

Vicky Beddow
introduces
Guilty Thing:
A Life of Thomas De Quincey
(Bloomsbury: 2016)
by Frances Wilson

WE ARE PLEASED TO BE ABLE TO PROVIDE READERS with a 30% discount for this new biography of Thomas De Quincey, courtesy of Bloomsbury. All you need to do is order from www.bloomsbury.com and quote GUILTYTHING at the checkout. A hardback copy will thus be reduced from £22.50 to £17.50 including postage.

The following extract from the introductory chapter, 'The Prelude', sets the scene for De Quincey's life and Wilson's approach as a biographer (pp. 9-11):

Thomas De Quincey was an obsessive: he was obsessed with the Ratcliffe Highway murders and he was obsessed with William Wordsworth. *Guilty Thing* is an attempt to follow the growth of these twin obsessions from seed to full flowering and to trace the way in which they intertwined. Positioning his preoccupation with murderers and poets at the forefront of what follows, I have placed De Quincey's numerous other interests in the background, and sought permission for this biographical privilege in his own example. Revising his autobiographical writings for the collected edition of his works, De Quincey dismissed as 'wearisome and useless' the 'hackneyed roll-call' of a man's life, 'chronologically arranged'; it was surely better, he suggested, to 'detach' a 'single' scene that would record 'some of the deep impressions under which my childish sensibility expanded'.¹ De Quincey never put childish things away, and the deep impressions under which his sensibility expanded tended to be scenes of terror, deluge and sudden death. These are the scenes on which I too have focused, believing that in his return to the Ratcliffe Highway murders we can find, dispersed in anagram, the story of De Quincey's life.

Like Shakespeare, De Quincey enjoyed the idea of a play within a play and he compared 'The Murder of Gonzago', the tragedy performed under Hamlet's direction by the strolling players at Elsinore, to a room on whose wall is a picture of the room on whose wall is a picture of that room. 'We might', De Quincey wrote, 'imagine this descent into a life below a life going on *ad infinitum*',² and we might see his folding of the Ratcliffe Highway murders into his possession by Wordsworth as achieving a similar effect: a story within a story within a story, a room

¹ De Quincey, 'A Sketch from Childhood', *Instructor*, Edinburgh: 1851, p. 147.

² David Masson, ed., *The Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey*, 13 vols, London: A & C Black, 1897, X, p. 344.

within a room within a room, going on *ad infinitum*.

He was intensely aware of the spaces he occupied, the heights and widths surrounding him, the positions of windows, the number of steps on a staircase, but what were De Quincey's own dimensions? The amount of room taken up by a biographical subject is not always relevant but in De Quincey's case it cannot be underestimated. His opium trances described descents into what Coleridge, in 'Kubla Khan', called 'caverns measureless to man' and his impacted writing impersonates endless growth, but De Quincey's body itself barely grew. Like Hogarth, Pope and Charles Lamb, he was one of those called by the tiny antiquary, George Vertue, 'the five foot men or less'. At four foot eleven inches, De Quincey was not small so much as Lilliputian – wiry, barely there. He was 'unfortunately diminutive', said Dorothy Wordsworth, who was the same height, 'but there is a sweetness in his looks, especially about the eyes, which soon overcomes the oddness of your first feeling at the sight of so very little a man.'³ Wordsworth's sister-in-law, Joanna Hutchinson, said that De Quincey looked 'helpless' and 'dissipid', and Robert Southey referred to him as 'little Mr Quincey'. 'I wish', Southey complained, 'he was not so little, and I wish he would not leave his greatcoat always behind him on the road.'⁴ Thomas Carlyle, who compared him to a pair of sugar tongs, left this description of De Quincey aged forty-two: 'When he sate, you would have taken him, by candlelight, for the beautifullest little child; blue-eyed, sparking face, had there not been a something, too, which said, "*Eccovi* – this child has been in hell."⁵

It is into this hell that we are to look.

³ Ernest de Selincourt, ed., *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, The Middle Years*, part I, 1806-1811, revised by Mary Moorman and Alan G. Hill, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967, p. 255.

⁴ Carol Bolton and Tim Fulford, eds., *The Collected Letters of Robert Southey, 1804-9*, University of Maryland: A Romantic Circles Electronic Edition, Part 3, no. 1534.

⁵ Thomas Carlyle, *Reminiscences*, ed. James Anthony Froude, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1881, p. 203.