

## Autobiographers and Diarists

### Passage 1a: Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*

I here present you, courteous reader, with the record of a remarkable period in my life: according to my application of it, I trust that it will prove not merely an interesting record, but in a considerable degree useful and instructive. In that hope it is that I have drawn it up; and that must be my apology for breaking through that delicate and honourable reserve which, for the most part, restrains us from the public exposure of our own errors and infirmities. Nothing, indeed, is more revolting to English feelings than the spectacle of a human being obtruding on our notice his moral ulcers or scars, and tearing away that “decent drapery” which time or indulgence to human frailty may have drawn over them; accordingly, the greater part of our confessions (that is, spontaneous and extra-judicial confessions) proceed from demireps, adventurers, or swindlers: and for any such acts of gratuitous self-humiliation from those who can be supposed in sympathy with the decent and self-respecting part of society, we must look to French literature, or to that part of the German which is tainted with the spurious and defective sensibility of the French. All this I feel so forcibly, and so nervously am I alive to reproach of this tendency, that I have for many months hesitated about the propriety of allowing this or any part of my narrative to come before the public eye until after my death (when, for many reasons, the whole will be published); and it is not without an anxious review of the reasons for and against this step that I have at last concluded on taking it.

Guilt and misery shrink, by a natural instinct, from public notice: they court privacy and solitude: and even in their choice of a grave will sometimes sequester themselves from the general population of the churchyard, as if declining to claim fellowship with the great family of man, and wishing (in the affecting language of Mr. Wordsworth):

Humbly to express  
A penitential loneliness.

It is well, upon the whole, and for the interest of us all, that it should be so: nor would I willingly in my own person manifest a disregard of such salutary feelings, nor in act or word do anything to weaken them; but, on the one hand,

as my self-accusation does not amount to a confession of guilt, so, on the other, 30  
it is possible that, if it did, the benefit resulting to others from the record of an  
experience purchased at so heavy a price might compensate, by a vast overbalance,  
for any violence done to the feelings I have noticed, and justify a breach of the  
general rule. Infirmity and misery do not of necessity imply guilt. They approach  
or recede from shades of that dark alliance, in proportion to the probable motives 35  
and prospects of the offender, and the palliations, known or secret, of the offence;  
in proportion as the temptations to it were potent from the first, and the resistance  
to it, in act or in effort, was earnest to the last. For my own part, without breach  
of truth or modesty, I may affirm that my life has been, on the whole, the life of  
a philosopher: from my birth I was made an intellectual creature, and intellectual 40  
in the highest sense my pursuits and pleasures have been, even from my schoolboy  
days. If opium-eating be a sensual pleasure, and if I am bound to confess that I have  
indulged in it to an excess not yet recorded of any other man, it is no less true that  
I have struggled against this fascinating enthrallment with a religious zeal, and have  
at length accomplished what I never yet heard attributed to any other man—have 45  
untwisted, almost to its final links, the accursed chain which fettered me. Such a  
self-conquest may reasonably be set off in counterbalance to any kind or degree  
of self-indulgence. Not to insist that in my case the self-conquest was unquestion-  
able, the self-indulgence open to doubts of casuistry, according as that name shall  
be extended to acts aiming at the bare relief of pain, or shall be restricted to such 50  
as aim at the excitement of positive pleasure.

