THOMAS DE QUINCEY

ADDICTION LITERATURE

ESSENTIAL NOVELISTS

TACET BOOKS

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Thomas De Quincey

EDITED BY

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Author

Thomas De Quincey, (born Aug. 15, 1785, Manchester, Lancashire, Eng.—died Dec. 8, 1859, Edinburgh, Scot.), English essayist and critic, best known for his Confessions of an English Opium-Eater.

As a child De Quincey was alienated from his solid, prosperous mercantile family by his sensitivity and precocity. At the age of 17 he ran away to Wales and then lived incognito in London (1802–03). There he formed a friendship with a young prostitute named Ann, who made a lasting impression on him. Reconciled to his family in 1803, he entered Worcester College, Oxford, where he conceived the ambition of becoming “the intellectual benefactor of mankind.” He became widely read in many subjects and eventually would write essays on such subjects as history, biography, economics, psychology, and German metaphysics. While still at college in 1804, he took his first opium to relieve the pain of facial neuralgia. By 1813 he had become “a regular and confirmed opium-eater” (i.e., an opium addict), keeping a decanter of laudanum (tincture of opium) by his elbow and steadily increasing the dose; he remained an addict for the rest of his life.

De Quincey was an early admirer of Lyrical Ballads, and in 1807 he became a close associate of its authors, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He rented Wordsworth’s former home, Dove Cottage at Grasmere, on and off from 1809 to 1833. In 1817 De Quincey married Margaret Simpson, who had already borne him a son. Though he wrote voluminously, he published almost nothing. His financial position as head of a large family went from bad to worse until the appearance of Confessions

(1821) in London Magazine made him famous. It was reprinted as a book in 1822.

The avowed purpose of the first version of the Confessions is to warn the reader of the dangers of opium, and it combines the interest of a journalistic exposé of a social evil, told from an insider’s point of view, with a somewhat contradictory picture of the subjective pleasures of drug addiction. The book begins with an autobiographical account of the author’s addiction, describes in detail the euphoric and highly symbolic reveries that he experienced under the drug’s influence, and recounts the horrible nightmares that continued use of the drug eventually produced. The highly poetic and imaginative prose of the Confessions makes it one of the enduring stylistic masterpieces of English literature.

In 1856 he seized the opportunity provided by the publication of his collected works to rewrite the book that had made him famous. He added some descriptions of opium-inspired dreams that had appeared about 1845 in Blackwood’s Magazine under the title Suspiria de Profundis (“Sighs from the Depths”). But by this time he had lost most of the accounts he had kept of his early opium visions, so he expanded the rather short original version of the Confessions in other ways, adding much autobiographical material on his childhood and his experiences as a youth in London. His literary style in the revised version of the Confessions, however, tends to be difficult, involved, and even verbose.

Among De Quincey’s other autobiographical writings, the so-called Lake Reminiscences (first printed in Tait’s Magazine, 1834–40), which deeply offended Wordsworth and the other Lake poets, remains of great interest, although it is highly subjective, not without malice, and unreliable in matters of detail. As a literary critic De Quincey

is best known for his essay “On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth” (first printed in the London Magazine, October 1823), a brilliant piece of psychological insight and a classic of Shakespearean criticism.

De Quincey became increasingly solitary and eccentric, especially after his wife’s death in 1837, and he often retreated for long periods into opium dreams. Of the more than 14 volumes of his work, only the original Confessions is a definitive literary expression.

Confessions of an English Opium-Eater

To the Reader

[From the “London Magazine” for September 1821.]

I here present you, courteous reader, with the record of a remarkable period in my life: according to my application of it, I trust that it will prove not merely an interesting record, but in a considerable degree useful and instructive.
In *that* hope it is that I have drawn it up; and *that* must be my apology for breaking through that delicate and honourable reserve which, for the most part, restrains us from the public exposure of our own errors and infirmities. Nothing, indeed, is more revolting to English feelings than the spectacle of a human being obtruding on our notice his moral ulcers or scars, and tearing away that “decent drapery” which time or indulgence to human frailty may have drawn over them; accordingly, the greater part of *our* confessions (that is, spontaneous and extra-judicial confessions) proceed from demireps, adventurers, or swindlers: and for any such acts of gratuitous self-humiliation from those who can be supposed in sympathy with the decent and self-respecting part of society, we must look to French literature, or to that part of the German which is tainted with the spurious and defective sensibility of the French. All this I feel so forcibly, and so nervously am I alive to reproach of this tendency, that I have for many months hesitated about the propriety of allowing this or any part of my narrative to come before the public eye until after my death (when, for many reasons, the whole will be

published); and it is not without an anxious review of the reasons for and against this step that I have at last concluded on taking it.

Guilt and misery shrink, by a natural instinct, from public notice: they court privacy and solitude: and even in their choice of a grave will sometimes sequester themselves from the general population of the churchyard, as if declining to claim fellowship with the great family of man, and wishing (in the affecting language of Mr. Wordsworth)

Humbly to express

A penitential loneliness.

It is well, upon the whole, and for the interest of us all, that it should be so: nor would I willingly in my own person manifest a disregard of such salutary feelings, nor in act or word do anything to weaken them; but, on the one hand, as my self-accusation does not amount to a confession of guilt, so, on the other, it is possible that, if it *did*, the benefit resulting to others from the record of an experience purchased at so heavy a price might compensate, by a vast overbalance, for any violence done to the feelings I have noticed, and justify a breach of the general rule. Infirmity and misery do not of necessity imply guilt. They approach or recede from shades of that dark alliance, in proportion to the probable motives and prospects of the offender, and the palliations, known or secret, of the offence; in proportion as the temptations to it were potent from the first, and the resistance to it, in act or in effort, was earnest to the last. For my own part, without breach of truth or modesty, I may affirm that my life has been, on the whole, the life of a philosopher: from my birth I was made an intellectual creature, and intellectual in the highest sense my pursuits and pleasures have been, even from my schoolboy days. If opium-eating be a sensual pleasure, and if I am bound to

confess that I have indulged in it to an excess not yet *recorded* [1] of any other man, it is no less true that I have struggled against this fascinating enthralment with a religious zeal, and have at length accomplished what I never yet heard attributed to any other man — have untwisted, almost to its final links, the accursed chain which fettered me. Such a self-conquest may reasonably be set off in counterbalance to any kind or degree of self-indulgence. Not to insist that in my case the self-conquest was unquestionable, the self-indulgence open to doubts of casuistry, according as that name shall be extended to acts aiming at the bare relief of pain, or shall be restricted to such as aim at the excitement of positive pleasure.

Guilt, therefore, I do not acknowledge; and if I did, it is possible that I might still resolve on the present act of confession in consideration of the service which I may thereby render to the whole class of opium-eaters. But who are they? Reader, I am sorry to say a very numerous class indeed. Of this I became convinced some years ago by computing at that time the number of those in one small class of English society (the class of men distinguished for talents, or of eminent station) who were known to me, directly or indirectly, as opium-eaters; such, for instance, as the eloquent and benevolent —, the late Dean of — Lord — Mr. — the philosopher, a late Under-Secretary of State (who described to me the sensation which first drove him to the use of opium in the very same words as the Dean of — viz., “that he felt as though rats were gnawing and abrading the coats of his stomach”), Mr. — and many others hardly less known, whom it would be tedious to mention. Now, if one class, comparatively so limited, could furnish so many scores of cases (and *that* within the knowledge of one single inquirer), it was a natural inference that the entire population of England would furnish a proportionable number. The soundness of this inference, however, I

doubted, until some facts became known to me which satisfied me that it was not incorrect. I will mention two. (1) Three respectable London druggists, in widely remote quarters of London, from whom I happened lately to be purchasing small quantities of opium, assured me that the number of *amateur* opium-eaters (as I may term them) was at this time immense; and that the difficulty of distinguishing those persons to whom habit had rendered opium necessary from such as were purchasing it with a view to suicide, occasioned them daily trouble and disputes. This evidence respected London only. But (2) — which will possibly surprise the reader more — some years ago, on passing through Manchester, I was informed by several cotton manufacturers that their workpeople were rapidly getting into the practice of opium-eating; so much so, that on a Saturday afternoon the counters of the druggists were strewed with pills of one, two, or three grains, in preparation for the known demand of the evening. The immediate occasion of this practice was the lowness of wages, which at that time would not allow them to indulge in ale or spirits, and wages rising, it may be thought that this practice would cease; but as I do not readily believe that any man having once tasted the divine luxuries of opium will afterwards descend to the gross and mortal enjoyments of alcohol, I take it for granted

That those eat now who never ate before;

And those who always ate, now eat the more.

Indeed, the fascinating powers of opium are admitted even by medical writers, who are its greatest enemies. Thus, for instance, Awsiter, apothecary to Greenwich Hospital, in his “Essay on the Effects of Opium” (published in the year 1763), when attempting to explain why Mead had not been sufficiently explicit on the properties, counteragents, &c., of this drug, expresses himself in the following mysterious

terms ([Greek text]): “Perhaps he thought the subject of too delicate a nature to be made common; and as many people might then indiscriminately use it, it would take from that necessary fear and caution which should prevent their experiencing the extensive power of this drug, *for there are many properties in it, if universally known, that would habituate the use, and make it more in request with us than with Turks themselves*; the result of which knowledge,” he adds, “must prove a general misfortune.” In the necessity of this conclusion I do not altogether concur; but upon that point I shall have occasion to speak at the close of my Confessions, where I shall present the reader with the *moral* of my narrative.

Preliminary Confessions

These preliminary confessions, or introductory narrative of the youthful adventures which laid the foundation of the writer's habit of opium-eating in after-life, it has been judged proper to premise, for three several reasons:

1. As forestalling that question, and giving it a satisfactory answer, which else would painfully obtrude itself in the course of the Opium Confessions — "How came any reasonable being to subject himself to such a yoke of misery; voluntarily to incur a captivity so servile, and knowingly to fetter himself with such a sevenfold chain?" — a question which, if not somewhere plausibly resolved, could hardly fail, by the indignation which it would be apt to raise as against an act of wanton folly, to interfere with that degree of sympathy which is necessary in any case to an author's purposes.

2. As furnishing a key to some parts of that tremendous scenery which afterwards peopled the dreams of the Opium-eater.

3. As creating some previous interest of a personal sort in the confessing subject, apart from the matter of the confessions, which cannot fail to render the confessions themselves more interesting. If a man "whose talk is of oxen" should become an opium-eater, the probability is that (if he is not too dull to dream at all) he will dream about oxen; whereas, in the case before him, the reader will find that the Opium-eater boasteth himself to be a philosopher; and accordingly, that the phantasmagoria of *his* dreams (waking or sleeping, day-dreams or night-dreams) is suitable to one who in that character

Humani nihil a se alienum putat.

For amongst the conditions which he deems indispensable to the sustaining of any claim to the title of philosopher is not merely the possession of a superb intellect in its *analytic* functions (in which part of the pretensions, however, England can for some generations show but few claimants; at least, he is not aware of any known candidate for this honour who can be styled emphatically *A Subtle Thinker*, with the exception of *Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, and in a narrower department of thought with the recent illustrious exception [2] of *David Ricardo*) but also on such a constitution of the *moral* faculties as shall give him an inner eye and power of intuition for the vision and the mysteries of our human nature:*that* constitution of faculties, in short, which (amongst all the generations of men that from the beginning of time have deployed into life, as it were, upon this planet) our English poets have possessed in the highest degree, and Scottish professors [3] in the lowest.

I have often been asked how I first came to be a regular opium-eater, and have suffered, very unjustly, in the opinion of my acquaintance from being reputed to have brought upon myself all the sufferings which I shall have to record, by a long course of indulgence in this practice purely for the sake of creating an artificial state of pleasurable excitement. This, however, is a misrepresentation of my case. True it is that for nearly ten years I did occasionally take opium for the sake of the exquisite pleasure it gave me; but so long as I took it with this view I was effectually protected from all material bad consequences by the necessity of interposing long intervals between the several acts of indulgence, in order to renew the pleasurable sensations. It was not for the purpose of creating pleasure, but of mitigating pain in the severest degree, that I first began to use opium as an article of daily diet. In the twenty-eighth year of my age a most

painful affection of the stomach, which I had first experienced about ten years before, attacked me in great strength. This affection had originally been caused by extremities of hunger, suffered in my boyish days. During the season of hope and redundant happiness which succeeded (that is, from eighteen to twenty-four) it had slumbered; for the three following years it had revived at intervals; and now, under unfavourable circumstances, from depression of spirits, it attacked me with a violence that yielded to no remedies but opium. As the youthful sufferings which first produced this derangement of the stomach were interesting in themselves, and in the circumstances that attended them, I shall here briefly retrace them.

My father died when I was about seven years old, and left me to the care of four guardians. I was sent to various schools, great and small; and was very early distinguished for my classical attainments, especially for my knowledge of Greek. At thirteen I wrote Greek with ease; and at fifteen my command of that language was so great that I not only composed Greek verses in lyric metres, but could converse in Greek fluently and without embarrassment — an accomplishment which I have not since met with in any scholar of my times, and which in my case was owing to the practice of daily reading off the newspapers into the best Greek I could furnish extempore; for the necessity of ransacking my memory and invention for all sorts and combinations of periphrastic expressions as equivalents for modern ideas, images, relations of things, &c., gave me a compass of diction which would never have been called out by a dull translation of moral essays, &c. “That boy,” said one of my masters, pointing the attention of a stranger to me, “that boy could harangue an Athenian mob better than you and I could address an English one.” He who honoured me with this eulogy was a scholar, “and a ripe and a good one,” and of all my tutors was the only one whom I loved or

reverenced. Unfortunately for me (and, as I afterwards learned, to this worthy man’s great indignation), I was transferred to the care, first of a blockhead, who was in a perpetual panic lest I should expose his ignorance; and finally to that of a respectable scholar at the head of a great school on an ancient foundation. This man had been appointed to his situation by — College, Oxford, and was a sound, well-built scholar, but (like most men whom I have known from that college) coarse, clumsy, and inelegant. A miserable contrast he presented, in my eyes, to the Etonian brilliancy of my favourite master; and beside, he could not disguise from my hourly notice the poverty and meagreness of his understanding. It is a bad thing for a boy to be and to know himself far beyond his tutors, whether in knowledge or in power of mind. This was the case, so far as regarded knowledge at least, not with myself only, for the two boys, who jointly with myself composed the first form, were better Grecians than the head-master, though not more elegant scholars, nor at all more accustomed to sacrifice to the Graces. When I first entered I remember that we read Sophocles; and it was a constant matter of triumph to us, the learned triumvirate of the first form, to see our “Archididascalus” (as he loved to be called) conning our lessons before we went up, and laying a regular train, with lexicon and grammar, for blowing up and blasting (as it were) any difficulties he found in the choruses; whilst *we* never condescended to open our books until the moment of going up, and were generally employed in writing epigrams upon his wig or some such important matter. My two class-fellows were poor, and dependent for their future prospects at the university on the recommendation of the head-master; but I, who had a small patrimonial property, the income of which was sufficient to support me at college, wished to be sent thither immediately. I made earnest representations on the subject to my guardians, but all to no purpose. One, who was more

reasonable and had more knowledge of the world than the rest, lived at a distance; two of the other three resigned all their authority into the hands of the fourth; and this fourth, with whom I had to negotiate, was a worthy man in his way, but haughty, obstinate, and intolerant of all opposition to his will. After a certain number of letters and personal interviews, I found that I had nothing to hope for, not even a compromise of the matter, from my guardian. Unconditional submission was what he demanded, and I prepared myself, therefore, for other measures. Summer was now coming on with hasty steps, and my seventeenth birthday was fast approaching, after which day I had sworn within myself that I would no longer be numbered amongst schoolboys. Money being what I chiefly wanted, I wrote to a woman of high rank, who, though young herself, had known me from a child, and had latterly treated me with great distinction, requesting that she would “lend” me five guineas. For upwards of a week no answer came, and I was beginning to despond, when at length a servant put into my hands a double letter with a coronet on the seal. The letter was kind and obliging. The fair writer was on the sea-coast, and in that way the delay had arisen; she enclosed double of what I had asked, and good-naturedly hinted that if I should *never* repay her, it would not absolutely ruin her. Now, then, I was prepared for my scheme. Ten guineas, added to about two which I had remaining from my pocket-money, seemed to me sufficient for an indefinite length of time; and at that happy age, if no *definite* boundary can be assigned to one’s power, the spirit of hope and pleasure makes it virtually infinite.

It is a just remark of Dr. Johnson’s (and, what cannot often be said of his remarks, it is a very feeling one), that we never do anything consciously for the last time (of things, that is, which we have long been in the habit of doing) without sadness of heart. This truth I felt deeply when I

came to leave — a place which I did not love, and where I had not been happy. On the evening before I left — for ever, I grieved when the ancient and lofty schoolroom resounded with the evening service, performed for the last time in my hearing; and at night, when the muster-roll of names was called over, and mine (as usual) was called first, I stepped forward, and passing the head-master, who was standing by, I bowed to him, and looked earnestly in his face, thinking to myself, “He is old and infirm, and in this world I shall not see him again.” I was right; I never *did* see him again, nor ever shall. He looked at me complacently, smiled good-naturedly, returned my salutation (or rather my valediction), and we parted (though he knew it not) for ever. I could not reverence him intellectually, but he had been uniformly kind to me, and had allowed me many indulgences; and I grieved at the thought of the mortification I should inflict upon him.

The morning came which was to launch me into the world, and from which my whole succeeding life has in many important points taken its colouring. I lodged in the head-master’s house, and had been allowed from my first entrance the indulgence of a private room, which I used both as a sleeping-room and as a study. At half after three I rose, and gazed with deep emotion at the ancient towers of — “drest in earliest light,” and beginning to crimson with the radiant lustre of a cloudless July morning. I was firm and immovable in my purpose; but yet agitated by anticipation of uncertain danger and troubles; and if I could have foreseen the hurricane and perfect hail-storm of affliction which soon fell upon me, well might I have been agitated. To this agitation the deep peace of the morning presented an affecting contrast, and in some degree a medicine. The silence was more profound than that of mid-night; and to me the silence of a summer morning is more touching than all other silence, because, the light being broad and strong

as that of noonday at other seasons of the year, it seems to differ from perfect day chiefly because man is not yet abroad; and thus the peace of nature and of the innocent creatures of God seems to be secure and deep only so long as the presence of man and his restless and unquiet spirit are not there to trouble its sanctity. I dressed myself, took my hat and gloves, and lingered a little in the room. For the last year and a half this room had been my “pensive citadel”: here I had read and studied through all the hours of night, and though true it was that for the latter part of this time I, who was framed for love and gentle affections, had lost my gaiety and happiness during the strife and fever of contention with my guardian, yet, on the other hand, as a boy so passionately fond of books, and dedicated to intellectual pursuits, I could not fail to have enjoyed many happy hours in the midst of general dejection. I wept as I looked round on the chair, hearth, writing-table, and other familiar objects, knowing too certainly that I looked upon them for the last time. Whilst I write this it is eighteen years ago, and yet at this moment I see distinctly, as if it were yesterday, the lineaments and expression of the object on which I fixed my parting gaze. It was a picture of the lovely — which hung over the mantelpiece, the eyes and mouth of which were so beautiful, and the whole countenance so radiant with benignity and divine tranquillity, that I had a thousand times laid down my pen or my book to gather consolation from it, as a devotee from his patron saint. Whilst I was yet gazing upon it the deep tones of — clock proclaimed that it was four o’clock. I went up to the picture, kissed it, and then gently walked out and closed the door for ever!

So blended and intertwisted in this life are occasions of laughter and of tears, that I cannot yet recall without smiling an incident which occurred at that time, and which had nearly put a stop to the immediate execution of my

plan. I had a trunk of immense weight, for, besides my clothes, it contained nearly all my library. The difficulty was to get this removed to a carrier's: my room was at an aerial elevation in the house, and (what was worse) the staircase which communicated with this angle of the building was accessible only by a gallery, which passed the head-master's chamber door. I was a favourite with all the servants, and knowing that any of them would screen me and act confidentially, I communicated my embarrassment to a groom of the head-master's. The groom swore he would do anything I wished, and when the time arrived went upstairs to bring the trunk down. This I feared was beyond the strength of any one man; however, the groom was a man

Of Atlantean shoulders, fit to bear

The weight of mightiest monarchies;

and had a back as spacious as Salisbury Plain. Accordingly he persisted in bringing down the trunk alone, whilst I stood waiting at the foot of the last flight in anxiety for the event. For some time I heard him descending with slow and firm steps; but unfortunately, from his trepidation, as he drew near the dangerous quarter, within a few steps of the gallery, his foot slipped, and the mighty burden falling from his shoulders, gained such increase of impetus at each step of the descent, that on reaching the bottom it trundled, or rather leaped, right across, with the noise of twenty devils, against the very bedroom door of the Archididascalus. My first thought was that all was lost, and that my only chance for executing a retreat was to sacrifice my baggage. However, on reflection I determined to abide the issue. The groom was in the utmost alarm, both on his own account and on mine, but, in spite of this, so irresistibly had the sense of the ludicrous in this unhappy contretemps taken possession of his fancy, that he sang out a long, loud, and

canorous peal of laughter, that might have wakened the Seven Sleepers. At the sound of this resonant merriment, within the very ears of insulted authority, I could not myself forbear joining in it; subdued to this, not so much by the unhappy etourderie of the trunk, as by the effect it had upon the groom. We both expected, as a matter of course, that Dr. — would sally, out of his room, for in general, if but a mouse stirred, he sprang out like a mastiff from his kennel. Strange to say, however, on this occasion, when the noise of laughter had ceased, no sound, or rustling even, was to be heard in the bedroom. Dr. — had a painful complaint, which, sometimes keeping him awake, made his sleep perhaps, when it did come, the deeper. Gathering courage from the silence, the groom hoisted his burden again, and accomplished the remainder of his descent without accident. I waited until I saw the trunk placed on a wheelbarrow and on its road to the carrier's; then, "with Providence my guide," I set off on foot, carrying a small parcel with some articles of dress under my arm; a favourite English poet in one pocket, and a small 12mo volume, containing about nine plays of Euripides, in the other.

It had been my intention originally to proceed to Westmoreland, both from the love I bore to that country and on other personal accounts. Accident, however, gave a different direction to my wanderings, and I bent my steps towards North Wales.

After wandering about for some time in Denbighshire, Merionethshire, and Carnarvonshire, I took lodgings in a small neat house in B—. Here I might have stayed with great comfort for many weeks, for provisions were cheap at B — from the scarcity of other markets for the surplus produce of a wide agricultural district. An accident, however, in which perhaps no offence was designed, drove me out to wander again. I know not whether my reader may have remarked,