

From THE POETRY OF POPE Thomas DeQuincey 1848 LITERATURE OF KNOWLEDGE AND LITERATURE OF POWER

What is it that we mean by *literature*? Popularly, and amongst the thoughtless, it is held to include everything that is printed in a book. Little logic is required to disturb *that* definition. The most thoughtless person is easily made aware that in the idea of *literature* one essential element is,—some relation to a general and common interest of man, so that what applies only to a local or professional or merely personal interest even though presenting itself in the shape of a book, will not belong to literature. So far the definition is easily narrowed; and it is as easily expanded. For not only is much that takes a station in books not literature, but, inversely, much that really *is* literature never reaches a station in books. The weekly sermons of Christendom, that vast pulpit literature which acts so extensively upon the popular mind—to warn, to uphold, to renew, to comfort, to alarm—does not attain the sanctuary of libraries in the ten-thousandth part of its extent. The drama, again, as for instance the finest of Shakspeare's plays in England and all leading Athenian plays in the noontide of the Attic stage, operated as a literature on the public mind, and were (according to the strictest letter of that term) *published* through the audiences that witnessed their representation, some time before they were published as things to be read; and they were published in this scenical mode of publication with much more effect than they could have had as books during ages of costly copying or of costly printing.

Books, therefore, do not suggest an idea co-extensive and interchangeable with the idea of literature, since much literature, scenic, forensic, or didactic (as from lectures and public orators), may never come into books, and much that *does* come into books may connect itself with no literary interest. But a far more important correction, applicable to the common vague idea of literature, is to be sought, not so much in a better definition of literature, as in a sharper distinction of the two functions which it fulfils. In that great social organ which, collectively, we call literature, there may be distinguished two separate offices, that may blend and often *do* so, but capable, severally, of a severe insulation, and naturally fitted for reciprocal repulsion. There is, first, the literature of *knowledge*, and, secondly, the literature of *power*. The function of the first is to *teach*; the function of the second is to *move*: the first is a rudder; the second an oar or a sail. The first speaks to the *mere* discursive understanding; the second speaks ultimately, it may happen, to the higher understanding, or reason, but always *through* affections of pleasure and sympathy. Remotely it may travel towards an object seated in what Lord Bacon calls *dry* light; but proximately it does and must operate—else it ceases to be literature of *power*--on and through that *humid* light which clothes itself in the mists and glittering *iris* of human passions, desires, and genial emotions. Men have so little reflected on the higher functions of literature as to

find it a paradox if one should describe it as a mean or subordinate purpose of books to give information. But this is a paradox only in the sense which makes it honorable to be paradoxical. Whenever we talk in ordinary language of seeking knowledge, we understand the words as connected with something of absolute novelty. But it is the grandeur of all truth which *can* occupy a very high place in human interests that it is never absolutely novel to the meanest of minds: it exists eternally, by way of germ or latent principle, in the lowest as in the highest, needing to be developed but never to be planted. To be capable of transplantation is the immediate criterion of a truth ranges on a lower scale. Besides which, there is a rarer thing than truth, namely, *power*, or deep sympathy with truth. What is the effect, for instance, upon society, of children? By the pity, by the tenderness, and by the peculiar modes of admiration, which connect themselves with the helplessness, with the innocence, and with the simplicity of children, not only are the primal affections strengthened and continually renewed, but the qualities which are dearest in the sight of heaven—the frailty, for instance, which appeals to forbearance, the innocence which symbolizes the heavenly, and the simplicity which is most alien from the worldly—are kept up in perpetual remembrance, and their ideals are continually refreshed. A purpose of the same nature is answered by the higher literature, *viz.*, the literature of power. What do you learn from *Paradise Lost*? Nothing at all. What do you learn from a cookery book? Something new, something that you did not know before, in every paragraph. But would you therefore put the wretched cookery-book on a higher level of estimation than the divine poem? What you owe to Milton is not any knowledge, of which a million separate items are still but a million of advancing steps on the same earthly level; what you owe is *power*, that is, exercise and expansion to your own latent capacity of sympathy with the infinite, where every pulse and each separate influx is a step upwards, a step ascending as upon a Jacob's ladder from earth to mysterious altitudes above the earth. *All* the steps of knowledge, from first to last, carry you further on the same plane, but could never raise you one foot above your ancient level of earth; whereas the very *first* step in power is a flight, is an ascending movement into another element where earth is forgotten.

Were it not that human sensibilities are ventilated and continually called out into exercise by the great phenomena of infancy, or of real life as it moves through chance and change, or of literature as it recombines these elements in the mimicries of poetry, romance, etc., it is certain that, like any animal power or muscular energy falling into disuse, all such sensibilities would gradually droop and dwindle. It is in relation to these great *moral* capacities of man that the literature of power, as distinguished from that of knowledge, lives and has its field of action. It is concerned with what is highest in man; for the Scriptures themselves never condescended to deal by suggestion or co-operation with the mere discursive understanding: when speaking of man in his intellectual capacity, the Scriptures speak, not of the understanding, but

of "*the understanding heart*," making the heart,—that is, the great intuitive (or non-discursive) organ, to be the interchangeable formula for man in his highest state of capacity for the infinite. Tragedy, romance, fairy tale, or epopee, all alike restore to man's mind the ideals of justice, of hope, of truth, of mercy, of retribution, which else (left to the support of daily life in its realities) would languish for want of sufficient illustration. What is meant, for instance, by *poetic justice*? It does not mean a justice that differs by its object from the ordinary justice of human jurisprudence, for then it must be confessedly a very bad kind of justice; but it means a justice that differs from common forensic justice by the degree in which it *attains* its object, a justice that is more omnipotent over its own ends, as dealing, not with the refractory elements of earthly life, but with the elements of its own creation and with materials flexible to its own purest preconceptions. It is certain that, were it not for the literature of power, these ideals would often remain amongst us as mere arid notional forms; whereas, by the creative forces of man put forth in literature, they gain a vernal life of restoration and germinate into vital activities. The commonest novel, by moving in alliance with human fears and hopes, with human instincts of wrong and right, sustains and quickens those affections. Calling them into action, it rescues them from torpor. And hence the pre-eminency, over all authors that merely *teach*, of the meanest that proves, or that teaches, if at all, indirectly by moving. The very highest work that has ever existed in the literature of knowledge is but a provisional work, a book upon trial and sufferance, and *quamdiu bene se gesserit* [while it behaved well]. Let its teaching be even partially revised, let it be but expanded, nay, even let its teaching be but placed in a better order, and instantly it is superseded. Whereas the feeblest works in the literature of power, surviving at all, survive as finished and unalterable among men. For instance, the *Principia* of Sir Isaac Newton was a book *militant* on earth from the first. In all stages of its progress it would have to fight for its existence: first, as regards absolute truth; secondly, when that combat was over, as regards its form, or mode of presenting the truth. And as soon as a La Place, or anybody else, builds higher upon the foundations laid by this book, effectually he throws it out of the sunshine into decay and darkness; by weapons won from this book he superannuates and destroys this book, so that soon the name of Newton remains as a mere *nominis umbra*, but his book, as a living power, has transmigrated into other forms. Now, on the contrary, the *Iliad*, the *Prometheus* of AEschylus, the *Othello* or *King Lear*, the *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*, and the *Paradise Lost* are not militant but triumphant forever, as long as the languages exist in which they speak or can be taught to speak. They never can transmigrate into new incarnations. To reproduce these in new forms or variations, even if in some things they should be improved, would be to plagiarize. A good steam-engine is properly superseded by a better. But one lovely pastoral valley is not superseded by another, nor a statue of Praxiteles by a statue of Michael Angelo. These things are separated, not by imparity, but by disparity. They are not thought of as unequal under the same standard, but as different in *kind*, and, if otherwise equal,

as equal under a different standard. Human works of immortal beauty and works of nature in one respect stand on the same footing: they never absolutely repeat each other, never approach so near as not to differ; and they differ not as better and worse, or simply by more and less; they differ by undecipherable and incommunicable differences, that cannot be caught by mimicries, that cannot be reflected in the mirror of copies, that cannot become ponderable in the scales of vulgar comparison.

Thomas De Quincey

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Thomas Penson De Quincey (/ˈtoʊməs də ˈkwɪnsi/^[f1] 15 August 1785 – 8 December 1859) was an English essayist, best known for his *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821).^{[2][3]} Many scholars suggest that in publishing this work De Quincey inaugurated the tradition of addiction literature in the West

Major publications^[edit]

- *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1822)
- *On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth* (1823)
- *Walladmor* (1825)
- *On Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts* (1827)
- *Klosterheim, or the Masque* (1832)
- *Lake Reminiscences* (1834–40)
- *Revolt of the Tartars* (1837)
- *The Logic of the Political Economy* (1844)
- *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845)
- *The English Mail-Coach* (1849)
- *Autobiographical Sketches* (1853)

Confessions of an English Opium-Eater

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Confessions of an English Opium-Eater (1821) is an [autobiographical](#) account written by [Thomas De Quincey](#), about his [laudanum addiction](#) and its effect on his life. The *Confessions* was "the first major work De Quincey published and the one which won him fame almost overnight..."^[1]

First published anonymously in September and October 1821 in the [London Magazine](#),^[2] the *Confessions* was released in book form in 1822, and again in 1856, in an edition revised by De Quincey.

Synopsis[[edit](#)]

As originally published,^[a] De Quincey's account was organized into two parts:^[4]

- Part I begins with a notice "To the Reader", to establish the narrative frame: "I here present you, courteous reader, with the record of a remarkable period in my life...." It is followed by the substance of Part I,
 - *Preliminary Confessions*, devoted to the author's childhood and youth, and concentrated upon the emotional and psychological factors that underlay the later opium experiences — especially the period in his late teens that De Quincey spent as a homeless runaway in Oxford Street in London in 1802 and 1803.
- Part II is split into several sections:
 - A relatively brief introduction and connecting passage, followed by
 - *The Pleasures of Opium*, which discusses the early and largely positive phase of the author's experience with the drug, from 1804 until 1812;
 - *Introduction to the Pains of Opium*, which delivers a second installment of autobiography, taking De Quincey from youth to maturity; and
 - *The Pains of Opium*, which recounts the extreme of the author's opium experience (up to that time), with insomnia, nightmares, frightening visions, and difficult physical symptoms.
- Another "Notice to the Reader" attempts to clarify the chronology of the whole.

The cover of Thomas De Quincey's book *Confessions of an Opium-Eater*. This version was published by the Mershon Company in 1898.

Though De Quincey was later criticized for giving too much attention to the pleasure of opium and not enough to the harsh negatives of addiction, *The Pains of Opium* is in fact significantly longer than *The Pleasures*. However, even when trying to convey darker truths, De Quincey's language can seem seduced by the compelling nature of the opium experience:

"The sense of space, and in the end, the sense of time, were both powerfully affected. Buildings, landscapes, &c. were exhibited in proportions so vast as the bodily eye is not fitted to conceive. Space swelled, and was amplified to an extent of unutterable infinity. This, however, did not disturb me so much as the vast expansion of time; I sometimes seemed to have lived for 70 or 100 years in one night; nay, sometimes had feelings representative of a millennium passed in that time, or, however, of a duration far beyond the limits of any human experience."^[5]

Style[[edit](#)]

From its first appearance, the literary style of the *Confessions* attracted attention and comment. De Quincey was well-read in the English literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and assimilated influences and models from Sir [Thomas Browne](#) and other writers. Arguably the most famous and often-quoted passage in the *Confessions* is the [apostrophe](#) to opium in the final paragraph of *The Pleasures*:

"Oh! just, subtle, and mighty opium! that to the hearts of poor and rich alike, for the wounds that will never heal, and for 'the pangs that tempt the spirit to rebel,' bringest an assuaging balm; eloquent opium! that with thy potent rhetoric stealest away the purposes of wrath; and to the guilty man, for one night givest back the hopes of his youth, and hands washed pure of blood...."

De Quincey modelled this passage on the apostrophe "O eloquent, just and mightie Death!" in Sir [Walter Raleigh's](#) *History of the World*.^[6]

Earlier in *The Pleasures of Opium*, De Quincey describes the long walks he took through the London streets under the drug's influence:

"Some of these rambles led me to great distances; for an opium-eater is too happy to observe the motions of time. And sometimes in my attempts to steer homewards, upon nautical principles, by fixing my eye on the pole-star, and seeking ambitiously for a north-west passage, instead of circumnavigating all the capes and headlands I had doubled in my outward voyage, I came suddenly upon such knotty problems of alleys, such enigmatical entries, and such sphinx's riddles of streets without thoroughfares, as must, I conceive, baffle the audacity of porters, and confound the intellects of hackney-coachmen."^[7]

The *Confessions* represents De Quincey's initial effort to write what he called "impassioned prose", an effort that he would later resume in [Suspiria de Profundis](#) (1845) and [The English Mail-Coach](#) (1849).

The 1856 revision^[edit]

In the early 1850s, De Quincey prepared the first collected edition of his works for publisher James Hogg. For that edition, he undertook a large-scale revision of the *Confessions*, more than doubling the work's length. Most notably, he expanded the opening section on his personal background, until it consumed more than two-thirds of the whole. Yet he gave the book "a much weaker beginning" and detracted from the impact of the original with digressions and inconsistencies; "the verdict of most critics is that the earlier version is artistically superior".^[8]

"De Quincey undoubtedly spoiled his masterpiece by revising it... anyone who compares the two will prefer the unflinching vigour and tension of the original version to the tired prosiness of much of the revised one".^[9]

Influence^[edit]

The *Confessions* maintained a place of primacy in De Quincey's literary output, and his literary reputation, from its first publication; "it went through countless editions, with only occasional intervals of a few years, and was often translated. Since there was little systematic study of narcotics until long after his death, De Quincey's account assumed an authoritative status and actually dominated the scientific and public views of the effects of opium for several generations."^[10]

Yet from the time of its publication, De Quincey's *Confessions* was criticized for presenting a picture of the opium experience that was too positive and too enticing to readers. As early as 1823, an anonymous response, *Advice to Opium Eaters*, was published "to warn others from copying De Quincey."^[11] The fear of reckless imitation was not groundless: several English writers — [Francis Thompson](#), [James Thomson](#), William Blair, and perhaps [Branwell Brontë](#) — were led to opium use and addiction by De Quincey's literary example.^[12] [Charles Baudelaire's](#) 1860 translation and adaptation, *Les paradis artificiels*, spread the work's influence further. One of the characters of the Sherlock Holmes story, *The Man with the Twisted Lip* (1891), is an opium addict who began experimenting with the drug as a student after reading the *Confessions*. De Quincey attempted to address this type of criticism. When the 1821 original was printed in book form the following year, he added an Appendix on the withdrawal process; and he inserted significant material on the medical aspects of opium into his 1856 revision.^[13]

More generally, De Quincey's *Confessions* influenced [psychology](#) and [abnormal psychology](#), and attitudes towards dreams and imaginative literature.^[14]

Confessions of an English Opium-Eater also served as inspiration to one of [Hector Berlioz](#)'s most famous pieces, *Symphonie fantastique*.^[citation needed] The play *The Opium Eater* by [Andrew Dallmeyer](#) was also based on *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*,^[15] and has been published by [Capercaillie Books](#).^{[16][17]} In 1962, [Vincent Price](#) starred in the full-length film *Confessions of an Opium Eater* which was a reimagining of De Quincey's *Confessions* by Hollywood producer [Albert Zugsmith](#).

On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

"**On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth***" is an [essay](#) in [Shakespearean](#) criticism by the English author [Thomas De Quincey](#), first published in the October 1823 edition of *The London Magazine*. Though brief, less than 2000 words in length,^{[1][2]} it has been called "De Quincey's finest single critical piece"^[3] and "one of the most penetrating critical footnotes in our literature".^[4] Commentators who are dismissive of De Quincey's literary criticism in general make an exception for his essay on *Macbeth*.^[5]

The essay concerns Act II, scene three in *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, in which the murder of King Duncan by [Macbeth](#) and [Lady Macbeth](#) is succeeded by [Macduff](#) and Lennox knocking at the gate of the castle. The knocking ends Act II, scene 2 and opens II, 3, the Porter scene. De Quincey wrote that for him, the knocking always had a pronounced effect: "it reflected back upon the murderer a peculiar awfulness and a depth of solemnity...." De Quincey could not account rationally for this response, according to the then-accepted canons of [literary criticism](#); and he proceeded, through his essay, to venture a more psychological interpretation than had previously been applied to Shakespeare. The essay foreshadows the psychological approaches of much later criticism.

De Quincey's biographer Horace Ainsworth Eaton called the essay "penetrating and philosophic", adding that De Quincey in this essay "produced conclusions as significant as anything in [Coleridge](#) or [Hazlitt](#)".^[6]

De Quincey also views his responses to the play in reference to another of his classic essays, "[On Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts](#)"