Literature and Intoxication

WRITING, POLITICS AND THE EXPERIENCE OF EXCESS

Edited by Eugene Brennan and Russell Williams

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Also by Russell Williams

Autour de l'extrême littéraire (co-edited with Alastair Hemmens)

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Writing, Politics and the Experience of Excess

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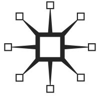

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Foreword: The Art of Hard Drugs

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

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

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

For De Quincey the most important aspect of the effect of opium was the way in which it enhanced reality rather than, as was the case with alcohol, obliterating it. Opium gave him at once a distance from the world, and allowed him to wander through cities, cultivating a deliberate alienation. In Everton, a suburb of Liverpool, he gave himself a dose of laudanum and spent nights gazing out at the point where the River Mersey meets the sea. 'I shall be charged

with mysticism,' he wrote, describing 'the great town' of Liverpool 'as representing the earth, with its sorrows left behind, yet not out of sight, nor wholly forgotten'. Opium 'transfigured all into harmony'.

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

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

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

The Velvet Underground knew very well what they were doing when they put this piece together. Some of the members of the group (Cale and an early drummer called Angus Maclise) had already been involved with the sound experiments of the minimalist composer La Monte Young, who was known for his use of long tones and very high volume and distortion. A piece from 1964, called 'Pre-Tortoise

Dream Music' (which almost certainly featured Cale) sounds very like 'Heroin', with its unwavering drone. La Monte Young had a belief that his music could create altered states, and this technique was meant to induce a mental space for mysticism and revelation. The Velvet Underground borrowed Young's technique but their intent was the opposite: they set out to create an aural landscape that told the listener what if felt like to be on heroin – claustrophobic, suicidal, ecstatic, obsessive, all in the same song.

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

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

It is addiction which shapes the style and content of *Naked Lunch*. The best way to read the book is as a series of sketches or skits written as the author was grappling with heroin withdrawal and possible insanity in Tangier. There is, as Burroughs put it, 'no real plot, no

beginning, no ending'. From this point of view, *Naked Lunch* is not really a novel at all but rather a compendium of nightmares. The book begins with the breathless voice of a junky on the run: 'I can feel the heat closing in, feel them out there making their moves, setting up their devil doll stool pigeons'. There then follows a whirlwind of disconnected scenes, all of them obscene, funny and appalling. A recurring motif in the North African dystopia called 'Interzone', where most of the book is set, is one of scenes of hanged men, their erect penises ejaculating at the point of death.

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

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

Inspired by De Quincey, the novelist Anna Kavan took up heroin in the 1920s, when she herself was in her twenties. She described her syringe as her 'bazooka'. When, in 1968, she died at home with a syringe in her arm, the policeman who found her said that she had enough heroin in stock 'to kill the whole street'. Kavan could be funny, friendly, welcoming – she enjoyed pubs, gambling and sex. But she also thought of herself as 'post-human' and a 'stranger on earth'. Kavan's London, depicted in her paintings and the nightmarish prose of her books, can be every bit as grotesque as the dreamscapes of William Burroughs.

She is also the ancestor of every other English heroin user since then – from the writers Mary Butts and Will Self, to the musicians Keith Richards and Lee Mavers, the photographer Michael Cooper, artists Sebastian Horsley, and others – for whom taking heroin was a choice. To this extent they all belong to the visionary tradition of English Romanticism. And this really is the point of hard drugs: it begins with De Quncey and the unleashing of a transcendental subjectivity which breaks with the classical tradition and gives birth to a new form of modernity, defined by what Wordsworth called the 'inward gaze'.

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

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Mike Jay has written widely on the history of science, medicine and drugs. His books include *High Society: Mind-altering Drugs in History and Culture* (2010) and *Emperors of Dreams: Drugs in the Nineteenth Century* (2011). See also: www.mikejay.net.

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Introduction: Writing, Politics and the Experience of Excess

Eugene Brennan and Russell Williams

Mundane sobriety is rarely enough. Throughout cultural history writers and readers have time and again found themselves in a state of willing intoxication. For Friedrich Nietzsche a feedback loop of cause and effect is endemic to the artistic process: 'the effect of works of art is to excite the states that create the work of art – intoxication' (Nietzsche, 1968, p. 168). Intoxication has had a particularly prominent place within modernism, bound up with artistic creation. The artist must confront the overwhelming socio-historical changes and cultural anxieties informing his or her moment in history: post-enlightenment secularisation with its effects of a de-sacralised and disenchanted world, the increasing precariousness of the figure of the artist within modernity, and the recurring feeling, paradoxically driving each modernist breakthrough, that art has in some sense reached its end and there is nothing more to say. Considering the task of the artist in such conditions, Maurice Blanchot describes modernist art as necessarily coming from a position of intoxication: 'from now on deprived or freed of the ideal of some absolute meaning conceived on the model of God, it is man who must create the world and above all create its meaning. An immense, intoxicating task' (Blanchot, 1993, p. 145).

For Walter Benjamin, the experience of modernity is also inseparable from intoxication, particularly in the paradigmatic modern figure of the *flâneur*. He wrote that 'the intoxication to which the *flâneur* surrenders is the intoxication of the commodity immersed in a surging stream of customers' (Benjamin, 2003, p. 31). Yet the inebriation of the *flâneur* is not a completely passive experience, as he notes of Baudelaire that 'the deepest fascination of this spectacle lay in the fact

that, even as it intoxicated him, it did not blind him to the horrible social reality' (ibid., p. 34). As Benjamin's own experiments with drugs in 'Hashish in Marseille' suggest, the experience of intoxication is profoundly connected with modernism's critical potential to defamiliarise the everyday and the banal. Under the effects of hashish, he describes the suddenly strange and defamiliarised sound of the Marseille dialect, as if it had become a barely discernible variant of French. He notes that 'the alienation effect that may underlie this, which Kraus once framed in the splendid sentence, "The more closely one examines a word, the more distant the look it returns", seems to extend to the optical in general. At any rate, I find among my notes the wondering words, "How objects withstand one's gaze!"' (Benjamin, 2009, p. 124). The intoxication Benjamin describes points towards how such states can amplify the strangeness and jarring tensions of the modern world.

Following Benjamin's lead, the essays collected in this volume propose a radical re-interrogation of notions of intoxication. Focussing largely, although not exclusively, on modernist texts, this collection casts critical doubt upon its commonly perceived subversive potential and upon excess as a value in itself. As a theoretical starting point for the analysis in the essays that follow, in this introductory chapter we will accordingly reconsider and problematise the counter-cultural valorisation of intoxication from a more critical perspective than has previously been offered. We will initially re-examine Nietzschean distinctions between Apollonian and Dionysian experiences, highlighting a more complex entanglement of the two tendencies. With particular attention to the work of Bataille, Deleuze and Guattari, we will trace a critique of intoxication up to the appropriation of excess within neoliberal capitalism. We will advocate a more cautious treatment of excess and reconsider the relationship between the Dionysian and the political within modernist literature and aesthetics. Alenka Zupančič's re-reading of the Dionysian informs this reconsideration of intoxication in terms of equivocation, duplicity and antagonism, in opposition to other accounts of the Dionysian which traditionally advocate self-loss or affirmation of the world.

Dionysian modernism: when 'one turns to two'

The cultural history of intoxication has largely unfolded under an opposition between the Apollonian and the Dionysian poles

of experience. For Nietzsche, the entire development of art was bound up with this duality. He described the two tendencies in his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), as representing two separate art worlds of dreams and intoxication. The Apollonian tendency is based on appearance and light. It was associated with the art of sculpture as opposed to the non-visual Dionysian art of music, with its greater capacity for intensity.

'Know thyself!' and 'Nothing in excess' are characteristically sober Socratic and Apollonian dictums. However, Nietzsche repeatedly stresses the entanglement of the two tendencies. In Greek tragedy, 'Apollo could not live without Dionysus!' (Nietzsche, 2000, p. 46) and the Dionysian chorus depends upon the Apollonian world of images through which it is communicated (ibid., p. 73). Intoxication has commonly been understood in terms of an opposition between the Dionysian and the Apollonian, but the dichotomy underwent significant changes throughout Nietzsche's work. The figures of Socrates, Christ and the Crucified came to occupy the place of Apollo and, while Dionysus was still associated with intoxication, he no longer primarily represented passionate self-loss but rather an affirmation of life: 'Saying Yes to life' is how Nietzsche defines the Dionysian in his later work (ibid., p. 72). Christ internalises the pain of life, putting the suffering of life in the service of an after-life, whereas Dionysus affirms life as it is, in all its suffering. Gilles Deleuze explains Nietzsche's development out of this opposition 'as that of the affirmation of life (its extreme valuation) and the negation of life (its extreme depreciation). Dionysian mania is opposed to Christian mania; Dionysian intoxication to Christian intoxication' (Deleuze, 2006, p. 15). There are thus not only several types of Dionysian intoxication, but intoxication itself is not always exclusive to the Dionysian.

A tension between antagonism and reconciliation is at stake in Dionysian intoxication. Both the early Nietzschean account of intoxication as self-loss and fusion with a mystical oneness, or the later visions of the Dionysian as an unequivocal affirmation of life, often imply renouncing antagonism and a depoliticised reconciliation with the world as it is. One might think of intoxication's oscillation between antagonism and reconciliation in terms of Alain Badiou's description of modernist aesthetics as an aesthetics of the Two, involving antagonism and internal conflict as opposed to the One, with its implications of reconciliation and unity. There is what

Badiou describes as a 'passion for the real' at work in aesthetic philosophies of the One, an obsession with 'unmasking' the fake semblance to discover the truth content beneath (Badiou, 2014). This is a passion for authenticity and implies that critical reading entails little more than an act of destroying the surface to see the 'pure' truth beneath, as if, in the realm of tragedy, it is simply a case of discovering the Dionysian truth beneath the Apollonian semblance.

Zupančič similarly argues that the tendency 'that ultimately identifies the Real with some unspeakable authenticity or Truth is the nihilist tendency par excellence' (Zupančič, 2003, pp. 129–30). As against the idea that the Real lies beyond language, or that the Real is undermined by the fact that everything is language, there is a 'something else' that exists besides this alternative, which is precisely a duality, a

> duality that has nothing to do with the dichotomies between complementary oppositional terms (which are ultimately always two sides of the One): this duality is not (yet) multiplicity either. It is perhaps best articulated in the topology of the edge as the thing whose substantiality consists in its simultaneously separating and linking two surfaces. This specific duality aims at the Real, and makes it take place through the very split that gives structure to this duality. (Ibid., pp. 12–13)

The neat separation of the Dionysian and the Apollonian throughout cultural history has thus often posited Dionysian excess under an illusory self-presence, as if it is an experience more authentically *real*. Zupančič gives us a more sober reading of Nietzsche in which the Dionysian is not a realm of pure immersion but is characterised by tension and duplicity. The perspective of this volume, following Zupančič, problematises any neat separation of the Dionysian and its other, and questions the widespread implication that Dionysian excess provides access to a more authentic reality. In her account, which stresses the absence of any authenticating self-presence, the difference between the Crucified (the negation of life) and Dionysus (life's beginning, its affirmation) is not as clear as it may seem. The difference between the two is rather, as Zupančič explains:

> that Dionysus is himself this very split (between the Crucified and Dionysus). Dionysus does not come after the Crucified, as

> something completely different. Dionysus is not simply the equivalent of new, different values; Dionysus is not the beginning of a new era, the morning of a new epoch after the fall of the old one. Dionysus is the beginning as midday, the moment when "one turns to two", namely, the moment of the very split or "becoming two" as that which is new'. (Ibid., p. 25)

In this sense, a reading of modernism which still stresses the importance of Dionysian excess would place less emphasis on Rimbaud's 'dérèglement de tous les sens', with its implications of freedom from constraints and jettisoning of tension, with a reading of the Dionysian within modernism which emphasises internal conflict, duplicity and non-reconcilable tensions. Our view of intoxication's place in modernism critiques its conventional role as what Badiou refers to as a philosophy of the One, a depoliticising reconciliation with the world through either obliterating self-loss or unequivocal affirmation of life as such. This collection advocates a more tempered view of intoxication, in which the subversive value of excess, or what remains of it, lies in its restraint and tension as against acceleration and self-loss.

Reconsidering intoxication

Intoxicated states have been described using a range of adjectives: drunk, stoned, high, wasted. In French usage, 'intoxication' chiefly describes poisoning (or brainwashing). Our use of the term in editing the collection, the proceedings of an international conference that took place in Paris in 2013, critiques the noxious potential of intoxication, but likewise considers how intoxication can be 'the action or power of exhilarating or highly exciting the mind' or 'elation or excitement beyond the bounds of society' (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Sigmund Freud described certain psychic states, such as mania, as intoxicating. This collection similarly explores states of excess which do not always arise from an explicit intoxicant. Furthermore, our view of intoxication is a less celebratory or elated one than previous studies. While considering the subversive potential of a variety of forms of intoxication and its potentially enlightening effects, we will be sensitive to its complicity with global capitalism.

The transgressive appeal of certain kinds of intoxication has often resided in their negative relationship to society. While certain

versions of the Dionysian may entail fusion with the world in self-loss, the embrace of intoxication has often meant saying no to the world as it is, rejecting the social order. For Freud the appeal of intoxication was in the mixture of pleasure and independence from the external world. In 'drowning our sorrows', he wrote, we can 'escape at any time from the pressure of reality and find refuge in a world of our own that affords us better conditions for our sensibility'. A grim picture of desperation and self-deluding escape emerges as he drily recounts that 'anyone who sees his quest for happiness frustrated in later years can still find consolation in the pleasure gained from chronic intoxication, or make a desperate attempt at rebellion and become psychotic' (Freud, 2004, p. 27).

The dangerous effects of intoxicants, for Freud, are that they 'are responsible for the futile loss of large amounts of energy that might have been used to improve the lot of mankind' (ibid., p. 19). Jacques Derrida similarly develops the threatening aspects of intoxication in an interview entitled 'The Rhetoric of Drugs'. While there are all manner of harmful intoxicants, such as cigarettes, alcohol and coffee, which are legally and socially permissible, Derrida notes that the threat of unpermitted intoxicants such as illegal drugs does not reside in either the potential harm or pleasure. What is forbidden is the solitary, desocialising world created by the drug user. Similar to the anti-social expenditure of energy Freud pointed towards, Derrida highlights the drug user's exile from reality, far from the everyday life of the city and community, 'into a world of simulacrum and fiction'(Derrida, 1995, pp. 234–6).

The modern experience of intoxication then turns over two opposing visions of its relationship with the world, firstly in a total immersion with the world in Dionysian self-loss, and secondly in a total rejection of the world and retreat from it in the self-enforced exile of certain kinds of drug addiction. However, both instances might be seen as dialectical inversions of one another, two sides of the same coin. To pursue either path of valorising intoxication, as pure retreat or pure immersion, one disavows and represses the tensions between self and world in a quest for escape. Such unbridled embrace of intoxication renounces the antagonism constitutive of modernism as described by Badiou and Zupančič among others.

While Zupančič offers a valuable and politicised reading of the later Nietzsche, the apolitical implications of Dionysian intoxication