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Dealing with the demon: Drugs, history and society

Brian Musgrove, University of Southern Queensland

Marcus Boon *The Road of Excess: A History of Writers on Drugs*, Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 2002 (339 pp). ISBN 0-674-00914-2 (paperback) RRP \$36.95.

‘Drugs’ were one of the 20th century’s great demonologies, sparking a series of moral panics: from the cocaine craze of the 1920s, through the ‘reefer madness’ of the 30s and the psychedelia of the 60s, to the heroin crisis of the 80s and ecstasy raves of the 90s. Public perceptions of drugs have always been constructed, or polluted, by other concerns. The myth of the lazy native and images of the murderous savage combined to ignite American popular opinion against marijuana in the 30s: it was the drug of idle Mexicans and rampant black men. Miscegenation coloured the reputation of opium in the early 1900s: the common tale of white girls seduced in Chinese opium dens, from San Francisco, London’s East End and inner-city Sydney, was international newspaper currency. In Australia, as Desmond Manderson (1993) showed, opium, racism and invasion paranoia were linked: *The Bulletin* exploited anti-opium legislation campaigns to intensify Yellow Peril fears and to bolster its ‘Australia for the White Man’ crusade.

Drugs can also be emblems of status and class. In fin de siècle Paris, absinthe drinkers and opium smokers were deplored as lost, degraded souls whilst ‘morphinism’ (as it was called at the time) was an upper-crust pursuit. As Marcus Boon observes in his book, *The Road of Excess: A History of Writers on Drugs*, ‘Morphine use was beyond the means of most people in French society’ and ‘morphinists’ usually ‘carried boxes with elegant handmade syringes’, re-casting drug taking as ‘an elegant refinement’ (p. 49).




In the late 1990s, the reception of Viagra exhibited similar tendencies. The miracle drug’s name ‘seems meant to evoke the thundering power of Niagara Falls, that gushing cascade of natural beauty central to so many honeymoons’, and it conjured the promise of a ‘mythical Fountain of Youth’ (Vaughan 1998, p. 12). America’s media soon carried stories of Viagra parties amongst the wealthy leisure classes of California and Florida: privileged echelons where cocaine had once been the drug of choice. Cocaine, it was noted, had become tainted by its conversion into ‘crack’—a derivative, home-made street drug, visiting misery and gang warfare on ‘ethnic’ urban ghettos. Viagra filled the recreational vacuum left by cocaine’s chemical and symbolic debasement.

REVOLUTION IN THE HEAD

The modern concept of ‘drugs’ emerged at a precise historical moment: with the rise of European Romanticisms in the late 18th century, and the proto-psychology found in the works of Rousseau, Goethe and Coleridge. Romanticism had a novel concept of human

character. In reaction to the Enlightenment view of personality as basically rational, Romanticism was fascinated by the irrational quality of reveries, dreams, nightmares and hallucinations. In addition, the Romantic creed encouraged revolutions in thought and deed, and Romantic writers experienced a deep alienation from social institutions. Consequently, drugs were re-defined as agents of mental travel, a flight from both reason and social convention, and drug taking was an act that estranged the user from community norms. The pioneer English drug writers—Coleridge and his acolyte Thomas De Quincey—extravagantly associated opium with theories of Imagination and the mind; and their relations with mainstream literary circles were frequently fraught by suspicion, strife and scandal. As Molly Lefebure's fine narco-biography of Coleridge, *A Bondage of Opium* (1974), effectively argued, he and De Quincey supplied an early typology of 'the addict': their lives were itinerant; they left grand literary schemes unfulfilled, they were dogged by poverty and squalor. (There is an unedifying episode in Coleridge's *Notebooks* in which the opium-addled poet watches the effect of candle-light on urine in a chamber pot.)

In Boon's *Road of Excess*, Romanticism bears the blame—or takes the honour—for creating the mystique of 'drugs'. Boon writes that the Romantic attitude to drugs is historically persistent: associated with the alluring notion of radical individualism and provocatively affirming 'our legitimate desire to be high' (p. 13). The value of a study of drug literature is that it reveals the socio-historical development of this abiding drug mystique; plotting the symbolic resonances and powers of attraction that the Romantic concept of 'drugs' has accumulated over time, revealing how the demon 'drugs' has a deeply-entrenched cultural magnetism.



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Generations of would-be experimenters have not been lured into drug taking because of moral deficiency or pathological flaw, or by the narcissistic self-fashioning that often accompanies the experience. 'Doing drugs' is a cultural action, framed by complex structures of meaning and very real, lived ritual practices. And as *Road of Excess* demonstrates, the temptation into this cultural action has often been cued by literary pre-publicity—though Boon notes that no book has ever been censored or prosecuted for its promotion of the drug mystique. Indeed, the embargo on William Burroughs' classic drug text *The Naked Lunch* (1959) was enforced in Australia until 1972 because of its graphic sexual passages, not its pictures of addiction.

Nevertheless, from the beginnings of modern drug literature in the 1790s there has been a discernible and acknowledged pattern of cultural influence, with older generations of drug taking writers casting their spell over younger disciples. Thomas De Quincey's landmark *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821) was translated into French by the dandy-poet Alfred de Musset and quickly adopted as an article of faith by Parisian bohemians. As a result, Théophile Gautier founded the drug taking Hashish Club in the city's notorious Hôtel Pimodan; and a regular, Charles Baudelaire, proceeded to write his own magnum opus on the subject, *Les paradis artificiels* (1860), guided by De Quincey's delinquencies.

De Quincey's spirit also pervaded the 19th-century American scene: William Blair's 'An Opium Eater in America' (1842) and Fitz Hugh Ludlow's sensational *The Hasheesh Eater* (1857); and disembarking in Melbourne in 1863, Marcus Clarke's first material acquisition was De Quincey's multi-volume works. Clarke's metropolitan journalism and his peculiar essay on 'Cannabis Indica' (1868) were products of this purchase. William Burroughs confided that as a youth he wanted to be a writer because writers 'lounged around Singapore

and Rangoon smoking opium', snorted high-quality 'cocaine in Mayfair' and relaxed 'in the native quarter of Tangier smoking hashish' (Bokris 1997, p. xvii). In homage to Burroughs, singer Marianne Faithfull disclosed that her near-disastrous affair with heroin had literary origins: reading '*The Naked Lunch* for the first time' she had an epiphanous 'blinding flash. It became as clear as day to me what I must do. I would become a junkie' (Faithfull & Day 1994, p. 147).

This pattern of influence is a reminder that understanding drugs cannot be reduced or left to clinical or legal debate. The concept 'drugs' has an important aesthetic dimension, and this dimension has concrete social functions. As an historical appreciation of drug literature demonstrates, the aesthetic can direct life choices, and spawn subcultures and provide a rationale or value system for their codes and practices.



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Thus, for two centuries, the aesthetic pull of drug writing has induced real life experiment. The dramatic mescaline visions recorded in Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception*, for example, seduced Timothy Leary away from mainstream psychology and into his notorious role as LSD guru. It is also the case that drug taking writers have sometimes supplied the most important, pioneering information on drugs and their effects: in drug books, 'science' can be indistinguishable from 'imaginative literature'.

But 'literature' is rarely the first port-of-call for legislators or politicians: the idea of a president or foreign minister reaching for *All Quiet on the Western Front*, or Wilfred Owen's poetry, to inform a decision about going to war seems preposterous. However, Boon's *Road to Excess* cites the case of Harry Anslinger, America's Federal Bureau of Narcotics chief, in his deposition to congress in 1937 to facilitate the passage of the Taxation of Marijuana Act. Anslinger employed literature to explain the drug's sordid past and present menace. He invoked the famous Nepenthe episode from Homer's *Odyssey*: a chapter in which the unidentified drug Nepenthe induced forgetfulness and paralysed the human will. Obviously cannabis, Anslinger insisted. He supplemented this with references to Marco Polo's *Travels* and the cult of the 'hashishin', or assassins. Drugged by the Old Man of the Mountains, the hashish-eating assassins were programmed to commit secret murder. Again, the connection and point were clear. America's popular press and film industry obligingly followed, creating fictions about depravity and madness that featured portraits of a new folk devil, 'the dope fiend'.

Anslinger thus confronted the drug mystique with a counter-aesthetic, a demonology; and it is worth reflecting on the persistence of literary-historical stereotypes in contemporary drug policy discussion. A recent ABC television 'Four Corners' documentary (20 March 2006) illustrates the point. Clearly intended as a contribution to drug policy debate—in this case the issue of how to deal with 'ice', or crystal methamphetamine—the program's consciously-chosen central character was a classic 'dope fiend': unemployed, ungroomed, uneducated, under class and bordering on petty criminal. But as serious researchers have continually discovered, reality defies stereotype: the 'ice' user is commonly a young urban professional, employed and paid well enough to support a habit without recourse to crime. But the Anslinger-style image of the 'dope fiend' is still used to fuel community outrage, and this has a potential impact on the impressionable public opinion that legislators take into account when they frame drug laws and policies.

‘ADDICTION’ AND THE MODERN CONDITION

No drug comes ‘raw’, straight from nature. In the labour-intensive poppy field and the well-equipped laboratory, drugs require technical tampering. The drugs of today are amongst the most innovative products of industrial chemistry, and whether on the black market or the pharmacy shelf they circulate according to the principles of consumer economy. In fact, as Wolfgang Schivelbusch (1993) argued, from the formation of the first world-market in the Renaissance spices and drugs were highly valued, both for their symbolic functions and simply as commodities. Coleridge would not have had the opportunity to try the ‘exotic’ cannabis without the generosity of Joseph Banks, who brought it back to England from a voyage to the East motivated by botanical commercialisation.



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Drugs and drug taking played an important part in the post-Enlightenment social process known as ‘modernisation’ for a variety of reasons. With the industrial revolution, technological advance, and mass production, came new markets for commodities. Because of rapid scientific innovation, new drugs were developed (tinctures of cannabis, nitrous oxide, morphine, ether) and they became some of the most lucrative products on the mass market.

Drugs also became a popular palliative for industrial society’s pressures. The Victorian sage Thomas Carlyle considered Coleridge’s opium taking as a nerve-shattered reaction to the blight of industrial modernisation; De Quincey’s dreadful opium dreams were a direct product of his terrifying experiences in modern, mass-metropolitan London. The shock wave of industrial revolution in late 18th century Britain stressed and fractured traditional community ties. It transplanted displaced populations into the mushrooming mill towns, and its factory system required new forms of routine and regulation—modern habits like shift work and clocking on and off, day in day out, which were unknown in traditional pastoral communities.

Under the new industrial system, life was understood as an endlessly-repeated series of habitual actions, and this view of human behaviour is the same as the view of ‘addiction’ that developed in the 19th century. Like the factory worker, the addict was a creature of habit, who seemed compelled to repeat the same action over and over, every day. Industrial society operated with the same ‘modern’ logic as an addiction. Thus, it was thus no accident of language that in the 19th century repeated drug use came to be known as ‘habituation’ and the drug user was labelled an ‘habitué’.

Industrial manufacturing created a bountiful economy of cheaper goods, and this led to another new concept of modern life: for the first time, people were *consumers*. Free-market capitalism, and the advertising that accompanied it, persuaded mass populations that consuming habits were essential to human nature, and that through the act of consuming people could—and should—immediately satisfy any appetite or craving. From this, Karl Marx derived his theory of commodity fetishism: the idea that ‘humble objects’ circulating in a consumer economy acquired an aura, an almost ‘metaphysical’ quality, and to possess or consume them was the ultimate fulfilment of human desire. Consequently, modern commodity capitalism had an aesthetic dimension: like the mystique of drugs, the aura of the commodity provoked conspicuous consumption.

As commodity capitalism has dramatically enlarged, from its origins in western European and American industrial revolutions, today's global market is driven by the principle of consumerism. And Eve Sedgwick (1993) lucidly argues that the final post-industrial, capitalist refinement of the principle of consuming habit is best described by the term 'addiction'. In Sedgwick's view, this is a world where desires are constantly stimulated, and the instantaneous way to fulfil them is by compulsively and repetitively consuming. Consequently, she reasons, there is no moral or qualitative difference between the drug addict, the alcoholic, chocoholic or shopaholic. All these types are motivated by the same belief: that conspicuous consumption is a hall-mark of human nature and, indeed, of 'being modern'.



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The mystique of drugs and the fashions and cultures of consumer capitalism are twins. Brookings Institution policy analyst Paul Stares concludes that the very success of American popular culture and its media 'after World War II clearly contributed to the rise of a mass market in drugs'. He goes on to argue that, just as the imagery and mystique of American life 'have helped homogenise consumer tastes and created mass markets for products such as blue jeans, T-shirts, hamburgers, rock music, and Walkmans' (1996, p. 62), so they have catalysed the international appetite for the alluring drug experience. Again, drug use and consumerism go hand in hand.

There is a compelling case that 'legitimate' overground economies and drug undergrounds share an identical inner logic. As the literary 'master addict' Burroughs wrote (1972/1959, pp. 8–9), heroin or 'junk' is retailed according to 'basic principles of monopoly' capitalism and junk 'is the mold of monopoly and possession'; it is 'the ultimate merchandise. No sales talk necessary. The client will crawl through a sewer and beg to buy'. Burroughs' fictional drug writings regularly contained satirical, but lethally serious, observations on the similarities of narcotics addiction and consumer capitalism.

Crazes for new drugs and the cultural fashions that surround them make the 'aesthetic of addiction' an ongoing feature of contemporary life. And this is the finally troubling—but perhaps unconscious—power of the shibboleth 'drugs'. In an age when people are consumers first, and citizens second, how is the consuming habit of the addict different from that of the compulsive shopper? The lifestyles of the drug addict and the shopaholic follow the same patterns and beliefs, and the attempt to discriminate 'normal' and 'deviant' behaviour, licit and illicit desire, is constantly confounded.

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[Brian Musgrove](#) lectures in literature and cultural theory at the University of Southern Queensland and is a member of the Public Memory Research Centre. He has published several articles on drugs and drug writing.