

Markus Iseli, "Thomas de Quincey's Subconscious: Nineteenth-Century Intimations of the Cognitive Unconscious."
Romanticism 20.3 (2014): 294-305.

Highlighting a dearth of critical attention to the creation and first appearance in print of the word *subconscious*, Markus Iseli's essay sets out to offer a more nuanced understanding of the popular term via an examination of its nineteenth-century usage. The article argues that while Thomas De Quincey's concept of the word is similar to that of modern cognitive psychologists, all too frequently Freudian psychoanalytic theories have been used to interpret De Quincey's works and that, in wider terms, the nineteenth-century idea of the *subconscious* has been "almost completely obliterated by Freud's psychoanalysis" (294). Rather than the Freudian *unconscious*, which focuses on "the irrational, the innate sex drives, and the symbolic instantiation of repressed childhood experiences," Iseli's article seeks to reorientate present scholarship, foregrounding instead the "cognitive unconscious" – those "complex and rational processes that are not part of conscious reflection" – as a way of understanding De Quincey's use of the term (295). In short, Iseli's article "seeks to provide an alternative approach to the unconscious in literary studies, the cognitive unconscious, at the example of De Quincey's coinage and usage of *subconscious*" in order to "to sharpen our awareness of the pre-Freudian tradition and determine the frequently implicit meanings of nineteenth-century accounts" (295).

Iseli begins by tracing the origins of the word *subconscious* itself through the works of De Quincey, who coined both "the adjective *subconscious* and the adverb *subconsciously*," bringing them into print in 1834 and 1844 respectively (294). Noting that De Quincey's use of the word is closer to twentieth- and twenty-first-century terminology – ideas indicating "productive unconscious processes, a notion that fundamentally contradicts psychoanalysis in many points" – Iseli situates De Quincey's application as of central importance to the history of psychology (294). The inconsistency and scarcity of the term's usage amongst late nineteenth-century psychologists, alongside Freud's rejection of the term, reinforces Iseli's suggestion that a study of De Quincey's usage might have valuable and previously unconsidered implications for our understanding of nineteenth-century theories of mind.

Unpacking De Quincey's coinage of *subconscious* (1834) after Coleridge's *subconsciousness* (1806) through the intimacy of the two men, Iseli nonetheless rejects "the generally received notion of the Romantic tradition as being distinctly Freudian" (295). While Iseli acknowledges the mutual influence of De Quincey's association with Wordsworth, Coleridge and other Romantic poets, the fact that De Quincey used the term *subconscious* in print over two decades provides compelling evidence that it was his usage that brought it before the wider public. Splitting De Quincey's ten uses of *subconscious* into "implicit thought, automaticity, implicit perception and implicit motivation," Iseli illustrates how these closely mirror recent categories in the concept of the cognitive unconscious, "a form of unconscious cognition, as opposed to the lower level mechanisms of Freudian theories" (297). Close reading the specific instances in which De Quincey used the term *subconscious* in a comparison to Kihlstrom's "Unconscious Processes" (2013), provides striking evidence for Iseli's theory. For example, in "The Caesars," De Quincey's use of the word *sub-conscious* "resembles the cognitive psychologists' assertion that the unconscious executes the same complex and rational processes as deliberate thought"

(298). Iseli further explores De Quincey's definition of the *sub-conscious* through quotation from De Quincey's article on Immanuel Kant in *Tait's Magazine* (1836), in which "De Quincey's 'sub-conscious thought' virtually coincides with Kihlstrom's implicit thought" as a process governing "tentative motions" (299). "Automaticity" is applied by De Quincey to the reception of literary texts, with Iseli noting how "De Quincey argues that the style of a poem or other piece of writing often eludes conscious appreciation, but the effects are nevertheless felt intuitively" (300). Iseli explores how later uses of *sub-conscious* evoke "implicit perception" through De Quincey's article "On Wordsworth's Poetry" (1845) and the undated "Pope and Didactic Poetry," where the term *sub-conscious* is used "to designate this phenomena of processed but not consciously perceived sense impressions as discussed by cognitive psychologists today" (301). The final instance of *subconscious* is from a letter to De Quincey's eldest daughter Margaret in 1856, and is suggestive of, Iseli argues, the modern understanding of implicit motivation.

These analyses serve to affirm Iseli's argument that the psychoanalytic approach "does not furnish the theoretical framework to discuss a range of vital aspects of unconscious mentation," not simply in terms of the specific case of *subconscious*, but also in terms of "De Quincey's iterations about dreams, the workings of the mind, the self, and his theories on language and literature" (303). The article suggests that "moving away from the psychoanalytical to the cognitive processes in literary criticism adds a valuable new dimension to authors, texts and literary periods," gesturing outwards to the need for new work into the analysis and etymology of *subconscious* (303). One might have wished for further exploration of how this concept sits within the wider understanding of mental faculties in the nineteenth century, as well as if and how De Quincey's usage of the term *subconscious* impacted these theories of mind, but this would perhaps have detracted from the force and clarity of a superb argument which opens new avenues of investigation for psychology in the nineteenth century.

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