

[Review] Cian Duffy (2014) My purpose was humbler, but also higher: Thomas De Quincey's 'System of the heavens', popular science and the sublime

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Cian Duffy, “‘My purpose was humbler, but also higher’: Thomas De Quincey’s ‘System of the Heavens’, Popular Science and the Sublime.” *Romanticism* 20. 1 (2014): 1-14.

“Come, and I will show what is sublime!” writes Thomas De Quincey in his essay “System of the Heavens as Revealed by Lord Rosse’s Telescopes,” first published in *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine* in 1846. De Quincey composed his essay following the observation of the Orion nebula by William Parsons, third Earl of Rosse, using his massive newly-built telescope, the “Leviathan of Parsonstown.” Rosse’s investigation resolved the nebula into individual stars rather than gaseous mass, thus refuting the most important nineteenth-century theory of the development of the solar system, the nebular hypothesis. However, Cian Duffy skilfully demonstrates that De Quincey’s primary concern is not with Rosse’s finding, nor indeed with his professed scientific source, the popular astronomy book, John Pringle Nichol’s *Thoughts on Some Important Points Relating to the System of the World* (1846). Instead, Duffy astutely argues, De Quincey’s essay “remediates in non-specialist language” the “impressive effect” of the “natural sublime,” widely employed in astronomical and cosmological writing (2). Duffy claims that in “System of the Heavens,” De Quincey’s long-standing personal fascination with the science is relegated to his and *Tait’s* financial concerns, the “natural sublime,” inherited from Romantic science, having proven marketability. This leads Duffy to propose that De Quincey offers his readers a “vicarious” knowledge of the “natural sublime” as experienced by the astronomer looking through the telescope remediated through “rhetorical effect,” rather than the actual spectacle of astronomical phenomena, thus rendering it a commodity for the readership of *Tait’s* (3).

According to Duffy, De Quincey’s use of “impressive effect” reflects his concern with the “power” infusing the genre of astronomical writing, rather than an intention to communicate astronomical knowledge (3). Duffy explicates the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century excitement at the second astronomical renaissance started by William Herschel, continued by his son John Herschel, and occasioned by the development of telescopes with greater optical power. This exhilaration Duffy reads as evidenced in the heightened language of the “natural sublime” employed in popular astronomy texts such as Nichol’s *Thoughts* – “depths apparently fathomless,” “a boundless ocean of space,” “the idea [...] of infinity in its true awfulness” – and which Duffy finds sustained in De Quincey’s description of Rosse’s findings (5). Invoking William Wordsworth’s poem “Star-Gazers” (1807) which describes those who gathered round the popular street telescope exhibitors in London’s Leicester Square – “spectators rude, / Poor in estate, of manners base, men of the multitude” – Duffy sees De Quincey’s use of the intensified language of the “natural sublime” as placing him as a “show”-man of the same “tradition,” appealing to the “multitude” with profitability in mind, rather than the “men and women of science” (2, 4).

Particularly interesting is Duffy’s focus on the core section of De Quincey’s essay, his reimagining of the Orion nebula in an illustration taken from Nichol’s *Thoughts* as an “abominable apparition” (7). Rather than transmitting scientific knowledge about the Orion nebula and its verification or disproving of the nebular hypothesis, De Quincey creates a spectacle of the nebula formed from a “composite”

of empirical observations of the Herschels and Rosse, and “culturally-determined responses” including well-known lines from John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Here, Duffy stresses how De Quincey creates a “spectacular product specifically designed for sale and consummation,” with little resemblance to the nebula itself (8). Pointing out the vehement criticism De Quincey’s nebula received, Duffy gives an informative analysis of De Quincey’s footnotes to the republished “System of the Heavens” written for his *Selections Grave and Gay* in 1853. Reinforcing his thesis, Duffy argues De Quincey rejects criticism of his description of the nebula in Orion as “fanciful” and “un-scientific,” by stating that it did not need to resemble the “actual nebula” as “modified” by more recent observations (10-12). For De Quincey it is “enough that once, in a single stage” it appeared as he describes: “momentary glimpses of objects vast and awful” more successfully conveying “impressive effect” than “any amount of scientific discussion” (11, 10). Duffy suggests De Quincey’s rejection of empirical truth signals the “dilemma” popular science writing still faces today: how to achieve an equilibrium between making science accessible, accurate and commercially valuable (12).

Cian Duffy contributes a unique perspective to an already impressive body of scholarship on De Quincey’s “System of the Heavens,” by John Barrell, Joseph Hillis-Miller, Alex Murray, Robert Platzner, Jonathan Smith, and Robert Lance Snyder. While the majority have focussed on the essay’s representations of De Quincey’s autobiographical concerns, Duffy pays heed to Smith’s appeal for critics to underscore the connections between De Quincey’s essay and existing astronomical and cosmological genres. The risk here is that the rich interplay of discourses – personal, literary and scientific – that characterise De Quincey’s essay become subsumed to one cause. Providing the reader keeps this in mind they will find much of interest in Duffy’s article, not just with reference to De Quincey’s essay, but also regarding the wider rhetorical strategies of nineteenth-century popular scientific writing.

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