

Thomas De Quincey's Portrait of the Lake Poets:  
Individual Reality and Universal Ideal

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Akira Fujimaki

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**Introduction: Pictorial versus Literary Portraits**

As David Piper (120) and Richard Holmes (12) concurrently mention, Washington Allston, the American painter of arguably the best portrait of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) [Figure 1], confessed to feeling incompetent to paint the poet in 1814:

So far as I can judge of my own production the likeness of Coleridge is a true one, but it is Coleridge in repose; and, though not unstirred by the perpetual ground-swell of his ever-working intellect, and shadowing forth something of the deep philosopher, it is not Coleridge in his highest mood, the poetic state, when the divine afflatus of the poet possessed him. When in that state, no face I ever saw was like his; it seemed almost spirit made visible without a shadow of the physical upon it. Could I then have fixed it upon canvas! but it was beyond the reach of my art. (Flagg 104)

Morton D. Paley, who has studied the portraits of the poet, suggests one of the

reasons why it is not easy to paint him: “it does seem as if Coleridge’s personal appearance could vary dramatically within short periods, and this may have been one of the effects of his opium addiction” (45).

We have to consider other effects as well. According to Frances Blanshard, who has done thorough research on all the extant portraits of William Wordsworth (1770-1850), portrait painters of these Romantic poets, under the remaining influence of Sir Joshua Reynolds’s classicist theory of art, usually did not pursue the likeness or singularity of the sitter, but tried rather to present the generalized or even idealized form (25, 31-33).

In the *Discourses*, a collection of formal lectures Reynolds gave to the students and members of the Royal Academy from 1769 until 1790, a passage in “Discourse IV” (10 December 1771) epitomizes his view of this point: “The general idea constitutes real excellence. . . . To every kind of painting this rule may be applied. Even in portraits, the grace, and, we may add, the likeness, consists more in taking the general air, than in observing the exact similitude of every feature” (58-59).

In other words, it was more important to represent the species than to stick to a particular individuality. Therefore, as “[a]lmost any artist then . . . tried to please his subject with a little flattery” and “rarely an artist was daring enough to accept the face before him,” Blanshard proposes that, to measure the “fidelity to a subject’s [i.e. Wordsworth’s] features” of each portrait, we should “look for help to a group of pen portraits” (111-12) in addition to the life mask in plaster by Benjamin Robert Haydon [Figure 2].

Paley seems to agree with her when he turns to a prose description by Thomas De Quincey as well as Allston’s 1814 portrait to judge the likeness of Matilda



Fig. 1 Coleridge by Washington Allston 1814 (Paley 54)

Betham's somewhat idealized image of Coleridge [Figure 3]: "her rendering is enough like Allston's (which she could not have seen) and enough like De Quincey's description to suggest that this is a reliable representation of Coleridge in 1808" (48). Besides, he refers to an article in the London *Guardian*, which judges the truth of some engraving of the poet after Allston's portrait by the poet's life mask [Figure 4] well-known at one time (80).

Their attitudes, however, seem a little bit perverse because, to decide on the truth or likeness of painted portraits, they rely on literary ones, which are generally thought inferior in representing human faces or fig-

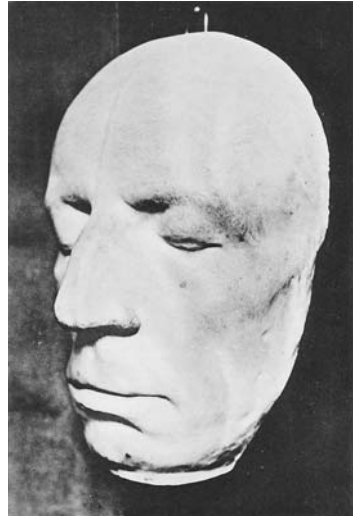


Fig. 2 Wordsworth's life mask by Benjamin Robert Haydon 1815 (Blanshard Pl. 4)



Fig. 3 Coleridge by Matilda Betham 1808 (Paley 47)



Fig. 4 Coleridge's life mask by J. G. Spurzheim 1825 (Paley 81)

ures. Naturally this leads us to suppose that prose might sometimes be beyond the pictorial representation and present a truer portrait of a subject. To validate our supposition, among other prose writers, I will focus on Thomas De Quincey (1785-1859) [Figure 5], who not only lived in the neighbourhood of Coleridge and Wordsworth, the then called “Lake poets” because both of them lived in the Lake District, but later became a writer himself to publish a portrait of the poets. In this article, I will consider its characteristic and significance and then suggest the difference between literary and pictorial portraits in that period by comparing the two kinds of representation.



Fig. 5 De Quincey by Sir John Watson-Gordon, c. 1845 (Holmes 41)

## 1 Thomas De Quincey and the Formation of *Recollections of the Lakes and the Lake Poets*

Before going on to the main subject, we have to take a brief look at his life to know the occasion for him to begin writing about the Lake poets.

In 1785, De Quincey was born in Manchester, as the second son of a fairly rich linen-merchant, who was constitutionally weak and died early before the son was eight years old. Shortly before entering Oxford University at the end of 1803, he wrote a devoted fan letter to Wordsworth, whose *Lyrical Ballads* co-authored with Coleridge had been anonymously published five years before.

During his Oxford days he took opium for the first time and after leaving the university without any degree in 1808, he turned to the Lake District, where he stayed at first with the Wordsworths and then took a cottage at Grasmere, which they had left for larger accommodation. He had to support his growing family after his marriage, fighting against opium addiction and published *Confessions of*

an *English Opium-Eater* in 1821 and, encouraged by its huge popularity, decided to write and sell essays to magazines for a living.

He left the district for Edinburgh in about 1830 and on the occasion of Coleridge's death in 1834, immediately suspended a series of autobiographical sketches of an English Opium-Eater to write four articles on the late poet for *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* from September till January 1835. Four years later, in January 1839, he took up Lake materials and wrote five articles mainly on Wordsworth, then six on the Lake District in general and finally one revealing the reason for estrangement from Wordsworth in its latter half for the October 1840 issue. These articles were posthumously collected and published as *Recollections of the Lakes and the Lake Poets* or with similar titles. The history of its formation and publication is rather complicated and here should be explained as briefly as possible.

All the sixteen Lake articles for the *Tait's* were included with seven other literary materials for the same magazine as "Literary Reminiscences" in Volumes 5 and 6 of the first collected works of De Quincey (1850-59) published in Boston. Ten of the Lake articles were substantively revised by the author and printed with two newly-written chapters as "Autobiographic Sketches" in the second volume of his first selected edition in the UK (1853-60), which was completed a year after the author's death. When the newly-edited works (1862-63) were published, the same ten revised articles were collected without any other in the second volume, entitled for the first time as "Recollections of the Lakes and the Lake Poets." When David Masson edited and published the next collected edition (1889-90), he allocated nine of those ten revised Lake articles and five of the other six with an autobiographical essay for *Tait's* in the second volume as "Literary and Lake Reminiscences."

After that, various collections of the Lake articles for *Tait's* were published as a single book, but their title and selection of articles are different from each other, generally with the text in the revised version. See for example Edward Sackville-West's and John E. Jordan's editions. Later, David Wright collected almost all the *Tait's* articles on the Lake poets in his Penguin edition in 1970, importantly, not in the revised version, but as they were originally published in the periodical, which are not restrained by after-thoughts and truer to the author's heart. In the latest collected works edited by Grevel Lindop (2000-03), the *Tait's* articles are dis-

sembled and divided into two volumes (10 and 11) in the chronological order of publication, losing a status of literary portrait as a book form. Accordingly, all the references to *Tait's* articles on the Lake poets here are based on Wright's edition and only their page numbers in it are shown parenthetically.

## 2 Robert Southey's Rhadamanthine Rage

Hearing that the recollections were written by a colleague, who made friends with those poets not only as their neighbour for more than twenty years but as an idolater as well, you might suppose that they are records of friendship fostered in the beautiful pastoral scenery. When you are informed, however, of their impacts on the poets' circle, you think that your inference might have been rather hasty. Thomas Carlyle reports in his *Reminiscences* that, when he first met Robert Southey, a brother-in-law of Coleridge and a Lake poet himself in 1836 or 1837 and mentioned De Quincey's name, the former changed his face like "the figure altogether a picture of Rhadamanthine rage" and began to call the latter "one of the greatest scoundrels living," "a calumniator, cowardly spy, traitor, base betrayer of the hospitable social hearth" (315-16).

Probably what angered him most was the reference to the marriage. De Quincey reveals that Coleridge was not happy because he was forced, "by the scrupulous Southey, who insisted that he had gone too far in his attentions to Miss F—, for any honourable retreat" (53), to marry Sara Fricker, who was an elder sister of Southey's wife Edith and generally thought to be inferior to her husband both in social status and in intelligence.<sup>1</sup> It was, however, because the statement was unfortunately on the whole true, that Southey lost his temper.<sup>2</sup> Yet De Quincey, seemingly not satisfied with that much, proceeds to cite "the weight of dejection which sat upon Coleridge's countenance and deportment," resulting, he supposes, from "the dismal degradations of pecuniary difficulties," as an example to validate Joseph Addison's famous saying: "Babylon in ruins is not so affecting a spectacle, or so solemn, as a human mind overthrown by lunacy" (55-56). We see many other spiteful passages. He begins his recollection by recounting many instances of Coleridge's plagiarism (36-41) and caricatures the poet beyond measure when he gave a series of lectures for the Royal Institution in 1808 (77-79), which were not

thought to be as complete a failure as he suggests. Moreover, he discloses that, like himself, “already he was under the full dominion of opium, as he himself revealed to me” (43), with an absurd episode to the effect that to deliver himself from the bondage Coleridge hired a man as his “external conscience” (98) to prevent him from taking opium, of course, in vain.

In the last article on Coleridge, he announces that it is among his aims in writing these essays on him “to relieve [the writer’s own sad feelings caused by the death], by expressing his own deep sentiments of reverential affection to his memory” (100); but the reaction of Coleridge’s family is not compatible with his intention. Such a change of attitudes is beyond belief when we think of De Quincey’s idolatry of both the poets at the beginning and the reason is worth considering. As Wright and other critics have pointed out, Coleridge and De Quincey have too many things in common. Opium addiction, irresolution, superb conversation, digression in talking and writing, deep interest in German Idealist philosophy and innumerable others. De Quincey amusingly writes about the other’s circuitous tendency in conversation:

Coleridge, to many people, and often I have heard the complaint, seemed to wander; and he seemed then to wander the most, when in fact his resistance to the wandering instinct was greatest,—viz. when the compass, and huge circuit, by which his illustrations moved, travelled farthest into remote regions, before they began to revolve. Long before this coming-round commenced, most people had lost him, and naturally enough supposed that he had lost himself. (46)

But De Quincey is equal to him in his inclination to wander. When he admits that in these articles he has decided “rather to seek after the graces which belong to the epistolary form, or to other modes of composition professedly careless, than after those which . . . having originally settled their plan upon a regular foundation, are able to pursue a course of orderly development,” he tries to attribute this “desultory and unpremeditated style” to the “circumstances of such extreme haste” brought about by the poet’s unexpected death (100). In another essay, instead of trying to excuse his own digressive tendency, he even defiantly declares

that “I enjoy a privilege of neglecting harsher logic, and connecting the separate sections of these sketches, not by ropes and cables, but by threads of aerial gossamer” (Masson ed. *Writings* I 316). This statement characterizes his prose style, whose parts are connected not by strict reason but by free association. On the other hand, in his letter of 1809 Coleridge brilliantly describes the other’s turn of mind as “anxious yet dilatory, confused from over-accuracy, & at once systematic and labyrinthine” (205), but these words can be generally applied to himself.

As Wright points out, it is “a not always agreeable experience” for each to see “in the other an image of himself” (14-15) and intense rivalry tends to be nurtured between those so similar to each other. Besides, although their characteristics mirror each other, one man finds many supporters in his life, while the other has almost none and has to support his growing family by himself. This easily leads to envy on the latter’s part. It may be difficult to identify the precise reason for animosity, but we can see idolatry at the beginning has changed over many years to more mixed feelings.

### 3 William Wordsworth’s Smouldering Resentment

Immediately after the publication of De Quincey’s first article on Coleridge in *Tait’s Magazine*, Wordsworth was excited enough to advise his late friend’s literary executor Joseph Henry Green to address to the writer or the editor of the magazine “a letter of caution, or remonstrance, as in your judgement may seem most likely to put a check upon communications so injurious, unfeeling, and untrue” (*Letters* 740), but that was all he did and nothing more. When the English Opium-Eater resumed his sketches of the Lake poets four years later, however, nearly-seventy-year-old Wordsworth could not suppress his “smouldering [sic] resentment” (Jordan 347) and cursed his former disciple: “A man who can set such an example, I hold to be a pest in society, and one of the most worthless of mankind.”<sup>3</sup>

What infuriated him so much? We cannot feel happy when someone else enumerates the defects in our appearance. De Quincey describes his legs and bust: “Wordsworth was, upon the whole, not a well-made man. His legs were pointedly condemned by all the female connoisseurs in legs . . . were certainly not ornamental; . . . But the worst part of Wordsworth’s person was the bust” (135). He then



goes on to “the idiosyncrasies of old age” affecting his family and asserts that “the effect upon each was so powerful . . . that strangers invariably supposed them fifteen to twenty years older than they were.” He is not content with this much again, however, and begins to report “a little personal anecdote” as heard from Wordsworth himself that, when travelling by a stage coach, he was taken by all the fellow-passengers as “rather over than under sixty” years of age when in reality not thirty-nine yet (141-42). Even if we cannot help laughing, this passage leaves a bitter aftertaste to us.

His attacks are not restricted to the poet himself. His wife Mary [Figure 6] was “a woman, neither handsome nor even comely, according to the rigour of criticism—nay, generally pronounced very plain” (129) and in her eyes, which her poet husband compared to “stars of twilight fair,” there was a considerable squint (130-31). He is not reticent about her intelligence either: “she could only say ‘*God bless you!*’ Certainly her intellect was not of an active order” (129) and somehow, on the whole, of all the family he is most severe towards her. Even Wordsworth’s dearest sister Dorothy cannot escape his criticism: “the glancing quickness of her motions, and . . . her stooping attitude when walking . . . gave an ungraceful, and even an unsexual character to her appearance when out of doors” (132). These harsh words on his family members must have pierced Wordsworth’s heart.

We wonder what has changed thus the eighteen-year-old boy, who wrote a devoted fan letter to the poet in 1803, when, according to the former, no one in the world seemed to pay attention to his poetry. While, as we have seen, De Quincey was too similar to Coleridge, he was completely different from Wordsworth in temperament. Jordan, in his superb study of their relation-



Fig. 6 Mary Wordsworth, aged sixty-nine, by Margaret Gillies 1839 (Juliet Barker Pl. 27)

ship, consulting in detail the correspondence between them, brings their difference into relief: “De Quincey lived the life of the mind, which fed on distinctions, and Wordsworth the life of the spirit, which was nourished by certainties. . . . His blacks and whites bothered De Quincey, and De Quincey’s shifting grays annoyed him” (214).

In this masculine and determined man, the younger one seems to have found an ideal father figure because he lost his own father very early and to have expected from him a fatherly protection as a proper reward for his loyal devotion, which was shown since the poet was still unrecognized in the world. But, because “[a] father figure’ must understand and forgive everything—must never withdraw, never change, never show coldness or indifference (let alone hostility),” as Sackville-West points out in his edition of *Recollections* (x), the worshipper’s expectations could not be met to the full, and gradually he began to feel not only disappointed with but even betrayed by his idol as well:

. . . to neither of us [Professor Wilson and me], though, at all periods of our lives, treating him with the deep respect which is his due, and, in our earlier years, with a more than filial devotion . . . yet to neither of us has Wordsworth made those returns of friendship and kindness which most firmly I maintain that we were entitled to have challenged. More by far in sorrow than in anger . . . I acknowledge myself to have been long alienated from Wordsworth; sometimes even I feel a rising emotion of hostility—nay, something, I fear, too nearly akin to vindictive hatred. Strange revolution of the human heart! (145-46)

Seemingly he was most disillusioned when Wordsworth and the whole family were opposed to his marriage because it took place after he had an affair leading to the birth of a child, in addition to the fact that his bride Margaret Simpson was a farmer’s daughter, whose social status did not match De Quincey’s as a gentleman. Henry Crabb Robinson, who was very close to all these authors and is now known for his posthumously-published diary recording his friendship with them, notes that “Mrs. Wordsworth has expressed her disapprobation of the connection, and I expect has affronted him” (195). This might explain De Quincey’s extreme

animosity towards her.

Without any support from native Lake District people like the Wordsworths, he felt isolated in a situation where he was only an incomer. He imagines the case of a man who has dedicated himself to another for many years:

. . . suppose this man to fall into a situation in which, from want of natural connexions and from his state of insulation in life, it might be most important to his feelings that some support should be lent to him by a family having a known place and acceptance, and what may be called a root in the country, by means of connexions, descent, and long settlement. To look for this might, be a most humble demand on the part of one who had testified his devotion in the way supposed. To miss it might—But enough. I murmur not; complaint is weak at all times; . . . (148)

As with Coleridge, his bitter feelings must have been further aggravated when he compared his own poverty with “Wordsworth’s good luck” (192) and quite unashamedly expressed his envy of the latter’s “ascent through its several steps and stages, to what . . . may be fairly considered opulence” (194).

In the last article on the Lake District, De Quincey cites Wordsworth’s one-sided intellectual curiosity and disrespectful attitudes towards books in general as resulting in his further estrangement from the poet. Early on he recollects the occasion when Wordsworth cut pages of a book, which he lent to him, with a knife oily with butter: “he tore his way into the heart of the volume with this knife, that left its greasy honours behind it upon every page; and are they not there to this day?” (217) Although he narrates it rather humorously, as a bibliophile he must be feeling his blood made to boil. In the end he has to give his final verdict on Wordsworth:

this defect [defective sympathy in Wordsworth with the universal feelings of his age]. . . raised a curtain which had hitherto sustained my idolatry. I viewed him now as a *mixed* creature, made up of special infirmity and special strength. And, finally, I now viewed him as no longer capable of an equal friendship. (383-84)

According to Crabb Robinson, they avoided meeting each other in a childish way by 1816.<sup>4</sup>

#### 4 Inward Sympathy

It is true that defects and infirmities described like this contribute to presenting a vivid life-size portrait, as it were, by adding a human touch which flattering biographies of a great man would lack. It would be rather rash again, however, to conclude that its interest lies only in the exposure of the poets' private life and the invectives by an ex-disciple, feeling his service unappreciated by his master. Even among the bereaved relatives of Coleridge, his daughter Sara, admitting that they "have been very much hurt with our former friend, Mr. De Quincey," honestly recognized his "great eloquence and discrimination" (*Memoir* I 115) and defended the ex-friend:

Of all the censors of Mr. Coleridge, Mr. Dequincey [sic] is the one whose remarks are the most worthy of attention; . . . The Opium eater, as he has called himself, had sufficient inward sympathy with the subject of his criticism to be capable in some degree of beholding his mind, as it actually existed, in all the intermingling shades of individual reality; . . . (*Biographia* II 408-09)

In fact, if De Quincey, having lost all traces of such "inward sympathy," felt only enmity towards Coleridge, he would not have so graphically described him when they had met for the first time about thirty years before:

In height he might seem to be about five feet eight; (he was, in reality, about an inch and a half taller, but his figure was of an order which drowns the height;) his person was broad and full, and tended even to corpulence; his complexion was fair, though not what painters technically style fair, because it was associated with black hair; his eyes were large and soft in their expression; and it was from the peculiar appearance of haze or dreaminess, which mixed with their light, that I recognized my object. This was Coleridge. I examined him steadfastly for a minute or more; and it struck me that he saw

neither myself nor any other object in the street. He was in a deep reverie; for I had dismounted, made two or three trifling arrangements at an inn door, and advanced close to him, before he had apparently become conscious of my presence. The sound of my voice, announcing my own name, first awoke him: he started, and, for a moment, seemed at a loss to understand my purpose or his own situation; for he repeated rapidly a number of words which had no relation to either of us. (43-44)

Here, not carried away when he met one of the idols he had pursued for some years, De Quincey self-possessedly observed him without missing any of his characteristics and it is this detached point of view towards the objects of observation that is the base of his prose and makes it readable. As Virginia Woolf acutely points out, he would follow an object "sympathetically, but at a distance. He was intimate with no one" and for him "[n]othing must come too close" ("Impassioned Prose" 601). Besides, he presents the poet so vividly that we feel as if we saw the Coleridge of about two hundred years ago before our eyes, by exercising, again as Woolf acknowledges, "his extraordinary powers of description" (602).<sup>5</sup> We are especially thrilled to read the passage on his appearance as if in a haze, in a daydream, seeing nothing around him. This is Coleridge, the arch-opium-eater, senior to De Quincey in addiction as Wright estimates the degree of each man's opium addiction: "Coleridge's addiction was infinitely the heavier—at one period he took 80,000 drops of laudanum a day, or ten times the amount taken by De Quincey" (15).<sup>6</sup> This graphic portrayal cannot be achieved without his excellent "'photographic' faculty of recall" as Lindop calls it (332). If we are pleased with it, it is because we feel here his "inward sympathy" with the poet which De Quincey has not entirely lost.

Sara was not alone. Crabb Robinson tried to calm Wordsworth's anger by writing to him that "[t]here is a considerable part of these articles which published thirty years hence would be read with pride & satisfaction by your grand-children—I dare say the unhappy writer means to be honest."<sup>7</sup> It is true that De Quincey is too honest and seems cold, even cruel on occasion, but his acute and vivid observation and description reach the great heights we rarely see when he portrays Dorothy:

Her eyes were not soft, as Mrs Wordsworth's, nor were they fierce or bold; but they were wild and startling, and hurried in their motion. Her manner was warm and even ardent; her sensibility seemed constitutionally deep; and some subtle fire of impassioned intellect apparently burned within her, . . . (131)



Fig. 7 Dorothy Wordsworth, aged sixty-two, by Samuel Crosthwaite 1833 (Blanshard Pl. 46)

This is that Dorothy in her brother's famous poem "Tintern Abbey," who, with "the shooting lights / Of thy wild eyes" (lines 119-20; *Lyrical Ballads* 119), looks around in nature beside William, but with much more flesh put

on. He does not forget to mention that "she was a person of very remarkable endowments intellectually" (132) and bids farewell to Dorothy [Figure 7], who he now only hears has been suffering from nervous depression:

I have not seen you for many a day—shall never see you again perhaps; but shall attend your steps with tender thoughts, so long as I hear of you living: . . . and, from . . . hearts at least, that loved and admired you in your fervid prime, it may sometimes cheer the gloom of your depression to be assured of never-failing remembrance, full of love and respectful pity. (206)

We perceive here the same "inward sympathy" as with Coleridge.

## 5 Dry Humour and Pre-emptive Self-justification

As we can infer from the frequent references in his articles to the word "phrenology," the pseudo-scientific study of the shape and size of people's heads and

faces to interpret their personality, which was very popular in the 19th century, De Quincey had an extraordinary interest in human appearance and he observed other people and their behaviour very minutely. Hugh Sykes Davies esteems him as “also a gifted observer of human beings, of their appearances, manners, conduct, and—a rarer gift—of those traits which are revealed in their bodily postures and gestures”. Although De Quincey sometimes goes beyond the realm of good sense and makes us feel fed up, his “observations of such penetration and candour” (15) bring us the useful information about the poets that those who were close to them and at the same time had the eye of “discrimination” could supply. We find ourselves smiling when we feel a touch of dry humour in not necessarily innocent descriptions:

But the total effect of Wordsworth’s person was always worst in a state of motion; for, according to the remark I have heard from many country people, “he walked like cade”—a cade being some sort of insect which advances by an oblique motion. This was not always perceptible, and in part depended (I believe) upon the position of his arms; when either of these happened (as was very customary) to be inserted into the unbuttoned waistcoat, his walk had a wry or twisted appearance; and not appearance only—for I have known it, by slow degrees, gradually to edge off his companion from the middle to the side of the highroad. (136)

This kind of humour is among the pleasures the recollections give us as Sackville-West, acknowledging “his dry, impish humour” (248) in his Coleridge articles in particular, emphasizes generally that “[h]umour . . . is one of the most important characteristics of these sketches, and it is probably the one which will take most readers back to them” (253).<sup>8</sup>

Wright also regards humour as one of De Quincey’s remarkable points, but at the same time suggests that his is not necessarily intellectual but “nearer slapstick than wit, as in the Chaplinesque scene of Coleridge’s father stuffing a lady’s skirt down his breeches at a dinner-party” (17). The passage quoted above could be counted among these examples of slapstick. He is persuasive when he argues that “[a]t its best and least forced the essence of De Quincey’s humour is a quiet but ac-

curate eye for that deflating comedy of things as they are opposed to things as they should be, or as we would have them" (17). De Quincey's humour is caused by an anticlimactic effect of things going beyond the normal, which process is observed and described with detachment.

After criticizing each part of the poet's body, legs, shoulders as well as his insect-like walking, De Quincey proceeds to sketch full details of his face:

Meantime, his face—that was one which would have made amends for greater defects of figure; it was certainly the noblest for intellectual effects that, in actual life, I have seen, or at least have consciously been led to notice. Many such, or even finer, I have seen amongst the portraits of Titian, and, in a later period, amongst those of Vandyke, from the great era of Charles I., as also from the court of Elizabeth and of Charles II.; but none which has so much impressed me in my own time. (137)

We can see that here still remains an admiration for the ex-idol. After this, he delineates one feature after another: "A face of the long order, often falsely classed as oval"; "the real living forehead . . . not remarkable for its height; but . . . for its breadth and expansive development"; "Neither are the eyes of Wordsworth 'large,' as is erroneously stated somewhere . . . on the contrary, they are (I think) rather small; but *that* does not interfere with their effect, which at times is fine and suitable to his intellectual character"; "The nose, a little arched, and large"; "the swell and protrusion of the parts above and around the mouth, are both noticeable in themselves" (137-40). He sometimes cannot restrain himself and caricatures the poet excessively, but on the whole he is detached and objective here. There is no doubt that what he describes thus helps us conceive what kind of person William Wordsworth was.

Reflecting on his own mixed remarks about Wordsworth's face and figure, however, De Quincey feels that he has to defend himself pre-emptively from foreseeable blame for his ingratitude or insolence:

. . . how invaluable should we all feel any record to be, which should raise the curtain upon Shakspeare's [sic] daily life—his habits, personal and social,



his intellectual tastes, and his opinions on contemporary men, books, event, or national prospects! I cannot, therefore, think it necessary to apologize for the most circumstantial notices past or to come of Wordsworth's person and habits of life. (145)

We can understand that he tries to justify himself because he feels guilty about uttering too severe words on his former idol and master, but parts of his literary portrait of the Lake poets are very often quoted as "invaluable" sources of information when we refer to their outward as well as inward characteristics, as we see in Blanshard's and Paley's books for example. Though retrospectively, for that reason alone, he need not have endeavoured to justify himself.

Although he probably felt much greater disappointment with Wordsworth than with Coleridge, he did not lose all of his "inward sympathy" with the former, either, and we can be assured of it by his admiration for the poet's "noblest" face making "amends for greater defects of figure" or by his frequent quotations from Wordsworth's poetry, which are not perfect of course but nevertheless relatively accurate considering the situation he was in. While he wrote these recollections, losing his wife in extreme poverty in 1837, De Quincey very often had to go into hiding away from home, with the result that, as Judson S. Lyon reminds us, "he had to do much of his writing on the run, without access to his books" (73), at the very moment he needed them most for quotation and so he had to rely on his memory.<sup>9</sup> Although his mixed emotions about Wordsworth sometimes made him take very harsh attitudes, we must not forget his enduring loyalty as Wright comments: "De Quincey's affection for the man at last foundered. Perhaps it was never very strong; what had captured his imagination was the poet. For Wordsworth the poet De Quincey never lost allegiance" (10). Before him, Crabb Robinson said almost the same thing in his diary for 25<sup>th</sup> September 1816: "De Quincey still praises Wordsworth's poetry, but he speaks with no kindness of the man. . . . He is now bitter towards Wordsworth, and Wordsworth and the ladies seem indifferent towards him, and the indifference is the worse feeling of the two" (195-96).

## 6 True-to-life Portraiture

Thomas De Quincey seems too severe towards both of the Lake poets at times and we can see here and there his tendency to caricature them too much since he feels that his devotion to them was not fully requited. He may, therefore, as Wright suggests, not always be objective like “a camera, which is so often able to disguise a spiritual lie with the literal truth” and so “his are *personal* impressions and portraits, touched by his own feelings and concerns” (16).<sup>10</sup> Alina Clej even claims that “[h]is perception of detail was imperfect,” because of his self-acknowledged tendency “to meditate too much and to observe too little” (Masson ed. *Writings* III 394) as well as of “the kind of myopia and absentmindedness he evinced in his relation to the world” (159). In addition, John Beer points to “the incompleteness of his later reminiscences” caused by Wordsworth’s three-year-old daughter Catherine’s death in 1812 because De Quincey’s grief over her death might have eliminated “many of the associations and emotional tensions that had been accumulating during his sojourn in Grasmere” (170). As for incompleteness, his reminiscences cannot avoid being fragmented and digressive since the author himself admits that he has given up an orderly course of development in favour of an unplanned style from the first.

In spite of those which seem to be psychological or perceptual defects, we feel that the portrait left to us is very true to life. While a fine artist like Allston admits the impossibility, or at least the difficulty to paint Coleridge in the poetic state, we could say that in its best parts, some of which have been quoted in this article, De Quincey’s prose portrait of Romantic poets has delineated what is beyond the art of portrait painters, that is, the living poets in motion, not in repose. Not only with “penetrating and perceptive observations” (Jordan ed. *Reminiscences* v) and “extraordinary powers of description” (Woolf 602), that is, with his “discrimination” and “great eloquence,” to use Sara Coleridge’s phrase in the reverse order, but also with his “inward sympathy” for the poets, which was never completely lost, he could capture true-to-life images of the sitters, what portrait painters then tended to miss.

De Quincey’s own individual art of prose alone, however, could not produce such a portrait. If he had written these prose essays in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, when

the neo-classicist presumption that even a portrait artist should seek for the universal ideal instead of the individual particularity of a sitter was unshakable, he would not have depicted such realistic and colourful a portrait of the Lake poets. Although the influence of Reynolds's classicist theory of art still lingered when De Quincey wrote these articles in 1830-40s, it was weakened to the extent that he could attempt to depict something beyond universality, encouraged by a newer principle burgeoning in the Romantic Era, that of respect for particularities. In that sense this portrait was a product of the spirit of the age.

At the same time, his portrait went beyond the bounds of literary biographies of great poets at the time, which were (or even now are) believed to show proper respect and consideration for them. As David Higgins remarks, in these articles De Quincey depicted the Lake poets "as living, breathing, *flawed* individuals . . . thus undercutting the extreme representation of the creative artist as a transcendent, Godlike figure" (89).<sup>11</sup> If it had idealized the poets enough to flatter them as many biographies as well as painted portraits did in the period, it would not have provoked such angry responses from those who were concerned.

Then, if, as Wright believes, "hagiologies are boring because they are not true" (10), or, if, as Higgins argues, "the Romantics, Wordsworth in particular," those "transcendent, redemptive figures whose works might aid spiritual-social rebirth" "could only be made interesting and sympathetic to readers by emphasizing their human qualities and failings" (45), the reaction does not necessarily reduce its status as a literary product but rather proves that De Quincey's portrait is based mainly on what Sara Coleridge called the "individual reality," which always contains bad as well as good aspects. After implying that, as "[i]t takes the sharp obsessive eye of frustrate love to note and record the minor miseries that go with and set off the major splendours of genius," none other than "disconcerted disciples" are well qualified to write "the better, or at any rate the more acute and entertaining, biographies," Wright admires the portrait full of personal defects by one of those disillusioned devotees:

De Quincey's portrait of Wordsworth has been called malicious, but no other conveys so intensely the fascination that emanated from the exasperating and dedicated egotism of the poet's personality. (10)

This is the highest praise any literary portrait can receive.

## Conclusion

Now it seems inevitable and reasonable that both Blanshard and Paley quote a number of passages from this literary portrait by De Quincey as a frame of reference for the truth of each pictorial portrait in relation to its sitter. The former gives some examples of “great liberties” most artists took with Wordsworth’s features by comparing them with his life mask by Haydon: the “bold nose” not only being “thinned and refined,” but “lengthened to shorten the camel-like upper lip,” the “whole mouth, heavy to coarseness” being “commonly curved into a semblance of the popular Cupid’s bow” and the “small eyes, wide apart” being “made fuller, or brought closer together” (112). When she assumes that “both the widely reproduced portraits [Figures 8, 9, 10 and 11] and the plaudits accompanying them,” which “tended to be stereotyped and sentimental,” “must have done their part to create an unfortunate figment of a ‘Daddy Wordsworth’ guaranteed to alien-

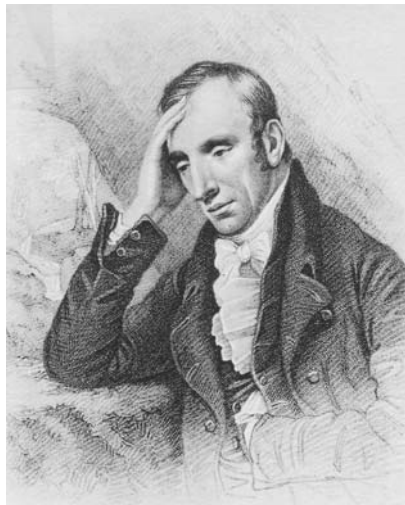


Fig. 8 Richard Carruthers’s portrait of Wordsworth (1817), engraved by H. Meyer 1819 (Blanshard Pl. 42a)



Fig. 9 Henry William Pickersgil’s portrait of Wordsworth (1832), engraved by W. H. Watt 1836 (Blanshard Pl. 44a)



Fig. 10 Sir William Boxall's portrait of Wordsworth (1831), engraved by R. Roffe 1835 (Blanshard Pl. 44c)

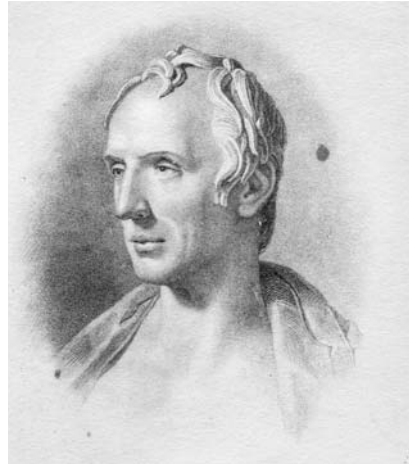


Fig. 11 Sir Francis Legatt Chantrey's bust of Wordsworth (1820), engraved by William Finden 1845 (Blanshard Pl. 45b)

ate many younger readers and poets" (107), her criticism is convincing, as is understood when we compare them with a more rugged portrait of the poet by Haydon in 1842 [Figure 12].

It is true that those popular engraved portraits are depicted softly and handsomely and so are easier to be accepted in the household, but they evidently lack that power of the poet who was so indefatigable a walker as to climb the summit of Mount Helvellyn when he was well over seventy. On the other hand, this portrait by Haydon is no less than what Blanshard values most because there the artist "succeeded in dramatizing the poet after a



Fig. 12 Wordsworth by Benjamin Robert Haydon 1842 (Blanshard Pl. 23)

fashion that still pleases us today, not by stressing traits common to ‘the species’ but by emphasizing some of those peculiar to himself” (118).<sup>12</sup> This is just what De Quincey did in his prose version of portraiture as we have seen.

We could conclude now that Thomas De Quincey’s portraits are more realistic and truer representations of the Lake poets than most of the painted ones, with the possible exception of Haydon or Allston, by paying attention to individual reality instead of universal ideal.

### Notes

This is an expanded and revised version of the paper read at the International Symposium on Portrait and Personality, held at Rikkyo University on 28 October 2006, then translated into Japanese and printed in *Shouzou To Kosei [Portrait and Personality]*. Eds. Akira Fujimaki, Satoshi Urano and Nahoko Kojima. Kanagawa: Shumpusha, 2008. 163-205. Print.

1. Although De Quincey regarded as “a pure falsehood” Lord Byron’s passage in his *Don Juan* that both the poets married “two milliners from Bath” and defended them and their wives against his attack (51), it seems that his real intention was to inform the reader of a misalliance between the poet and his wife Sara by this rather lengthy reference.
2. Molly Lefebure (91-93) argues against De Quincey’s view of Sara’s intellectual inferiority to Dorothy Wordsworth (Wright 53-54), but she still notices some kind of naiveté in the former as inferred from her own daughter’s recollection of her (92): “She never admires anything she doesn’t understand . . . my mother’s very honesty stood in her way” (Griggs 105-06).
3. These words are written in pencil as a comment on the margin of page 15, continuing into its reverse of Volume 1 of the unpublished biography of him by Barron Field (British Museum Add MS 41325-41327) and are quoted in Jordan 347 and Wright 25 among others. Immediately before this now famous passage, the poet vehemently responds to his biographer’s criticism of De Quincey’s portraits of the poet and his family as “not only unfavourable likenesses, but unwarrantable exposures, especially as published during their

lifetime”:

Not so much as published during their lives as published or intended to be published at all. The Man has written under the influence of wounded feelings as he avows, I am told; for I have never read a word of his infamous production nor ever shall. My acquaintance with him was the result of a letter of his own volunteered to me. He was 7 months an inmate of my house; by what breach of the laws of hospitality, that kindness was repaid, his performance, if rightly represented to me, sufficiently shows.

4. It is reported that either of them escorted their mutual friend Crabb Robinson to the other's house after a walk together and left him near it or at its gate to avoid meeting each other (194).
5. Julian North notes Woolf's critical ingenuity in “recreating De Quincey in her own image as a modernist writer” with “[h]er emphasis on his ability to reveal the inner life in a way that suddenly transforms reality” (67). In fact, this passage on the first meeting with Coleridge assures us of De Quincey's capability of “being transfixed by the mysterious solemnity of certain emotions; of realising how one moment may transcend in value fifty years” (Woolf, “Autobiography” 138).
6. Alethea Hayter, admitting the difficulty to determine Coleridge's daily consumption of opium, estimates that he “began with about a hundred drops a day” in 1801, went on to take “nearly 20,000 drops” at the peak of his addiction in 1814 and sank to the level of “about 1,000 drops” in 1820s when living with the Gillmans (194). According to Lyon, De Quincey's daily dose rose to between 8,000 and 12,000 drops at his peak from 1813 to 1815, which was “considerably less than Coleridge's maximum,” but “it was enough to render De Quincey an invalid” (59). Then the former's consumption is extraordinary even if we follow Hayter's modest calculation.
7. The original letter dated 27 August 1839 is owned by Dr Williams's Library, London. The passage is quoted in Jordan 347, Wright 25 and Lindop 333.
8. Sackville-West never forgets to point out another effect of humour on those who are depicted by his pen: “The sting of these indiscretions must have been felt all the more sharply in that they were so amusingly related” (247-48).
9. According to Horace Ainsworth Eaton, who indicated De Quincey's constant

economic straits with the various legal records attached as an appendix (519-20), he was “put to the horn” no less than nine times in as many years since 1832. It means that he was “declared bankrupt and liable to imprisonment” for unsettled debts unless he disappeared into some hiding place or took “refuge in Sanctuary, i.e. in Holyrood,” the Abbey precincts of Edinburgh, where debtors could receive a protection “at a cost of two guineas,” which he sought “on and off for six or eight years” (341-43). Alexander H. Japp informs us that “some of the best essays that appeared in *Tait* . . . were written there” (219).

10. Pointing out that De Quincey is “not a camera,” however, Wright seems rather to admire him paradoxically in that he did not fall to that spurious objectivity or realism which tends to hide what the heart really feels in favour of neutrality.
11. It is noteworthy that Higgins thus detects in the articles “an egalitarian edge,” which “fitted in well with the radicalism of *Tait’s*” (89), in spite of De Quincey’s conservative political views.
12. Besides, Haydon not only portrayed Wordsworth in 1818 when he was still full of energy around fifty, but slipped a figure of the poet into the group of people around the saviour in *Christ’s Entry into Jerusalem* (1819).

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