Preface

Variously dubbed Gothic Hero, Gothic Parasite, and author of a Gothick sport, De Quincey is the dark horse of Gothicism, for while his work has, increasingly, been associated with Gothic, not one of the recent companions to Gothic so much as mentions his name. There will be more than one reason for this state of affairs. One is the fact that, while definitions of what is meant by ‘Gothic’ have changed, and are still evolving, claiming more territory all the time, even Gothic specialists have their blind spots, of which De Quincey is one. This is shown by the fact that the editor of the recent and generally excellent *Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* felt able to write that ‘several features of the Gothic [...] eventually became a basis for Sigmund Freud’s *fin de siècle* sense of the unconscious as a deep repository of very old, infantile, and repressed memories or impulses, the archaic underworld of the self’, without mentioning De Quincey’s *Confessions*, and that Alison Milbank’s essay on ‘Victorian Gothic in English Novels and Stories, 1830-1880’ included the anonymous ‘The Iron Shroud’ (*Blackwood’s*, August 1830), but not *The Avenger* (*Blackwood’s*, August 1838) or any other tale by De Quincey, who is not mentioned, despite the fact that he had featured in a recent study of Victorian Gothic.

Another reason for this neglect will be the fact that in his work the Gothic is interwoven with the German. Gothic, as he knew and loved it, had a German dimension in that it was regarded, and for a time disparaged, as largely German-inspired, and these days English studies tend to ignore German literature or betray unfamiliarity with the language and its literature by the serial mistakes that mar so much Gothic criticism (e.g. by treating *Romantik* as though it meant Romantic, when its real meaning is Romanticism; by the same token, *Schauerromantik* means Dark Romanticism, not its practitioners). That it was not always so, is, of course, shown by De Quincey’s generation. The present study, which is concerned with his knowledge of German literature only insofar as it impinges on or illuminates his gothicity, shows that his knowledge of German Gothic/Romantic literature (as opposed to his very wide knowledge of the secondary literature in German on all manner of subjects) and his indebtedness to it have both been exaggerated.

What makes him an interesting figure in this context is (i) the way in which he epitomizes Gothic in both ancient and modern definitions, and (ii) the way in which focusing on the Gothic takes one to the heart of his literary masquerade, and more especially to the heart of his masked autobiographical enterprise, in other words, to the heart of the matter so far as De Quincey as a writer is concerned. His life and work are alike shot through with Gothic motifs, while his fiction in the narrower sense is entirely Gothic in today’s terms. The texts examined here are those on which, for better or worse, his reputation as a writer both of autobiography and of fiction depends. What will probably come as the greatest

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2 *Cambridge Companion*, 3.

surprise to many readers are the manifold parallels between De Quincey and Kafka, a writer separated from him in time, place, race, religion, and language, but who proves, in all sorts of interesting ways, to be a literary descendant.

For help with problems along the way I am indebted to the staff of the Bodleian, Taylorian, and English Faculty Libraries, Oxford, the Special Collections of the Brotherton Library, Leeds, and the Deutsche Bücherei, Leipzig. It is a pleasure to acknowledge their invariable helpfulness.