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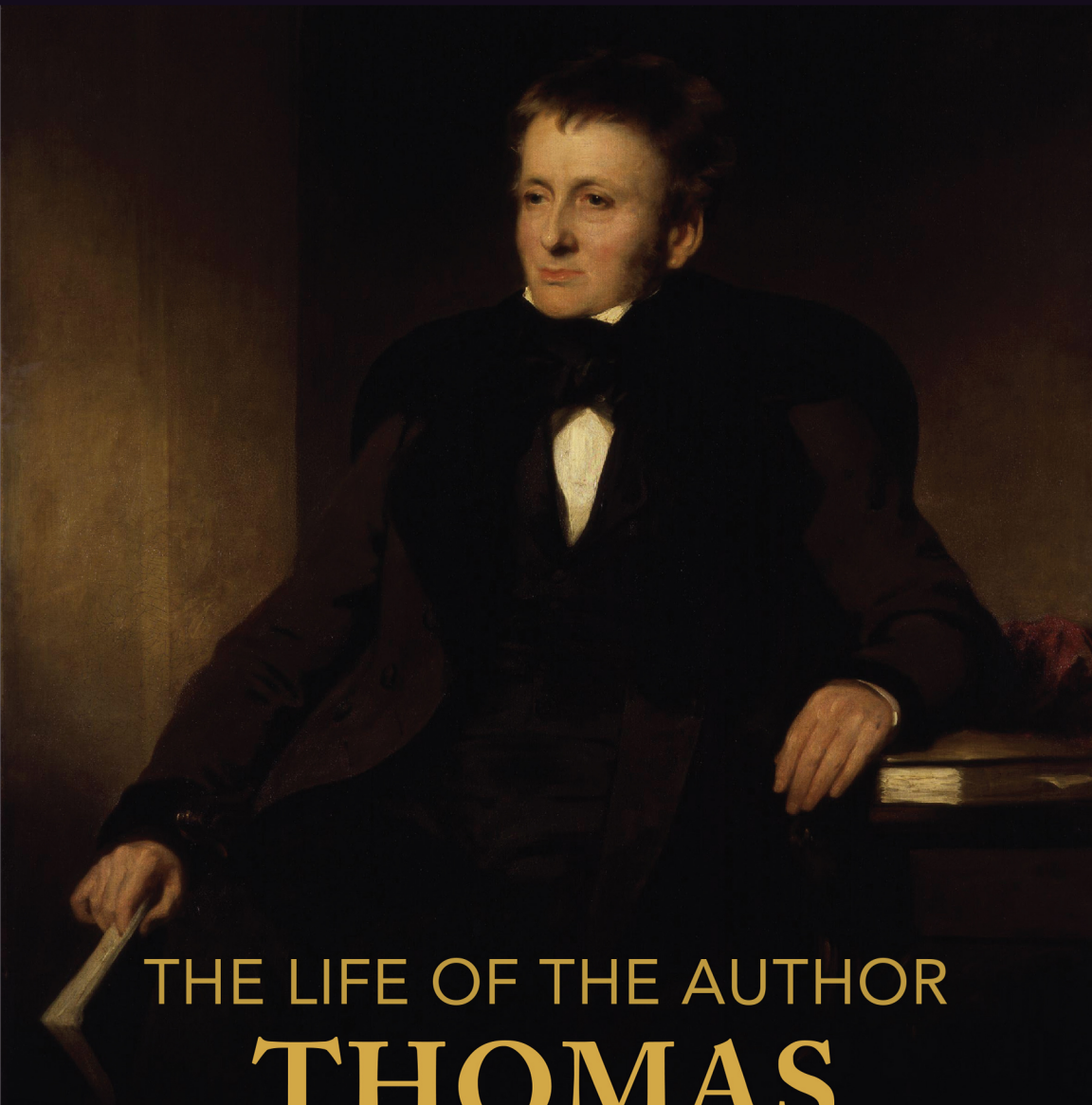

THE LIFE OF THE AUTHOR
THOMAS DE QUINCEY

by Andrew Keanie

WILEY Blackwell

The Life of the Author: Thomas De Quincey

THE LIFE OF THE AUTHOR

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To Eleanor

At the epicentre of De Quincey's work lay a dead child (Elizabeth Young, *Pandora's Handbag*).

There on my couch, a figure lies
It is the shadow of my dreams
A ghost, devoid of human ties
It moves, gestures; alive it seems.
Delusive hallucination
Move out to grasp and touch: it goes –
Returns, divines inclination;
My very steps and thoughts it knows

(Jim Hodgson, ‘Image’)

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All thanks above are heartfelt. Any error or enormity below is nobody's but mine.

Research Sources

I will quite frequently refer to the Pickering and Chatto *Works of Thomas De Quincey* (21 volumes, 2000–2003). The editorial introductions and textual appendixes to the *Works*, edited by Grevel Lindop, provide (still, in 2025) underexploited accounts of De Quincey's writing practices and evidence of the composition, publication, reception and influence of his writing. But I will refer most often to the Oxford University Press *Selected Writings*, edited by Robert Morrison (2019), because it is such a handy single volume, and it contains the most thorough and accurate annotation of De Quincey's major works ever compiled.

Abbreviations

BL	*Biographia Literaria*, 2 Vols., ed. James Engle and W. Jackson Bate, Bollingen Series. Princeton University Press, 1985.
EOE	*The English Opium Eater*, Robert Morrison. London: Phoenix, 2010.
GT	*Guilty Thing: A Life of Thomas De Quincey*, Frances Wilson. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016.
HCW	*Hazlitt Complete Works*, 21 Vols., ed. P.P. Howe. London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1932.
Prelude	*The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams and Stephen Gill. New York: W.W. Norton, 1979. References are taken from the 1805 text unless otherwise indicated.
SW	*Selected Writings: Thomas De Quincey*, ed. Robert Morrison. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.
Works	*Works of Thomas De Quincey*, 21 Vols., ed. Grevel Lindop. Pickering and Chatto, 2000–2003.

Preface

To the critic the work of art is simply a suggestion for a new work of his own
(Oscar Wilde, *The Critic as Artist*)

Stand clear of inward opening doors
(Sign on a London bus)

There will always be De Quincey debunkers, but this book is not for them. It may be labelled as a 'literary biography' but may as aptly be read as a long essay from the heart in response to De Quincey's most self-searching and impassioned prose. My focus falls (as it so often does in work on De Quincey) largely on a handful of texts through which De Quincey has constructed his own biography for us, and through which he has dawned upon generations of readers to reveal a sublime synopsis of English Romanticism – *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821), *Recollections of the Lake Poets* (1834–1840), *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845) and so on.

This is quite a short book about a very large subject. There are many other texts, which De Quincey wrote, which do not feature in this study, and my economy of emphasis, courteous reader, is best acknowledged here explicitly at the outset, so that you may anticipate its compensations before deciding whether or not to read any further. I have not tried to be comprehensive, nor have I set out to give a full account of De Quincey and his times. Instead, I have looked into the life of his life-writing, keeping in mind throughout what I take to be the central interest of 'our deepest thoughts and feelings' which 'pass to us as *involutes*... in compound experiences incapable of being disentangled' (*SW* 270). I am aiming to capture De Quincey's soul, which entails some speculative psychologization.

My approach has resulted in a book which is very different from the excellent biographies and monographs on De Quincey which are already available, and I write neither to discredit nor disagree with scholars' well-grounded disclosures of De Quincey's shocking shortcomings, not least his racism.

The Gothic nightmares of *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, which have electrified generations of readers, originated not in opium but in a racist attitude as real as repellent as H.P. Lovecraft's (1890–1937). From the 1990s, De Quincey became the focus of several severe assessments by critics such as John Barrell (1943–) and Margaret Russett who concentrated on his High Tory politics and racist and sexist views to question his aesthetics and unveil him in all his imperialist and masculinist nastiness. There is no getting around these discoveries, arrived at as they have been through scrupulous scholarship. De Quincey's racist and imperialist attitudes cannot, and should not, be whitewashed from his oeuvre any more than Roald Dahl's (1916–1990) or Karl Marx's (1818–1883) writings ought to be bowdlerised or burned.

Had it not been for the revealing studies of scholars such as Barrell and Russett, the English Opium-Eater might well have carried on, unchecked, occupying hearts and minds manipulatively and elusively. And yet there is still no automatic requirement for any new study to retain and renew enlightened annoyance at De Quincey, particularly when his unpleasantness can be set against, and thence subsumed by, his capacity as a progenitor of British Romanticism. The raw reality of the man need not degrade the illusion.

Rather than insisting on his never again being released back into his own inimitably declamatory context (radiant Romanticism shot through with stylish self-regard, delivered from the podium of English supremacy), I would like to let him go there again. Furthermore, I would like to follow him, like a *jeu d'esprit*, even if at the risk of sinking with him to a point of redundant raptness in his rhetoric, from which all reäscent might soon become hopeless.

Some levity should buoy me, allowing me to investigate the De Quinceyan involute short of irretrievable immersion in it. Some impressionistic views should shed new light on him – and his era – as he moves again in his natural environment and on his own terms. In not engaging very much with the more theoretically inclined work on De Quincey, I write with general as well as academic readers in mind. I need hardly say how nervously alive I am to the reproaches which will come, as they no doubt will.

If the chapters of this book (a number of which are short) at times fragment the narrative, making the main contours of De Quincey's life and work seem a little lost, then this is part of the point. Each chapter works as a concentric meditation rather than a chronological examination of a distinct period in De Quincey's life and work. Chapter 5, 'Into the Depths: William Wordsworth's *Prelude*' (for example), involves Wordsworth's and Coleridge's poetry in detail, and De Quincey fades for some pages into the background. This is not unapt given the disputable nature of De Quincey's aura in the Lake circle. He has been recognised as something of 'a flame in sunlight', shone through (if not altogether outshone) by the eternally loftier Lake poets. By dint of this abiding suggestion of his

secondariness, De Quincey's presence at the birth of English Romanticism can look more like an absence at certain times, and from certain angles, as he dips and dodges. Fading in the face of *The Prelude*, and recoiling at the thought of creditors, he became complicit in his own ghostliness. As Barry Symonds has said:

> The debt-ridden and thus furtive life that De Quincey led in the 1820's and 1830's bore directly on the texts he was producing, whether articles or letters. The man who by turns demands that his publishers hide his letters from prying eyes, asks them to mislead enquirers about his whereabouts, gives his address only through the bearer of a letter, or locates himself simply as 'The Gent in the Swan' (14 July, 1823) and omits his signature as a safeguard, is not going to allow an editor easy access to a phenomenology of presence.
>
> (Symonds *23*)

Hence, many of this book's chapters are to work like magnifying glasses and mirrors, shifting the reader to the minutiae and innate peculiarities of De Quincey's character and then outward to the literature he inherited, and the world he inhabited and upon which he left his unique imprint, for good and bad.

Unlike many of the relatively specialised books on De Quincey, this brings together a large number of sources and takes a literary, essayistic approach to the author seriously. Extant biographies have found it difficult to accommodate De Quincey's myriad-mindedness, and my choice has been to join him if you can't beat him, which as you might expect means I have gone a little gonzo at times past the compass of customary criticism.

From being on the coat-tails of William Wordsworth (1770–1850) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) – and they rather looked down on him – De Quincey places them historically under the label of Romanticism where they are forever enfolded, which they were not in real life, except for a short time.

De Quincey is a historical figure of historical interest, but he is much more than just that. Via Wordsworth's long poem, *The Prelude* (unpublished until Wordsworth's death in 1850), De Quincey becomes of intrinsic interest, and this is where his greatest achievement lies. It is manifested in his major works including *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater, On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth* (1823), *On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts* (1827), *Recollections of the Lake Poets, Suspiria de Profundis* and *The English Mail Coach* (1849). Despite the contemporary references, these works could have been written now. De Quincey's function was 'Critic as Artist', as envisioned by Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) later in the nineteenth century.

Chief of his flaws as a writer and human being were the limitations of racism and imperialism. On top of this, his attitude to women and sexual needs was not

what a twenty-first century reader would be expected to entertain as humane and timeless, embedded as it was in evangelical and Victorian values. But he did not pretend to himself or others (tempting though it might have been) that he was superior in his needs or in his relationships.

This book is my attempt to write the life of De Quincey – the artist and critic most responsible for English Romanticism as we know it – from the inside out. It is not so much a cradle-to-grave biography as a life-writing experiment, taking seriously De Quincey's statement that 'our deepest thoughts and feelings pass to us through perplexed combinations of *concrete* objects, pass to us as *involutes* (if I may coin that word) in compound experiences incapable of being disentangled' (*SW* 270).

If Ann Wroe's (1951–) Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822), in *Being Shelley: the Poet's Search for Himself* (2007), is an ecstatic spirit breaking free into the contemporary *zeitgeist*, my De Quincey, if unable to break free by his own light, has taken the Wordsworth Coleridge luminosity with him. This book is more of a shimmering and overlapping arrangement of literary lives than a solid life story, revealing the De Quincey who, having absorbed the ambience of his Lake poets, emanated English Romanticism.

Romanticism is that colourful and contradictory essence characteristic of the artistic and literary era that began in the late eighteenth century. As it emphasised subjectivity and the primacy of the individual, Romanticism is today often considered so far removed from utility as to be simply too silly to study. The skiey (not to say groundless) enthusiasms that once brought Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Constable (1776–1837) towards renewed prospects of visionary transformation have long flown. The best that the study of Romanticism seems to be able to offer the student in our briskly debunking and digitising new world is a competent historicist's handling of a mercifully bygone age.

This leaves me in a rather awkward position. Even if I profess indifference to, if not unbelief in, Romanticism (daffodils flashing upon that inward eye; Xanadu winking just out of waking reach), I am still an inheritor of much of its philosophy about spirit and soul, and I am still a custodian of its modes of expression and a carrier of its molten re-malleability. I am involved in it. I have wandered lonely as a cloud. I have felt a presence that disturbs me with the joy of elevated thoughts. I would build that dome in air. I look before and after and pine for what is not. Do I wake or sleep?

If I find Romanticism feeling rather too intensely significant (molten re-malleability indeed), am I supposed to cure it by analysing it? Failing that, am I to be kept right by someone else's analysis of Romanticism? Even when twentieth-century thinkers as eminent as Isiaih Berlin (1909–1997), A.O. Lovejoy (1873–1962) and others have gone into Romanticism, grippingly and at great