

‘The Awful Parenthesis’: Ethics and Aesthetics in De Quincey’s Murder Essays

Johan Wijkmark, Karlstad University, Sweden

Abstract

Thomas De Quincey’s series of three essays under the general title ‘On murder considered as one of the fine arts’ (1827–1854) has delighted and puzzled readers and critics for its iconoclastic representation of violent material. Whereas the first two instalments are satirical and comical, clearly parodying amoral, disinterested, approaches to aesthetics and ethics, the last one is more problematic as it seems to embody precisely those approaches. In order to bridge the theoretical gap between the first two and the third, the argument here is that an earlier essay, ‘On the knocking at the gate in *Macbeth*’ (1823), should be seen as part of the series, based on similarities in form and content. In the course of these four essays, De Quincey creates a metafictional discussion of the relation of ethics and aesthetics that has broader application to later emanations of crime writing as well.

Keywords: Thomas De Quincey; ‘On murder considered as one of the fine arts’; ‘On the knocking at the gate in *Macbeth*’; ethics; aesthetics; violence

Thomas De Quincey’s most notorious piece of writing may well be the suite of three essays published under the general title ‘On murder considered as one of the fine arts’ (1827–1854). As the title implies, these papers all revolve around the topic of murder regarded from an aesthetic perspective. The first two of these are straightforward parodies of aesthetic and philosophic ideas in vogue at the time, and De Quincey lashes out in all directions, saving his most acrid remarks for his contemporary litterateur, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (see especially Keanie 2014) and German philosopher Immanuel Kant. In these two first instalments, the general idea is pursued that aesthetics and metaphysical philosophy can legitimize violence by viewing it as an object of art, thus satirically exposing its idealism as ungrounded mental gymnastics rather than serious, realist philosophy. The third instalment, the ‘Postscript,’ is, however, harder to approach as pure satire. It reads as a sensationalized and dramatized true-crime narrative more than anything else, and it is clearly intended to be captivating and horrifying rather than humorous. The rather paradoxical ethical problem of this aestheticization of

Wijkmark, Johan. 2020. “‘The Awful Parenthesis’: Ethics and Aesthetics in De Quincey’s Murder Essays.” *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 19(4): 37–60.

violence is that the reader is caught in the pleasure of violent representations—the exact same impulse that had been satirized in the previous two instalments. This apparent discrepancy can be read as inconsistency plain and simple, because, after all, the instalments were published quite far apart and nothing really obligates De Quincey to be maintaining a unified aesthetic expression for the entire series. However, the ‘Postscript’ can be read as a way to have the texts provoke reflection on the ethics involved in the act of reading, and it is precisely this aspect of the texts I will pursue in the present article. But in order to give a more comprehensive treatment of this idea in the three ‘On murder’ essays, I will also bring another essay of De Quincey’s, arguably his most well-known, into play, ‘On the knocking at the gate in *Macbeth*’ (1823). The argument regarding this latter piece is that it should be properly regarded as part of the ‘On murder’ cycle: partly because aspects of style and content signal that the texts should be regarded as inhabiting the same fictional universe, but primarily because the trope of the ‘awful parenthesis’ that De Quincey establishes here provides a unifying theoretical, metareflective link between the two first instalments of the series and the ‘Postscript,’ in which the categories of ethics and aesthetics are explored.

‘First Paper’ and ‘Second Paper’

The ‘First paper’ (1827) and ‘Second paper’ (1839) are very similar in tone and subject and will therefore be treated together, especially since the latter is very brief and does not introduce any new ideas. Even though the two papers are published twelve years apart, textual evidence indicates that they are actually composed within a narrower time frame, as the second paper was conceived in 1828 (Burwick 1996: 81). The first instalment in the series appeared in *Blackwood’s Magazine*,¹ February

¹ *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* alternated between essays on philosophical and political topics and lurid horror fiction, later lampooned by Edgar Allan Poe in ‘How to write a Blackwood article’ (1838) and ‘Loss of breath: a tale neither in nor out of “Blackwood”’ (1846). The magazine published most major Romantic poets, which means that De Quincey satirized them in the same venue that they were published to begin with and that he slyly attacked the very readership of *Blackwood’s* and their taste for titillating stories (Snyder 2001: 105; Leask 1995: 97; Whale 1985: 48). The ruse of the society of murder

1827. Here is presented the illustrious *Society of Connoisseurs in Murder*, whose members 'profess to be curious in homicide, amateurs and dilettanti in the various modes of carnage, and, in short, Murder-Fanciers. Every fresh atrocity of that class which the police annals of Europe bring up, they meet and criticize as they would a picture, statue, or other work of art' (De Quincey 1827: 9–10). The connotation of 'amateurs' should in this context be understood as positive, as describing someone whose motives are pure and ideal, in contrast to 'professionals,' whose motives are intrinsically material (Whale 1985: 47)—I will have occasion to return to the discussion on amateurs below, especially in the context of 'On the knocking at the gate in *Macbeth*,' where its use is significant.

In the first paper we are treated to the notes from one of the monthly lectures of that hermetically closed society of murder connoisseurs, through the care of 'a man morbidly virtuous' who has decided to expose the shady society (De Quincey 1827: 10).

The purloined manuscript starts with a quotation from the fourth-century Christian writer Lactantius, commenting on the ethical implications of gladiator games:

Now, if merely to be present at a murder fastens on a man the character of an accomplice; if barely to be a spectator involves us in one common guilt with the perpetrator: it follows, of necessity, that, in these murders of the amphitheatre, the hand which inflicts the fatal blow is not more deeply imbrued in blood than his who passively looks on; neither can *he* be clear of blood who has countenanced its shedding; nor that man seem other than a participator in murder who gives his applause to the murderer and calls for prizes on his behalf.

(De Quincey 1827: 11)

The conveyor of the manuscript sides with Lactantius in denouncing every type of appreciation of murder, whether it be real or fictional—both are equally reprehensible. It is important to note the centrality of this quotation and its position as directly preceding the manuscript, as this passage introduces to us the apparent moral problem inherent in fictional representations of violence.

aficionados satirically chastises what De Quincey 'believed to be the decline in art and in public tastes, even in polite circles' (Oliver 2013: 49).

The manuscript then presented is that of the chairman who gives a talk on murder considered from an aesthetic perspective. The fervor with which he proposes his aesthetics of murder and keeping it a distinguished art form shares many of its characteristics with, for example, the literary classicists of the previous century. Consider, for example, his vehement objection to imported innovation to the arts: ‘Fie on these dealers in poison, say I: can they not keep to the old honest way of cutting throats, without introducing such abominable innovations from Italy?’ (De Quincey 1827: 39). One might also, perhaps, read into this comment a satire of the contemporary Romantic idealization of common, indigenous lyrical forms instead of the refined and decadent continental ones.

This first paper also introduces a character that will recur in all the texts that will be discussed in the following: John Williams, the murderer in the infamous Ratcliffe Highway case in 1811, where seven people, including an infant, were killed in two attacks of incomprehensible brutality within only twelve days. Because it was so brutal and horrific, it was, at the time, probably the most publicized case, and it retains its notoriety to this day. Williams was caught, and confessed, but committed suicide before he could be executed. Throughout the essays, Williams is styled as a supreme artist of ‘colossal sublimity,’ whose art reverberates through the history of murder, thereby establishing the iconoclastic trope of the murderer as artist and murders as art (De Quincey 1827: 12). From these simple facts about the murders, one gets a sense of exactly how radical and provocative De Quincey’s apotheosis of Williams as creative genius actually was—especially since the murders were still fresh in the collective consciousness when the first paper was published in 1827, as well as the 1823 essay on *Macbeth* that will be discussed below.

Murder seems to have been a captivating topic to De Quincey as he—as the proverbial criminal—returned to the scene of the crime for a ‘Second paper’ (1839), published twelve years after the first one, also in *Blackwood’s Magazine*. Here we once again meet the illustrious society and especially their madcap member Mr. Toad-in-the-Hole. But, whereas the first paper consists largely of the manuscript of a lecture with only a deadpan sense of humor, the second paper is all-out hilarious with its account of a society dinner that ends with Toad-in-the-Hole wreaking havoc. The general idea pursued in the first two papers is to parody the aesthetic and philosophic idea of disinterestedness, especially in the works of Kant and Schiller, in which De Quincey identified a clear

resemblance to purposeless violence (Black 2000: 783). As Joel Black (2000) indicates, De Quincey found a 'resemblance between the disinterestedness of the aesthete/artist and the motivelessness of the cold-blooded killer,' which lead him to 'formulate his outrageous but prophetic thesis of murder as an art form' (783–84). Also, in particular, it was Coleridge's aesthetics that became the target of De Quincey's satire. Nigel Leask (1995) addresses the relation between De Quincey's and Coleridge's ideas: 'If one can conflate the work of art with the genius of the artist to the extent to which Coleridge did in the *Biographia [Literaria]*... could one not judge the murderer—provided he was 'systematic' or disinterested, unmotivated by gain or lust—in the same aesthetic terms as one judged the murder when "virtue was in no request"?' (100). In this regard, Coleridge's ideas of artistic disinterestedness seem to be derived from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, which De Quincey was very familiar with. Kant actually figures in the essay, walking from Königsberg and only just escaping being murdered by an 'amateur' who saw 'how little would be gained to the cause of good taste by murdering an old, arid, and adust metaphysician' (De Quincey 1827: 35). The amateur instead proves his exquisite refinement and sense of taste by murdering a child.

De Quincey is often preoccupied with power relations in art, both within texts and between texts, readers, and authors:

No power in De Quincey is ever entirely innocent or purely aesthetic, as Kant declared judgements of beauty to be in the *Critique of Judgment* aesthetic power in De Quincey is always political and ideological. Much of the comedy of De Quincey's essays on 'Murder,' indeed, resides in their *parody* of Kant's claim that the aesthetic can be severed from—or 'disinterested' in relation to—the ideological.

(Vine 2008: 147)

Throughout the papers, aesthetic terms are pursued to their extreme and applied in ludicrous, albeit logically coherent, contexts. For example, an 'amateur,' who has decided to try his skills in a 'professional' line—i.e. committing a murder instead of just appreciating it after-the-fact in the amateur fashion—chooses his victim for no other reason than that he 'fancies' him (De Quincey 1827: 40). The primary meaning of 'fancy'—to feel attraction to something—is of course applicable. But, by setting it off by quotation marks, as it is in the original, the more specific,

Romantic meaning is also activated. *Fancy*, in Coleridge's aesthetics as he described it in *Biographia literaria*, was a more mundane and not as profound form of the creative process as the companion term, *imagination*. Whereas *fancy* refers to conscious, rational creation (closely related to wit), *imagination* is the mode of inspiration of the Romantic genius. The use of the term here indicates that the murderer should be considered as an aspiring artist, but perhaps not yet a true, imaginative murder artist.

As the murderous act proceeds, however, the victim, in panic, puts up unexpected resistance and almost manages to escape: 'so greatly was natural genius exalted and sublimed by the genial presence of his murderer' (De Quincey 1827: 42). The genius of the murderer rubs off indirectly on the victim, which is certainly an unusual way to see things. This is obviously a stab at another influential aesthetic theory: Joseph Addison's primitivist distinction between natural and learned geniuses, in the treatise 'On genius' (1711). Addison's use of the word 'genius,' in the modern sense of someone who is endowed with extraordinary intellectual and/or creative capabilities, was, of course, very influential on the Romantic notion of a genius. The natural genius, exemplified by the literary hero of the Romantics—Shakespeare—was regarded as unaffected by reason and convention (more of that in connection to De Quincey's essay on *Macbeth* below). This notion, as well as the intrinsic link to national romanticism is exemplified by Milton's distinction in 'L'Allegro' (1645) between two contemporary dramatists:

Then to the well-trod stage anon,
If Jonson's learned sock be on,
Or sweetest Shakespeare, Fancy's child,
Warble his native woodnotes wild.

The natural genius expresses the natural and, as the argument went, truer forms of human emotion. Hence the instinctive leap of the intended murder victim becomes labelled 'natural genius' in De Quincey's satire.

We are also treated to an absurd application of Aristotelian *catharsis*, which underpinned many Romantic theories of the sublime: 'For the final purpose of murder, considered as a fine art, is precisely the same as that of tragedy in Aristotle's account of it; viz. "to cleanse the heart by means of pity and terror"' (De Quincey 1827: 47). Indeed, as pointed out by Steve Vine (2008), Kantian sublimity is itself described as doing

violence to the human imaginative faculties (142). Borrowing more from Aristotle—who argues that in order to stir pity in the spectators, the tragic hero need to be noble, both in spirit and birth—the chairman reasons that a murder is more aesthetically efficient the more morally elevated and full of life the victim is:

A philosophic friend, well known for his philanthropy and general benignity, suggests that the subject chosen ought also to have a family of young children wholly dependent on his exertions, by way of deepening the pathos. And, undoubtedly, this is a judicious caution. Yet I would not insist too keenly on such a condition. Severe good taste unquestionably suggests it; but still, where the man was otherwise unobjectionable in point of morals and health, I would not look with too curious a jealousy to a restriction which might have the effect of narrowing the artist's sphere. (De Quincey 1827: 48)

De Quincey seems intent on provoking our sense of morality as is exemplified by the chairman's own, perversely inverted, version of a moral slippery slope: 'For, if once a man indulges himself in murder, very soon he comes to think little of robbing, and from robbing comes next to drinking and Sabbath-breaking, and from that to incivility and procrastination. Once begin upon this downward path, you never know where you are to stop' (De Quincey 1839: 56). As Andrew Keanie (2014) notes, 'It may be taken lightly. But it is still unsettling' (63).

All in all, we are humorously led to think of the chairman and his society as morally deficient aesthetes. But this comfortable distance between the characters and ourselves will be closed significantly in the third instalment of the series.

'Postscript'

The first two papers share the same kind of satirical wit, in combination with absurdly hilarious humor, that had become synonymous with Jonathan Swift. In those two papers, 'De Quincey's composition is rendered harmless precisely because we believe that he cannot possibly be serious about his project' (Malkan 1990: 104). In the 'Postscript,' which De Quincey added in preparation of a collected edition of his works in 1854, there is even a direct reference to 'A modest proposal.' The same narrator as in the previous papers argues that his treatise on murder has the moral advantage over Swift's that it concerns a universal

tendency in man—the aesthetic enjoyment of murder—whereas ‘A modest proposal’ is about something unnatural:

Nobody can pretend, for a moment, on behalf of the Dean, that there is any ordinary and natural tendency in human thoughts which could ever turn to infants as articles of diet; under any conceivable circumstances, this would be felt as the most aggravated form of cannibalism—cannibalism applying itself to the most defenceless part of the species. But, on the other hand, the tendency to a critical or aesthetic valuation of fires and murders is universal. (De Quincey 1854: 72)

Spectating grisly scenes of accidents or violent calamities is thus an unproblematic activity as long as we do it equipped with the proper critical faculties.

The ‘Postscript’ is preoccupied with two sets of actual violent crimes: detailed accounts of the Ratcliffe Highway murders and the murders committed by the two brothers M’Kean, both of them highly publicized contemporary murder cases. The former case has been treated above and the latter involved the brothers M’Kean, who failed miserably in an attempted robbery at an inn in Manchester, seriously wounding a servant girl in the process. The M’Keans figure in the text primarily as foil to Williams, in order to exalt his status of murder artist and Romantic genius even more by contrast.

But the ‘Postscript’ differs radically from the previous two papers in that it lacks the humorous tone of the previous two papers: ‘the tenor of address shifts to an almost unmediated immersion in the murders perpetrated by Williams, with a corresponding attention to grisly detail and dramatic re-enactment. ... the scrim of irony vanishes entirely’ (Snyder 2001: 107). As Black (2000) remarks, in the third instalment ‘he was purposely seeking the effect of horror’ (318). Philip Van Doren Stern (1937) also touches on the same subject, noting that when ‘he tells the stories of two actual murders, and in his encounter with reality, his whole attitude changes. There is very little levity in the ‘Postscript.’ It is a grim and fearful description of terror let loose at night’ (19). In the third paper, then, the aesthetic and emotional aspect totally shifts from satire to affective writing.

The ‘Postscript’ also dispenses with the indirect address to the reader by way of a society, instead opting for a more immediate rhetorical approach (Whale 1985: 51). Rather, it can be said to be dramatic even to

the point of becoming pathetic, using the hyperbolic style of gothic romances:

What a Medusa's head must have lurked in those dreadful bloodless features, and those glazed rigid eyes, that seemed rightfully belonging to a corpse, when one glance at them sufficed to proclaim a death-warrant ... Infinite terror inspired him ... The situation was tremendous beyond any that is on record. A sneeze, a cough, almost a breathing, and the young man would be a corpse, without a chance or a struggle for his life. (De Quincey 1854: 101)

When it comes to content, it is more of a dramatized true-crime report than anything else.²

With the witticisms and the aristocratic tone gone, what is left is a genuinely sublime representation of a couple of murders, which is paradoxical given the satirical edge of the previous two instalments. The representation of violence is left to stand alone without moral or aesthetic commentary, and this makes the text seem somewhat strange in its context. Nigel Leask (1995) notes that the 'Postscript'

marks what is perhaps a unique moment in nineteenth-century criminal literature, resisting both the moral and political telos underpinning Romantic tragedy, and the growing challenge (in the 1840s and 50s) of the new genre of detective fiction, which placed the reassuring figure of the detective between the criminal and a bourgeois reading public. (106)

Tellingly, the 'Postscript' is also almost exactly as long as the previous two instalments together and is more detailed and focused in style as if the narration gets caught up in the excitement of the bloody deeds. This apparent amorality, I think, fills the purpose of making the readers, through an act of estrangement, reflect on their own ethical position in relation to representations of violence. In order to achieve this effect, 'De Quincey's preface reassures readers of the essay that their voyeuristic

² De Quincey had experience writing about murders and trials as editor of *The Westmorland Gazette*, 1818–1819. According to Van Doren Stern (1937), De Quincey 'was not a good editor but ... the interest in murder and horror which later served to inspire the famous "On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts" was prefigured ... by his filling the paper with long and detailed accounts of sensational murder trials' (9).

impulses are not only natural, but actually commendable. De Quincey disarms his readers by congratulating them on their good taste; at the same time, he unmasks his readers by revealing them to be connoisseurs of crime' (Malkan 1990: 102).

The 'Postscript' is also different from the two others in that we do not encounter the same society and the focus is entirely on the two sets of murders mentioned previously. These murders also figure in the previous two papers, but are there satirically celebrated for their aesthetic brilliance. In the 'First paper,' there is a passage which seems to promise the more comprehensive treatment of the Williams murders that is provided in the 'Postscript': 'With respect to the Williams murders, the sublimest and most entire in their excellence that ever were committed, I shall not allow myself to speak incidentally. Nothing less than an entire lecture, or even entire course of lectures, would suffice to expound their merits' (De Quincey 1827: 43). Indeed, one could argue that the 'Postscript' is that lecture, although not framed explicitly as such.

In a curious twist of events, in De Quincey's version, it is actually Williams' artistic sensibility that causes his downfall and subsequent capture as he decides to linger at the scene of the crime in order to complete his work of art:

The logic of the case, in short, all rested upon the *ultra* fiendishness of Williams. Were he likely to be content with the mere fact of the child's death, apart from the process and leisurely expansion of its mental agony—in that case there would be no hope. But, because our present murderer is fastidiously finical in his exactions—a sort of martinet in the scenical grouping and draping of the circumstances in his murders—therefore it is that hope becomes reasonable, since all such refinements of preparation demand time. Murders of mere necessity Williams was obliged to hurry: but in a murder of pure voluptuousness, entirely disinterested, where no hostile witness was to be removed, no extra booty to be gained, and no revenge to be gratified, it is clear that to hurry would be altogether to ruin. If this child, therefore, is to be saved, it will be on pure aesthetical considerations. (De Quincey 1854: 110)

Notice the reference to Kant's theory of artistic disinterestedness, which proclaimed that the artist should make art for art's sake and not out of worldly consideration, that is here perverted in the same way as other aesthetic philosophies have been.

The narrative of the M'Keans' murders, on the other hand, seems to be included merely for comparative purposes in order to make Williams' true artistic genius stand out in relief. Here, perhaps, is the only instance in which this 'Postscript' slips back into the satirical style of the first two papers. The main reason that the two M'Keans cannot be considered artists in the same sense as Williams, according to the narrator, seems to be that they act for a specific purpose. Such purposefulness was forbidden to the pure aesthete—remember how Williams had murdered way beyond any rational impulse. As Matthew Schneider (1995) remarks, 'Williams very monstrosity, his insensitivity to practicality and economy, made him the supreme artist' (40). The M'Keans, on the other hand, as they were robber-murderers, acted within an economic system, very unromantically involved in worldly business. The narrator makes the comparison between the M'Keans and Williams:

their case fell so flat within the sheltering limits of what would *now* be regarded as extenuating circumstances that, whilst a murder more or less was not to repel them from their object, very evidently they were anxious to economize the bloodshed as much as possible. Immeasurable, therefore, was the interval which divided them from the monster Williams. (De Quincey 1854: 123)

Note that 'monster,' in this context is not a pejorative, but the true expression of the inhumanly detached murderer-artist as the embodiment of the disinterested aesthete.

The futile end of the M'Keans also stands in stark contrast to the grandiose dramatic gesture of Williams's suicide and interment which becomes the last, volitional, performance of that great performance artist. And like his spiritual ancestor, Cain, Williams becomes a foundation upon which a city rests:

They perished on the scaffold: Williams, as I have said, by his own hand; and, in obedience to the law as it then stood, he was buried in the centre of a *quadrivium*, or conflux of four roads (in this case four streets), with a stake driven through his heart. And over him drives for ever the uproar of unresting London! (De Quincey 1854: 123-24)

This description is not dramatized for effect: Williams' interment really was a public spectacle with ritualistic overtones, as superstitious throwback, which are measured to the extreme violence and evil of the

murderer. A more ready-to-be-mythicized murderer than Williams is hard to find.

Thus far the three essays generally considered as making up the ‘On murder’ cycle³; the first in a kind of elevated academic mode, the second more of a burlesque, and the third radically different in tone in its dramatization of mainly the Ratcliffe Highway murders. Apart from their shared topic, there seems to be little that would unite them thematically. So far, we have three papers of which the last seems disparate: it seems to adopt the same aesthetic fascination for violence that the first two satirize. Leask (1995) writes that the ‘Postscript’ ‘enacts what the earlier “Murder” essays satirically assert, namely that murder can be represented aesthetically’ (113). There seems to be a link missing between the perspectives of the first two and the third papers that would account for the way in which the ‘Postscript’ is related to the other two papers. Or at least something that could help us discuss these problems in a purposeful manner.

‘On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth’

In this context, an earlier essay by De Quincey, perhaps also his most well-known, ‘On the knocking at the gate in *Macbeth*’ (1823), might be pertinent in order to understand the whole murder-essay cycle. ‘On the knocking at the gate’ was originally published in the *London Magazine*, October 1823, as ‘Notes from the pocket-book of a late opium eater,’ not ostensibly as a product of De Quincey, which is significant. The conflation of author and narrator is taken to its logical conclusion in *Confessions of an English opium-eater* (1821), to which it seems that De Quincey was planning a sequel that never materialized (Jenkins 1995: 109). In other words, De Quincey was playing with the idea of murder as art (obviously not autobiographical) around this time. It can be argued that the essay on *Macbeth* is the result of that abandoned project and the prototype of the three subsequent murder papers.

Although ‘On the knocking at the gate in *Macbeth*’ has not been considered as part of the ‘On murder’ papers, it is so closely related to the others thematically and formally that the texts seem to form a coherent whole. Jeffrey Malkan (1990) notes how this earlier text also

³ Among De Quincey’s papers of unpublished material, were actually drafts of two additional murder papers that were never completed (Burwick 1996: 78).

asks the question about the relation of appreciation of violent representation and its moral implication (104). David Masson notes that 'De Quincey had intended to enlarge it; but this was not done' (De Quincey 1823: 189n). But this missing enlargement can actually be found in the subsequent 'On murder' essays, only it does not delve deeper into Shakespeare but into the ethics and aesthetics of representations of violence. It also seems as if this is in fact the first time we make acquaintance with the connoisseur of murder that figures in the other papers. It makes much sense to read 'On the knocking at the gate' as the first installation in the 'On murder' cycle. First, the papers explore a common motif: murder and aesthetics, exemplified here as well by two geniuses, Shakespeare and Williams of the Ratcliffe Highway murders. Second, the papers use the same manner of apostrophizing the reader, by making references to 'amateurs' and 'connoisseurs' of murder. Third, and more importantly in the present context, it makes the *four* essays into complete cycle that revolves around the ethics of reading and violence. 'The awful parenthesis' that De Quincey writes about in this essay becomes problematic as it is revealed mainly as a readerly alibi to be entertained by violence.

It is essential, however, in order to read 'Knocking at the gate' as part of the 'Murder' series, that we distinguish between De Quincey himself and the narrative voice in these papers. Generally, 'Knocking at the gate' has been treated as a straightforward essay by De Quincey the literary critic—as an 'excursus on *Macbeth*' (Snyder 2001: 104). Judson S. Lyon (1969), for instance, writes about the essay: 'By general consent, De Quincey's finest single critical piece is "On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*"' (131). Frederick Burwick (1996) represents this view as well, but also intimates that something else is going on, beyond literary criticism: 'Although this essay is usually cited as an early study of "comic relief" in Shakespearean tragedy, De Quincey's problem is more complex' (85). Geoffrey Carnall (1961) also sees the essay as a 'fine piece of interpretation' of Shakespeare's play, but recognizes that it is adapted to a new cultural context as it is 'obviously the work of a nineteenth-century critic, and admirer of Wordsworth, a connoisseur of murder' (49); however, he continues that '[t]he odd thing about this interpretation is its unconcern with the most obvious immediate cause of the reverberations produced by the knocking at the gate: the sense of guilt discovered, the hint of supernatural retribution' (50). In other

words, De Quincey is interested in the effect of violence without considering its moral component, which is what destabilizes the reading. This must be construed as meaningful. Reading it without qualification as a piece of literary criticism is thus problematic, as many critics have testified, since the essay is rather disturbing in its amorality. Vincent A. De Luca (1980), for instance, reads it as De Quincey's own aesthetic treatise, but is forced to make a slightly consternated remark: 'The essay as a whole is striking for the peculiar aristocracy of its tone' (40). The disturbing 'peculiar aristocracy' of tone can best be exemplified by the introduction of Williams (the Ratcliffe Highway murderer) in the text, which treats him as a stage artist:

At length, in 1812, Mr. Williams made his *début* on the stage of Ratcliffe Highway, and executed those unparalleled murders which have procured for him such a brilliant and undying reputation. On which murders, by the way, I must observe that in one respect they have had an ill effect, by making the connoisseur in murder very fastidious in his taste, and dissatisfied by anything that has been since done in that line. All other murders look pale by the deep crimson of his; and, as an amateur once said to me in a querulous tone, 'There has been absolutely nothing *doing* since his time, or nothing that's worth speaking of.' But this is wrong; for it is unreasonable to expect all men to be great artists, and born with the genius of Mr. Williams. (De Quincey 1823: 390-91)

It is clearly the 'amateur' we meet here for the first time, discoursing about Williams' pre-emptive pre-eminence as murder artist, making his '*début*.' There is also a reference to a fellow amateur, which could perhaps indicate a prototype for the *Society for Connoisseurs in Murder* in the three papers already discussed. Masson even notes that the essay can be regarded as a 'presentiment' of the murder essays (De Quincey 1823: 391n), but does not take it to its logical conclusion: that it might actually be included in the same cycle of texts and the same fictional universe. It is difficult to see the amoral assessment in the *Macbeth* piece of the Williams' murders, where these are judged to have the 'ill effect' of setting an unattainable standard for all artists to come, as anything other than the sentiment of a murder aficionado. Thus, it would make most sense to see the authorial position in this paper as a fictionalized persona rather than as De Quincey's own voice. Also, as mentioned above, the allusion to the Ratcliffe Highway murders in such an

aestheticized manner was clearly meant as a provocation—the murders serving the function of being the most brutal and infamous acts of violence in recent collective memory.

This depraved aesthete reserves his moral indignation and forceful expressions to things of real importance when he vents his outrage against what he feels to be an improper use of the word ‘sympathy’ as a synonym for ‘pity.’ He writes, ‘instead of saying ‘sympathy *with* another,’ many writers adopt the monstrous barbarism of ‘sympathy *for* another’” (De Quincey 1823: 391–92n). In a typical move of a degenerate aestheticism, the in-text author deconstructs ordinary notions of a dichotomy such as humanity and brutality, arguing that the murderer and not the victim is the proper topic for the poet:

Murder, in ordinary cases, where sympathy is wholly directed to the case of the murdered person, is an incident of coarse and vulgar horror; and for this reason, that it flings the interest exclusively upon the natural but ignoble instinct by which we cleave to life; an instinct, which as being indispensable to the primal law of self-preservation, is the same in kind, (though different in degree) amongst all living creatures; this instinct, therefore, because it annihilates all distinctions, and degrades the greatest of men to the level of ‘the poor beetle that we tread on,’ exhibits human nature in its most abject and humiliating attitude. Such an attitude would little suit the purposes of the poet. What then must he do? He must throw the interest on the murderer.

(De Quincey 1823: 391)

Thus what separates us from the animals, what defines us as human beings, becomes in this perverted aestheticism the brutal act of murder and our proper civilized interest is in the brutality of the murderer: ‘If the “natural” maintenance of life is ignoble, then the murderer who chooses to destroy life at will surpasses nature and enters the world of design though his exercise of Titanic will’ (De Luca 1980: 42). De Quincey has certainly pulled us out of the moral mainstream here and into some murky waters.

De Quincey describes the creative process of representing violence as he writes about how murders have to be aestheticized in order to be proper topics for the poet. In this essay he also for the first time considers murder as a fine art as he discusses the Ratcliffe Highway murders as an aesthetic object and compares it to *Macbeth*. As such it brings a reality effect to the reading: ‘This new digression is a story of an actual murder,

and as such draws the poetic experience onto the level of society and language where the unspeakable is accommodated or naturalized' (Corrigan 1984: 140). As has been seen, this linking of Williams and Shakespeare is not confined to 'On the knocking at the gate' either. In the 'First paper,' the bard is promoted to the status of an amateur: 'As to Shakespeare, there never was a better; witness his description of the murdered Duncan, Banquo, &c.; and above all witness his incomparable miniature, in "Henry VI," of the murdered Gloucester' (De Quincey 1827: 17–18). And in the 'Postscript,' the memory of those who had witnessed Williams prior to the second murders had 'something of the same freezing effect as belongs to the two assassins in "Macbeth" who present themselves reeking from the murder of Banquo, and gleaming dimly, with dreadful faces, from the misty background, athwart the pomps of the regal banquet' (De Quincey 1854: 99). De Luca (1980) notes regarding De Quincey's treatment of *Macbeth* that, '[b]eyond its immediate concern with a particular scene in a particular play the essay aims to provide further documentation for the validity of Shakespeare's Romantic apotheosis as a poet gifted with the multitudinousness of nature and the designing powers of God' (40). But all of these essays discussed develop the basic idea that a great murderer can also be considered a great Romantic artist. As Leask (1995) points out, 'In the "Knocking at the Gate" essay Shakespeare the tragedian and Williams the murderer compete uneasily for the laurels and ... one feels that Williams and not his dramaturgical namesake has stolen the show' (98).

So why not regard this piece as one of the 'On murder' essays? We can see how the narrator of the 'Postscript' does the same thing to the murderer, Williams, as he thinks Shakespeare does to the Macbeths: he is unsexed and dehumanized, becomes pure murderous intent. In *Macbeth*, a more conventional reading of this dehumanizing process would be to assume that this is something that the Macbeths have to do in order to stifle a guilty conscience, but we have to remember that the narrator of these murder essays is not your average moralist. In other words, the reading of *Macbeth* provided in this paper would make more sense as well if regarded in the light of the subsequent papers. It still provides, however, an acute analysis of the play, as evidenced by numerous critics who have shown it to be an exemplar of Romantic drama theory (e.g. Jacobus 1983).

But perhaps the most interesting aspect of 'Knocking at the gate' is that it provides a succinct analytical description of exactly the kind of estrangement effect that disrupts our reading of the 'Postscript.' De Quincey writes about the horrors of the knocking at the gate after Duncan is murdered:

All action in any direction is best expounded, measured, and made apprehensible, by reaction. Now, apply this to the case in *Macbeth*. Here, as I have said, the retiring of the human heart and the entrance of the fiendish heart was to be expressed and made sensible. Another world has stepped in; and the murderers are taken out of the region of human things, human purposes, human desires. They are transfigured: Lady Macbeth is 'unsexed'; Macbeth has forgot that he was born of woman; both are conformed to the image of devils; and the world of devils is suddenly revealed. But how shall this be conveyed and made palpable? In order that a new world may step in, this world must for a time disappear. The murderers and the murder must be insulated—cut off by an immeasurable gulf from the ordinary tide and succession of human affairs—locked up and sequestered in some deep recess; we must be made sensible that the world of ordinary life is suddenly arrested, laid asleep, tranced, racked into a dread armistice; time must be annihilated, relation to things without abolished; and all must pass self-withdrawn into a deep syncope and suspension of earthly passion. Hence it is that, when the deed is done, when the work of darkness is perfect, then the world of darkness passes away like a pageantry in the clouds: the knocking at the gate is heard, and it makes known audibly that the reaction has commenced; the human has made its reflux upon the fiendish; the pulses of life are beginning to beat again; and *the re-establishment of the goings-on of the world in which we live first makes us profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis that had suspended them.* (De Quincey 1823: 393; my italics)

What is described here is how Shakespeare makes us suspend our moral judgement on the Macbeths, by creating a slippery slope on which the audience follows them. Gradually, we are removed from our own reality and into the fiction. We are made to understand their actions; the dramatic logic of the events seems undeniable. We are also led to sympathize with the murderers rather than the victims. De Quincey's definition of sympathy is also somewhat off the beaten track: 'the act of reproducing in our minds the feelings of another, whether for hatred, love, pity, or approbation' (391n). But, when the knocking at the gate is

sounded, we are suddenly startled back into reality to realize the horror of the deeds. This is the estrangement effect that is caused by our suspension in an ‘awful parenthesis’ that has bracketed us off with the Macbeths, becoming unsexed and dehumanized in the process as well, forgetting ordinary morality under the spell of the murderous narrative.

De Quincey would actually reuse the trope of a dramatic parenthesis in the ‘First paper,’ where we encounter the unorthodox account of the death of Gustavus Adolphus II as a murder:

The King of Sweden’s assassination, by the bye, is doubted by many writers, Harte amongst others; but they are wrong. He *was* murdered; and I consider his murder unique in its excellence; for he was murdered at noon-day, and on the field of a battle—a feature of original conception which occurs in no other work of art that I remember. To conceive the idea of *a secret murder on private account as enclosed within a little parenthesis on a vast stage of public battle-carnage is like Hamlet’s subtle device of a tragedy within a tragedy.*

(De Quincey 1827: 23; my italics)

De Quincey uses the conceit of a parenthesis that sets off the private action of *Hamlet* from the rest of the world in precisely the same way that he had done in his essay on *Macbeth* in 1823 (cf. Knox 2002: 68).

But, if we have felt any kind of sympathy *with* the Macbeths, the knocking should also alert us to how deeply we have descended into this immoral world and how much the action moves us. In fact, we are made aware not only of the awful parenthesis that has suspended them, but also of the parenthesis that has suspended *us*. De Quincey’s readers ‘cannot have both the pleasure of the text and the comfort of a clear conscience at the same time,’ Malkan (1990) argues: ‘If they want to be titillated by the excess of extravagance, they cannot avoid the self-division that comes from recognizing within themselves a divided nature, partly moral and sympathetic, but also partly immoral and voyeuristic’ (103). Or maybe even more radically, that there is no parenthesis at all: ‘at least part of the shock felt from the reassertion of reality must derive from our realization that, for a moment, we were, like Macbeth and Williams, accomplished murderers’ (Schneider 1995: 21). Following the logical conclusion of this, the moral problem with fictional representations of violence is that we, at least momentarily, live vicariously through its characters, good or bad. And we are drawn to representations of violence because we *want* these things to happen. No drama without conflict, no conflict without

violence, no violence without victims and, more importantly, perpetrators.

Regarding the effect of estrangement, here it does not flaunt its own fictionality to us, but instead problematizes our moral position in relation to the text. It thus insists that the text carries moral complications beyond the fiction at hand. Schneider proposes that this metareflexivity constitutes the moral of the story: 'Macbeth's and our own easy slide into diabolism admonishes us to be ever aware of the ethical ground on which we stand. Yet moralizing of any kind is conspicuously absent from the conclusion of this inquiry into the meaning of representational violence' (Schneider 1995: 21). However, as discussed above, this absence of moralizing is only strange if one regards 'Knocking at the gate' to be De Quincey's own aesthetic treatise. If we read it as a piece with the same narrator as in the 'On murder' essays this lack seems less disconcerting and the ideas coherent.

There is also a perfect poetic symmetry between De Quincey's use of the Ratcliffe Highway murders to illuminate the motivations of characters and dramaturgical effects in *Macbeth* and the way that he dramatizes the very same murders in the 'Postscript.' 'De Quincey's account of the Williams murders shows how well he had absorbed the lessons of Shakespeare's dramaturgical skill' (Plumtree 1985: 147).

Conclusion

As a writer and critic, De Quincey was often engaged in analyzing the effects of literature and art, frequently grounding his reasoning in his own experience with various forms of texts, adopting various positions experimentally to explore what happens when a reader engages with a text, often embracing the effect of deeply personal associations by dilation, rather than trying to establish objective readings (cf. Bilsland 1982: 80). It is important to keep this tentative stance in mind when approaching De Quincey, as he 'was a Protean critic, capable of many guises yet the same god underneath; he was both a dreamer and a logician; he wanted art to be both universal and unique, discursive and spontaneous; he explored biography, history, and genre—but essentially he was an affective critic' (Jordan 1952: 263).

If we accept the premise above, that the 1823 essay is part of the same fictional construction as the later pieces, we can say that, in presenting the 'Postscript' as an after-the-fact aestheticized narrative of

actual murders—one in which we are caught up in the suspenseful narration and are, indeed, lured into considering murder as one of the fine arts—De Quincey playfully lays bare the readerly position as being more than just a passive spectator mode: we are revealed as voyeurs, wanting the murders to happen for our pleasure. As Susan Oliver (2013) remarks, each of the papers ‘features a different conceit’ to expose the reader to ethically problematic violence, creating generic confusion, ‘in which irony and a tangible excitement concerning real cases of murder undermine expectations even of satire, breaking the bounds of literary protocol. Consequently, the “On Murder” trilogy is most effective when read as a series that gradually dismembers and dissolves literary form’ (45). In other words, we have to think about these papers, including ‘Knocking at the gate,’ as essentially metadiscursive texts that disrupt conventional form to comment on the conditions of violent representation in art. This creates what can be thought of as an inverted estrangement effect in that it does not break the mimetic illusion to reveal its own fictionality. Instead, the buffer zone of fiction that has operated as our moral safeguard is removed. We are left with the responsibility for the apparent immorality of consuming violence, in any form, which obviously becomes even more problematic when a factual case is narrated. But, then again, De Quincey’s narrator would argue that if it has already taken place, the deed is done and is irreversible, why not enjoy it? Incidentally, and perhaps unintentionally, the ‘On murder’ essays can be regarded as a textual machine that shifts its readers into a position in which our own ethical stance can be inspected. We are caught red-handed in enjoying the narrative of the murders in the ‘Postscript’ on the same premises and with the same alibi as the head of the society does:

When a murder is in the Paulo-post-futurum tense—not done, not even (according to modern purism) *being* done, but only going to be done—and a rumour of it comes to our ears, by all means let us treat it morally. But suppose it over and done ... it is a *fait accompli*; suppose the poor murdered man to be out of his pain, and the rascal that did it off like a shot nobody knows whither; suppose, lastly, that we have done our best, by putting out our legs, to trip up the fellow in his flight, but all to no purpose ... why, then, I say, what’s the use of any more virtue? Enough has been given to morality; now comes the turn of Taste and Fine Arts. A sad thing it was, no doubt, very sad; but we can’t mend it. Therefore let us make the best of a bad matter; and, as it

is impossible to hammer anything out of it to moral purposes, let us treat it aesthetically, and see if it will turn to account in that way. Such is the logic of a sensible man ... (De Quincey 1827: 16)

There are many ways in which the 'On murder' essays can be seen as anticipating the evolution of crime fiction during the 19th century and beyond: 'The extravagance and ironies of the "murder" essays resonate through the second half of the 19th century in new literary genres including sensation, detective, crime fiction, popular journalism, and theories of writing' (Oliver 2013: 44). We can also consider the essays as 'located at the start of a larger process of discursive change in nineteenth-century England regarding crime and the criminals. What *Murder as a Fine Arts* turns on is the moment, historically speaking, when the killer takes the cultural stage' (Knox 2002: 64). Burwick (1996) also notes how the essays can properly be regarded as the antecedents of the true-crime genre, in especial Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (85). Emily Jenkins (1995) sees a connecting line from De Quincey to modern artists as Harry Clarke and Ivan Albright and filmmakers like Alfred Hitchcock and David Cronenberg (124). It can be argued that De Quincey's musings on the aesthetics of violence and death still have relevance today, perhaps even more so, with the shifting media landscape, ubiquity of violent narratives, (especially true crime and serial-killer fiction), and modes of consumption.

The pleasure derived from this activity is very special; it follows the same logic as rubbernecking at road accidents or being horrified by the hyper-realistic images from 9/11. We are morally indignant, of course, but since we have a *fait accompli*, we are justified in consuming it like any other aesthetic object, and the question of fictionality has become irrelevant: it all has assumed the same ontological status as narrative. We would never admit to it, however, as is evident from the moral outrage caused by the German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen, who claimed that the events of 9/11 were 'the greatest work of art ever,' or remarks to the same effect made by artists Damien Hirst and Gail Haffern. Actually, Haffern put her own twenty-first-century spin on De Quincey's styling Williams as an artistic genius. As she explains the subtext for her sculptural treatment of the subject: 'I thought what if this had been a performance piece and Osama bin Laden had declared himself an artist, how would the world have seen it then?' She even approaches it in terms that reminds of the Romantic notion of geniality when she applauds the

attacks as artistically ‘wonderful because it was a new idea.’⁴ The moral outrage caused by such statements seems to have been incited because of the apparent frivolity with which the artists commented on such a horrendous situation. By reading it in aesthetic terms, the moral significance seems to have been reduced and the event in itself banalized.

But if we read De Quincey in the way suggested here, we see that it is not the significance of the real events that is underestimated; it is the ethical ground on which art operates that is neglected. These texts seem to show us by inversion that we are morally accountable for appreciating violent representation. It is art in itself that is criticized as the texts go beyond mere parody in their implications. They do not only ridicule their objects, but also form a well-grounded critique of the received notions of the boundaries of art. Schneider (1995) comments:

Williams’s murders were artistic precisely because they, like performance art, problematize, even challenge conventional notions of art’s permanence, moral usefulness, beauty, and accessibility. But if the essence of art lies in its freedom to test its own principles of organization and restraint, Williams’s acts in those awful two weeks of 1811 emerge as much more than just an example of the sublime in action, of life imitating art. They are the logical extension, indeed the purest expression, of an aesthetics of affect and a theory of art that sees the drama of opposition as the basis of representation. (40)

It is precisely this aesthetic function, this instability in aesthetic morality, that De Quincey chooses to defamiliarize by introducing us to the Society of Connoisseurs in Murder. It is not the fact that these gentlemen take an interest in murders, but that they take interest in *real* murders, that he finds appalling. Examples of real societies that judge fictional violence aesthetically are legion—some of them even hand out annual awards for most creative murders in fiction. As long as something is fictional, we can safely use it for pleasure as it is beyond our moral reach. It is the reality factor that is decisive in this case, and De Quincey, as prophetic prober of violent popular culture, playfully probes the fault lines between fact and fiction by analyzing reality and drama on the same

⁴ See for example the artists quoted in Charles Paul Freund, ‘The art of terror,’ *San Francisco Gate* (Oct. 9, 2002). This article is doubly interesting as it incidentally refers back to De Quincey’s ‘On murder considered as one of the fine arts.’

terms. He seems to point out to us that we are, through some impulse or other, drawn to violent entertainment; and, what is more disturbing, that there really is no solid moral ground for us to stand on to claim an ethical distance from these acts.

References

- Bilsland, John W. 1982. De Quincey's critical dilations. *University of Toronto Quarterly* 52(1): 79–93. doi:10.3138/utq.52.1.79.
- Black, Joel. 2000. Murder: the state of the art. *American Literary History* 12(4): 780–93. doi:10.1093/alh/12.4.780.
- Burwick, Frederick. 1996. De Quincey and the aesthetics of violence. *The Wordsworth Circle* 27(2): 78–86. doi:10.1086/twc24042629.
- Carnall, Geoffrey. 1961. De Quincey on the knocking at the gate. *Review of English Literature* 2(1): 49–57.
- Corrigan, Timothy. 1984. Interpreting the uncitable text: the literary criticism of Thomas De Quincey. In *Ineffability: naming the unnamable from Dante to Beckett*, edited by Peter S. Hawkins, Anne Howland Schotter, and Allen Mandelbaum, 131–46, New York: AMS Press, Inc.
- De Luca, Vincent A. 1980. *Thomas De Quincey: the prose of vision*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- De Quincey, Thomas. 1823. On the knocking at the gate in *Macbeth*. In *The collected writings of Thomas De Quincey*, vol. X, edited by David Masson, 389–94, London: Adam and Charles Black, 1897.
- De Quincey, Thomas. 1827. First paper. In *The collected writings of Thomas De Quincey*, vol. XIII, edited by David Masson, 9–51, Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1890.
- De Quincey, Thomas. 1839. Second paper. In *The collected writings of Thomas De Quincey*, vol. XIII, edited by David Masson, 52–69, Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1890.
- De Quincey, Thomas. 1854. Postscript. In *The collected writings of Thomas De Quincey*, vol. XIII, edited by David Masson, 70–124, Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1890.
- Jacobus, Mary. 1983. 'That great stage where senators perform': *Macbeth* and the politics of Romantic theatre. *Studies in Romanticism* 22(3): 353–87. doi:10.2307/25600435.
- Jenkins, Emily. 1995. Execution: murder and writing in the work of Thomas De Quincey. *VIJ: Victorians Institute Journal* 23: 109–27.

- Jordan, John E. 1952. *Thomas De Quincey: literary critic*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Keanie, Andrew. 2014. On De Quincey's portrait of Coleridge considered as a work of fine art. *Coleridge Bulletin: The Journal of the Friends of Coleridge* 44: 57–67.
- Knox, Sarah. 2002. Writing killing: Thomas de Quincey and the culture of spectacle. *Cultural Studies Review* 8(1): 59–71.
- Leask, Nigel. 1995. Toward a universal aesthetic: De Quincey on murder as carnival and tragedy. In *Questioning Romanticism*, edited by John Beer, 92–120, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins.
- Lyon, Judson S. 1969. *Thomas De Quincey*. New York: Twayne.
- Malkan, Jeffrey. 1990. Aggressive text: murder and the fine arts revisited. *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 23(1): 101–14.
- Oliver, Susan. 2013. De Quincey's 'On murder': the generic conflict. *The Wordsworth Circle* 44(1): 44–51. doi:10.1086/twc24045876.
- Plumtree, A. S. 1985. The artist as murderer: De Quincey's essay 'On murder considered as one of the fine arts'. In *Thomas De Quincey: bicentenary studies*, edited by Robert Lance Snyder, 140–63. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Schneider, Matthew. 1995. *Original ambivalence: autobiography and violence in Thomas De Quincey*. Series: *The Age of Revolution and Romanticism*, vol. 11. New York: Peter Lang.
- Snyder, Robert Lance. 2001. De Quincey's liminal interspaces: 'On murder considered as one of the fine arts.' *Nineteenth-Century Prose* 28(2): 102–18.
- Van Doren Stern, Philip. 1937. Introduction. In *Selected writings of Thomas De Quincey*, edited by Philip Van Doren Stern. New York: Random House.
- Vine, Steve. 2008. 'Intermitting power': De Quincey's sublime identifications. *Prose Studies* 30(2): 142–58. doi:10.1080/01440350802372941.
- Whale, John C. 1985. 'In a stranger's ear': De Quincey's polite magazine context. In *Thomas De Quincey: bicentenary studies*, edited by Robert Lance Snyder, 35–53. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.