THE LETTERS OF DE QUINCEY TO WORDSWORTH, 1803-1807

By Horace Ainsworth Eaton

The four letters which are printed in this article are all that remain of those which De Quincey wrote to Wordsworth before the two men met at Dove Cottage on November 4, 1807. Two more which are referred to in the correspondence have been lost.[1] The originals were up to the time of his death in the possession of Mr. Gordon Wordsworth, who some years ago gave me typewritten copies of them, made by himself, for use in my Life of De Quincey which the Oxford University Press is soon to publish. The first of the letters has been printed before,[2] but the other three are here given for the first time. The letters of Wordsworth are found in William Knight's edition of *The Wordsworth Family Letters*; and all but two—those of 1807—in more accurate form in *The Early Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth (1787-1805)* edited by Professor Ernest de Selincourt.

De Quincey's letters are the expression of an enthusiastic boy—he wrote the first before he had completed his eighteenth year—driven by admiration to address his poetical hero; yet shy and self-conscious. In spite of a stilted style and almost ludicrous adulation, they show a sincere longing for communication with his deity, born partly of unhappiness and intellectual loneliness.

At the moment when De Quincey wrote the first letter, he was spending some months at Everton, near Liverpool, with a Mrs. Best who let rooms, where he and his family on and off for a number of years spent a good deal of time.[3] He had been sent there by his mother in March, 1803, after the elopement from the Manchester Grammar School in the preceding July,

[1] For references to these see (a) *The Early Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth (1787-1805)*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, p. 373; and (b) *The Wordsworth Family Letters*, ed. William Knight, 3 vols., 1. 300. The first was written in early March, 1806; the second in April, 1807.

[2] *A Diary of Thomas De Quincey, Written in 1803*, ed. H. A. Eaton, p. 185. As there printed, it is taken from the draft for the letter which is in all respects identical with the original letter itself. In the Diary there is also an earlier draft dated May 13 (p. 167).

[3] *Diary*, p. 5 ff.

the wanderings in Wales, and the harrowing experiences in London of which he tells in the *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*. At the end of this long escapade he had returned to his mother's house, St. John's Priory (or, simply The Priory), more or less in disgrace; and while his mother and his other guardians were making up their minds as to his future educational career, he was sent to Everton to rusticate. There he marked time intellectually, reading only light literature, finding a few congenial friends, but for the most part feeling at loose ends and unhappy. He was planning to write—novels, dramas, criticism and poetry—but without any immediate success. He must have been haunted by memories of his sufferings and disappointments during the terrible London months, although he does not say so. He was, however, ambitious and eager to make the acquaintance of the men of letters whom he so deeply admired. It is with this background that the first letter to Wordsworth was composed.

LETTER 1

May 31, 1803.

Sir,

I suppose that most men would think what I am going to say[4] . . . strange at least or rude: but I am bold enough to imagine that, as you are not yourself "in the roll of common men", you may be willing to excuse anything uncommon in the liberty I am now taking.

My object in troubling you, Sir, is that hereafter I may have the satisfaction of recollecting that I made one effort at least for obtaining your notice . . . and that I did not, through any want of exertion on my own part, miss that without which what good can my life do me? I have no other motive for soliciting your friendship than what (I should think) every man, who has read and felt the "Lyrical Ballads" must have in common with me. There is no need that I should express my admiration and love for those delightful poems; nor is it possible that I should do so. Besides, I am persuaded that the dignity of your moral character sets you as far above the littleness of any vanity which could be soothed by applause feeble and insignificant as mine . . . as the transcendency of your genius makes all applause fall beneath it. But I may say in general, without the smallest exaggeration, that the whole aggregate of pleasure I have received from some eight or nine other poets

[4] The dots here and below in the De Quincey letters do not indicate omissions, but are in the original.

that I have been able to find since the world began . . . falls infinitely short of what those two enchanting volumes have singly afforded me;—that your name is with me for ever linked to the lovely scenes of nature;—and that not yourself only but that each place and object you have mentioned . . . and all souls in that delightful community of your's to me "Are dearer than the sun." With such opinions, it is not surprising that I should so earnestly and humbly sue for your friendship;—it is not surprising that the hope of that friendship should have sustained me through two years of a life passed partially in the world . . . and therefore not passed in happiness;—that I should have breathed forth my morning and my evening orisons for the accomplishment of that hope;—that I should now consider it as the only object worthy of my nature or capable of rewarding my pains. Sometimes indeed, in the sad and dreary vacuity of worldly intercourse, this hope will touch those chords that have power to rouse me from the lethargy of despair; and sometimes, from many painful circumstances—many many bitter recollections, it is my only refuge.

But my reasons for seeking your regard . . . it would be endless to recount and (I am afraid) useless; for I do not forget that the motives to any intimacy must be mutual; and alas! to me, unknown and unhonored as I am, why should anyone—the meanest of God's creatures—extend his friendship? What claim can I urge to a fellowship with a society such as yours . . . beaming (as it does) with genius so wild and so magnificent? I dare not say that I too have some spark of that heavenly fire which blazes there; for, if I have, it has not yet kindled and shone out in any exertion which only could entitle me to your notice. But, though I can show no positive pretensions to a gift so high, I may yet advance some few negative reasons why you may suffer me, if but at a distance, to buoy myself up with the idea that I am not wholly disregarded in your sight . . . when I say that my life has been passed chiefly in the contemplation and altogether in the worship of nature—that I am but a boy and have therefore formed no connection which could draw you one step farther from the sweet retreats of poetry to the detested haunts of men—that no one should ever dare, in confidence of any acquaintance you might have with me, to intrude on your hallowed solitude—and lastly that you would at any rate have an opportunity of offering to God the pleasant and grateful incense of a good deed by blessing the existence of a fellow creature. As to all external points, I believe that there is nothing in them which would disgrace you.

I cannot say anything more than that, though you may find many minds more congenial with your own, and therefore proportionably more worthy of your regard, you will never find any one more zealously attached to you—more full of admiration for your mental excellence and of reverential love for your moral charac-

ter—more ready (I speak from my heart) even to sacrifice his life . . . whenever it could have a chance of promoting your interest and happiness—than he who now bends the knee before you. And I will add that, to no man on earth except yourself and one other (a friend of yours),[5] would I thus lowly and suppliantly prostrate myself.

Dear Sir!
Yours for ever,
Thomas de Quincey

Mrs. Best's, Everton
near Liverpool.

The first letter to Wordsworth, because of the delay of Longman and Rees in forwarding it, was not received until July 27.[6] Wordsworth, however, replied promptly on July 29. He was evidently touched by the admiration of the lad at a time when he found praise none too abundant, and the answer was genuinely cordial. To be sure, De Quincey's petition for friendship was received with caution. "My friendship is not in my power to give," he wrote; ". . . A sound and healthy friendship is the growth of time and circumstance." But he did not refuse it. He also protested against the "unreasonable value" which De Quincey placed upon the *Lyrical Ballads*. "Sorry indeed should I be to stand in the way of the proper influence of other writers." Then Wordsworth went on to give De Quincey an invitation to visit him at Grasmere, an invitation repeated and stressed in a postscript. The response may well have warmed the heart of the young adorer.

A week after De Quincey received the reply he wrote the second letter, dated from Chester.

LETTER 2

Chester, August 6, 1803.

Dear Sir,

This is the first morning I have been completely at leisure since I received your letter, or it should not have remained unanswered until now. It is impossible to express how much I was delighted and surprised with it. To obtain that, which one has so long and ardently wished, at the very moment when one has ceased to expect it . . . is a happiness which falls to the lot of few men. Many

[5] Of course, Coleridge.
[6] *W. F. L.* 1.147; *Early Letters*, p. 332.

days before your letter arrived, I had given up almost every hope of having succeeded in my object;—one stay of hope still remained; and that, it appears, was well founded. But thoughts were continually rising to shake this; for I had doubted, before I wrote, whether I was not likely to offend you by obtruding myself on your notice; and afterwards I recollected that, from having written during a fit of languor and despondency, I had expressed myself in a tone of egotism which (I was afraid) might be disgusting. I had thus ceased to expect an answer; and yet I am sure that I felt no anger but only sorrow at being (as I then thought) neglected: I had spent many hours in devising other plans for compassing my point . . . and had at length determined to send some slight metrical trifles;—I thought of such a scheme however only when I despaired of succeeding by any other. At last, on Tuesday evening . . . when I hoped no longer (for it was the last evening of my stay in Everton), all my fears and schemes were put to flight by your kindness: I am utterly unable to express my deep sense of it; but I assure you, Sir, that, if you knew what great and lasting pleasure you have afforded me—how you have made me rise in my own estimation, you would think your purpose (or what I suppose to be a great part of your purpose) in writing to me . . . fully answered; for I know how much more of that favour I should attribute to your goodness than to any merit of my own.

When you say that you are kindly disposed towards me, you say a great deal more than I dared to expect. What foolish thing I said of friendship, I cannot now recollect: but, if (as I gather from your remarks on it) I asked for your friendship, I must have written without consulting my understanding;—to think only that my name should meet your eyes . . . was sufficient to animate me; and the marks of kindness you have already shewn me . . . are far above what, in my most sanguine moments, I looked for.

On the subject of poetry above all others, he must be a bold man that should venture to combat one opinion of your's; and certainly I am the last person in the world to think myself capable of maintaining even the shadow of an argument against what you have said on that point. I am not attempting therefore to justify . . . but only to explain myself in what I reply to that part of your letter where you express your concern at the very unreasonable value I "set upon your writings compared with those of others." Nothing, I am sure, was further from my intention than to breathe a syllable of disrespect against our elder poets;—from my youth up I have reverd them: Spenser—Shakespeare—Milton—Thomson (partially)—and Collins were the companions of my childhood: I well remember that it was Milton who first waked me to a sense of poetry, and I think there are only two names that I honour above his; but it would be mere hypocrisy in me to say even his works are so "twisted with my heart-strings" as the Lyrical Ballads. I

could be more diffuse on this subject; only that I know it would weary you and betray my ignorance in the philosophy of the mind if I should attempt to explain what I suppose to be the sources of the unspeakable pleasure which I derive from those wonderful poems. But even though abstractedly I did think it possible for the imagination of man to run forth in more delightful wanderings . . . or the heart in wilder passion—even though I should reason myself into a belief that anything, which the world has yet seen, can so well claim the title of pure poetry,—yet my feelings would contradict the cold deductions of my understanding: for I have felt more than once that I can hear other poems talked of by worldly men without such exquisite torture;—I am daily made sensible that I rest on no other poems with such permanent and increasing delight;—I feel that, from the wreck of all earthly things which belong to me, I should endeavour to save that work by an impulse second to none but that of self-preservation.

I must repeat that I say all this not with so foolish and vain a purpose as that of justifying myself against your opinion . . . but merely with a view to show that I was not betrayed, by any sudden warmth of gratitude for the pleasure I had received, into an exaggerated estimate of it—but that it was the result of my feelings . . . and that those feelings still continue in full force; but I am not so arrogant as to suppose that no revolution will take place in my sentiments . . . and that I shall never raise any other poems nearer to the level of the Lyrical Ballads; on the contrary, I believe that, to some degree, such a revolution will happen—because you tell me so; and I see that you say it from such profound observations on the progress of the mind in this point . . . as it would be folly in me to question.

To that part of your letter, in which you invite me to see you when I visit Grasmere, I scarcely know how to reply: it did indeed fill up the measure of my joy; because, though your kindness alone might have induced you to humour me by answering my letter, nothing less than your really thinking me in some measure worthy of your notice . . . could (I think) have made you run the risk of being pestered with an hour of my company. Henceforward I shall look to that country as to the land of promise; I cannot say how many emotions the land of lakes raises in my mind . . . of itself: I have always felt a strange love for everything connected with it; and the magic of the Lyrical Ballads has completed and established the charm. But, when, to these inducements for visiting it, is added the hope of seeing those whom no danger (but that of being an unwelcome visitor) could have with-held me from seeking out—I believe that the bowers of Paradise could hold out no such allurement. Unfortunately however I am not yet my own master; and (in compliance with the wishes of my Mother and my guardians) I am going, in a month or two, to enter myself at Ox-

ford.[7] I had myself an intention of making a tour in the Highlands this autumn; but now, just at the time when I find that I should have a chance of meeting you there, my plans (I fear) will be traversed. "Many a northern look" however I shall cast to the country of your wanderings; and (in the meantime) I shall be cheered with the hope that, when summer returns . . . and I bend my course to the lakes, I shall have the happiness of seeing those persons whom above all the world I honour—and amidst those scenes too which, delightful as they are in themselves, are more so on their account.

I remain, dear Sir,
With my deepest veneration, ever your's
Thomas de Quincey.

St. John's Priory.

P. S.

Your aversion to letter-writing, at the same time that it enhances the value of a letter from you, forces me to beg that you will not give yourself the trouble of writing at all oftener than you feel yourself disposed . . . in answer to those which I shall send you as long as you give me leave and as often as I think it will not be disagreeable to you. Be assured too that I shall never feel slighted by the shortness of your letters;—I shall think myself abundantly honoured by a single line: indeed, Sir, I am not worthy of such another letter as your first. In saying this, I am pleading violently against my own interest and wishes; for certainly no present can be so acceptable to me as a letter from you: but I cannot bear that you should put yourself to any inconvenience on my account . . . or that you should imagine I can think you capable of any unkindness to me.

You mention Miss Wordsworth (I speak at a venture) and Mr. Coleridge; and this emboldens me to use the privilege of a friend and take a liberty which I should not otherwise have done—when I beg you to convey my most sincere and respectful good wishes to them both.

Wordsworth did not reply to this second letter until March 6, 1804.[8] Then he was full of apologies for his long delay; but he was very friendly. "I have thought of you very often and with great interest," he wrote. He gave some account of the trip into Scotland with Coleridge of the preceding summer; and next turned to enquiries about De Quincey's college life. He wanted to hear about it; "above all that you have not been seduced into unworthy pleasures or pursuits"—mindful of his

[7] He did not go to Oxford until early December.

[8] *W. F. L.* 1. 159; *Early Letters*, p. 368.

own days in Cambridge. "There is no true dignity," Wordsworth went on, "but in virtue and temperance, and, let me add, chastity. . . . I have much anxiety on this head from a sincere concern for your welfare. . . . Do not on any account fail to tell me whether you are satisfied with yourself since you migrated to Oxford." Next, he proceeded to speak of "a poem on my own earlier life"—*The Prelude*. "I have just finished that part in which I speak of my residence at the University; it would give me great pleasure to read this work to you at this time . . . it would please you and might also be of service to you. . . . This Poem will not be published these many years, and never during my lifetime, till I have finished a larger and more important work to which it is tributary." The next matter introduced was a recent parody of some of his poems by "a wretched creature of the name of Peter Bailey" who pillaged the *Lyrical Ballads* "in a style of Plagiarism, I believe unexampled in the history of modern Literature"; and who "has spoken of me, *by name*, as the *simplest*, i. e. the most contemptible of poets!"[9] Coleridge was in London "on account of the very bad health under which he labours." After urging De Quincey to write to him again, Wordsworth signed himself "your very affectionate friend."

De Quincey, meanwhile, had been entered at Worcester College in the previous December. He had gone to Oxford with indifference if not actual unwillingness, had found little solace there in the companionship of his fellow students, had found no help or stimulation from tutors, and was living an almost solitary existence and reading at his own sweet will. At this precise moment, he had moved for a time to Littlemoor in order to escape from the depressing atmosphere of his college. The next letter is written from Littlemoor.

At almost the exact moment when Wordsworth was writing to De Quincey on March 6, De Quincey was writing to Wordsworth; and the letters crossed. Wordsworth had addressed his

[9] See Professor de Selincourt, *Early Letters*, p. 343 n. and p. 371 n.: "*Poems* by Peter Bayley, Jun. Esq., London, 1803. . . . 'The simplicity of that most simple of all poets, Mr. W. himself, is scarcely more simple than the language of this stanza.'" "This stanza" referred to is not one in the poems which Wordsworth here names. Mr. de Selincourt in the second note says, "*The Ivy Seat* might be regarded as a 'wretched Parody' of the poems to Lucy. *The Forest Fay* draws on *The Ancient Mariner*."

letter to Chester, the last address which he had; De Quincey's letter had been dated from Oxford. In fear lest the letter sent to Chester might get lost, Wordsworth wrote a short note on March 19 begging De Quincey to take measures to recover it.[10] De Quincey's letter to Wordsworth has, so far as I know, disappeared.

LETTER 3

Saturday, March 31. [1804]

Dear Sir,

I had given directions to have all my letters forwarded to Littlemoor; but, on not receiving any for some weeks, it occurred to me that they had been carried to the college; and accordingly, when I went there to enquire on last Thursday evening, I received a number among which were both yours. The first of them had come round by Bath, and both must have lain some days in college. I mention this circumstance to account to you for my delay in answering them . . . which must have surprised you.

I was greatly sorry to find that your first letter, which in every other respect gave me a degree of pleasure that I have not enjoyed for many weeks, should cloud it with the news of Mr. Coleridge's illness and your own. Your own you do not speak of as systematic; —Mr. Coleridge's, I rather gather from what you say, is so—but still, I hope not dangerous. If he is advised to try the Bath waters (which, I believe, are of great benefit in rheumatic complaints) and he has no friend there whose services he would prefer on such an occasion, I hope that I may be permitted to procure lodgings and all other accommodations for him. I can never have engagements here important enough to detain me from such an office.; besides that the distance from Bath to Oxford is so trifling and the time it would take to execute such a commission so short that the inconvenience to me, even on a less interesting occasion, would be none at all. I trust that you will consider this offer not as mere form but as proceding from a sincere desire to shew a small mark of the affection and great reverence I bear Mr. Coleridge both on his own account and as your friend.

To me, who am so much interested in the least anecdote relating to you you may imagine, Sir, how welcome that information must be which you have condescended to give of your prospects in poetry. Any person, who is not a perfect stranger to you, must wish most earnestly to see that work completed which you call the least important of the three: but to the world at large I suppose that the greater work to which it is attached must, from the more comprehensive range of its subjects and from the more universal connexion

[10] *Early Letters*, p. 373. This information about the missing letter and the reason for Wordsworth's second letter were omitted by Knight (*W. F. L.*).

it has with the condition of man, be at the same time more extensively useful and more delightful; and for my country's sake therefore I am bound to offer my first and most fervent petitions for the completion of that poem. But, with a view to my individual gratification, the poem on your own life is the one which I should most anxiously wish to see finished; and I do indeed look with great expectation for the advent of that day, on which I may hear you read it, as the happiest I shall see. I should not have presumed to form any such expectation, if some words in your letter had not suggested it.

The wretched man, who has parodied your poems, I have never before even heard of by name: but that is not extraordinary; for latterly I have left off looking into the reviews from which I used to gain a general knowledge of current English literature. Indeed, if I had seen any account of his work I should not have read it; for I have studiously avoided reading any attempts at [?] parody of real poetry wherever I have met with them—and especially of your poems. The harmless intrigues of the reviewers, as they were generally not conceived in a spirit of ridicule, I read; and, for the same reason, I generally felt real pity for them. Whenever indeed (as in the solemn and profound analysis of your poetry by the Scotch reviewers) I have seen men impressed with a sincere belief that you have founded a school of poetry adverse to the canons of true taste, I have always felt any momentary indignation at their arrogance overbalanced by compassion for the delusions they are putting upon themselves and the disordered taste which such a belief argues; but for this miscreant who, having himself felt their beauty, would belie his own convictions and with unparalleled depravity seek to mislead the tastes of a numerous class of his fellow-creatures that under happier guidance might have had their minds half hallowed by their salutary influence, I can scarcely feel the pity which yet his miserable state of mind demands; for, in such wanton wickedness, there seems to me the malignant temper of an evil spirit.—I lament this affair very deeply; not that I suppose such an attempt or the attempts of any man or any faction of men can ever take from you the least part of that "kingly style" which must hereafter be yours—but because I fear (which, I know, would grieve you much more) lest, if this book should have an extensive circulation, it may with low minds turned to ridicule and satire obstruct the beneficial effects which your poems might otherwise produce even on such distempered tastes.—I feel much curiosity to see this man's book; but the same fear, which has always hitherto made me turn away from burlesque imitations of what I love, operates with tenfold force on this occasion.

The interest—so gratifying to me, which you are kind enough to take in my welfare, would be of itself a sufficient check upon me if I were unhappily disposed to licentiousness: but I have been

through life so much restrained from dissolute conduct by the ever-waking love of my mother . . . and of late years so purified from dissolute propensities by the new order of pleasures which I have been led to cultivate that I feel a degree of confidence (not arrogant, I hope) that, even with greater temptations, I should not by my conduct at any rate make you repent the notice you have taken of me. The college however, which I am at, holds out no very powerful temptations: it has indeed the character of being very riotous; but I cannot see that it deserves such a character preeminently—though its discipline is certainly less strict than that of any other college. But it is singularly barren (as far as my short residence there will permit me to judge) of either virtue or talents or knowledge; so that the intemperance I see practised, coming unrecommended by any great qualifications, is doubly disgusting to me. And, even though I should meet with these debauched habits in the person of a man of genius, it would be difficult for me to be so much seduced as lightly to exchange the high and lasting pleasures which I have found in other paths for such as, exclusively of their vast intrinsic inferiority and the train of evils which attend them, bring along with them the seeds of their own destruction. And besides, from the great aversion I have to a college life, I shall pass no more of my time there than is necessary; and, for that reason as well as for the little attraction I have found in the society, I have lived almost alone since my entrance; and until I see something greater or better, I shall continue to do so.—With respect to my conduct therefore during the time I have been at college, I have not much to reproach myself with. But I hope that you will give me credit for not wishing to claim any praise for avoiding those intemperate pleasures for which I have so few opportunities from the secluded manner in which I live and so little inclination from the better direction which has been given to my pursuits. In all that relates to the government and cultivation of my mind I am very deficient and fully conscious of my own unworthiness; and it is only upon the perpetual hope and assurance of something better that I shall be hereafter that I found any pretensions to your regard.

Sunday morning.

Not having room to enter on any other subject I must here close my letter with the warmest wishes for Mr. Coleridge's and your recovery—taking the liberty of repeating my request to be made useful in any way which occurs to you . . . and begging my respectful acknowledgements to Miss Wordsworth for her kindness in remembering me.

Thanking you, dear Sir, for your great goodness in writing to me

I remain, with deepest devotion,

Your grateful and affectionate friend,

Thomas de Quincey.

Littlemoor.

For the two years between the third and fourth letters, the correspondence between De Quincey and Wordsworth seems to have ceased entirely. I know of no letters from Wordsworth to De Quincey; and certainly there were none from De Quincey to Wordsworth. But when the younger man took up his pen to write again on April 6, 1806, he wrote by far the most interesting letter of the series.

Once more De Quincey was writing from Everton and planning a tour into the Lake Country. He had, in August 1805, gone into Westmorland as far as Coniston, eight miles from Grasmere;[11] but he had not been able to muster sufficient courage to go on to accept the invitation which Wordsworth had so whole-heartedly offered. Now, in the spring of 1806, he was preparing once more to go northward and was sounding out Wordsworth as to whether he would still be welcome. He actually carried out his plan; and got within sight of Grasmere and of the little white cottage across the lake from Hammerscar;[12] but again his courage failed and he retreated. Perhaps if he had received a reply to Letter 3 before he took the summer trip, he might have brought himself to meet his hero in 1806. As it was, it required the need of Mrs. Coleridge for an escort for herself and her children, to carry De Quincey to the door of Dove Cottage, and to bring about at last the meeting on November 4, 1807.[13]

Meantime De Quincey was still a student at Oxford. For a long period he had been seriously ill;[14] he had experienced the agonies of neuralgia in the face which had led him to his first taste of opium in the autumn of 1804;[15] and was now in this spring of 1806, and for nine years later, taking it "not regularly, but intermittingly" for pleasure.[16] And it was opium which he believed to have cured him of his ailment. At this

[11] H. A. Page, *Thomas De Quincey; his Life and Writings*, 2 vols., 1.107.

[12] *The Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. David Masson, 14 vols., 2.231.

[13] *Ibid.* 2.304 ff.; also, a letter from Dorothy Wordsworth to Mrs. Clarkson (British Museum MSS. Add. 36, 997).

[14] *Ibid.* 3.424. In this passage by slip of memory, he post-dates this state of phthisis as occurring in his twenty-second and twenty-third years. The fourth letter fixes it in his twentieth and twenty-first years.

[15] *Ibid.* 3.380 ff.

[16] *Ibid.* 3.383, 387.

moment he could say that he was "completely restored" to health.

As for the grief which he felt for the disappearance of his brother Richard, or "Pink," that was very real. De Quincey has told the story at length in the *Autobiographic Sketches*[17]—a strange story substantiated by letters printed in the *De Quincey Memorials*, edited by A. H. Japp.[18] The facts necessary for the present purpose may be briefly summarised. Probably in 1803 Richard, whose schooling had been as badly bungled by parent and guardians as that of Thomas himself, was beaten by his school-master, ran away to Liverpool, was recovered and forced to return to school. Again he was flogged; and again the boy, who was four years younger than Thomas—at this date, therefore, about fourteen—ran away, eluded his pursuers and friends and sailed as cabin-boy on a privateer. Upon his return to England, unknown to his family, he transferred in March, 1804, to a ship bound for the south seas on a voyage which was planned to last for two years. There he was captured by pirates; but his life was spared because he had learned the use of the chronometer; and for some months he was one of the pirate gang. He escaped; in some way he was present at the storming of Monte Video by the British in 1805, and as a result of bravery and luck was taken aboard the commander's vessel as a midshipman. He was transferred from ship to ship, was commended for his services, was present at the battle of Copenhagen, was taken prisoner by the Danes, was freed by exchange and returned to his family in 1809.[19] He finally died about 1815. At the time that De Quincey was writing this fourth letter, he knew only that Richard had departed for the south seas, and he was suffering from uncertainties.

The poverty of which De Quincey complains in this letter was very real. Because of his rebellion in running away from the Manchester Grammar School, his guardians—the dominant one being the Reverend Samuel Hall—refused to give for his college expenses more than his previous school allowance of £100, in-

[17] *Ibid.* 1. 287 ff.

[18] 1. 220 ff.; and see also the *Times Literary Supplement* for Oct. 21, 1920, in which G. Scott Duckers gives excerpts from the Admiralty Treasurer's Pay Books.

[19] The return is recorded in the unpublished letters of De Quincey to the Wordsworths. See also, *Memorials*, vol. 1, chapters 15 and 16.

stead of the £150 which he felt he had the right to expect. Since the Oxford student of the time needed about £200 for comfortable maintenance at the University, De Quincey was not only sharply pinched in resources but felt the humiliation of being much poorer than his fellows. He did not come into his inheritance of about £2,000 until four months after this letter was written, namely, on August 15, when he reached his majority.

LETTER 4

April 6, 1806.

Dear Sir,

I have come up here from the south with the intention of visiting Westmoreland this spring; but I cannot resolve to advance any farther until I know whether it would be agreeable to you that I should call at your cottage in my tour: I feel unspeakable sorrow that I myself should have put this into doubt; for I cannot tell how far the kindness which you formerly shewed me and which led you then to desire that I would do so . . . has been alienated from me by my long silence.—That any intermission of a correspondence which I held one of the first privileges of my life should have arisen on my part . . . must have seemed strange; but you had, I think, an assurance in the very constitution of my mind (with which it could not but be that my veneration for you should be coeval) that no influence short of at least a moral necessity could have driven me to the suspension of such an intercourse as I always thought my pleasure and my interest more involved in cultivating than they could have been in an intercourse with any other of all the men that have lived from the beginning of time. To say then that the deep interest I took in all that related to you has suffered a pause is, I hope, unnecessary: but as a debt of respect to you and of justice to myself, I will briefly sketch the history of the long interval of pain between this letter and my last during which my faculties have been so withered and such gloom thrown upon my spirits that I have written none but a few letters of business and form.

Through the greater part of this interval I have been struggling with an unconfirmed pulmonary consumption which I inherit and which the sedentariness of a college life greatly aided: in their early state my symptoms might easily have been corrected; but the neglect with which I treated them at first from ignorance of their nature and a fever which flung me back after I had made some progress in recovery . . . have made my reestablishment a work of time and difficulty;—But my great affliction was the loss of my brother—a boy of great promise who, in disdain of the tyranny exercised over him at school, went to sea at a time when I was incapable of giving him assistance or advice: this has grown heavier

and heavier as the chance of my hearing tidings of him has diminished. In losing him I lost a future friend; for, besides what we had of alliance in our minds, we had passed so much of our childhood together (though latterly we had generally been separated) that we had between us common remembrances of early life. It has never happened to me before or after to meet any one among the many young men I have slightly known with whom I had such a community of thought and feeling on subjects most interesting to me as might serve for the basis of a friendship: this has been indeed my primal affliction through life and especially through my college life that I have lived under a perpetual sense of desertion and have felt, on any demand which my situation made for a service higher than mere youthful generosity could prompt, that I was walking alone in the world: in sickness I felt this severely; for then from the exhaustion and wasting which waits upon the hectic fever, my mind lost its energy so much that it was passive to whatever noxious influence I felt under for the time; and so by turns it was half palsied by total solitude or disentranced from its native mood by heartless society.

These things have shed blight upon my mind and have made the two last years of my life so complete a blank in the account of happiness that I know not whether there be one hour in that whole time which I would willingly recall;—I have had intervals of bodily health but never any respite from sickness of the mind; for books, which might in part have supplied the place of all other pleasures, my small income diminished by the expenses of illness &c and sometimes my situation would not permit me to procure in any tolerable quantity.

And thus, I could not endure to dissociate pleasure from my correspondence with you . . . and resolved therefore never to write under depression of spirits with shattered health and a famished intellect, I deferred writing from month to month—always calculating on the near approach of some period of pleasure and renovation which was never to arrive: how this could be, I can now scarcely understand; and if I could have foreseen the long term to which these alternations of pain and [MS. torn] would extend, I should have put violence on my feelings of reluctance and have written a few lines explaining my situation: but I [MS. torn] ——petually in prospect some change of life which I [MS. torn] ——state me in a capacity of writing more at length; and in some [MS. torn] or other I was perpetually disappointed.

Even at this time, though completely restored to health, I write by no means at ease—restlessly anxious to learn what interpretation you have put upon my silence and not knowing whether I am not utterly rejected from your thoughts. Nevertheless the recollections of the great kindness which you shewed me even in your first letter —which is so strongly recalled to me at this moment by the place

in which I write—gives me confidence that you will not, for a failure in the forms of respect (scarcely indeed within the control of my will), withdraw from me your notice at a time when it has become trebly necessary to me and when I have learned (if that were possible) yet more to value it.

I remain, dear sir, with great veneration, your affectionate friend,

Thomas de Quincey.

If you should find it convenient and should be disposed to write a single line in answer within a week, it will find me here; and at my departure I shall leave directions to have it sent after me.

Mrs. Best's—Everton near Liverpool.

The rest of the correspondence between De Quincey and Wordsworth before their meeting can be briefly disposed of. Some time before April 25, 1807, De Quincey wrote again to Wordsworth,[20] although the letter has disappeared. In reply to it, Wordsworth wrote from London to De Quincey, who was presumably at Oxford, to say that both he and Coleridge were in Town and that Wordsworth would be glad to see him. And again, on April 28, Wordsworth sent him a note apprising him of a change of address and reiterating his desire to see him.[21] De Quincey, however, did not get to London; and there was apparently no further communication between the men until that eventful fourth of November, 1807.

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[20] *W. F. L.* 1. 300.
[21] *Ibid.* 1. 301.