

**DE QUINCEY'S
LITERARY
CRITICISM**

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De Quincey's literary criticism by H. Darbishire

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EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION

BY

H. DARBISHIRE

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PREFACE

THE text used for the following extracts is that of the second Edinburgh edition of De Quincey's works, published in fifteen volumes in 1862 and 1863, which is itself a re-issue, with one additional volume, of the first collective edition in fourteen volumes (1853-1860), thirteen volumes of which were published under the supervision of De Quincey himself. The text of the paper 'On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*', which was re-published posthumously in the fourteenth volume of the first collective edition, and thus never underwent revision at De Quincey's hands, has been corrected by the text of the original publication in the *London Magazine*, October, 1823. The same is true of the extract from the 'Letters to a Young Man whose education has been neglected', originally published in the *London Magazine*, March, 1823.

Materials not included in the Edinburgh edition of 1862-3, which have been drawn upon, are as follows :—

'Notes from the Pocket-Book of an English Opium-Eater'; 'Antagonism' and 'English Dictionaries'. *London Magazine*, November, 1823.

'Sketches of Life and Manners from the Auto-

biography of an English Opium-Eater.' *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, August, 1835.

'Recollections of Charles Lamb.' *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, June, 1838.

'The English Language.' *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, April, 1839.

'Pope's retort upon Addison.' American edition of De Quincey's writings, vol. xvi, Boston, 1855.

References have been given for every extract to the place of original publication and to Masson's edition of De Quincey's works. A. & C. Black, 1889-1890.

I am indebted to Miss O. M. Myers for her kind help in collating portions of the text, and to Professor de Sélinecourt for some useful criticism.

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INTRODUCTION

DE QUINCEY has in our day no reputation as a literary critic. He lives for the world as the English Opium-Eater, for the student as the writer of a rare kind of imaginative prose.

Yet his critical work gives a fuller revelation of his many-sided genius than his more purely imaginative writings, and it has a high intrinsic value in its sincerity, its subtlety, and, to use a word which De Quincey himself applied to the highest function of literature, its *power*.

He was well equipped at the outset for the business of criticism. His subtle intellect was wedded to an imagination lofty and penetrating in a rare degree, and to this natural endowment he had added, by the time that he started upon his desultory career as a critic, an immense store of learning gathered from books, and a very real and intense, if limited experience of life. With all this, his achievement as a critic is disappointing. Every reader of De Quincey is familiar with the element of caprice that is present in his best work. In his imaginative prose-pieces he is apt to tumble his reader without a moment's warning from the heights of impassioned contemplation to the flats of mere commonplace. A consummate