

**THE ART OF  
CONVERSATION;  
AND OTHER PAPERS**

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The Art of Conversation; And Other Papers by Thomas de Quincey

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THOMAS DE QUINCEY

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EDINBURGH

ADAM AND CHARLES BLACK

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## ADVERTISEMENT.

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SEVERAL papers in this Volume were revised by the Author; others are republished in their original form.

Two of those in the latter class demand a special remark. in justice to the Author's memory. The "Letters to a Young Man whose Education has been Neglected," were always kept in abeyance, with the intention of being considerably extended. In like manner, the paper "On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth," was marked out for alteration and enlargement.

EDINBURGH, *January* 1863.

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# LETTERS TO A YOUNG MAN

WHOSE EDUCATION HAS BEEN NEGLECTED.

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## LETTER I.

MY DEAR SIR,—When I had the pleasure of meeting you at Ch—, for the second time in my life, I was much concerned to remark the general dejection of your manner. I may now add, that I was also much surprised; your cousin's visit to me having made it no longer a point of delicacy to suppress that feeling. General report had represented you as in possession of all which enters into the worldly estimate of happiness—great opulence, unclouded reputation, and freedom from unhappy connexions. That you had the priceless blessing of unfluctuating health, I know upon your own authority. And the concurring opinions of your friends, together with my own opportunities for observation, left me no room to doubt that you wanted not the last and mightiest among the sources of happiness—a fortunate constitution of mind, both for moral and intellectual ends. So many blessings as these, meeting in the person of one man, and yet all in some mysterious way defeated and poisoned, presented a problem too interesting, both to the selfish and the generous curiosity of men, to

make it at all wonderful that at that time and place you should have been the subject of much discussion. Now and then some solutions of the mystery were hazarded ; in particular, I remember one from a young lady of seventeen, who said, with a positive air, "That Mr. M—'s dejection was well known to arise from an unfortunate attachment in early life," which assurance appeared to have great weight with some other young ladies of sixteen. But, upon the whole, I think that no account of the matter was proposed at that time which satisfied myself, or was likely to satisfy any reflecting person.

At length the visit of your cousin L—, in his road to Th—, has cleared up the mystery in a way more agreeable to myself than I could have ventured to anticipate from any communication short of that which should acquaint me with the entire dispersion of the dejection under which you laboured. I allow myself to call such a disclosure agreeable, partly upon the ground that where the grief or dejection of our friends admits of no important alleviation, it is yet satisfactory to know that it may be traced to causes of adequate dignity ; and, in this particular case, I have not only that assurance, but the prospect of contributing some assistance to your emancipation from these depressing recollections, by co-operating with your own efforts in the way you have pointed out for supplying the defects of your early education.

L— explained to me all that your own letter had left imperfect ; in particular, how it was that you came to be defrauded of the education to which even your earliest and humblest prospects had entitled you ; by what heroic efforts, but how vainly, you laboured to repair that greatest of losses ; what remarkable events concurred to raise you to your present state of prosperity ; and all other circumstances

which appeared necessary to put me fully in possession of your present wishes and intentions.

The two questions which you addressed to me through him I have answered below : these were questions which I could answer easily and without meditation ; but for the main subject of our future correspondence, it is so weighty, and demands such close attention (as even *I* find, who have revolved the principal points almost daily for many years), that I would willingly keep it wholly distinct from the hasty letter which I am now obliged to write ; on which account it is that I shall forbear to enter at present upon the series of letters which I have promised, even if I should find that my time were not exhausted by the answers to your *two questions below*.

To your first question,—Whether to you, with your purposes and at your age of thirty-two, a residence at either of our English universities, or at any foreign university, can be of much service?—my answer is, firmly and unhesitatingly, No. The majority of the undergraduates of your own standing, in an academic sense, will be your juniors by twelve or fourteen years ; a disparity of age which could not but make your society mutually burthensome. What, then, is it that you would seek in a university? Lectures? These, whether public or private, are surely the very worst modes of acquiring any sort of accurate knowledge ; and are just as much inferior to a good book on the same subject, as that book hastily read aloud, and then immediately withdrawn, would be inferior to the same book left in your possession, and open at any hour, to be consulted, retraced, collated, and in the fullest sense studied. But, besides this, university lectures are naturally adapted, not so much to the general purpose of communicating knowledge, as to the specific purpose of meeting a particular form of exami-