THOMAS DE QUINCEY: A STUDY

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Thomas De Quincey: A Study by Ripley Hitchcock

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RIPLEY HITCHCOCK

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THOMAS DE QUINCEY

IN point of time, Thomas De Quincey was a child of revolution. He was born in 1785, at Greenhay, a suburb of Manchester, then the home of his much travelled father, a well to do merchant. The dominant Zeitgeist of his formative years was revolt, accompanied by production, while at the end of our own century the time-spirit is essentially critical or expository. During his precocious childhood the influence of Goethe was mounting in Germany, and the ferment of the French Revolution was at work throughout the world. His youth and early manhood were contemporary with impulses like those which had to do with the Grecian War of Independence, with the songs of Byron and of Keats, with the naturalistic movements in French and English letters and the romanticism of letters and art. At the close of our century the attitude of scientific scrutiny holds enthusiasm in leash. It is the fashion of the day to analyze great reputations with what we are pleased to term broad impartiality and to readjust rank, as the modern critics in the last twenty years have reclassified and renamed so many of the works in European picture galleries. New editions fail to reinvest the Byron of to-day with the glory of the century's earlier years, and Wordsworth, once the ark of the covenant, has, like Coleridge, been despoiled of much which it was once deemed sacrilege to touch. Whether we are pleased to call this iconoclasm, or "the new criticism," the tests brought by the time must be met, and we must look at De Quincey with the eyes of to-day, not with those of readers of the "London Magazine" in 1821.

This spirit of inquiry has a virtue sometimes obscured by the

rashness of protagonists searching for crumbling idols in the Pantheon of letters. In spite of standards and canons, each generation, more or less consciously, modifies the judgments of its predecessor and, in general, ultimately reaches a mean between ultra conservatism and such sweeping condemnation of the past as American readers of periodicals have seen from Mr. Howells, and after him by a long interval, Mr. Clemens and Mr. Garland. In the case of De Quincey there have been peculiar obstacles to the attainment of a mean of popular comprehension which should be just to the man and to his work. His lot was cast in a revolutionary period, and yet in many respects he was a conservative, and his purely literary affiliations were with the stately prose writers of the seventeenth century rather than the active unrest of the early nineteenth. Known to most readers as a dreamer, he was capable of the keenest analysis — witness his discussions of Shakspere and Goethe in the Encyclopedia Britannica. He has been held to be a rhetorician, a mere painter with words, and yet his analysis of Ricardo was gratefully acknowledged by so unrhetorical an economist as James Stuart Mill. Few writers, seemingly, have shown their personality more frankly in their work. Yet a reserve, of which Jean Paul and Sterne were ignorant, is felt by all who read between the lines, as it was felt by even his rare circle of friends at Grasmere and Edinburgh. This quality of reticence in one who apparently exposed his inner thoughts has led to miscomprehensions second only in consequence to the persistent delusion as to the predominant influence of opium upon De Quincey's contributions to literature. The late James T. Fields, a personal friend, as well as the publisher of De Quincey's collected works in America nearly fifty years ago, innocently encouraged this delusion in the lectures of his later years by constantly exhibiting a page of De Quincey's manuscript bearing the mark of his glass of laudanum. There was the drug, there was the manuscript. *Post hoc, propter hoc.* And so, for many reasons, there has grown up a popular inevitable association of De Quincey's rare and precious genius with the drug of the Orient, an association

more widespread in his case than in that of Coleridge, and therefore to be more earnestly rebutted. There is the testimony of medical science that opium cannot communicate to the brain any power or faculty of which it is not already possessed, and there is the record of his infancy and youth, showing that his dream experiences did not begin with his use of opium. Dr. Eatwell's diagnosis indicates that by palliating De Quincey's gastrodynia and averting a tuberculous predisposition opium probably prolonged his life.

If, then, we are to know the real De Quincey, we must follow him not only through his writings and those of his biographers, among whom Page is easily first, but we must also study the reactions of his individuality upon associates like Coleridge or Christopher North. The memoirs of Professor Wilson, prepared by his daughter, Mrs. Gordon, as well as the more familiar Noctes, is of intimate interest to students of De Quincey, even though in the latter we fail to accept the veritude of "The Opium-Eater's" monologues. In the "Confessions" presented complete in this volume there is so much of autobiography that a recurrence to such facts is useful simply as they illustrate the predilections and shaping influences which determined the development and character of his art. The reader of his biography dwells, unconsciously, upon the early evidences of almost abnormal intellectual development and shrinking sensitiveness, upon the profound influence exerted by "the gentlest of sisters," Elizabeth, and by her death, when he was six, and upon the tenderness of his memory of his father, who died in 1792, when the son was only seven. The impressions of these early years, the apparent tuberculous taint revealed in his father and sisters, and his own gastrodynia, if we are to accept Dr. Eatwell's diagnosis, might have darkened all his literary expression but for the intensely vital humanity which was so large a part of his nature. This intense sympathy with his fellow-men makes itself felt even when we are wondering at his early feats of scholastic prowess in the Bath school, his precocious mastery of dead languages, his study of Hebrew and theology with Lady Carbery, and his intimacy with the

Swedenborgian, John Clowes, during the unhappy life at the dull Manchester Grammar School, which he entered in 1801 and left a fugitive. His constant desire to understand the feelings and motives of the rustics with whom he came into contact in the Welsh wanderings which followed his flight from school is no less characteristic than the intellectual hunger which found welcome food even then in an introduction to Richter and German literature. The bitterness of his subsequent days of starvation in London was powerless over this love of mankind, and the pathetic tenderness of his attitude toward the lonely waif in Brunell's house, and toward the unhappy Ann touches us as nearly to-day as it touched the readers of 1821. Yet this is not a generation which weeps with Richardson's sentimental heroines or one which shares the sorrows of Werther.

If it were necessary here to follow De Quincey's life with a minute scrutiny, something must be said of the growth of his attainments and his conversational powers, but "The Confessions" indicates the one and suggests the other. More essential to our purpose are his meeting with Coleridge in 1807 and the intimacy with the "Lake School." Wordsworth he had worshipped from afar since reading "We are Seven" in 1799, but in spite of the intellectual comprehension which Wordsworth acknowledged, in the case of the appendix to the "Convention of Cintra," it was Coleridge who became his chosen friend. It is pleasanter to dwell upon his eager hero worship and his generous pecuniary aid than upon the indiscretion and dubious character of certain of the reminiscences and comments which De Quincey contributed to "Tait's Magazine" from 1834 onward. For these Miss Mitford and many another literary or personal historian of the period has administered chastisement, and yet De Quincey's errors may fairly be ascribed to the sufferings of many kinds which clouded that time. That the Grasmere associations exercised an interacting influence to some extent is no more doubtful than the occasional interaction of the painters associated with Fontainebleau, Rousseau, Diaz and Dupré. That there was no absolute

dependence, no self-surrender, is equally apparent. Both Coleridge and De Quincey were dreamers. Both were poets, although De Quincey is known to us as a writer of prose. The power to dream, which, as Coleridge said to Hazlitt, is essential to a class of poetry, was a power which De Quincey possessed without any adventitious aid. "How came you to dream more splendidly than others?" asks the imaginary reader of "Suspiria de Profundis," and De Quincey answers his own question, "Because (præmissis præmittendis) I took excessive quantities of opium." It is an answer often misinterpreted, although, just before, he has spoken of his main purpose in writing the "Confessions"— "to display the faculty of dreaming itself." There are two sentences of De Quincey's own which should guide his readers: "He whose talk is of oxen will probably dream of oxen," and again, "Habitually to dream magnificently a man must have a constitutional determination to reverie." Let the reader turn from the "Confessions" to the "Vision of Sudden Death," and again to "The Flight of a Tartar Tribe."

There was no "talk of oxen" in those years at Grasmere, but rather the converse of high spirits, who "swept the harps of passion, of genial wit, or of the wrestling and gladiatorial reason." It was at Grasmere that he met Wilson, *fervidus juventa*, whose companionship on ambrosian nights and in long walks over the beautiful Westmoreland country cemented a lasting friendship. Southey, also, was of the company, but De Quincey's more intimate associations were with Wilson, and Charles Lloyd, Coleridge, and Wordsworth's children. These years, the sunniest of his life, years which brought him like-minded friends and a devoted wife, were unhappily overshadowed toward 1818 by pecuniary losses, change, fruitless journalistic endeavours, and the nemesis of opium. But there was a solace in the affectionate welcome of the Lambs when De Quincey went to London in 1821. Through his gentle friend he entered a circle which numbered Hood, Talfourd, Cornwall and Hazlitt among its numbers, and it was to Elia again that he was indebted for an introduction to the editors