhelms me.’¹⁴ He relates days when bad weather would mean ‘a house full of people, a fire, games, a day that was intimate and without deserters. It is undoubtedly the old sensation of intimacy that governs the delight I feel when I listen to thunder.’¹⁵ Perhaps this attitude can also describe yearnings for opium, and the sense of inoculation from the world users feel. Cocteau’s recollection here is eerily similar to De Quincey’s summation of winter; ‘surely every body is aware of the divine pleasures which attend a winter fire-side: candles at four o’clock, warm hearth-rugs, tea, a fair tea-maker, shutters closed, curtains flowing in ample draperies on the floor, whilst the wind and rain are raging audibly without.’¹⁶ Another contrast between the two can be found in De Quincey’s longing for the care of his three older sisters—Cocteau also had a very close bond to his mother, one that he would maintain well into adulthood, even living with her until he was forty.

Interestingly, Baudelaire echoes De Quincey’s sentiments in his poem *Landscape*, from the collection entitled *Parisian Scenes*. It describes the isolative qualities of winter, when the poet longs to be a monk-like figure, living in a church steeple composing poems alone;

Springs, summers, autumns I shall watch, and when

The dreary winter snows are falling, then,

With curtains drawn and shutters fastened tight,

My castles in the air will fill the night.

Baudelaire’s visions also recall De Quincey’s celestial experiences at the death bed of his sister.

Above, the city masts, steeple and chimney,

*And skies with visions of eternity.*¹⁷

This longing for solitude, for atmospheres that resemble the security of the womb, is typical of all four and their artistic temperament. A nourishing environment must surely be tantamount to a productive creative space for each of them—and opiates must surely have conjured that same sense of security—a sensation similar to being snowed in during a Canadian winter, as De Quincey describes it.

Another commonality between all four is they all note radically altered and increasingly striking changes to their dreams. To Romantics like De Quincey, vivid dreams and nightmares were happily encouraged, by the ingestion of intoxicants or otherwise. Opium users, however, seem to stand in a league of their own regarding the importance they accord their dreams. As Baudelaire noted; ‘to dream magnificently is not a gift accorded to all men, and even among those who possess it, it is at serious risk of being ever more diminished by steadily growing modern dissipation and by the turbulence of material progress.’¹⁸ Might this contact with the ‘shadowy world’ be an adequate respite to use opiates?

These dreams are in equal parts eloquent and terrifying in their intensity. De Quincey, for instance, recounts that his dreams afforded him scenes of cities and kingdoms and endless oceans—indeed, dreams have also been known for cheating geography. Concurrent with opium, this ability to manipulate surroundings is taken to an entirely new level. ‘I beheld such pomp of cities and palaces as was never yet beheld by the waking eye, unless in the clouds,’¹⁹ he writes. Despite the richness of dreams like these, there are also the downsides—at times, his dreams were plagued by monsters, of which ‘the cursed crocodile became to me the object of more

horror than almost all the rest.’ The crocodile would become a fixture of his dreams for years, and he would forever detest ‘the abominable head of the crocodile, and his leering eyes.’²⁰

‘I seemed every night to descend, not metaphorically, but literally to descend, into chasms and sunless abysses, depths below depths, from which it seemed hopeless that I could ever reascend,’ De Quincey wrote. He attributes this change to anxiety and melancholy, but he also seems sustained by the lucid brilliance of the scenes in his dreams. ‘Nor did I, by waking, feel that I *had* reascended. This I do not dwell upon; because the state of gloom which attended these gorgeous spectacles, amounting at least to utter darkness, as of some suicidal despondency, cannot be approached by words.’²¹

The range of experiences an opiate user encounters is certainly broad. For all of the celestial visions and dreams of infinity, there is also the unavoidable depravity and degradation that comes with being hooked on the drug. Burroughs depicts his life as a junky as one full of misery, replete with court appearances, encounters with lowlife criminals and a bout of cold turkey in a jail cell. Perhaps most damning of all, the drug eventually hinders the very functions it once seemed to cultivate, including creativity.

Baudelaire marks the hubris that accompanies addiction, making the distinction that although the mind has been galvanised into deep thought, it remains ensnared with feeding the addiction only, therefore neglecting these new ambitions. ‘What a dreadful situation!’ he writes, ‘your mind is crowded with ideas, and yet you are unable to cross the bridge that separates the imaginary land of dream from the real pastures of action!’²² This neglect soon affects just about every aspect of the user’s functionality, to the point where simple tasks become incredibly difficult chores. Here he makes a fitting comparison to hashish; ‘everything that I have already

said in my study on hashish regarding the weakening of the will applies equally to the effects of opium. Answering a letter? A monumental undertaking, put off from hour to hour, from day to day. Finances? Puerile triviality.’²³

He also charts the trajectory of those who are able to avoid the bouts of idleness brought on by hashish and opium; ‘supposing a man were adroit and strong enough to elude this alternative, we must consider another inevitable and terrible danger, which is true of all habits: they all rapidly become dependencies. He who would resort to a poison in order to think would soon be incapable of thinking *without* the poison. Can you imagine this awful sort of man whose paralyzed imagination can no longer function without the benefit of hashish and opium?’²⁴ This is certainly a risk factor with opiates, but it seems that amongst certain people, this detriment only sets in after a long period of use. In the meantime, while their health and mental state allows it, they can revel in the joys of opium without any downside for at least some extended period of time.

For artists at least, it has often been said that opiates opens up a side of them they never knew existed. Though Burroughs had already begun using heroin by the time he was crafting his earlier work—not just *Junky*, but also *Queer* (1985) and short stories such as *The Finger* and *Driving Lesson*—he still portrayed a formalism he would later abandon in favour of the raucous imagery and subversion of *Naked Lunch* and the Cut-Up Trilogy of *The Soft Machine* (1961) and *The Ticket That Exploded* (1962) and *The Soft Machine* (1964). The prose of *Junky* is terse and straightforward, not aspiring to any style other than perhaps Hemingway’s—years later, Jack Kerouac would generously remark that *Junky* was ‘a classic. It’s better than Hemingway.’²⁵ In contrast, the prose of *Naked Lunch* is wildly poetic, non-linear, and often exaggeratory in its depictions of sex, violence and drug use. Here is an example of the prose in *Naked Lunch*;

„So we pour it in a Pernod bottle and start for New Orleans past iridescent lakes and orange gas flares, and swamps and garbage heaps, alligators crawling around in broken bottles and tin cans, neon arabesques of motels, marooned pimps scream obscenities at passing cars from islands of rubbish.”²⁶

The hallucinatory aspects of the language recall the dreamscapes described by De Quincey, though there was no precedent for this style in *Junky*. The trajectory Burroughs followed with increased usage of heroin correlated with the increasingly fragmented, non-linear poetic style that would define him as one of the most popular writers of his time. Another curious aspect of the prose here is the mention of an alligator—this could well be a knowing reference to De Quincey’s aforementioned crocodile, Burroughs would have undoubtedly been familiar with *Confessions*, such was his fondness for De Quincey. Cocteau also alludes to the connection between opium and the increased awareness of creativity, while also referring its ability to align the user with hidden realms of thought; ‘opium, which changes our speeds, procures for us a very clear awareness of worlds which are superimposed on each other, which penetrate each other, but do not even suspect each other’s existence.’²⁷

Indeed, opiates do seem to lead to an exaggerated sense of perception. It’s worth noting that although De Quincey paints the drug in an almost divine light, he stops short of formally equating the drug with mysticism. ‘I shall be charged with mysticism, Behmenism, quietism etc but *that* shall not alarm me.’²⁸ He does, however, note the antagonist effects of the drug—all activities take on a sensual beauty, but his favourite state is one of meditation and solitude, ‘infinite activities, infinite repose.’²⁹ Baudelaire made a similar observation; ‘the more man retires in thought, the more apt he is to dream freely and deeply. And what solitude is greater, calmer, further separated from the world of earthly interests than that created by opium?’³⁰

This antagonism is best described by De Quincey; ‘the ocean, in everlasting but gentle agitation, and brooded over by a dove-like calm, might not unfitly typify the mind and the mood which then swayed it. For it seemed to me as if then first I stood at a distance, and aloof from the uproar of life; as if the tumult, the fever, and the strife, were suspended; a respite granted from the secret burthens of the heart; a Sabbath of repose; a resting from human labours. Here were the hopes which blossom in the paths of life, reconciled with the peace which is in the grave; motions of intellect as unwearied as the heavens.’³¹ This reconciliation, which renders the world appealing to the user, but also leaves the user disinterested in the trivial matters of the world, may well be the key to explaining just how ‘subtle and mighty’³² opium and opiates can be.

Divorce

„Why do you do that to yourself? I don't know. I still don't know. Your skin crawling, your guts churning, you can't stop your limbs from jerking and moving about, and you're throwing up and shitting at the same time, and shit's coming out your nose and your eyes, and the first time that happens for real, that's when a reasonable man says "I'm hooked." But even that doesn't stop a reasonable man from going back to it. – Keith Richards.

Like the ending of a great love affair, or any estrangement from a significant artistic muse, the fallout when an addict realises they must sever their connection to opiates is a painful experience, and one with far-reaching connotations on their life as a whole. Cocteau describes it as ‘the worst moment, the worst danger. Health with this void and an immense sadness. The doctors honestly hand you over to suicide.’¹

Stories concerning addicts weaning themselves off the drug successfully are heartening, but even many of the successful ones come out radically altered by the experience. Perhaps the best example of the writers covered here is Burroughs, who pronounced himself clean at forty five, right after the publication of *Naked Lunch*. Critical posterity has noted that that novel stands as his crowning achievement, and that his great ability as an experimental writer, as a champion of the avant-garde, as a truly visionary prose stylist, was only reached again intermittently afterwards. In his later years, one sees Burroughs as an elderly man living in rural Kansas, back in the mid-American heartland that his work once scorned so accurately. Burroughs was a bona fide literary celebrity in his old age, accosted by rock stars and film directors, seemingly because his past work represented a cutting edge in art and a credibility that subsequent generations of artists aspired to. One sees him having lunch with Andy Warhol in the Chelsea Hotel, or posing

in magazines with David Bowie, proudly displaying the mangled finger he amputated down to the knuckle years before, perhaps conscious that these associations would help his book sales.

By the 1980's, Burroughs was again using heroin, although in a more controlled manner. That decade saw the release of a trilogy of novels, *Cities of the Red Night* (1981), *The Place of Dead Roads* (1983) and *The Western Lands* (1987) that were met with passable critical merits, though none of the three evoked the same searing madness of his earlier work.

Cocteau, despite his grave misgivings about life without the drug, was always lightning-quick in his ability to produce art. Coming out of the clinic in Saint-Cloud, he quickly readied a novel, *Les Enfants terrible* (1929), for publication. Though he doesn't inexplicably say it, that work, composed in tandem with the diaries, could be interpreted as Cocteau's farewell to opium. Of course, the diaries are essentially that too, but *Les Enfants terrible* is concerned with things other than opium addiction—a very probable sign that his mind was again interested by the world outside the protective bubble of addiction. The flurry of work that transpired during his stay saw a renewal in his creativity. He was effectively reborn as an artist, again eager and enthusiastic to create. Ever the consummate artist, Cocteau offers a bulwark to the notion that opium is strictly a destructive agent. His story, as revealed in his diaries, is one of personal devastation inflicted by opium, but it is also the story of a man emerging on the other side aware of his sickness, hardened and wiser because of what transpired. If it can be said that Cocteau emerged to find his creativity stoked by the opium pipe, then by that logic, it must be said that others can plausibly have the same reaction. That Cocteau's addiction didn't lead to death could be contributed to simple luck.

Indeed, the tone of the diaries has the quick pace and alacrity that suggests it was composed by a man in constant motion, surveying a series of events passing by rapidly. This pace may well foreshadow Cocteau's eventual interest in cinema, but it also casts him in a similar position to a passenger on a train—he was fond of this metaphor, one is reminded again of his quote about everything in life occurring on an 'express train racing towards death.'² These diaries read like a pit-stop, a moment of clarity and reflection. He is, so he says, producing documents for and against opium, but he is mostly partial, perhaps because his time with opium has passed. It would appear that he is saying goodbye, with some moments of fondness and melancholy, but also with moments that make him recoil in fear.

Though his artistic renewal suggested that Cocteau had come away from opium reasonably unscathed, it still cannot be denied that he suffered horribly before he was able to free himself from his addiction. He had spent roughly five years harbouring his opium pipe. Initially, Cocteau was adequately stimulated by smoking opium to disregard the side effects—this didn't last long however. His newfound happiness was soon stunted by his declining health; 'the cruel irony, of course, is that while serving to expand his rich fantasy world, opium was also making Cocteau sick and impotent.'³ The onset of opium-related illness first drove Cocteau to treatment in 1925, several years before the stay in Saint-Cloud that proved to be much more therapeutic. This first stint in treatment produced no diaries, but it did produce a collection of visceral drawings that portrayed Cocteau in the grip of brutal withdrawal symptoms. 'They present Cocteau naked in different stages of raw physical pain.'⁴ These drawings are meticulous in their depiction of the horrid realities of the sickness. 'Hands are splayed out in wild desperation and Cocteau's back is riddled with grotesque marks and blotches. All the drawings relate to the eyes and vision, in particular the pinpoint pupils of addicts, as well as to blood and veins.'⁵

The stay in Saint-Cloud would ultimately restore him to health. His experiences with opium had obviously been hellish, but this time, perhaps because the grief of Raymond Radiguet had eased, he was able to abandon opium, which is deliciously ironic—one of his most pointed quotes in *Opium* claims that ‘it is rare for an addict to forsake opium. Opium forsakes him, ruining everything.’⁶ Cocteau proved to be one of those rarities, and though he was reluctant to leave the clinic in Saint-Cloud, the spell opium had imposed on him had been broken.

When he eventually left the treatment clinic, Cocteau was decidedly eager for new surroundings, and promptly moved into an apartment alone, severing one of the more precious ties in his life—this would prove to be the first significant time in his life where he lived independent of maternal influence; ‘with this short and simple move he had finally broken away from his mother after a period of forty years.’⁷ This ability to emancipate himself from his mother forms a stark contrast with De Quincey, who would later tie his own opium habits to his desire to experience the maternal care given to him by his older sisters as a child. De Quincey would always be traumatised by the loss of two of them. Cocteau, however, was able to make that leap into self-dependency, which of course, was much more beneficial for him than his previous dependency on opium. This was still something he worried about however. It is noted that on top of his reservations about living alone, ‘he also felt severely depressed and daunted, however, at the prospect of confronting the cold face of reality without the ready buffer of opium.’⁸

Emancipating oneself from the drug is difficult emotionally. Time and time again, addicts have found themselves struggling to recondition themselves to a world without the delights of opiates. As Cocteau said ‘it is difficult to live without opium after having known it because it is difficult, after knowing opium, to take earth seriously. And unless one is a saint, it is difficult to

live without taking earth seriously.’⁹ This emotional shift is well documented. Burroughs was also quick to note a distinct change in perspective once a user has regained their faculties after abusing heroin; ‘like a man who has been away a long time, you see things differently when you return from junk.’¹⁰

In *Junky*, Burroughs illustrates the very real physical trauma of quitting heroin. Popular culture has imbued cold turkey with a sense of hubris, portraying a state where the body and the mind reject itself, where the user experiences horrible agony for an extended period of time. Perhaps the most famous example is the film version of Irvine Welsh’s *Trainspotting*, in which Renton’s withdrawal symptoms climax in a cacophony of nightmarish images that play on his guilt. This is actually a very accurate depiction of the sickness.

At several points throughout *Junky*, Burroughs is forced to quit the drug. He stresses that ‘a junkie does not ordinarily kick of his own choice. I had never kicked before until I couldn’t score for junk in any form and had to throw in the towel.’¹¹ Barring police intervention, it seems that heroin addicts will do anything to continue taking the drug. For Burroughs, his own attempts to quit at home led to a fondness for alcohol and disregard for his hygiene commensurate with his declining health. He recalls waking up in the middle of cold turkey; ‘my clothes were soaked through with sweat. My eyes were watering and smarting. My whole body felt itchy and irritable. I twisted about on the bed, arching my back and stretching my arms and legs.’¹² The ordeal of cold turkey also lasts for days—according to Burroughs, opium-eaters like De Quincey would have suffered even longer; it takes longer for opiates to leave the system if the user is eating as opposed to injecting. In his recollections, Burroughs notes that ‘after ten days of the cure I had deteriorated shockingly. My clothes were spotted and stiff from the drinks I had spilled all over myself. I never bathed. I had lost weight, my hands shook, I was always spilling things, knocking

over chairs, and falling down.’¹³ It seems that once the agony had passed, the user was left weakened and ill, only comparatively better in health to how they were before.

Here at least, Burroughs had the luxury of quitting alone. At another point in the narrative, he talks about going through cold turkey in custody. ‘There was a raw ache through my lungs. People vary in the way junk sickness affects them. Some suffer mostly from vomiting and diarrhea. The asthmatic type, with narrow and deep chest, is liable to violent fits of sneezing, watering at eyes and nose, in some cases spasms of the bronchial tubes that shut off the breathing.’¹⁴ Although he affirms here that cold turkey symptoms can differ from person to person, it’s clear that he is no way immune to the pain of withdrawal. ‘In my case, the worst thing is the lowering of the blood pressure with consequent loss of body liquid and extreme weakness, as in shock. It is a feeling as if the life energy has been shut off so that all the cells in the body are suffocating. As I lay there on the bench, I felt like I was subsiding into a pile of bones.’¹⁵

Writing about De Quincey, Baudelaire recognised that opium had accorded him a borrowed sense of health, a state that would be quickly negated if he stopped using. Indeed, fear of withdrawal symptoms was keeping his efforts to stop using at bay. ‘Opium had long since ceased to found its empire on spells of pleasure; it was solely by the tortures connected with the attempts to abjure it that it kept its hold.’¹⁶ Burroughs also colludes with this statement, remarking that ‘junk takes everything and gives nothing but insurance against junk sickness.’¹⁷

Suffering from hard times in London, De Quincey soon found his power over the drug to be waning. He admits that his early poverty and hunger did ‘*enforce* the use of opium’ but also concedes that ‘equally it is true that the sufferings themselves grew out of my own folly.’¹⁸ His

attempts to quit opium had limited success; ‘I, for my part, after I had become a regular opium-eater, and from mismanagement had fallen into miserable excesses in the use of opium, did nevertheless, four several times, contend successfully against the dominion of this drug; did four years renounce it; renounced it for long intervals.’¹⁹ It’s hard to believe De Quincey here—how could he validate the claim that he had contended successfully, when he inevitably went back to the drug? Although De Quincey did endure long periods without opium, he would spend his entire life figuratively—and sometimes literally—within arm’s reach of it.

Humorously, De Quincey begins his section on the pains of opium in *Confessions* to joke about his health after years of sustained use. Apart from revealing he takes opium only ‘on Saturday nights,’ he also claims that the drug has not thoroughly eroded his body and mind. ‘And how do I find my health after all this opium-eating? in short, how do I do? Why, pretty well, I thank you, reader.’²⁰ One is reminded of Cocteau here, who claimed that opium induces a state superior to health—this would explain De Quincey’s statement perfectly.

Baudelaire also expresses a familiarity with the defective health that marks opiate addiction; he relates suffering ‘the terrible morrow! when the feebleness of your body, the nerves worn thing to the point of breaking, the irritating urge to cry, the weak state of both mind and body—to the point that you are incapable of attending to any duty... your will, the most precious of all faculties, is subject to the most serious attack.’²¹ He also displays a distrust of the chemically-induced enthusiasm that users exhibit; ‘religion, worship, prayer, and dreams of happiness flare and explode with the ambitious energy and glow of a fireworks display; like the powder and colored materials of the fire, they dazzle only to perish in the shadows.’²²

Given Baudelaire's decline, it would appear that he failed to heed his own advice in listing the detriments of opium and hashish. By many accounts, Baudelaire worked ceaselessly honing his own work, particularly his verse—this effort may well have translated to his immersion in his quest for intoxication too. He was 'possessed of the absolute love of perfection that he applied himself with equal care to everything he did, and devoted as much minute attention to the polishing of his nails as to the writing of a sonnet!'²³ Still, his philosophy advocated hard work, and he believed that beauty wasn't effortless, and that the best works of art only appear effortless after much labour had been invested on the part of the author. In *Artificial Paradises*, he sums up this attitude, founded on the common sense that he would sadly mislay; regarding lovers of wine, hashish and opium he claims that 'magic dupes them and provides and false joy, a false light, while we, the poets and philosophers, have redeemed our soul through daily work and meditation; through the assiduous exercise of our will and our solid nobility of purpose, we have created a garden of true beauty for our enjoyment.'²⁴

Of course, in Baudelaire's case, blame can only tragically be bestowed upon himself. As Cocteau would say, in one of his more prophetic and haunting moments; 'opium is a decision to be taken. Our only error is wanting to smoke and to share the privileges of those who do not smoke. It is a substance that escapes analysis—living, capricious, capable of turning suddenly against the smoker. It is the barometer of a diseased sensibility.'²⁵

Conclusion

„Robinson, at last, left his island; a boat can pull away from the shore, and so be restored to solitary exile; but what man can quit the empire of opium?“ – Charles Baudelaire.

Nothing is ever simple with opiates. Whereas Cocteau successfully weaned himself off the drug in Saint-Cloud, Baudelaire succumbed to an early death. After years of consuming laudanum religiously, he was committed to an asylum suffering from aphasia. He died there aged forty-six, having been in a vegetative state for the final year of his life. De Quincey claimed several times that he had beaten the drug, but his sincerity can be justly doubted—he lived a life of poverty, where employment wasn't always plentiful for an addict. His efforts to appease his family were generally fruitless. He lived into his seventies, but spells of clean health were only achieved intermittently. Burroughs, too, was barely able to escape the drug. At the end of *Junky*, his interest in heroin has shifted to yage, a drug of semi-mystical qualities said to grow in the rainforests of the Amazon basin. Though it may seem outlandish that a grown man, a recovering drug addict nonetheless, would make a Quixotic journey to a remote land in search of this drug, a brief look at the other output of Burroughs reveals that this is exactly what he did. ‘I decided to go down to Colombia and score for yage.’¹ He later published *The Yage Letters* (1963) detailing this search. *Junky* ends with prophetic hope that yage will occupy a space he previously tried to fill with ‘junk and weed and coke.’² He hopes that yage will be the final fix.

The determination Burroughs exhibits in his longing for the ultimate fix sheds light on an essential aspect of all four men—they were all searching for something, something that could be deemed totally unobtainable. This search would hound the lives of De Quincey and Burroughs

into old age, and greatly contribute to Baudelaire's death. Cocteau, however, seemed to move on from opium, almost inexplicably considering the artistic temperament and background of misfortune that he shared with the other three. It may seem inexplicable, but then, that's the perplexing quality of opium. Nothing is ever simple with it.

At some point, all four artists had their lives dogged by the drug, but what about their creativity? It's certainly true that opiates inspired their work, at least in the sense that they each wrote an insightful, engaging text cataloguing their experiences and ruminations. It could also be said that the work of all four was powered by a sense of *otherness*, a discord from society and social normalities that lent their work a gravitas. In embracing opiates, and in having the courage to talk openly about it, they were self consciously setting up a perimeter between the world at large and the domains of drug users—a world of opium dens, seedy barrooms, depraved treatment clinics and dangerous environments that many people would never willingly stray into. As Cocteau said 'the half sleep of opium makes us pass down corridors and cross halls and push open doors and lose ourselves in a world where people startled out of their sleep are horribly afraid of us.'³ It's hard to imagine how something as monumental as opiates couldn't in some way inform their work. At the same time, however, it's hard to gage where exactly that influence is felt. Again, there are no easy answers. Nothing is ever simple with opiates.

One is drawn to Baudelaire's summation near the end of *Artificial Paradises*, an accurate encapsulation of the opium experience; 'what would our theatre audiences say if, at the end of the fifth act, they were not treated to the catastrophe which restores the normal, or rather utopian, equilibrium among all the parties as justice demands—that equitable catastrophe awaited so impatiently during all of those four long acts?'⁴

Opiates seem to evade that final catastrophe, that final unifying thread. Some men can evidently walk away from it having broken the spell it once held on them. Some are completely transfixed, and never really part with it. Still in regards to the work of each man, it is possible to detect the ghost of their acquaintance with opiates. Think of Cocteau's film *Orpheus* (1950), and the famous quote uttered in it; 'mirrors are gates through which death comes and goes. Moreover if you see your whole life in a mirror you will see death at work,'⁵ and one hears the same grave tone that was so prominent in his diaries. Reading the opening passages of *Naked Lunch*, one hears a familiar story of an addict dropping a needle and fleeing from a detective on the subway—it could come straight out of *Junky*, but then the scene quickly descends into the manic prose that epitomized the later work of Burroughs. De Quincey's *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845) almost seamlessly picks up where *Confessions* left off, highlighting his fantasies and dreams and remembrances that seem to stem from his time smoking opium. Baudelaire's attitudes towards modernity and his coupling of pleasure with sin in *Les Fleurs du Mal* reveal a dark grandeur that befits his fondness for opium.

Call it God, solitude, artistic enlightenment, inoculation from the world, but essentially, these artists were searching for something, something on a higher plain—but opiates are deceptive, and each of them may have felt it was what they were seeking, although in reality, it was too destructive a substance, too attractive to the misanthropic side of human nature to ever really raise them. The drive to take opium and heroin was part of their personality, long ingrained in them—the same way the drive to pursue art was already ingrained in them. In taking opiates, all four may well have been reinforcing who they already were.

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- ¹³ William S Burroughs, *Junky* (Ace Books, 1953) pg. 105
- ¹⁴ Jean Cocteau, *Opium: the Diary of his Cure* (Peter Owen, 1930), pg. 102
- ¹⁵ Jean Cocteau, *Opium: the Diary of his Cure* (Peter Owen, 1930), pg. 102
- ¹⁶ Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (Penguin Books, 1821), pg. 93
- ¹⁷ Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs Du Mal* (Elek Books, 1857) pg. 131
- ¹⁸ Charles Baudelaire, *Artificial Paradises* (Carol Publishing Group, 1860), pg. 138
- ¹⁹ Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (Penguin Books, 1821), pg. 106
- ²⁰ Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (Penguin Books, 1821), pg. 110
- ²¹ Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (Penguin Books, 1821), pg. 103
- ²² Charles Baudelaire, *Artificial Paradises* (Carol Publishing Group, 1860), pg. 118
- ²³ Charles Baudelaire, *Artificial Paradises* (Carol Publishing Group, 1860), pg. 119
- ²⁴ Charles Baudelaire, *Artificial Paradises* (Carol Publishing Group, 1860), pg. 74
- ²⁵ Jack Kerouac, interviewed by Ted Berrigan in The Paris Review, at <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4260/the-art-of-fiction-no-41-jack-kerouac>
- ²⁶ William S Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* (Grove Press, 1959) pg. 13
- ²⁷ Jean Cocteau, *Opium: the Diary of his Cure* (Peter Owen, 1930), pg. 88
- ²⁸ Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (Penguin Books, 1821), pg. 82
- ²⁹ Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (Penguin Books, 1821), pg. 83
- ³⁰ Charles Baudelaire, *Artificial Paradises* (Carol Publishing Group, 1860), pg. 138

³¹ Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (Penguin Books, 1821), pg. 82

³² Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (Penguin Books, 1821), pg. 83

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¹ Jean Cocteau, *Opium: the Diary of his Cure* (Peter Owen, 1930), pg. 93

² Jean Cocteau, *Opium: the Diary of his Cure* (Peter Owen, 1930), pg. 17

³ James S Williams, *Jean Cocteau* (Reaktion Books, 2008), pg. 121

⁴ James S Williams, *Jean Cocteau* (Reaktion Books, 2008), pg. 119

⁵ James S Williams, *Jean Cocteau* (Reaktion Books, 2008), pg. 119

⁶ Jean Cocteau, *Opium: the Diary of his Cure* (Peter Owen, 1930), pg. 36

⁷ James S Williams, *Jean Cocteau* (Reaktion Books, 2008), pg. 146

⁸ James S Williams, *Jean Cocteau* (Reaktion Books, 2008), pg. 144

⁹ Jean Cocteau, *Opium: the Diary of his Cure* (Peter Owen, 1930), pg. 93

¹⁰ William S Burroughs, *Junky* (Ace Books, 1953) pg. 127

¹¹ William S Burroughs, *Junky* (Ace Books, 1953) pg. 107

¹² William S Burroughs, *Junky* (Ace Books, 1953) pg. 106

¹³ William S Burroughs, *Junky* (Ace Books, 1953) pg. 107

¹⁴ William S Burroughs, *Junky* (Ace Books, 1953) pg. 76

¹⁵ William S Burroughs, *Junky* (Ace Books, 1953) pg. 77

¹⁶ Charles Baudelaire, *Artificial Paradises* (Carol Publishing Group, 1860), pg. 131

¹⁷ William S Burroughs, *Junky* (Ace Books, 1953) pg. 104

¹⁸ Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (Penguin Books, 1821), pg. 147

¹⁹ Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (Penguin Books, 1821), pg. 83

²⁰ Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (Penguin Books, 1821), pg. 85

²¹ Charles Baudelaire, *Artificial Paradises* (Carol Publishing Group, 1860), pg. 71

²² Charles Baudelaire, *Artificial Paradises* (Carol Publishing Group, 1860), pg. 67

²³ Charles Baudelaire, *Artificial Paradises* (Carol Publishing Group, 1860), pg. xiii

²⁴ Charles Baudelaire, *Artificial Paradises* (Carol Publishing Group, 1860), pg. 76

²⁵ Jean Cocteau, *Opium: the Diary of his Cure* (Peter Owen, 1930), pg. 54

Conclusion

¹ William S Burroughs, *Junky* (Ace Books, 1953) pg. 127

² William S Burroughs, *Junky* (Ace Books, 1953) pg. 128

³ Jean Cocteau, *Opium: the Diary of his Cure* (Peter Owen, 1930), pg. 86

⁴ Charles Baudelaire, *Artificial Paradises* (Carol Publishing Group, 1860), pg. 131

⁵ Jean Cocteau, *Orpheus* (DisCina, 1950).

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