# 1

# Roots



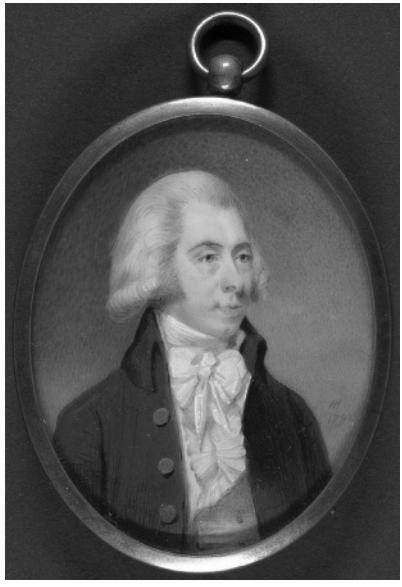
There was a boy...

(William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*)

Old Yew, which graspest at the stones
That name the under-lying dead,
Thy fibres net the dreamless head,
Thy roots are wrapt about the bones.

(Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam*)

Thomas Penson Quincey was born in Manchester on 15 August 1785. He was the fourth of eight children. His father (pictured here) was a successful merchant, or as De Quincey would put it later, 'a merchant... in the English sense... that is, he was a man engaged in *foreign* commerce and no other' (*SW* 262). Hence, De Quincey's sense of himself – as mixing a little with alien natures despite himself – may have been passed on to him from his father. De Quincey said that the 'expansive love' that characterised him and his favourite (tragically short-lived) sister Elizabeth came to them from their father.



Horace Hone / Yale Center for British Art / Public domain.

For De Quincey's biographer, Edward Sackville-West (1901–1965), 'These remarks are particularly illuminating, for

*The Life of the Author: Thomas De Quincey*, First Edition. Andrew Keanie.

they explain both the faint atmosphere of unreality that hangs round the mild, receding features of Thomas Quincey [senior] and also his son's evident feeling that, in spite of this ghostliness, his father was a man eminently worthy of a love which his unenthusiastic temperament perhaps had not the power of eliciting to the full' (*A Flame in Sunlight* 3).

Untypically for a trader in the West Indies, Thomas Quincey (senior) was a 'conscientious protester' (*GT* 23) against slavery. He died at the age of 40 of tuberculosis. De Quincey would spend his entire adult life expecting to die of tuberculosis too, and then, having himself lived for decades longer than his father, he would attribute his own longevity to laudanum, to which he was addicted (as the medical profession has since called it). It would be, to De Quincey, as if the 'fierce chemistry' (*SW* 60) of his opium habit was continually reconstituting and rekindling the life force in him, and it would finally seem to him to have practically doubled the number of years he might otherwise have got in this world.

With something of Victor Frankenstein's tendency to look for the divine spark in earthly decay, De Quincey, the writer, would dabble, as it were, among his own unhallowed attributes as a journalist, 'Pedantry, Digression, Prolixity, and Facetiousness' (*A Flame in Sunlight* 240), and make still more unquiet his own buried aspirations as a philosopher. In continually rekindling his own faded dreams, he would rouse himself into life, again and again, as misery-memoirist, literary journalist and propagandist, in a throng of opiated emotions.

Thomas Hazlehurst / Yale Center for British Art / Public domain.

His mother, Elizabeth Penson Quincey (1756–1846), 'although an attentive mother, inspired more irritation than love in her children' (*A Flame in Sunlight* 4). She has almost invariably, with a touch of misogynistic contempt, been characterised as a 'lady architect' (a specifically female bumptiousness as likely to stir male chauvinism as any bluestocking's self-assuredness), and Greenhay, the family house, was her big project. Her children 'grew up around stonemasons, carpenters, painters, plasterers and bell-hangers; while other women of her class busied themselves with gentler pursuits, Elizabeth Quincey demolished walls and improved views, expanded floors and widened

windows' (*GT* 13–14). Also, according to Michael Neve in the *London Review of Books* (3 September 1981), she was 'Evangelical, rather aloof, and able, in the manner of Evangelicals, to shield her dislikes and enmities behind an apparently impersonal language of moral disapproval and disdain.' This all seems to have had something to do with the fact that two of her four sons ran away from home, one to Wales and the other to sea.

The miniature (pictured above) painted after her marriage has suggested, to some commentators, the domineering disposition of a dowager or matron as played by, say, Joan Sanderson (1912–1992). For example, Edward Sackville-West has said, 'It is not a very pleasing face: a certain hard fixity in the eyes, a general lack of sensitiveness in the bold, handsome features, delineate a nature uncompromising and obtuse' (*A Flame in Sunlight* 5). Here, it is possible that Sackville-West has written out of sympathy with that most eloquent spokesman for victims of cold, conceited and dogmatic mothers everywhere, Lord Byron (1788–1824): 'Some women use their tongues – She looked a lecture' (*Don Juan* i. xv.)

At any rate, readers of Sackville-West's De Quincey are to understand that Mrs Quincey's contribution to the number of children in the world who feel bad about themselves was exemplary. 'Trial by jury, English laws of evidence, all were forgotten; and we were found guilty on the bare affidavit of the angry accuser' (*GT* 29). De Quincey grew up believing – or said he grew up believing – himself to be a criminal. He might now be alleged to have been inscrutably upset by his mother's covert narcissism.

It is compelling to speculate that Oscar Wilde's belief, that there is 'no essential incongruity between crime and culture' (*GT* 341), can be traced all the way back to De Quincey's keen consciousness of responsibility for his family's litany of ill-luck. As a child, he felt to blame for any praise his intelligence might receive. 'Usually mothers defend their own cubs right or wrong... Not so my mother... Did a visitor say some flattering thing of a talent or accomplishment by one or other of us? My mother protested so solemnly against the possibility that we could possess either one or the other, that we children held it a point of filial duty to believe ourselves the very scamps and refuse of the universe' (*Works* x. 5).

In fairness to De Quincey's mother, it may have been under the pressure of a widow's anxieties that she spoke and acted as she did. As Morrison has said, 'Thomas, even at that early age, seems to have known that something was missing in his relationship with his mother. He wanted love. She wanted duty. He wanted understanding. She wanted discipline. He wanted praise. She wanted humility' (*EOE* 12–13). Thus, by a peculiar cruelty of fate, had she but known it, she was really losing her children as well as her husband. The Quincey siblings were coming to rely more and more on themselves and each other for all that made life bearable: to have confidence, at best, in each other. They were already learning to lie to her.

Whatever had made the house a home had failed Mrs Quincey's children; everything except one another: 'love, which is *altogether* holy, like that between two children, will revisit undoubtedly by glimpses the silence and darkness of old age: and I repeat my belief – that, unless bodily torment should forbid it, that final experience in my sister's bedroom, or some other in which her innocence was concerned, will rise again for me to illuminate the hour of death' (*SW* 273).

If De Quincey did not actually draw close to his sister Elizabeth like a frightened stray huddling for warmth in a bleak world, he would for the rest of his life be haunted by her absence after her death at the age of nine in 1792.

> Rightly it is said of utter, utter misery, that it 'cannot be *remembered*.' Itself, as a rememberable thing, is swallowed up in its own chaos. Mere anarchy and confusion of mind fell upon me. Deaf and blind I was, as I reeled under the revelation. I wish not to recall the circumstances of that time, when *my* agony was at its height, and hers in another sense was approaching. Enough to say – that all was soon over; and the morning of that day had at last arrived which looked down upon her innocent face, sleeping the sleep from which there is no awakening, and upon me sorrowing the sorrow for which there is no consolation.
>
> (*SW* 269)

That year, 1792, was the year in which De Quincey began to walk the verges of the grave. 1792 was also the year that any shallow notions of decency in public life in Paris fell off, and reality stood gaunt, hateful and undisguised. In September 1792, there were reports that Princess de Lamballe had been struck on the head with a pike and then raped, mutilated and stabbed to death by the mob before being paraded through the streets naked, eviscerated and decapitated.

In this now terror-stricken world, a young man, 15 years De Quincey's senior, had already suffered the childhood loss of both parents, followed by years of separation from his beloved sister, and he had been enchanted and then disappointed in revolutionary France, and he had already fallen in love with a Frenchwoman and fathered her child. And now, he was in the process of becoming England's foremost Romantic poet: William Wordsworth.