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DE QUINCEY ON POETIC GENIUS

THE LITERARY CRITICISM OF THE ROMANTIC PERIOD in England is marked by a number of important declarations on the nature of the poet as creator and social benefactor. Three of the most celebrated of these—those of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley—have become common counters in our critical tradition, and rightly so: they stand as noble, illuminating statements by men who were themselves great poets.¹ But valuable though these statements are, it is noteworthy that each of them is clearly marked by the nature of the writer from whom it comes. In their attempts to describe the poetic nature, all of these poets look into themselves, and in their observations they reflect their own deepest concerns as artists. Their introspection does not, of course, in any way weaken the validity of their statements; rather, it lends those statements a particular force. It is, however, very evident that one finds in each case a poet who has a vested interest in the claims he makes, and that his treatment of the poet's nature is limited by that interest. For this reason there is value in sometimes leaving their claims behind and noting the kind of comment on poetic genius which one meets in the work of lesser writers of the Romantic Period, authors who, if not themselves poets (or at least poets of any importance), had nonetheless the sensitivity and sympathy to be able to write with insight of the poet's genius. There were many such—the names of Hazlitt, Lamb, and Mary Shelley come immediately to mind—but of them all probably the one who best lends himself to fruitful study is Thomas De Quincey, who coupled with his innate sensibility and wide reading of poets, both Nowhere does this critical sense show itself more clearly than in his various past and present, remarkable gifts for curiously close analysis and discrimination. attempts to define the nature of the poet, and in the various oppositions that he establishes between particular classes of poets.

In all that he says of that great body of work which he terms *literature of power* De Quincey is primarily interested in the effect which a piece makes upon the reader or audience. That effect is the *raison d'être* of the poem, play, or novel, and De Quincey never loses sight of its importance: he constantly

works from it, and returns to it. To understand this effect, and to clarify it, he often turns to the origins of the work, and looks closely at its creator, attempting from an analysis of the writer's life and personality, or of his place in history, to throw light upon the work itself. He considers the essential qualities of the poet, defines the powers of genius and talent, and suggests the distinctive marks of various types of poet; and in the course of his several comments and classifications he develops a perceptive and often highly suggestive analysis of the most important single determinant in the whole literary activity, the nature of the creative genius himself.

In dealing with what De Quincey says of the creative genius one should from the outset be just to him and recognize that he never over-simplifies the artistic experience. He is never guilty of holding that in that experience any single force rules. He has a keen sense of the scope and complexity of the elements entering into his experience of literature, and this leaves him sharply conscious of the difficulties facing the critic who would undertake any generalizations upon the nature of literature. In arts such as poetry De Quincey believes that we find not simply passing pleasures which "embellish" life, but powers that "mould" it,² powers which trace their origins to the life and nature of a complex being, the creative poet, and which have deeply affected the lives and natures of many other complex beings, those men who have come under their influence. Hence De Quincey feels strongly that for truly sound criticism one needs "a good psychology" (XI, 294), a clear and deep understanding of the nature of man.

Although he believes that his own age does not afford such psychology, De Quincey nevertheless frequently attempts to analyze the highly complicated creative nature of the writer. Before turning to what he says of this nature, and of the ways in which it manifests itself, one should perhaps make one point very clear. Despite the fact that in "literature of power" De Quincey includes both prose and poetry, he quite evidently sees poetry of the highest order as the greatest variety of this literature. He values the prose of Sir Thomas Browne and Jean Paul Richter—no one has ever held it more highly—but for literature in its sublime reaches he turns to the poetry of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Shakespeare, Milton, and Wordsworth. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that almost all that he says of the nature of the literary artist centres on the poet rather than on writers generally, whether of prose or of poetry.

De Quincey's general conception of the poet builds on the idea that the poet is a man who is moved to the act of creation by a force within himself too strong to be resisted. True poets, he writes in his autobiography

(I, 194), are "men who groan, like prophets, under the burden of a message which they have to deliver, and *must* deliver, of a mission which they *must* discharge". They are not—as are many who pose as poets—mere "simulators of the part they sustain", but men who do what they must.

The compulsive force in the poet lies, De Quincey believes, in his emotional nature. The poet always speaks from profoundly stirred emotion: poetry is "the spontaneous overflow of real unaffected passion, deep, and at the same time original". The poet's creative activity is an almost involuntary expression of this passion: the feeling is "forced into public manifestation of itself from the necessity which cleaves to all passion alike of seeking external sympathy". And in his work the poet reveals his feelings to be not only deeper than those of ordinary life, and nobler and purer (XI, 228), but also of universal significance: the great poet brings into our consciousness "those grand catholic feelings that belong to the grand catholic situations of life through all its stages" (II, 250-251). He is able to do so because in the greatest of poets a deeply emotional nature exists in union with the searching intellect, the comprehensive grasp, and the sustaining power necessary for the conception and execution of a great poem (III, 88).

De Quincey's indebtedness to Wordsworth here—particularly to the Preface of 1800—is quite evident. One finds the same stress on the spontaneous emotional origins of poetry, and on the pervasively emotional quality of the finished poem; the same belief in the poet as one whose emotional nature has achieved an unusual development enabling him to feel more deeply than most men; the same recognition of the universality of the poet's effect; and the same emphasis on the importance of profound intellectual powers operating in conjunction with this emotional nature in the activity of creation.

All that De Quincey says of the nature of the poet is echoed and developed in his comments on the differences between genius and talent. He sees talent as a purely intellectual power, having no connection with the feelings or the moral sense, and manifesting itself through the active will. It reveals itself always in the form of an effort of the insulated intellect. Genius, on the other hand, although also an intellectual power, is in every other respect "in polar opposition" to talent (I, 194 n.). It is closely allied with the feelings—it "moves in alliance with the *genial* nature, *i.e.*, with the capacities of pleasure and pain" (III, 34, n. 2)—and it operates in conjunction with man's moral nature, being, as it is, impregnated with his sense of right and wrong. Therefore a man of the highest talent is often obtuse and below the ordinary standard of men in his feelings; but no man of genius can unyoke himself

from the society of moral perceptions that are brighter, and sensibilities that are more tremulous, than those of men in general (XI, 383). And since genius is directly linked with the sensibilities, it is independent of the active will and functions as a spontaneous movement of the passive nature: "All talent, in whatsoever class, reveals itself as an effort—as a counteraction to an opposing difficulty or hindrance; whereas genius universally moves in headlong sympathy and concurrence with spontaneous power" (I, 195, n.).

Where talent, therefore, manifests itself as an exercise of one human faculty alone, the intellect, genius reveals itself as a "synthesis of the human spirit with the human intellect" (XI, 383). In a work of genius the total spirit of man is brought into play—his intellectual capacities, his sensibilities, and his moral nature. And this spirit manifests itself in one great spontaneous expression of the creative urge:

Hence . . . arises the reason that genius is always peculiar and individual; one man's genius never exactly repeats another man's. But talent is the same in all men; and that which is effected by talent can never serve to identify or indicate its author. Hence, too, that although talent is the object of respect, it never conciliates love; you love a man of talent perhaps *in concreto*, but not talent; whereas genius, even for itself, is idolized (III, 35 n.).

When one begins to speak in terms of synthesis in the creative activity one cannot but think immediately of Coleridge, and it is highly probable—despite De Quincey's declaration that he was "the more proud" of his distinction between genius and talent since he had seen "the utter failure of Mr. Coleridge" to achieve as much—that Coleridge's influence reveals itself in what De Quincey offers on the subject. For not only is there the same concern with synthesis, but Coleridge, too, sees sensibility as "a component part" of genius; he recognizes a close link between genius and the moral nature; and he accepts the creations of genius as spontaneous expressions of the "genial and productive nature."³

De Quincey's general considerations of genius as a human power merely elucidate and give broad application to the ideas found in his comments on the nature of the poet. The poet, like all men of genius, is possessed of a fine intellect, a deeply emotional nature, and an elevated moral sense; and from the synthesis of these three emerges the created work. All poets have these faculties and powers in common. Nevertheless, poets do differ: for all they have in common, Wordsworth makes an effect markedly different from that of Shakespeare. Aware that such differences exist, De Quincey moves

from his broad generalizations with regard to all poets to a number of carefully developed distinctions among different classes of poets. In doing so he does nothing which should surprise any reader of his works: one cannot read far in his essays without becoming conscious of the pleasure which he always finds in determining the various provinces into which the world of man's knowledge can be divided. He delights in establishing distinctions, divisions, classifications, categories of all sorts. Sometimes the distinctions he draws are broad and sweeping; sometimes they are curiously subtle; but always they reflect De Quincey's acutely analytical mind, ever seeking to distinguish, to relate, and to order, so that he can eventually arrive at understanding. Hence one finds De Quincey speaking of such contrasted types of poets as the *subjective* and the *objective*, and the *picturesque* and the *sculpturesque*; suggesting the differences between the *tragic* and the *epic constitutions* of poets' minds; and commenting on the differences between the writers of *worldly* and *unworldly* books.

In arriving at these distinctions De Quincey obviously looks at literature under different attributes, stressing now one, now another quality, but in all his classifications he holds firmly to his conviction that all true literature has a common end: every work of art may be unique in its means of communication, in its intensity and profundity of effect, and in its concomitant values of beauty, form, and moral force, but all have the one primary object of evoking an experience of power in the reader.

The most fully treated of De Quincey's distinctions between writers is that which he draws between *subjective* and *objective poets*. He turns frequently to this, but his most succinct statement of the essential difference between the two types of poet appears in his *Literary and Lake Reminiscences* (II, 319), in a comment on Southey's poems: "the sole objection to them is, that they are too intensely objective—too much reflect the mind, as spreading itself out upon external things—too little exhibit the mind as introverting itself upon its own thoughts and feelings". The objective writer is one who deals primarily in "external facts, tangible realities and circumstantial details" (X, 227), and the most striking example of such a poet is probably Homer. The subjective writer, on the other hand, seeks "to project his own inner mind; to bring out consciously what yet lurks by involution in many unanalysed feelings; in short, to pass through a prism and radiate into distinct elements what previously had been even to himself but dim and confused ideas intermixed with each other" (X, 226-227). He is one who gives imag-

inative expression to the experiences of his inner being, and the greatest example here, for De Quincey, is Jean Paul Richter.

There is no question which of these two categories of writers De Quincey finds more interesting. It happens that in the *Literary and Lake Reminiscences*, after making his comment on the objectivity of Southey's poetry, he goes on to insist in a most tolerant way that this objectivity "only seems to limit the range of the poetry—and all poetry *is* limited in its range: none comprehends more than a section of the human power" (II, 319). But elsewhere De Quincey almost always stresses the richness of the subjective writer's work over that of the objective. He has no sympathy with the belief that Homer's detachment in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is itself a value; it merely reveals the meagre development in Homer's time of the human mind and heart:

Not only the powers for introverting the eye upon the *spectator*, as himself the *spectaculum*, were then undeveloped and inconceivable, but the sympathies did not exist to which such an appeal could have addressed itself. . . . The metrical romances of the Middle Ages have the same shivering character of starvation as to the inner life of man; and, if *that* constitutes a meritorious distinction, no man ought to be excused for wanting what it is so easy to obtain by simple neglect of culture (XI, 386-387).

Nor is De Quincey's favouring of the subjective at all surprising when one recalls his concern with his own inner being. The state of his mind, heart, and spirit was always for De Quincey much more interesting than any matter entirely external to him. He was an introvert, and felt it personally rewarding to be so. To find him stressing the importance of the inner man—the subjective—in literature, is, therefore, quite what one would expect.

For De Quincey the most striking characteristic of subjective writing is its curious fusion of a writer's personality and his work. He suggests that of all writers in English, probably the most subjective is Charles Lamb, an author so much a part of his work that his essays and poems are often scarcely intelligible to the reader without some understanding of Lamb himself:

Everywhere, indeed, in the writings of Lamb, and not merely in his *Elia*, the character of the writer co-operates in an undercurrent to the effect of the thing written. To understand, in the fullest sense, either the gaiety or the tenderness of a particular passage, you must have some insight into the particular bias of the writer's mind, whether native and original, or impressed gradually by the

accidents of situation; whether simply developed out of predispositions by the action of life, or violently scorched into the constitution by some fierce fever of calamity. There is in modern literature a whole class of writers, though not a large one, standing within the same category: some marked originality of character in the writer becomes a co-efficient with what he says to a common result; you must sympathize with this *personality* in the author before you can appreciate the most significant parts of his views (V, 217-218).⁴

In the works of such a writer—and those of Sir Thomas Browne, Laurence Sterne, and Jean Paul Richter all resemble Lamb's in this—one finds a close interaction between "the author as a human agency and his theme as an intellectual re-agency", the "absorption of the universal into the concrete—of the pure intellect into the human nature of the author". The author is as much in evidence as his subject.

Acutely aware of the way in which a subjective writer constantly reveals himself in his work, De Quincey moves, in the essay "Style", to the conclusion that such a writer actually must manifest his personal nature and presence in his style. He points out that anyone who seeks only to convey sure facts about some field of knowledge external to himself (that is, to deal entirely in objective material—and De Quincey cites the fields of physiology, anatomy, and astronomy) need not concern himself with style because what he has to say transcends his manner: "The matter tells without any manner at all". But in subjective writing the case is quite different: "the more closely any exercise of mind is connected with what is internal and individual in the sensibilities,—that is, with what is philosophically termed *subjective*,—precisely in that degree, and the more subtly, does the style or the embodying of the thoughts cease to be a mere separable ornament, and in fact the more does the manner . . . become confluent with the matter". Referring to Wordsworth's description of style as "the *incarnation* of thoughts" rather than "the *dress* of thoughts" DeQuincey declares:

Never in one word was so profound a truth conveyed. Mr. Wordsworth was thinking, doubtless, of poetry like his own: viz. that which is eminently meditative. And the truth is apparent on consideration: for if language were merely a dress, then you could separate the two; you could lay the thoughts on the left hand, the language on the right. But generally speaking, you can no more deal thus with poetic thoughts than you can with soul and body. The union is too subtle, the intertexture too ineffable,—each co-existing not merely *with* the other, but each *in* and *through* the other. An image, for instance, a

single word, often enters into a thought as a constituent part. In short, the two elements are not united as a body with a separable dress, but as a mysterious incarnation (X, 226, 229-230).

It must follow, therefore, that the work of the subjective writer will demand a most expressive, malleable medium. This is necessary if all the varied tones of feeling and attitude are to be suggested. Chaucer is for De Quincey a more subjective writer than Homer, and Chaucer's language must, therefore, be much wider in range and more subtle in suggestion, and in distinctions of meaning. When Homer does notice feelings they are presented in broad, easily distinguished strokes of anger, fear, love, and hate, "without any vestige of a sense for the more delicate interblending or *nuances* of such qualities" (VI, 73). For such strokes Homer's Greek was sufficient. But Chaucer's more subjective writing required something further, and the double origin of the English language enabled his medium to meet his requirement: "Simple narration, and a pathos resting upon artless circumstances,—elementary feelings,—homely and household affection,—these are most suitably managed by the old indigenous Saxon vocabulary. But a passion which rises into grandeur, which is complex, elaborate, and interveined with high meditative feelings, would languish or absolutely halt without aid from the Latin moiety of our language" (XIV, 157). In other words, as writing becomes more subjective—as poetry, for example, moves from Homer to Wordsworth—the language must act as a more delicately expressive instrument, for by that instrument the writer seeks to convey not only certain facts, but also—and more important—an impression of how he himself feels about those facts.

Having established his distinction between objective and subjective writers, De Quincey realistically does not attempt any detailed pigeonholing: one does not find him declaring that some poets are purely objective, others wholly subjective. Rather, apart from suggesting what for him are the most striking examples of objectivity and subjectivity, he is content to use his distinguishing terms relatively. Homer is the marked example of an objective writer, and Richter and Lamb are the equally striking examples of the subjective; but apart from a very few cases of black or white labelling like these, De Quincey is wisely content to limit himself to suggesting comparisons between writers. All creators of literature of power are in part objective, and in part subjective; some, for example Chaucer and Wordsworth, are simply more subjective, and less objective, than others such as Homer and Southey.

The next two pairs of De Quincey's classifications are very closely re-

lated to each other. These are his distinctions between *tragic* and *epic* writers, and *picturesque* and *sculpturesque*. In both, De Quincey's interest lies in his awareness that literature offers two quite different ways in which intense feeling can be effectively expressed: it can be expressed in the form of seemingly unrestrained excitement and tumult, or it can be expressed with controlled dignity and majesty. He sees the first of these as the form of expression adopted by those he calls *tragic* and *picturesque* writers, and the second as that used by *epic* and *sculpturesque* writers.

In applying the terms *tragic* and *epic* to particular authors De Quincey does not have in mind merely the forms which such writers have used—although these obviously enter into the distinction—but rather what he broadly calls “the constitution of their minds” (V, 103). He recognizes that some poets can be classed as *tragic* because their work is marked by “the *impassioned* movements of the tragic . . . muse”, and others can be classed as *epic* because their work is marked by “the majestic movements of the epic muse” (IV, 279—italics added). In English literature Shakespeare and Milton are the two notable examples of these different types of genius. The work of the one is characterized by “motions like those of lightning, the fierce angular coruscations of that wild agency which comes forward so vividly in the sudden peripeteia, in the revolutionary catastrophe, and in the tumultuous conflicts, through persons or through situations of the tragic drama” (V, 236). That of the other is marked by the epic quality evident in the “solemn planetary wheelings”, the “vast ideas”, the “undying grandeur”, of *Paradise Lost* (X, 108; IV, 113, n. 1; V, 236). Both offer movement, but in the one this is particularly excited, impassioned, while in the other it is more stately, majestic.

De Quincey sees these two casts of the poetic mind as virtually antithetical. In the essay on Goethe he writes: “those who have reflected at all upon the fine arts know that power of one kind is often inconsistent, positively incompatible, with power of another kind. For example, the *dramatic* mind is incompatible with the *epic*” (IV, 396). The strength of De Quincey's conviction that the two powers are fundamentally opposed becomes evident when one draws together certain of his comments on Addison, Scott, and Lamb. Addison, although not himself an epic poet, had the epic constitution of mind, and, therefore, the English poet with whom he had most sympathy was Milton: “There was . . . in the very constitution of Milton's mind, in the majestic regularity and planetary solemnity of its *epic* movements, something which he could understand and appreciate: as to the meteoric and incalculable eccentricities of the *dramatic* mind, as it displayed itself in the heroic age

of our Drama amongst the Titans of 1590-1630, they confounded and overwhelmed him (IV, 23). Scott and Lamb, on the other hand, possessed the dramatic constitution of mind, and their temperaments—the converse of Addison's—allowed for slight appreciation of Milton: "In one feature, though otherwise as different as possible, Lamb resembles Sir Walter Scott—viz. in the dramatic character of his mind and taste. Both of them recoiled from the high ideality of such a mind as Milton's; both loved the mixed standards of the world as it is—the dramatic standards in which good and evil are intermingled; in short, that class of composition in which a *human* character is predominant" (III, 88).

This general distinction between the excited activity of some writers and the stately manner of others is further developed in the related classification of *sculpturesque* and *picturesque* poets. The categories here are not quite identical with those of the tragic and epic classifications—there is an obvious overlapping in the case of Greek tragedy, which De Quincey suggests is tragic but sculpturesque—but the essential distinction remains; the one is marked by majesty, the other by excitement. The clearest statement of the difference appears in "A Brief Appraisal of the Greek Literature", in a comparison of the tragic drama of ancient Greece with that of England:

In the ancient drama, to represent it justly, the unlearned reader must imagine grand situations, impressive groups; in the modern tumultuous movement, a grand stream of action. In the Greek drama, he must conceive the presiding power to be *Death*; in the English, *Life*. What Death?—What Life? That sort of death, or of life locked up and frozen into everlasting slumber, which we see in sculpture; that sort of life, of tumult, of agitation, of tendency to something beyond, which we see in painting. The picturesque, in short, domineers over English tragedy; the sculpturesque, or the statuesque, over the Grecian (X, 315).⁵

And if one places beside this a similar passage from "The Antigone of Sophocles" one can gain a fair idea of the nature of De Quincey's distinction. Again comparing Greek tragedy to sculpture, he writes:

What we read in sculpture is not absolutely death, but still less is it the fulness of life. We read there the abstraction of a life that reposes, the sublimity of a life that aspires, the solemnity of a life that is thrown to an infinite distance. . . . It affects us profoundly, but not by agitation. Now, on the other hand, the breathing life—life kindling, trembling, palpitating—that life which speaks to

us in painting, this is also the life that speaks to us in English Tragedy. . . . In [the Greek]. . . . Tragedy what uniformity of gloom; in the English what light alternating with depths of darkness! The Greek, how mournful; the English, how tumultuous! Even the catastrophes how different! In the Greek we see a breathless waiting for a doom that cannot be evaded,—a waiting as it were, for the last shock of an earthquake, or the inexorable rising of a deluge; in the English it is like a midnight of shipwreck, from which up to the last, and till the final ruin comes, there still survives the sort of hope that clings to human energies (X, 375).

De Quincey effectively illustrates his distinction in his essay "Shakespeare", in a comparison of Shakespeare's women with those found in the Greek drama (IV, 70-71). He suggests that the most striking women in the Greek drama are Antigone and Electra, but our feeling for neither of these is the deep love we feel for some of Shakespeare's women: rather, we respect them. We admire one as the very embodiment of "filial duty, cleaving to the steps of a desolate and afflicted old man", and the other as the embodiment of "sisterly affection, maintaining the rights of a brother under circumstances of peril, of desertion, and consequently of perfect self-reliance"; but they are figures from sculpture, "fine marble groups", deeply impressive, but lacking the breath of life, the "pulses of womanly sensibilities". Shakespeare's women, on the other hand, are "warm breathing realities", not creatures marked simply by a single heroic quality which rouses our respect and nothing more, but complex living beings, humanly mixed and blended, even confused, as is their world: "in Shakespeare all is presented in the *concrete*,—that is to say, not brought forward in relief, as by some effort of an anatomical artist, but embodied and imbedded, so to speak, as by the force of a creative nature, in the complex system of a human life. . . . In Shakespeare's characters is felt for ever a real *organic* life, where each is for the whole and in the whole, and where the whole is for each and in each. They only are real incarnations" (IV, 71).

De Quincey's fullest treatments of this distinction appear in his considerations of these two schools of tragic drama, but in his examples elsewhere he does not limit himself to dramatists alone. Among his sculpturesque poets he numbers not only Aeschylus, Sophocles, and their fellows, but also Milton; and among his picturesque poets he includes Wordsworth as well as Shakespeare. The widely embracing range of his categories is indicated in a comment that he makes in a paper on Shakespeare and Wordsworth: "In these

two poets . . . alike is seen the infinite of Painting: in Aeschylus and Milton alike . . . are seen the simplicities and stern Sublimities of Sculpture."⁶

There remains one last, rather minor, distinction to consider, the classification of books into the *worldly* and the *unworldly*. The distinction does not bear specifically on De Quincey's conception of the poet, and it plays no significant part in his critical thinking—it appears only twice—but it does suggest one further difference between poets' attitudes.

The clearest treatment of the distinction appears in the review of Thomas Noon Talfourd's *Final Memorials of Charles Lamb* (V, 215-216). Here De Quincey points out that popularity alone is not necessarily a dependable test of value. Many books are not popular, but real worth is sometimes suggested by unpopularity: books sometimes fail to appeal because they do not conform to current taste. Although unpopularity need not, of course, be a reason for valuing a book—"*Prima facie*, it must suggest some presumption *against* a book that it has failed to gain public attention"—an actively hostile reaction in itself implies power in the book: "Hatred may be promising. The deepest revolutions of mind sometimes begin in hatred". Sometimes, however, the response to a book is neutral, neither hostile nor favourable. In such cases the book may have failed to impress because of an inherent weakness, but it may also have failed because of the peculiar nature of its author's "positive powers": these may be "such as rarely reflect themselves in the mirror of the ordinary understanding". They are foreign to the natures of most men, and hence uninteresting, unappealing. But they are still powers which can make their effect on the understanding heart: they, like the powers of popular writers, can move the sympathetic reader who is prepared to surrender himself to them. In books marked by such powers one finds what De Quincey terms the *unworldly* in literature.

It seems little to be perceived how much the great scriptural idea of the worldly and the unworldly is found to emerge in literature as well as in life. . . . A library divides into sections of worldly and unworldly, even as a crowd of men divides into that same majority and minority. The world has an instinct for recognizing its own, and recoils from certain qualities when exemplified in books, with the same disgust or defective sympathy as would have governed it in real life. From qualities, for instance, of childlike simplicity, of shy profundity, or of inspired self-communion, the world does and must turn away its face toward grosser, bolder, more determined, or more intelligible expressions of character and intellect; and not otherwise in literature, not at all less in literature, than it does in the realities of life.

It is significant that De Quincey's comments on worldly and unworldly books both appear in his essays on Charles Lamb. For De Quincey, Lamb's collected *Essays of Elia* offer a great example of an unworldly book: "They traverse a peculiar field of observation, sequestered from general interest; and they are composed in a spirit too delicate and unobtrusive to catch the ear of the noisy crowd, clamouring for strong sensations". But in their detachment from the commonly valued things of this world, they possess qualities which mark them as precious to the sensitive, understanding reader: a "retiring delicacy", a "pensiveness chequered by gleams of the fanciful", and a "humour that is touched with cross lights of pathos". Probably their most distinctive quality is their essential purity:

[They] . . . will be received as amongst the most elaborately finished gems of literature; as cabinet specimens which express the utmost delicacy, purity, and tenderness of the national intellect, together with the rarest felicity of finish and expression, although it may be the province of other modes of literature to exhibit the highest models in the grandeur [*sic*] and more impassioned forms of intellectual power (III, 91).

From the several distinctions which De Quincey draws between types of writers certain features emerge. The first is that in making the distinctions De Quincey is constantly tending towards some sort of broad distinction between the dominantly classical and the dominantly romantic genius or temperament. He himself would probably not care for a generalization phrased in quite these words—he had little sympathy with what seemed to him barren disputes in France and Germany between the *classical* and the *romantic*—but the opposition which he eventually establishes between pagan and Christian literature is in many respects close to that which our popular use of the terms *classical* and *romantic* implies, and in the more restricted categories of subjective and objective poets, and tragic and epic, and sculpturesque and picturesque, and the distinction between worldly and unworldly books, one sees him moving towards the broader classifications. As he uses them, *objective*, *epic*, *sculpturesque*, and *worldly* are all terms indicative of the classical temperament, of an attitude which highly values detachment, reason, control, form, restraint, dignity, and universality. And in the same way, *subjective*, *tragic*, *picturesque*, and *unworldly* are terms which generally suggest the romantic genius: as De Quincey uses them they describe the writer deeply concerned with his inner self, his feelings, and his spiritual experiences, and at the same time with the richness and fulness of this world.

The second noteworthy feature of the distinctions is that they reveal much with regard to De Quincey's own nature as a man, and with regard to his preferences as a critic of literature. He is a man of his time, and although he frequently finds great value in what he calls *objective*, *epic*, and *sculpturesque* works—one should not forget that Milton, an *epic* and *sculpturesque* writer, is for him the greatest of all poets—he makes abundantly evident in establishing these categories that his sympathies usually lie much more strongly with the romantic varieties of literature than with the classical. He prefers *subjective* poetry to *objective*, and he implies a liking for the warmly vital *picturesque* over the stately *sculpturesque*. He himself is a romantic convinced of the essential value of emotional experience, and he here reveals a preference for those poets and works which afford him the richest, most intense, most powerful experience.

The distinctions are generally important, however, for what they reveal of De Quincey's recognition of the striking differences which distinguish poets, and of the way in which these differences result in the great variety and range of literature of power. All writers of genius have certain characteristics in common—a capacity for deep feeling, a keen intellect, a pure moral sense, and a compulsive urge to express themselves—but in almost all other respects they can, and do, differ, and every work bears the unique stamp of its creator. Every work, therefore, has its own unique effect. Although unique, however, that effect is always a species of power: no matter how greatly works of literature may differ they all have in common the essential characteristics of intense and pleasurable excitement of the emotions, and revelation of the highest truth; and these characteristics reflect the capacities of the poet, the man of genius.

NOTES

1. I have in mind the statements to be found in Wordsworth's 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (Chapter XIV), and Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*.
2. "Oliver Goldsmith", *The Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. David Masson, Vol. IV (Edinburgh, 1889), p. 309. Later references to this edition are given in parentheses.
3. *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross (Oxford, 1907), Vol. I, pp. 30, 153; Vol. II, p. 12.
4. There are obvious, but none the less striking, anticipations here of Browning's comments on the *subjective poet* in his essay on Shelley.

5. In what he says of this distinction between *sculpturesque* and *picturesque* poets, De Quincey is close to Coleridge's distinction between the *statuesque* and the *picturesque*, *statuesque* describing ancient art, *picturesque* modern.
6. "Shakespeare and Wordsworth", in Claude E. Jones, "Some De Quincey Manuscripts", *ELH*, VIII (September, 1941), p. 219.

EXPECT NIGHT, THEN

Willis Eberman

Expect to be lonely: it is the lot
of most men on earth. Not even love
will alleviate that aching. Expect old age:
accept the inevitable. It is enough
that you have been a part of the music of youth;
danced, gathered flowers, run in the golden wind
of vanished summer. . . . Now the autumn lies
like a burnished field before you. Prepare to watch
heaven hold earth in sunset: wine and gold,
and singing heart of amber on the west
above this ocean. . . . Expect night, then,
to embrace all, even the loneliness.