Paul Hamilton

reads

Guilty Thing: A Life of Thomas De Quincey

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by Frances Wilson

'WHAT', ASKS FRANCES WILSON TOWARDS THE END of her enthralling biography, 'can it have been like to have De Quincey as a father?' Or as a friend, one might add. By this stage of the story, the mind boggles. As his son or daughter, you wouldn't see much of him, would be occasionally provided for, passionately loved, and early learn to cover for his total inability to live within his means. You might be detailed to deliver his latest manuscript to an editor, primed to 'throw the package into the room and shout "There!" before rushing off'. De Quincey was constitutionally duplicitous, religious in his pursuit of grudges, sensitive to a fault, frequently paranoid. As a friend of this man, you would, in addition have to suffer the imposition upon you of one or other of the archetypal characters of his obsessively recursive and memorializing self-consciousness. He would construct you as the model of something, and not necessarily something he liked. Later he would probably deny the friendship, as the repressed original began to surface. In his youth he might have lent you money; in maturity you would be relentlessly dunned.

Given this personality, it is also fair to say that De Quincey was not entirely fortunate in his friends. No less than did Coleridge, his 'role model in failure', De Quincey eventually found William Wordsworth impossible. Despite definite kindnesses on both sides, Wordsworth's habit of populating his world entirely with himself, effortlessly enlisting others almost by default in ancillary roles, made a trial of constant familiarity. It was not a good idea to take over Dove Cottage in which Wordsworth and retinue, a few yards away, continued to take an interest as though it was still theirs. But, in revenge, you could always take advantage of the poet's recitation of the great poem to Coleridge from an unpublished manuscript to provide copy of your own in a manner which these days, Wilson says, 'would land [you] in court'. And then there was friend Coleridge, incapable of acknowledging the addiction which had become the literary livelihood of the 'English Opium Eater', rivalrous and often fraudulent in his scholarship, diligent in not returning debts. The affinity with wayward brilliance producing De Quincey's friendship for him was bound eventually to prove toxic, although Coleridge near his end, praising De Quincey's novel *Klosterheim*, expressed the desire to see his 'old friend'. John Wilson, De Quincey's elder brother *redivivus*, who fuelled with anecdote a hatchet job on him by William Maginn in *John Bull*, got his come-uppance when De Quincey effectively danced on his grave by imitating his lecturing style as Edinburgh's improbable Professor of Moral Philosophy with some glee. That this was not affectionate re-conjuring of the friend of his youth is rendered more likely by the fact that John Wilson's take-offs of De Quincey had been well-known. The *Blackwoods* crowd however, absolutely no

respecters of persons, especially of each other, were probably most equipped to get the best out of him, welcoming him to the abrasive company of *Noctes Ambrosianae*, and satirising him mercilessly but as a matter of course in 'Confessions of an English Glutton', in which pursuit of roast pork proves as vertiginous in its pleasures as any opiate, surely by implication dissolving De Quincey's vaunted horror in the laughter of another little man, Charles Lamb?

Wilson's biography paints a more vivid picture of De Quincey's life than any other. She exerts a lot of good sense in navigating the stream of crises, quarrels and disasters, and De Quincey's part-invention of them, but also shows what a comic figure good sense must cut in this drama. This enables her to flit constantly between existential catastrophe and literary success, and to suggest that we should try to understand the uncomfortable connection of one with the other. Translated in turn by Musset and Baudelaire, De Quincey is more like a French 'frenetic' of the 1820s than an English Romantic, turning transgression into sublime excess, aestheticizing murderous violence, using licence to invigorate contemporary ideas of the artistic, indulging self-annihilation as a symbol of self-consciousness. The Wordsworthian patterns of De Quincey's writings are always inverted. For Frances Wilson's De Quincey, the mind is a Wordsworthian abyss opened up not in the encounter with Nature but in the lethal meeting with itself. 'The Jolly Corner', not 'The Private Life', is the comparison looming here, or even, as Wilson suggests, Poe's 'William Wilson'.

De Quincey's imagination, fearful of looking down into the chasm, registers its depths in words. Words are the 'hinges' on which the door to this gulf swings open or shut. Wilson emphasizes that descriptions for De Quincey are always 'paintings', in part depictions of their own power of revelation or repression, or, indeed, both. For, as Wilson puts it neatly, De Quincey was always a 'duplicate' writer, his autobiographies apparently accompanied by a commentary by someone other than their author, as if ghost-written, but by himself. So when he objectifies himself, he simultaneously produces a subject free to reflect upon that definition. Or else the self he demarcates slips independently of its own accord beyond the writing's jurisdiction to mount yet another of Piranesi's (Coleridgean) stairways, and not to paradise. Wilson delves into the rough life of the diaries and confronts, for example, the callousness of his exploitation of young prostitutes in contrast to his romanticizing of them in *Confessions*. His adolescence already prepares us for the difficulties of squaring squalid, 'real' material with De Quincey's opportunistic sublimation of it in his literary horrors. Opium, like a church, was to consecrate this duplicity in which, shrived of the world, 'each of us lives a second life apart and with himself alone'. But the guilt felt when a knock on the door finds you in one world when you should be in the other haunted De Quincey, and this book is fascinated by the consequences of his frequent retreats and adventurous incursions from one domain into the other.

In one aside, Wilson, after quoting from some little-known verses by De

Quincey, remarks on 'his hexameters being indistinguishable from his prose'. A closer look reveals that the hexameters are even dactyls, as in Homer and Virgil, and one suddenly glimpses De Quincey's vaunted classical erudition in an English prose solution. De Quincey's style is constantly active in his thought, just as recurring settings and receding spaces are fundamental to his style. The arguments are interwoven with their figurative expression, and a great merit of this book is to make us read and think of De Quincey from these premises. De Quincey could affect a strictly analytic vein when he wanted. He could introduce us straightforwardly to minor characters belonging to the 'Society of the Lakes', and keep autobiographical resonance to a minimum. But once you are acquainted with the labyrinthine virtuosity elsewhere, the plain, descriptive ground always feels liable to crumble under your feet. Scenarios repeat themselves, inevitably inviting psychoanalytic sleuthing of varying degrees of intensity, although it is rather the staging or housing of the fantasy which attracts De Quincey back to it. It is the stylistic possibilities released by repetition, glossed by Wilson as 'paraclusithyron', or 'lament by a shut door', that his involuted writing so often celebrates. The lament, needless to say, rises up intriguingly muffled by the door.

The supervening orientalism of De Quincey's writing, and his obsession with a series of bounded spaces, can lead critics to devise a psychoanalytic and postcolonial nutcracker, from which poor De Quincey struggles to escape. There too he is cast as 'a guilty thing' like Hamlet's father's ghost, or Wordsworth's child when his immortality is intimated to him. Critically crushed in this way, John Barrell's De Quincey is made to document a life 'we cannot repair'. Latent and manifest content cooperate to put the frighteners on each other. To move from one to the other alleviates nothing, far less offers an escape. Wilson looks into the hell recent criticism has constructed for De Quincey with equal boldness, but she is less bent on prosecution, more on dramaturgy. She uses the evidence of guilt to raise consciousness of the pleasures of its remarkable literary style, rather as De Quincey treats murder. The ways in which he blocks the parts he plays in life differentiates its genuine drama from mere subservience to or infection by the ideologies of the time.

All biographies of De Quincey are like him. Barrell's compulsive book is full of repetitions that confirm the diagnosis. The invariable, mechanical plot of De Quincey's psychopathology becomes a reflex of the reader who sits in judgement. The parts circulate, but the story remains the same. When Wilson openly chases a 'De Quinceyan biography', though, she looks for one that worries less about a core ego and the masking characters it adopts. Her book is about inhabiting and being inhabited, like the hexameters, and about the different places in which De Quincey elegiacally replays himself to literary advantage. Her treatment is compendious and she skilfully settles De Quincey's words among her own, wearing his autobiographical habit over her biographical one. That said, she can be a sharp demystifier, although always alert to the stylistic profit De Quincey looked for in his self-deceptions and deceptions of others. His 'stories lead back not to events but to other stories'.

London, where he was most invisible, grows literary, is transformed into the self he writes about in the *Confessions*. It leads from the precedent of the youthful Samuel Johnson's impoverishment, knocking around with the disreputable Richard Savage, on to the host of other literary profiteers detailed in Wilson's final summary of 'The Tables Turned'. It presages the simultaneous strata of Freud's psychic archaeology, and supplies a general literary recourse – from Poe to Eliot, from Dickens to Paul Auster.

Wilson is expert in literary seductions. She writes knowingly about the initial liberties De Quincey takes with Wordsworth, presuming like a suitor on his enthusiasm for *Lyrical Ballads*. Once in the society of the Lakers, though, De Quincey is upstaged, but feels jilted. Both he and Coleridge are diminished by the egotistical sublime of *The Prelude*, not to be published until after Wordsworth's death, and Wilson claims their foreknowledge of probably the greatest literary autobiography of the age did real damage to their own self-possession. The harm is of a piece with Wordsworth's untroubled indifference to opinions and talents not immediately assimilable to his own. The key to De Quincey's retaliation is space. When he leases Dove Cottage after the Wordsworths move to Allan Bank, he promptly trashes the moss cabin in which Wordsworth had written so much 'at the top of my orchard', and severely culls the orchard itself. Consternation ensues amongst the Wordsworths, but a door opens for him. He now casts himself in a role independent of his place in the Wordsworthian project as acolyte, errand-boy, proof-reader, librarian, babysitter, tutor and, while his inheritance lasted, banker. Communications between him, William, Dorothy and the others break down. He finds his own voice. Or, rather, he finds his own style. This discovery, though, is not the integration of a previously scattered personality, but the management of defining experiences of disorientation and dissolution. The Bible of this is, notoriously, the *Confessions*, and its muse is opium.

The exit from the Wordsworthian matrix was to be painful and incomplete, especially from his rapprochement with Dorothy and his devotion to Wordsworth's ill-fated little daughter, Catherine. But his eventual wife, Margaret Simpson, did her simple best to nurse him through the worst of the hallucinogenic life his writing needed so much. And then there were the children, real ones instead of the ghosts of Ann, Elizabeth and the others by whom, however, he still would always be revisited.

Wilson pursues the ageing De Quincey as indefatigably as her namesake, one of his Edinburgh landladies who ultimately had him arrested for a bad debt. Our Wilson, though, can be more forgiving, and is especially understanding of De Quincey whenever his prose merits it. In the late flowering of *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845), De Quincey joins in the hunt for himself and his debts. In so doing, he produces what many thought his most matchless prose. In his elaboration of 'The Palimpsest', he makes the double into a literary artefact. His 'dark interpreter', Brocken spectres and other more conventional duplications stand in waiting, but now writing itself was acknowledged to be its own subject, forever anterior to itself. Its fictional

characters become our closest approach to understanding the instabilities of identity because they are derivative and because, on examination, they perpetually recede from prominence as more original features begin to explain their own. This is the process which opium disguised by exaggerating. Eventually, the dominant fiction articulating De Quincey's life came from the orientalist vocabulary of tigerish forms which could be relied upon to voice itself when his habitually uncontrollable career, like that of the English Mail Coach, both perpetrated and suffered another casualty.

Finally, his velocity at last lessening, De Quincey was directed towards the search for his own writings by James Hogg's entrepreneurial son. In facilitating a collected edition he at last began to make reasonable money. This venture produced one of his last pieces of theatre, appropriately back in the rooms formerly rented from Frances Wilson in Lothian Street, Edinburgh, a hospitality renewed. There he wrote the 'Postscript' to his second essay on 'Murder as One the Fine Arts', in which the murderer, in Wilson's reading, doubles as just about everything, door after door opening interminably, a palimpsest of De Quincey's life and a fittingly literary end to a story so well told.

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