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 THOMAS DE QUINCEY

 On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts<sup>1</sup>
*Second Paper*

A good many years ago, the reader may remember that I came forward in the character of a dilettante in murder. Perhaps dilettante is too strong a word. *Connoisseur* is better suited to the scruples and infirmity of public taste. I suppose there is no harm in *that*, at least. A man is not bound to put his eyes, ears, and understanding into his breeches pocket when he meets with a murder. If he is not in a downright comatose state, I suppose he must see that one murder is better or worse than another, in point of good taste. Murders have their little differences and shades of merit, as well as statues, pictures, oratorios, cameos, intaglios, or what not. You may be angry with the man for talking too much, or too publicly (as to the too much, that I deny—a man can never cultivate his taste too highly); but you must allow him to think, at any rate. Well, would you believe it? all my neighbors came to hear of that little aesthetic essay which I had published; and, unfortunately, hearing at the very same time of a club that I was connected with, and a dinner at which I presided—both tending to the same little object as the essay, viz., the diffusion of a just taste among Her Majesty's subjects—they got up the most barbarous calumnies against me. In particular, they said that I, or that the club (which comes to the same thing), had offered bounties on well-conducted homicides—with a scale of drawbacks, in case of any one defect or flaw, according to a table issued to private friends. Now, let me tell the whole truth about the dinner and the club, and it will be seen how malicious the world is. But, first, confidentially, allow me to say what my real principles are upon the matter in question.

As to murder, I never committed one in my life. It's a well-known thing amongst all my friends. I can get a paper to certify as much, signed by lots of people. Indeed, if you come to that, I doubt whether many people could produce as strong a certificate. Mine would be as big as a breakfast tablecloth. There is indeed one member of the club who pretends to say he caught me once making too free with his throat on a club night, after everybody else had retired. But, observe, he shuffles in his story according to his state of civilization.<sup>2</sup> When not far gone, he contents himself with saying that he caught me ogling his throat, and that I was melancholy for some weeks after, and that my voice sounded in a way expressing, to the nice ear of a connoisseur, *the sense of opportunities lost*; but the club all know that he is a disappointed man himself, and that he speaks querulously at times about the fatal neglect of a man's coming abroad without his tools. Besides, all this is an affair between two amateurs,<sup>3</sup> and everybody makes allowances for

1. Under this title De Quincey gathered three essays, the first published in 1827, the second (here reproduced in its entirety) in 1839, and a long "Postscript" in 1854. This work is a brilliant success in a mode of grotesque and sinister comedy that suggests the recent German writer, Franz Kafka. To sustain his outrageous irony, De Quincey assumes the guise of a humorless, obsessed, and over-logical essayist, a device which Jonathan Swift

had exploited for satirical purposes in such writings as his *Modest Proposal*. The narrative evolves with a learned but insane reasonableness, and ends in an explosion of nightmarish conviviality.

2. De Quincey later explained that this word is "civilization" as pronounced by a man in his cups: "*Civilation*, by ellipsis \* \* \* or, rigorously speaking, by hiccup, from *civilization*."

3. A fancier or follower of an art or sport.

little asperities and fibs in such a case. “But,” say you, “if no murderer, you may have encouraged, or even have bespoken, a murder.” No, upon my honor—no. And that was the very point I wished to argue for your satisfaction. The truth is, I am a very particular man in everything relating to murder; and perhaps I carry my delicacy too far. The Stagirite<sup>4</sup> most justly, and possibly with a view to my case, placed virtue in the τὸ μέσον,<sup>5</sup> or middle point between two extremes. A golden mean is certainly what every man should aim at. But it is easier talking than doing; and, my infirmity being notoriously too much milkiness of heart, I find it difficult to maintain that steady equatorial line between the two poles of too much murder on the one hand and too little on the other. I am too soft; and people get excused through me—nay, go through life without an attempt made upon them—that ought *not* to be excused. I believe, if I had the management of things, there would hardly be a murder from year’s end to year’s end. In fact, I’m for peace, and quietness, and fawningness, and what may be styled knocking-underness. A man came to me as a candidate for the place of my servant, just then vacant. He had the reputation of having dabbled a little in our art; some said, not without merit. What startled me, however, was, that he supposed this art to be part of his regular duties in my service, and talked of having it considered in his wages. Now, that was a thing I would not allow; so I said at once, “Richard (or James, as the case might be), you misunderstand my character. If a man will and must practice this difficult (and, allow me to add, dangerous) branch of art—if he has an overruling genius for it—why, in that case, all I say is that he might as well pursue his studies whilst living in my service as in another’s. And also I may observe that it can do no harm either to himself or to the subject on whom he operates that he should be guided by men of more taste than himself. Genius may do much, but long study of the art must always entitle a man to offer advice. So far I will go—general principles I will suggest. But, as to any particular case, once for all I will have nothing to do with it. Never tell me of any special work of art you are meditating—I set my face against it *in toto*. For, if once a man indulges himself in murder, very soon he comes to think little of robbing, and from robbing he 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. Many a man dated his ruin from some murder or other that perhaps he thought little of at the time. *Principiis obsta*<sup>6</sup>—that’s my rule.” Such was my speech, and I have always acted up to it; so, if that is not being virtuous, I should be glad to know what is.

But now about the dinner and the club. The club was not particularly of my creation; it arose—pretty much as other similar associations for the propagation of truth and the communication of new ideas—rather from the necessities of things than upon any one man’s suggestion. As to the dinner, if any man more than another could be held responsible for that, it was a member known amongst us by the name of *Toad-in-the-hole*. He was so called from his gloomy misanthropical disposition, which led him into constant disparagements of all modern murders as vicious abortions, belonging to no authentic school of art. The finest performances of our own age he snarled at cynically; and at length this querulous humor grew upon him so much, and he became so notorious as a *laudator temporis acti*,<sup>7</sup> that few people cared to seek his society. This made him still more fierce and truculent. He went about muttering and growling; wherever you met him, he was soliloquizing, and saying “Despicable pretender—without

4. Aristotle, so called because he was born at Stagira, in Macedonia.

5. The mean.

6. “Make a stand against the beginnings”; a quotation from Ovid’s *Remedies of Love*.

7. Praise of times past.

grouping—without two ideas upon handling—without—”; and there you lost him. At length existence seemed to be painful to him; he rarely spoke; he seemed conversing with phantoms in the air; his housekeeper informed us that his reading was nearly confined to *God’s Revenge upon Murder* by Reynolds, and a more ancient book of the same title, noticed by Sir Walter Scott in his *Fortunes of Nigel*.<sup>8</sup> Sometimes, perhaps, he might read in the *Newgate Calendar*<sup>9</sup> down to the year 1788; but he never looked into a book more recent. In fact, he had a theory with regard to the French Revolution, as having been the great cause of degeneration in murder.<sup>1</sup> “Very soon, sir,” he used to say, “men will have lost the art of killing poultry: the very rudiments of the art will have perished!”

In the year 1811 he retired from general society. Toad-in-the-hole was no more seen in any public resort. We missed him from his wonted haunts: “Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he.”<sup>2</sup> By the side of the main conduit his listless length at noontide he would stretch, and pore upon the filth that muddled by. “Even dogs,” this pensive moralist would say, “are not what they were, sir—not what they should be. I remember in my grandfather’s time that some dogs had an idea of murder. I have known a mastiff, sir, that lay in ambush for a rival—yes, sir, and finally murdered him, with pleasing circumstances of good taste. I also was on intimate terms of acquaintance with a tomcat that was an assassin. But now—”; and then, the subject growing too painful, he dashed his hand to his forehead, and went off abruptly in a homeward direction towards his favorite conduit; where he was seen by an amateur in such a state that he thought it dangerous to address him. Soon after Toad shut himself entirely up; it was understood that he had resigned himself to melancholy; and at length the prevailing notion was that Toad-in-the-hole had hanged himself.

The world was wrong *there*, as it had been on some other questions. Toad-in-the-hole might be sleeping, but dead he was not; and of that we soon had ocular proof. One morning in 1812, an amateur surprised us with the news that he had seen Toad-in-the-hole brushing with hasty steps the dews away, to meet the postman by the conduit side.<sup>3</sup> Even that was something: how much more, to hear that he had shaved his beard—had laid aside his sad-colored clothes, and was adorned like a bridegroom of ancient days. What could be the meaning of all this? Was Toad-in-the-hole mad? or how? Soon after the secret was explained: in more than a figurative sense “the murder was out.” For in came the London morning papers, by which it appeared that, but three days before, a murder the most superb of the century by many degrees had occurred in the heart of London. I need hardly say that this was the great exterminating chef-d’œuvre of Williams at Mr. Marr’s, No. 29 Ratcliffe Highway.<sup>4</sup> That was the debut of the artist; at least for anything the public knew. What occurred at Mr. Williamson’s twelve nights afterwards—the second work turned out from the same chisel—some people pronounced even superior. But Toad-in-the-hole always “reclaimed,”<sup>5</sup> he was even angry, at such comparisons. “This vulgar *goût de comparaison*,<sup>6</sup> as La Bruyère calls it,” he would often remark, “will be our

8. The first book alluded to was published in 1621. Scott’s “notice” occurs in Chapter XXIV: Nigel is reading this book late at night, when he hears the shriek announcing the discovery of the murdered body of old Trapbois, the miser.

9. A series of books published between 1774 and 1826, dealing with the lives and deeds of the most notorious criminals confined in Newgate prison, London.

1. Because of the mass executions by the guillotine.

2. Gray’s *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, line 112. The next sentence parodies lines 103–4 of that poem.

3. Another distorted echo of Gray’s *Elegy*, lines 99–100.

4. In December, 1811, John Williams murdered the Marr family and, twelve days later, the Williamson family.

5. Cried out against.

6. Taste for comparison.

ruin; each work has its own separate characteristics—each in and for itself is incomparable. One, perhaps, might suggest the *Iliad*—the other the *Odyssey*: but what do you get by such comparisons? Neither ever was or will be surpassed; and, when you've talked for hours, you must still come back to that." Vain, however, as all criticism might be, he often said that volumes might be written on each case for itself; and he even proposed to publish a quarto on the subject.

Meantime, how had Toad-in-the-hole happened to hear of this great work of art so early in the morning? He had received an account by express,<sup>7</sup> dispatched by a correspondent in London who watched the progress of art on *Toad's* behalf, with a general commission to send off a special express, at whatever cost, in the event of any estimable works appearing. The express arrived in the night-time; Toad-in-the-hole was then gone to bed; he had been muttering and grumbling for hours; but of course he was called up. On reading the account, he threw his arms round the express, declared him his brother and his preserver, and expressed his regret at not having it in his power to knight him. We, amateurs, having heard that he was abroad, and therefore had *not* hanged himself, made sure of soon seeing him amongst us. Accordingly he soon arrived; seized every man's hand as he passed him—wrung it almost frantically, and kept ejaculating, "Why, now, here's something like a murder!—this is the real thing—this is genuine—this is what you can approve, can recommend to a friend: this—says every man, on reflection—this is the thing that ought to be! Such works are enough to make us all young." And in fact the general opinion is that Toad-in-the-hole would have died but for this regeneration of art, which he called a second age of Leo the Tenth;<sup>8</sup> and it was our duty, he said, solemnly to commemorate it. At present, and *en attendant*,<sup>9</sup> he proposed that the club should meet and dine together. A dinner, therefore, was given by the club; to which all amateurs were invited from a distance of one hundred miles.

Of this dinner there are ample shorthand notes amongst the archives of the club. But they are not "extended," to speak diplomatically; and the reporter who only could give the whole report *in extenso*<sup>1</sup> is missing—I believe, murdered. Meantime, in years long after that day, and on an occasion perhaps equally interesting, *viz.*, the turning up of Thugs and Thuggism,<sup>2</sup> another dinner was given. Of this I myself kept notes, for fear of another accident to the shorthand reporter. And I here subjoin them.

Toad-in-the-hole, I must mention, was present at this dinner. In fact, it was one of its sentimental incidents. Being as old as the valleys at the dinner of 1812, naturally he was as old as the hills at the Thug dinner of 1838. He had taken to wearing his beard again; why, or with what view, it passes my persimmon<sup>3</sup> to tell you. But so it was. And his appearance was most benign and venerable. Nothing could equal the angelic radiance of his smile as he inquired after the unfortunate reporter (whom, as a piece of private scandal, I should tell you that he was himself supposed to have murdered in a rapture of creative art). The answer was, with roars of laughter, from the under-sheriff of our county—"Non est inventus."<sup>4</sup> Toad-in-the-hole laughed outrageously at this: in fact, we all thought he was choking; and, at the earnest request of the company,

7. Messenger.

8. Pope Leo X (1513–23), was a great patron of art and letters.

9. In the meantime.

1. At full length.

2. The Thugs were members of a religious association in India who strangled and robbed their vic-

tims. In the early 1830's the British government took energetic measures to suppress them.

3. De Quincey was fond of American slang; this expression is apparently based on the American proverb, "The longest pole knocks down the persimmons."

4. A Latin legal phrase: "He has not been found."

a musical composer furnished a most beautiful glee<sup>5</sup> upon the occasion, which was sung five times after dinner, with universal applause and inextinguishable laughter, the words being these (and the chorus so contrived, as most beautifully to mimic the peculiar laughter of Toad-in-the-hole):

*Et interrogatum est a Toad-in-the-hole—Ubi est ille reporter?  
Et responsum est cum cachinno—Non est inventus.*

CHORUS

*Deinde iteratum est ab omnibus, cum cachinnatione undulante,  
trepidante—Non est inventus.*<sup>6</sup>

—Toad-in-the-hole, I ought to mention, about nine years before, when an express from Edinburgh brought him the earliest intelligence of the Burke-and-Hare revolution in the art,<sup>7</sup> went mad upon the spot, and, instead of a pension to the express for even one life, or a knighthood, endeavored to Burke *him*; in consequence of which he was put into a strait-waistcoat. And that was the reason we had no dinner then. But now all of us were alive and kicking, strait-waistcoaters and others; in fact, not one absentee was reported upon the entire roll. There were also many foreign amateurs present.

Dinner being over, and the cloth drawn, there was a general call made for the new glee of *Non est inventus*; but, as this would have interfered with the requisite gravity of the company during the earlier toasts, I overruled the call. After the national toasts had been given, the first official toast of the day was *The Old Man of the Mountains*<sup>8</sup>—drunk in solemn silence.

Toad-in-the-hole returned thanks in a neat speech. He likened himself to the Old Man of the Mountains in a few brief allusions that made the company yell with laughter; and he concluded with giving the health of

*Mr. von Hammer*,<sup>9</sup> with many thanks to him for his learned History of the Old Man and his subjects the Assassins.

Upon this I rose and said that doubtless most of the company were aware of the distinguished place assigned by Orientalists to the very learned Turkish scholar, Von Hammer the Austrian; that he had made the profoundest researches into our art, as connected with those early and eminent artists, the Syrian assassins in the period of the Crusaders; that his work had been for several years deposited, as a rare treasure of art, in the library of the club. Even the author's name, gentlemen, pointed him out as the historian of our art—Von Hammer—

“Yes, yes,” interrupted Toad-in-the-hole, “Von Hammer—he's the man for a *malleus haereticorum*.<sup>1</sup> You all know what consideration Williams bestowed on the hammer, or the ship-carpenter's mallet,<sup>2</sup> which is the same thing. Gentlemen, I give you another great hammer—Charles the Hammer, the Marteau, or, in Old French, the Martel: he hammered the Saracens till they were all as dead as doornails.”

“*Charles the Hammer*, with all the honors.”

5. A song for a number of unaccompanied voices.

6. “And it was asked by Toad-in-the-hole—Where is that reporter? And it was answered with laughter—He has not been found. CHORUS: Then it was repeated by everyone, with swelling, agitated laughter—He has not been found.”

7. In 1828 it was discovered in Edinburgh that William Burke and William Hare had lured homeless people into their houses, gotten them drunk, strangled them, and sold their bodies for anatomical dissection. “To Burke” became a verb meaning “to smother or strangle.”

8. The term for the chief of a band of Moslem fanatics called “Assassins,” who were dedicated to the stealthy murder of the Christian leaders during the Crusades.

9. Author of a German *History of the Assassins* (1818).

1. “Hammer of the heretics,” the title given to Charles Martel (*martel* is the modern French *marteau*, meaning “hammer”) after he defeated the Saracens near Poitiers in 732.

2. Williams had used this instrument in the murders mentioned earlier in the essay.

But the explosion of Toad-in-the-hole, together with the uproarious cheers for the grandpapa of Charlemagne, had now made the company unmanageable. The orchestra was again challenged with shouts the stormiest for the new glee. I foresaw a tempestuous evening; and I ordered myself to be strengthened with three waiters on each side—the vice-president with as many. Symptoms of unruly enthusiasm were beginning to show out; and I own that I myself was considerably excited as the orchestra opened with its storm of music and the impassioned glee began—“*Et interrogatum est a Toad-in-the-hole—Ubi est ille reporter?*” And the frenzy of the passion became absolutely convulsing as the full chorus fell in—“*Et iteratum est ab omnibus—non est inventus.*”

The next toast was—*The Jewish Sicarii.*

Upon which I made the following explanation to the company: “Gentlemen, I am sure it will interest you all to hear that the Assassins, ancient as they were, had a race of predecessors in the very same country. All over Syria, but particularly in Palestine, during the early years of the Emperor Nero, there was a band of murderers, who prosecuted their studies in a very novel manner. They did not practice in the nighttime, or in lonely places; but, justly considering that great crowds are in themselves a sort of darkness by means of the dense pressure, and the impossibility of finding out who it was that gave the blow, they mingled with mobs everywhere; particularly at the great paschal feast in Jerusalem; where they actually had the audacity, as Josephus<sup>3</sup> assures us, to press into the temple—and whom should they choose for operating upon but Jonathan himself, the Pontifex Maximus? They murdered him, gentlemen, as beautifully as if they had had him alone on a moonless night in a dark lane. And, when it was asked who was the murderer, and where he was——”

“Why, then, it was answered,” interrupted Toad-in-the-hole, “‘*Non est inventus.*’” And then, in spite of all I could do or say, the orchestra opened, and the whole company began—“*Et interrogatum est a Toad-in-the-hole—Ubi est ille Sicarius? Et responsum est ab omnibus—Non est inventus.*”

When the tempestuous chorus had subsided, I began again: “Gentlemen, you will find a very circumstantial account of the Sicarii in at least three different parts of Josephus: once in Book XX, sec. v, c. viii, of his *Antiquities*; once in Book I of his *Wars*: but in sec. x of the chapter first cited you will find a particular description of their tooling. This is what he says: ‘They tooled with small scimitars not much different from the Persian *acinacae*, but more curved, and for all the world most like the Roman semi-lunar *sicae*.’ It is perfectly magnificent, gentlemen, to hear the sequel of their history. Perhaps the only case on record where a regular army of murderers was assembled, a *justus exercitus*,<sup>4</sup> was in the case of these *Sicarii*. They mustered in such strength in the wilderness that Festus<sup>5</sup> himself was obliged to march against them with the Roman legionary force. A pitched battle ensued; and this army of amateurs was all cut to pieces in the desert. Heavens, gentlemen, what a sublime picture! The Roman legions—the wilderness—Jerusalem in the distance—an army of murderers in the foreground!”

The next toast was—“To the further improvement of Tooling, and thanks to the Committee for their services.”

Mr. L., on behalf of the Committee who had reported on that subject, returned thanks. He made an interesting extract from the report, by which it

3. The great Jewish historian of the 1st century A.D., author of *The Jewish War* and *Antiquities of the Jews*. In the latter book he relates the murder of Jonathan the high priest (“Pontifex Maximus”) dur-

ing the “paschal feast,” or Passover.

4. Regular army.

5. The Roman Procurator in Palestine, A.D. 60–62.

appeared how very much stress had been laid formerly on the mode of tooling by the Fathers, both Greek and Latin. In confirmation of this pleasing fact, he made a very striking statement in reference to the earliest work of antediluvian art. Father Mersenne,<sup>6</sup> that learned French Roman Catholic, in page one thousand four hundred and thirty-one of his operose Commentary on Genesis, mentions, on the authority of several rabbis, that the quarrel of Cain with Abel was about a young woman; that, according to various accounts, Cain had tooled with his teeth (*Abelem fuisse morsibus dilaceratum a Cain*<sup>7</sup>); according to many others, with the jawbone of an ass—which is the tooling adopted by most painters. But it is pleasing to the mind of sensibility to know that, as science expanded, sounder views were adopted. One author contends for a pitchfork, St. Chrysostom for a sword, Irenaeus for a scythe, and Prudentius, the Christian poet of the fourth century, for a hedging-bill.<sup>8</sup> This last writer delivers his opinion thus:

*Frater, probatae sanctitatis aemulus,  
Germana curvo colla frangit sarculo:*

i. e., “his brother, jealous of his attested sanctity, fractures his fraternal throat with a curved hedging-bill.” “All which is respectfully submitted by your Committee, not so much as decisive of the question (for it is not), but in order to impress upon the youthful mind the importance which has ever been attached to the quality of the tooling by such men as Chrysostom and Irenaeus.”

“Irenaeus be hanged!” said Toad-in-the-hole, who now rose impatiently to give the next toast: “Our Irish friends; wishing them a speedy revolution in their mode of tooling, as well as in everything else connected with the art!

“Gentlemen, I’ll tell you the plain truth. Every day of the year when we take up a paper we read the opening of a murder. We say, This is good, this is charming, this is excellent! But, behold you! scarcely have we read a little farther before the word Tipperary or Ballina-something betrays the Irish manufacture. Instantly we loathe it; we call to the waiter; we say, ‘Waiter, take away this paper; send it out of the house; it is absolutely a scandal in the nostrils of all just taste.’ I appeal to every man whether, on finding a murder (otherwise perhaps promising enough) to be Irish, he does not feel himself as much insulted as when, Madeira being ordered, he finds it to be Cape,<sup>9</sup> or when, taking up what he takes to be a mushroom, it turns out what children call a toadstool? Tithes, politics, something wrong in principle, vitiate every Irish murder. Gentlemen, this must be reformed, or Ireland will not be a land to live in; at least, if we do live there, we must import all our murders, that’s clear.” Toad-in-the-hole sat down, growling with suppressed wrath; and the uproarious “Hear, hear!” clamorously expressed the general concurrence.

The next toast was—“The sublime epoch of Burkism and Harism!”

This was drunk with enthusiasm; and one of the members who spoke to the question made a very curious communication to the company: “Gentlemen, we fancy Burkism to be a pure invention of our own times; and in fact no Pancirolus has ever enumerated this branch of art when writing *de rebus deperditis*.<sup>1</sup> Still, I have ascertained that the essential principle of this variety in the art was

6. A monk who wrote a commentary on Genesis in 1623.

7. “That Abel had been torn to pieces by Cain *with his teeth*.”

8. A hedge-pruner, consisting of a hooked blade at

the end of a staff.

9. I. e., cheap Cape Colony wine.

1. Guido Pancirolus was the 16th-century Italian author of a work “On Lost Arts and Inventions.”

known to the ancients; although, like the art of painting upon glass, of making the myrrhine cups,<sup>2</sup> etc., it was lost in the dark ages for want of encouragement. In the famous collection of Greek epigrams made by Planudes<sup>3</sup> is one upon a very fascinating case of Burkism: it is a perfect little gem of art. The epigram itself I cannot lay my hand upon at this moment; but the following is an abstract of it by Salmasius,<sup>4</sup> as I find it in his notes on Vopiscus: '*Est et elegans epigramma Lucilii, ubi medicus et pollinctor de compacto sic egerunt ut medicus aegros omnes curae suae commissos occideret.*'<sup>5</sup> This was the basis of the contract, you see—that on the one part the doctor, for himself and his assigns, doth undertake and contract duly and truly to murder all the patients committed to his charge: but why? There lies the beauty of the case—'*Et ut pollinctori amico suo traderet pollingendos.*'<sup>6</sup> The *pollinctor*, you are aware, was a person whose business it was to dress and prepare dead bodies for burial. The original ground of the transaction appears to have been sentimental: 'He was my friend,' says the murderous doctor—'he was dear to me'—in speaking of the pollinctor. But the law, gentlemen, is stern and harsh: the law will not hear of these tender motives: to sustain a contract of this nature in law, it is essential that a 'consideration' should be given. Now, what *was* the consideration? For thus far all is on the side of the pollinctor: he will be well paid for his services; but meantime the generous, the noble-minded doctor gets nothing. What *was* the equivalent, again I ask, which the law would insist on the doctor's taking, in order to establish that 'consideration' without which the contract had no force? You shall hear: '*Et ut pollinctor vicissim τελαμῶνας quos furabatur de pollinctione mortuorum medico mitteret donis ad alliganda vulnera eorum quos curabat*'; i.e., 'and that reciprocally the pollinctor should transmit to the physician, as free gifts for the binding up of wounds in those whom he treated medically, the belts or trusses (τελαμῶνας) which he had succeeded in purloining in the course of his functions about the corpses.'

"Now the case is clear: the whole went on a principle of reciprocity which would have kept up the trade forever. The doctor was also a surgeon: he could not murder *all* his patients: some of the patients must be retained intact. For these he wanted linen bandages. But, unhappily, the Romans wore woolen; on which account it was that they bathed so often. Meantime, there *was* linen to be had in Rome; but it was monstrously dear; and the τελαμῶνες, or linen swathing bandages, in which superstition obliged them to bind up corpses, would answer capitally for the surgeon. The doctor, therefore, contracts to furnish his friend with a constant succession of corpses—provided, and be it understood always, that his said friend, in return, should supply him with one-half of the articles he should receive from the friends of the parties murdered or to be murdered. The doctor invariably recommended his invaluable friend the pollinctor (whom let us call the undertaker); the undertaker, with equal regard to the sacred rights of friendship, uniformly recommended the doctor. Like Pylades and Orestes,<sup>7</sup> they were models of a perfect friendship: in their lives they were lovely; and on the gallows, it is to be hoped, they were not divided.

"Gentlemen, it makes me laugh horribly when I think of those two friends

2. Precious cups made by the Romans from a stone called "murra."

3. Byzantine monk of the 14th century.

4. The great French classical scholar of the 17th century. Vopiscus, in the 4th century, was the author of lives of the Roman emperors.

5. "That is also a fine epigram of Lucilius, in which a doctor and an undertaker by agreement so

arrange that the doctor shall kill all the sick committed to his care."

6. "And that he shall turn them over to his friend the undertaker to be prepared for the funeral."

7. Orestes, hero of the *Oresteia*, killed his mother, Clytemnestra, in revenge for her murder of his father, Agamemnon. The friendship of Pylades and Orestes was proverbial.

drawing and redrawing on each other: 'Pollinctor in account with Doctor, debtor by sixteen corpses: creditor by forty-five bandages, two of which damaged.' Their names unfortunately are lost; but I conceive they must have been Quintus Burkius and Publius Harius. By the way, gentlemen, has anybody heard lately of Hare? I understand he is comfortably settled in Ireland, considerably to the west, and does a little business now and then; but, as he observes with a sigh, only as a retailer—nothing like the fine thriving wholesale concern so carelessly blown up at Edinburgh. 'You see what comes of neglecting business'—is the chief moral, the ἐπιμύθιον, as Aesop would say, which Hare draws from his past experience."

At length came the toast of the day—*Thugdom in all its branches*.

The speeches *attempted* at this crisis of the dinner were past all counting. But the applause was so furious, the music so stormy, and the crashing of glasses so incessant, from the general resolution never again to drink an inferior toast from the same glass, that I am unequal to the task of reporting. Besides which, Toad-in-the-hole now became ungovernable. He kept firing pistols in every direction; sent his servant for a blunderbuss, and talked of loading with ball-cartridge. We conceived that his former madness had returned at the mention of Burke and Hare; or that, being again weary of life, he had resolved to go off in a general massacre. This we could not think of allowing; it became indispensable, therefore, to kick him out; which we did with universal consent, the whole company lending their toes *uno pede*,<sup>8</sup> as I may say, though pitying his gray hairs and his angelic smile. During the operation the orchestra poured in their old chorus. The universal company sang, and (what surprised us most of all) Toad-in-the-hole joined us furiously in singing—

*Et interrogatum est ab omnibus—Ubi est ille Toad-in-the-Hole?*  
*Et responsum est ab omnibus—Non est inventus.*

1839

## From The English Mail Coach<sup>1</sup>

### From II. *The Vision of Sudden Death*<sup>2</sup>

\* \* \* On this occasion the usual silence and solitude prevailed along the road. Not a hoof nor a wheel was to be heard. And, to strengthen this false lux-

8. As with a single foot.

1. The three essays joined under this title were first published anonymously in *Blackwood's Magazine* for 1849. *The Glory of Motion* gave an account of the fast English coaches which carried both passengers and mail; it emphasized their function in disseminating military news, especially that of the great victory over Napoleon at Waterloo. *The Vision of Sudden Death*, partly reproduced here, describes De Quincey's experience of a near accident. *Dream-Fugue*, reprinted in its entirety, treats this incident as it entered into De Quincey's dreams of terror.

A fugue is a musical composition in which a theme, or "subject," is introduced successively by various voices and then developed in contrapuntal fashion. When he reprinted these essays in his "Collective Edition" (1854), De Quincey undertook to explain the "logic" of his composition for the perplexed critics of his day. He pointed out that

the whole of the *Dream-Fugue* "radiates as a natural expansion" of *The Vision of Sudden Death*: "So far as I know, every element in the shifting movements of the Dream derived itself either primarily from the incidents of the actual scene, or from secondary features associated with the mail."

The structure of this essay, though its materials are no doubt derived, as De Quincey says, from his dreams, does not simply reproduce these dreams. Instead, the essay states a thematic subject and then enriches, varies, and develops it until it reaches a grand climax which incorporates the Christian pattern of death, grace, and resurrection. De Quincey was attempting in prose what T. S. Eliot, in *Four Quartets*, was to attempt a century later in verse—the adaptation of a musical form to a literary medium of expression.

2. In the first part of this essay, De Quincey has described his situation as a lone passenger on the

urious confidence in the noiseless roads, it happened also that the night was one of peculiar solemnity and peace. For my own part, though slightly alive to the possibilities of peril, I had so far yielded to the influence of the mighty calm as to sink into a profound reverie. The month was August; in the middle of which lay my own birthday—a festival to every thoughtful man suggesting solemn and often sigh-born thoughts. The county was my own native county—upon which, in its southern section, more than upon any equal area known to man past or present, had descended the original curse of labor in its heaviest form, not mastering the bodies only of men, as of slaves, or criminals in mines, but working through the fiery will. Upon no equal space of earth was, or ever had been, the same energy of human power put forth daily. At this particular season also of the assizes,<sup>3</sup> that dreadful hurricane of flight and pursuit, as it might have seemed to a stranger, which swept to and from Lancaster all day long, hunting the county up and down, and regularly subsiding back into silence about sunset, could not fail (when united with this permanent distinction of Lancashire as the very metropolis and citadel of labor) to point the thoughts pathetically upon that counter-vision of rest, of saintly repose from strife and sorrow, towards which, as to their secret haven, the profounder aspirations of man's heart are in solitude continually traveling. Obliquely upon our left we were nearing the sea; which also must, under the present circumstances, be repeating the general state of halcyon repose. The sea, the atmosphere, the light, bore each an orchestral part in this universal lull. Moonlight and the first timid tremblings of the dawn were by this time blending; and the blendings were brought into a still more exquisite state of unity by a slight silvery mist, motionless and dreamy, that covered the woods and fields, but with a veil of equable transparency. Except the feet of our own horses—which, running on a sandy margin of the road, made but little disturbance—there was no sound abroad. In the clouds and on the earth prevailed the same majestic peace; and, in spite of all that the villain of a schoolmaster has done for the ruin of our sublimer thoughts, which are the thoughts of our infancy, we still believe in no such nonsense as a limited atmosphere. Whatever we may swear with our false feigning lips, in our faithful hearts we still believe, and must forever believe, in fields of air traversing the total gulf between earth and the central heavens. Still, in the confidence of children that tread without fear *every* chamber in their father's house, and to whom no door is closed, we, in that Sabbatic vision which sometimes is revealed for an hour upon nights like this, ascend with easy steps from the sorrow-stricken fields of earth upwards to the sandals of God.

Suddenly, from thoughts like these I was awakened to a sullen sound, as of some motion on the distant road. It stole upon the air for a moment; I listened in awe; but then it died away. Once roused, however, I could not but observe with alarm the quickened motion of our horses. Ten years' experience had made my eye learned in the valuing of motion; and I saw that we were now running thirteen miles an hour. I pretend to no presence of mind. On the contrary, my fear is that I am miserably and shamefully deficient in that quality as regards action. The palsy of doubt and distraction hangs like some guilty weight of dark unfathomed remembrances upon my energies when the signal is flying for

top of the mail coach from Manchester to Glasgow on a summer night two or three years after the Battle of Waterloo. To relieve his fatigue he takes a dose of opium and sinks "into a profound reverie"; the one-eyed coachman drowns off; the great

coach rushes on unguided through the extraordinarily peaceful night.

3. The sessions of the superior courts in each of the English counties.

*action*. But, on the other hand, this accursed gift I have, as regards *thought*, that in the first step towards the possibility of a misfortune I see its total evolution; in the radix<sup>4</sup> of the series I see too certainly and too instantly its entire expansion; in the first syllable of the dreadful sentence I read already the last. It was not that I feared for ourselves. *Us* our bulk and impetus charmed against peril in any collision. And I had ridden through too many hundreds of perils that were frightful to approach, that were matter of laughter to look back upon, the first face of which was horror, the parting face a jest—for any anxiety to rest upon *our* interests. The mail was not built, I felt assured, nor bespoke, that could betray *me* who trusted to its protection. But any carriage that we could meet would be frail and light in comparison of ourselves. And I remarked this ominous accident of our situation—we were on the wrong side of the road. But then, it may be said, the other party, if other there was, might also be on the wrong side; and two wrongs might make a right. *That* was not likely. The same motive which had drawn *us* to the right-hand side of the road—viz., the luxury of the soft beaten sand as contrasted with the paved center—would prove attractive to others. The two adverse carriages would therefore, to a certainty, be traveling on the same side; and from this side, as not being ours in law, the crossing over to the other would, of course, be looked for from *us*. Our lamps, still lighted, would give the impression of vigilance on our part. And every creature that met us would rely upon *us* for quartering.<sup>5</sup> All this, and if the separate links of the anticipation had been a thousand times more, I saw, not discursively, or by effort, or by succession, but by one flash of horrid simultaneous intuition.

Under this steady though rapid anticipation of the evil which *might* be gathering ahead, ah! what a sullen mystery of fear, what a sigh of woe, was that which stole upon the air, as again the far-off sound of a wheel was heard! A whisper it was—a whisper from, perhaps, four miles off—secretly announcing a ruin that, being foreseen, was not the less inevitable; that, being known, was not therefore healed. What could be done—who was it that could do it—to check the storm-flight of these maniacal horses? Could I not seize the reins from the grasp of the slumbering coachman? You, reader, think that it would have been in *your* power to do so. And I quarrel not with your estimate of yourself. But, from the way in which the coachman's hand was vised between his upper and lower thigh, this was impossible. Easy was it? See, then, that bronze equestrian statue. The cruel rider has kept the bit in his horse's mouth for two centuries. Unbridle him for a minute, if you please, and wash his mouth with water. Easy was it? Unhorse me, then, that imperial rider; knock me those marble feet from those marble stirrups of Charlemagne.

The sounds ahead strengthened, and were now too clearly the sounds of wheels. Who and what could it be? Was it industry in a taxed cart? Was it youthful gaiety in a gig?<sup>6</sup> Was it sorrow that loitered, or joy that raced? For as yet the snatches of sound were too intermitting, from distance, to decipher the character of the motion. Whoever were the travelers, something must be done to warn them. Upon the other party rests the active responsibility, but upon *us*—and, woe is me! that *us* was reduced to my frail opium-shattered self—rests the responsibility of warning. Yet, how should this be accomplished? Might I not sound the guard's horn? Already, on the first thought, I was making my way over the roof to the guard's seat. But this, from the accident which I have

4. Root; here used in its mathematical sense, as the basic number of a numerical system.

5. I.e., pulling aside in order to yield the right of way.

6. A small two-wheeled carriage, drawn by one horse.

mentioned, of the foreign mails being piled upon the roof, was a difficult and even dangerous attempt to one cramped by nearly three hundred miles of outside traveling. And, fortunately, before I had lost much time in the attempt, our frantic horses swept round an angle of the road which opened upon us that final stage where the collision must be accomplished and the catastrophe sealed. All was apparently finished. The court was sitting; the case was heard; the judge had finished; and only the verdict was yet in arrears.

Before us lay an avenue straight as an arrow, six hundred yards, perhaps, in length; and the umbrageous trees, which rose in a regular line from either side, meeting high overhead, gave to it the character of a cathedral aisle. These trees lent a deeper solemnity to the early light; but there was still light enough to perceive; at the farther end of this Gothic aisle, a frail reedy gig, in which were seated a young man, and by his side a young lady. Ah, young sir! what are you about? If it is requisite that you should whisper your communications to this young lady—though really I see nobody, at an hour and on a road so solitary, likely to overhear you—is it therefore requisite that you should carry your lips forward to hers? The little carriage is creeping on at one mile an hour; and the parties within it, being thus tenderly engaged, are naturally bending down their heads. Between them and eternity, to all human calculation, there is but a minute and a half. Oh heavens! what is it that I shall do? Speaking or acting, what help can I offer? Strange it is, and to a mere auditor of the tale might seem laughable, that I should need a suggestion from the *Iliad* to prompt the sole resource that remained. Yet so it was. Suddenly I remembered the shout of Achilles, and its effect.<sup>7</sup> But could I pretend to shout like the son of Peleus, aided by Pallas? No: but then I needed not the shout that should alarm all Asia militant; such a shout would suffice as might carry terror into the hearts of two thoughtless young people and one gig-horse. I shouted—and the young man heard me not. A second time I shouted—and now he heard me, for now he raised his head.

Here, then, all had been done that, by me, *could* be done; more on *my* part was not possible. Mine had been the first step; the second was for the young man; the third was for God. If, said I, this stranger is a brave man, and if indeed he loves the young girl at his side—or, loving her not, if he feels the obligation, pressing upon every man worthy to be called a man, of doing his utmost for a woman confided to his protection—he will at least make some effort to save her. If *that* fails, he will not perish the more, or by a death more cruel, for having made it; and he will die as a brave man should, with his face to the danger, and with his arm about the woman that he sought in vain to save. But, if he makes no effort, shrinking without a struggle from his duty, he himself will not the less certainly perish for this baseness of poltroonery. He will die no less: and why not? Wherefore should we grieve that there is one craven less in the world? No; *let* him perish, without a pitying thought of ours wasted upon him; and, in that case, all our grief will be reserved for the fate of the helpless girl who now, upon the least shadow of failure in *him*, must by the fiercest of translations—must without time for a prayer—must within seventy seconds—stand before the judgment seat of God.

But craven he was not: sudden had been the call upon him, and sudden was his answer to the call. He saw, he heard, he comprehended, the ruin that was coming down: already its gloomy shadow darkened above him; and already he was measuring his strength to deal with it. Ah! what a vulgar thing does courage seem

7. In *Iliad* XVIII the unarmed Achilles, aided by the voice of Pallas Athena, shouts so loudly that he

frightens the Trojans away from the corpse of his friend Patroclus.

when we see nations buying it and selling it for a shilling a day:<sup>8</sup> ah! what a sublime thing does courage seem when some fearful summons on the great deeps of life carries a man, as if running before a hurricane, up to the giddy crest of some tumultuous crisis from which lie two courses, and a voice says to him audibly, "One way lies hope; take the other, and mourn forever!" How grand a triumph if, even then, amidst the raving of all around him, and the frenzy of the danger, the man is able to confront his situation—is able to retire for a moment into solitude with God, and to seek his counsel from *Him!*

For seven seconds, it might be, of his seventy, the stranger settled his countenance steadfastly upon us, as if to search and value every element in the conflict before him. For five seconds more of his seventy he sat immovably, like one that mused on some great purpose. For five more, perhaps, he sat with eyes upraised, like one that prayed in sorrow, under some extremity of doubt, for light that should guide him to the better choice. Then suddenly he rose; stood upright; and, by a powerful strain upon the reins, raising his horse's forefeet from the ground, he slewed him round on the pivot of his hind legs, so as to plant the little equipage in a position nearly at right angles to ours. Thus far his condition was not improved; except as a first step had been taken towards the possibility of a second. If no more were done, nothing was done; for the little carriage still occupied the very center of our path, though in an altered direction. Yet even now it may not be too late: fifteen of the seventy seconds may still be unexhausted; and one almighty bound may avail to clear the ground. Hurry, then, hurry! for the flying moments—*they* hurry. Oh, hurry, hurry, my brave young man! for the cruel hoofs of our horses—*they* also hurry! Fast are the flying moments, faster are the hoofs of our horses. But fear not for *him*, if human energy can suffice; faithful was he that drove to his terrific duty; faithful was the horse to *his* command. One blow, one impulse given with voice and hand, by the stranger, one rush from the horse, one bound as if in the act of rising to a fence, landed the docile creature's forefeet upon the crown or arching center of the road. The larger half of the little equipage had then cleared our over-towering shadow: *that* was evident even to my own agitated sight. But it mattered little that one wreck should float off in safety if upon the wreck that perished were embarked the human freightage. The rear part of the carriage—was *that* certainly beyond the line of absolute ruin? What power could answer the question? Glance of eye, thought of man, wing of angel, which of these had speed enough to sweep between the question and the answer, and divide the one from the other? Light does not tread upon the steps of light more indivisibly than did our all-conquering arrival upon the escaping efforts of the gig. *That* must the young man have felt too plainly. His back was now turned to us; not by sight could he any longer communicate with the peril; but, by the dreadful rattle of our hardness, too truly had his ear been instructed that all was finished as regarded any effort of *his*. Already in resignation he had rested from his struggle; and perhaps in his heart he was whispering, "Father, which art in heaven, do Thou finish above what I on earth have attempted." Faster than ever millrace we ran past them in our inexorable flight. Oh, raving of hurricanes that must have sounded in their young ears at the moment of our transit! Even in that moment the thunder of collision spoke aloud. Either with the swingle-bar,<sup>9</sup> or with the haunch of our near leader, we had struck the off wheel of the little gig; which stood rather obliquely, and not quite so far

8. The daily pay of the English soldier.

9. The swinging bar to which the traces of a harness are fastened.

advanced as to be accurately parallel with the nearwheel. The blow, from the fury of our passage, resounded terrifically. I rose in horror, to gaze upon the ruins we might have caused. From my elevated station I looked down, and looked back upon the scene; which in a moment told its own tale, and wrote all its records on my heart forever.

Here was the map of the passion<sup>1</sup> that now had finished. The horse was planted immovably, with his forefeet upon the paved crest of the central road. He of the whole party might be supposed untouched by the passion of death. The little cany carriage—partly, perhaps, from the violent torsion of the wheels in its recent movement, partly from the thundering blow we had given to it—as if it sympathized with human horror, was all alive with tremblings and shiverings. The young man trembled not, nor shivered. He sat like a rock. But *his* was the steadiness of agitation frozen into rest by horror. As yet he dared not to look round; for he knew that, if anything remained to do, by him it could no longer be done. And as yet he knew not for certain if their safety were accomplished. But the lady—

But the lady—! Oh, heavens! will that spectacle ever depart from my dreams, as she rose and sank upon her seat, sank and rose, threw up her arms wildly to heaven, clutched at some visionary object in the air, fainting, praying, raving, despairing? Figure to yourself, reader, the elements of the case; suffer me to recall before your mind the circumstances of that unparalleled situation. From the silence and deep peace of this saintly summer night—from the pathetic blending of this sweet moonlight, dawnlight, dreamlight—from the manly tenderness of this flattering, whispering, murmuring love—suddenly as from the woods and fields—suddenly as from the chambers of the air opening in revelation—suddenly as from the ground yawning at her feet, leaped upon her, with the flashing of cataracts, Death the crowned phantom, with all the equipage of his terrors, and the tiger roar of his voice.

The moments were numbered; the strife was finished; the vision was closed. In the twinkling of an eye, our flying horses had carried us to the termination of the umbrageous aisle; at the right angles we wheeled into our former direction; the turn of the road carried the scene out of my eyes in an instant, and swept it into my dreams forever.

### III. *Dream-Fugue Founded on the Preceding Theme of Sudden Death*

*Whence the sound  
Of instruments, that made melodious chime,  
Was heard, of harp and organ; and who moved  
Their stops and chords was seen; his volant<sup>2</sup> touch  
Instinct through all proportions, low and high,  
Fled and pursued transverse the resonant fugue.*

PARADISE LOST XI. 558–63.

#### TUMULTUOSISSIMAMENTE<sup>1</sup>

Passion of sudden death! that once in youth I read and interpreted by the shadows of thy averted signs!<sup>2</sup>—rapture of panic taking the shape (which

1. In the old sense: suffering. De Quincey means to suggest Christ's passion on the cross, preparatory to the concluding section of the fugue.

2. Flying.

1. "Very tumultuously"—in imitation of a composer's instruction to the performer of a piece of

music.

2. In a note De Quincey reminds us that he interpreted the lady's agony from her gestures alone, "never once catching the lady's full face, and even her profile imperfectly."

amongst tombs in churches I have seen) of woman bursting her sepulchral bonds—of woman's Ionic<sup>3</sup> form bending forward from the ruins of her grave with arching foot, with eyes upraised, with clasped adoring hands—waiting, watching, trembling, praying for the trumpet's call to rise from dust forever! Ah, vision too fearful of shuddering humanity on the brink of almighty abysses!—vision that didst start back, that didst reel away, like a shriveling scroll from before the wrath of fire racing on the wings of the wind! Epilepsy so brief of horror, wherefore is it that thou canst not die? Passing so suddenly into darkness, wherefore is it that still thou sheddest thy sad funeral blights upon the gorgeous mosaics of dreams? Fragment of music too passionate, heard once, and heard no more, what aileth thee, that thy deep rolling chords come up at intervals through all the worlds of sleep, and after forty years have lost no element of horror?

## 1

Lo, it is summer—almighty summer! The everlasting gates of life and summer are thrown open wide; and on the ocean, tranquil and verdant as a savannah, the unknown lady from the dreadful vision and I myself are floating—she upon a fairy pinnacle,<sup>4</sup> and I upon an English three-decker. Both of us are wooing gales of festal happiness within the domain of our common country, within that ancient watery park, within the pathless chase of ocean, where England takes her pleasure as a huntress through winter and summer, from the rising to the setting sun. Ah, what a wilderness of floral beauty was hidden, or was suddenly revealed, upon the tropic islands through which the pinnacle moved! And upon her deck what a bevy of human flowers: young women how lovely, young men how noble, that were dancing together, and slowly drifting towards *us* amidst music and incense, amidst blossoms from forests and gorgeous corymbi<sup>5</sup> from vintages, amidst natural caroling, and the echoes of sweet girlish laughter. Slowly the pinnacle nears us, gaily she hails us, and silently she disappears beneath the shadow of our mighty bows. But then, as at some signal from heaven, the music, and the carols, and the sweet echoing of girlish laughter—all are hushed. What evil has smitten the pinnacle, meeting or overtaking her? Did ruin to our friends couch within our own dreadful shadow? Was our shadow the shadow of death? I looked over the bow for an answer, and, behold! the pinnacle was dismantled; the revel and the revelers were found no more; the glory of the vintage was dust; and the forests with their beauty were left without a witness upon the seas. "But where," and I turned to our crew—"where are the lovely women that danced beneath the awning of flowers and clustering corymbi? Whither have fled the noble young men that danced with *them*?" Answer there was none. But suddenly the man at the masthead, whose countenance darkened with alarm, cried out, "Sail on the weather beam!<sup>6</sup> Down she comes upon us: in seventy seconds she also will founder."

## 2

I looked to the weather side, and the summer had departed. The sea was rocking, and shaken with gathering wrath. Upon its surface sat mighty mists, which grouped themselves into arches and long cathedral aisles. Down one of

3. Graceful; from the Greek Ionic column, which is more graceful and feminine than the heavier Doric.

4. A light sailing vessel.

5. Clusters of grapes or other fruits.

6. To windward, at right angles to the ship.

these, with the fiery pace of a quarrel<sup>7</sup> from a crossbow, ran a frigate right athwart our course. "Are they mad?" some voice exclaimed from our deck. "Do they woo their ruin?" But in a moment, as she was close upon us, some impulse of a heady current<sup>8</sup> or local vortex gave a wheeling bias to her course, and off she forged without a shock. As she ran past us, high aloft amongst the shrouds<sup>9</sup> stood the lady of the pinnacle. The deeps opened ahead in malice to receive her, towering surges of foam ran after her, the billows were fierce to catch her. But far away she was borne into desert spaces of the sea: whilst still by sight I followed her, as she ran before the howling gale, chased by angry sea birds and by maddening billows; still I saw her, as at the moment when she ran past us, standing amongst the shrouds, with her white draperies streaming before the wind. There she stood, with hair disheveled, one hand clutched amongst the tackling—rising, sinking, fluttering, trembling, praying; there for leagues I saw her as she stood, raising at intervals one hand to heaven, amidst the fiery crests of the pursuing waves and the raving of the storm; until at last, upon a sound from afar of malicious laughter and mockery, all was hidden forever in driving showers; and afterwards, but when I know not, nor how,

## 3

Sweet funeral bells from some incalculable distance, wailing over the dead that die before the dawn, awakened me as I slept in a boat moored to some familiar shore. The morning twilight even then was breaking; and, by the dusky revelations which it spread, I saw a girl, adorned with a garland of white roses about her head for some great festival, running along the solitary strand in extremity of haste. Her running was the running of panic; and often she looked back as to some dreadful enemy in the rear. But, when I leaped ashore, and followed on her steps to warn her of a peril in front, alas! from me she fled as from another peril, and vainly I shouted to her of quicksands that lay ahead. Faster and faster she ran; round a promontory of rocks she wheeled out of sight; in an instant I also wheeled round it, but only to see the treacherous sands gathering above her head. Already her person was buried; only the fair young head and the diadem of white roses around it were still visible to the pitying heavens; and, last of all, was visible one white marble arm. I saw by the early twilight this fair young head, as it was sinking down to darkness—saw this marble arm, as it rose above her head and her treacherous grave, tossing, faltering, rising, clutching, as at some false deceiving hand stretched out from the clouds—saw this marble arm uttering her dying hope, and then uttering her dying despair. The head, the diadem, the arm—these all had sunk; at last over these also the cruel quicksand had closed; and no memorial of the fair young girl remained on earth, except my own solitary tears, and the funeral bells from the desert seas, that, rising again more softly, sang a requiem over the grave of the buried child, and over her blighted dawn.

I sat, and wept in secret the tears that men have ever given to the memory of those that died before the dawn, and by the treachery of earth, our mother. But suddenly the tears and funeral bells were hushed by a shout as of many nations, and by a roar as from some great king's artillery, advancing rapidly along the valleys, and heard afar by echoes from the mountains. "Hush!" I said, as I bent my ear earthwards to listen—"hush!—this either is the very anarchy of strife, or

7. The square-headed arrow for a crossbow.

8. A current directly opposed to a ship's course.

9. The ropes attached to the top of a mast which help to support it.

else”—and then I listened more profoundly, and whispered as I raised my head—“or else, oh heavens! it is *victory* that is final, victory that swallows up all strife.”

## 4

Immediately, in trance, I was carried over land and sea to some distant kingdom, and placed upon a triumphal car, amongst companions crowned with laurel. The darkness of gathering midnight, brooding over all the land, hid from us the mighty crowds that were weaving restlessly about ourselves as a center: we heard them, but saw them not. Tidings had arrived, within an hour, of a grandeur that measured itself against centuries; too full of pathos they were, too full of joy, to utter themselves by other language than by tears, by restless anthems, and *Te Deums*<sup>1</sup> reverberated from the choirs and orchestras of earth. These tidings we that sat upon the laureled car had it for our privilege to publish amongst all nations. And already, by signs audible through the darkness, by snortings and tramlings, our angry horses, that knew no fear of fleshly weariness, upbraided us with delay. Wherefore *was* it that we delayed? We waited for a secret word, that should bear witness to the hope of nations as now accomplished for ever. At midnight the secret word arrived; which word was—*Waterloo and Recovered Christendom!* The dreadful word shone by its own light; before us it went; high above our leaders' heads it rode, and spread a golden light over the paths which we traversed. Every city, at the presence of the secret word, threw open its gates. The rivers were conscious as we crossed. All the forests, as we ran along their margins, shivered in homage to the secret word. And the darkness comprehended it.<sup>2</sup>

Two hours after midnight we approached a mighty Minster.<sup>3</sup> Its gates, which rose to the clouds, were closed. But, when the dreadful word that rode before us reached them with its golden light, silently they moved back upon their hinges; and at a flying gallop our equipage entered the grand aisle of the cathedral. Headlong was our pace; and at every altar, in the little chapels and oratories to the right hand and left of our course, the lamps, dying or sickening, kindled anew in sympathy with the secret word that was flying past. Forty leagues we might have run in the cathedral, and as yet no strength of morning light had reached us, when before us we saw the aerial galleries of organ and choir. Every pinnacle of the fretwork, every station of advantage amongst the traceries, was crested by white-robed choristers that sang deliverance; that wept no more tears, as once their fathers had wept; but at intervals that sang together to the generations, saying,

Chant the deliverer's praise in every tongue,

and receiving answers from afar,

Such as once in heaven and earth were sung.

And of their chanting was no end; of our headlong pace was neither pause nor slackening.

Thus as we ran like torrents—thus as we swept with bridal rapture over the Campo Santo<sup>4</sup> of the cathedral graves—suddenly we became aware of a vast

1. From the hymn, *Te Deum laudamus*, “We praise thee, O God.”

2. An echo from John 1:5.

3. A large church.

4. “Holy Field”—i.e., the cemetery. In a note De Quincey points out that the graves within English cathedrals “often form a flat pavement over which carriages and horses *might* run.”

necropolis rising upon the far-off horizon—a city of sepulchers, built within the saintly cathedral for the warrior dead that rested from their feuds on earth. Of purple granite was the necropolis; yet, in the first minute, it lay like a purple stain upon the horizon, so mighty was the distance. In the second minute it trembled through many changes, growing into terraces and towers of wondrous altitude, so mighty was the pace. In the third minute already, with our dreadful gallop, we were entering its suburbs. Vast sarcophagi rose on every side, having towers and turrets that, upon the limits of the central aisle, strode forward with haughty intrusion, that ran back with mighty shadows into answering recesses. Every sarcophagus showed many bas-reliefs<sup>5</sup>—bas-reliefs of battles and of battlefields; battles from forgotten ages, battles from yesterday; battlefields that, long since, nature had healed and reconciled to herself with the sweet oblivion of flowers; battlefields that were yet angry and crimson with carnage. Where the terraces ran, there did *we* run; where the towers curved, there did *we* curve. With the flight of swallows our horses swept round every angle. Like rivers in flood wheeling round headlands, like hurricanes that ride into the secrets of forests, faster than ever light unwove the mazes of darkness, our flying equipage carried earthly passions, kindled warrior instincts, amongst the dust that lay around us—dust oftentimes of our noble fathers that had slept in God from Crécy to Trafalgar.<sup>6</sup> And now had we reached the last sarcophagus, now were we abreast of the last bas-relief, already had we recovered the arrow-like flight of the illimitable central aisle, when coming up this aisle to meet us we beheld afar off a female child, that rode in a carriage as frail as flowers. The mists which went before her hid the fawns that drew her, but could not hide the shells and tropic flowers with which she played—but could not hide the lovely smiles by which she uttered her trust in the mighty cathedral, and in the cherubim that looked down upon her from the mighty shafts of its pillars. Face to face she was meeting us; face to face she rode, as if danger there were none. “Oh, baby!” I exclaimed, “shalt thou be the ransom for Waterloo? Must we, that carry tidings of great joy to every people, be messengers of ruin to thee!” In horror I rose at the thought; but then also, in horror at the thought, rose one that was sculptured on a bas-relief—a Dying Trumpeter. Solemnly from the field of battle he rose to his feet; and, unslinging his stony trumpet, carried it, in his dying anguish, to his stony lips—sounding once, and yet once again; proclamation that, in *thy* ears, oh baby! spoke from the battlements of death. Immediately deep shadows fell between us, and aboriginal silence. The choir had ceased to sing. The hoofs of our horses, the dreadful rattle of our harness, the groaning of our wheels, alarmed the graves no more. By horror the bas-relief had been unlocked unto life. By horror we, that were so full of life, we men and our horses, with their fiery forelegs rising in mid air to their everlasting gallop, were frozen to a bas-relief. Then a third time the trumpet sounded; the seals were taken off all pulses; life, and the frenzy of life, tore into their channels again; again the choir burst forth in sunny grandeur, as from the muffling of storms and darkness; again the thunderings of our horses carried temptation into the graves. One cry burst from our lips, as the clouds, drawing off from the aisle, showed it empty before us—“Whither has the infant fled?—is the young child caught up to God?” Lo! afar off, in a vast recess, rose three mighty windows to the clouds; and on a level with their summits, at height insuperable to man, rose an altar of purest alabaster. On its eastern face was

5. “Low reliefs”: sculptured figures projecting from a background.

6. Crécy, France, was in 1346 the scene of the vic-

tory over the French knights by the English archers under Edward III; at Trafalgar Cape, off the coast of Spain, Nelson in 1805 destroyed Napoleon’s fleet.

trembling a crimson glory. A glory was it from the reddening dawn that now streamed *through* the windows? Was it from the crimson robes of the martyrs painted *on* the windows? Was it from the bloody bas-reliefs of earth? There, suddenly, within that crimson radiance, rose the apparition of a woman's head, and then of a woman's figure. The child it was—grown up to woman's height. Clinging to the horns of the altar, voiceless she stood—sinking, rising, raving, despairing; and behind the volume of incense that, night and day, streamed upwards from the altar, dimly was seen the fiery font, and the shadow of that dreadful being who should have baptized her with the baptism of death. But by her side was kneeling her better angel, that hid his face with wings; that wept and pleaded for *her*; that prayed when *she* could *not*; that fought with Heaven by tears for *her* deliverance; which also, as he raised his immortal countenance from his wings, I saw, by the glory in his eye, that from Heaven he had won at last.

## 5

Then was completed the passion of the mighty fugue. The golden tubes of the organ, which as yet had but muttered at intervals—gleaming amongst clouds and surges of incense—threw up, as from fountains unfathomable, columns of heart-shattering music. Choir and anti-choir were filling fast with unknown voices. Thou also, Dying Trumpeter, with thy love that was victorious, and thy anguish that was finishing, didst enter the tumult; trumpet and echo—farewell love, and farewell anguish—rang through the dreadful sanctus.<sup>7</sup> Oh, darkness of the grave! that from the crimson altar and from the fiery font wert visited and searched by the effulgence in the angel's eyes—were these indeed thy children? Poms of life, that, from the burials of centuries, rose again to the voice of perfect joy, did ye indeed mingle with the festivals of Death? Lo! as I looked back for seventy leagues through the mighty cathedral, I saw the quick and the dead that sang together to God, together that sang to the generations of man. All the hosts of jubilation, like armies that ride in pursuit, moved with one step. Us, that, with laureled heads, were passing from the cathedral, they overtook, and, as with a garment, they wrapped us round with thunders greater than our own. As brothers we moved together; to the dawn that advanced, to the stars that fled; rendering thanks to God in the highest—that, having hid His face through one generation behind thick clouds of War, once again was ascending, from the Campo Santo of Waterloo was ascending, in the visions of Peace; rendering thanks for thee, young girl! whom having overshadowed with His ineffable passion of death, suddenly did God relent, suffered thy angel to turn aside His arm, and even in thee, sister unknown! shown to me for a moment only to be hidden forever, found an occasion to glorify His goodness. A thousand times, amongst the phantoms of sleep, have I seen thee entering the gates of the golden dawn, with the secret word riding before thee, with the armies of the grave behind thee, seen thee sinking, rising, raving, despairing; a thousand times in the worlds of sleep have seen thee followed by God's angel through storms, through desert seas, through the darkness of quicksands, through dreams and the dreadful revelations that are in dreams; only that at the last, with one sling of His victorious arm, He might snatch thee back from ruin, and might emblazon in thy deliverance the endless resurrections of His love!

1849

7. The last part of the Preface to the Mass (repeated thrice, "Holy, Holy, Holy").