

*DE QUINCEY'S CONFESSIONS.*

It is not proposed in this essay to give a biography, already so well known of this eminent author; nor, on the other hand, is it our intention to comment on the whole of his writings, which, although not of very great range, are matter for more careful perusal and more lengthy criticism than present requirements demand. But we have selected one of his most interesting works and one sufficiently stamped with his own personality to warrant us in establishing as general characteristics of his style the distinctive qualities pertaining to it. The one then we have chosen is his "Confessions of an Opium-Eater." It is unnecessary to give a summary of the story contained in this work since it is now so widely read; we shall therefore pass immediately to the consideration of it as a work of literature.

Those who are unacquainted with this production, and who, perhaps, have read its author's life, might imagine that anything coming from his pen at the time the "Confessions" appeared, "debilitated as he then was in body and prostrated in mind," could in no wise be valuable as a literary performance. True it is that he ruined what certainly would have been a bright literary career by his inveterate habit of opium-eating. Still his writings are not void of merit as works of composition, and this is one of his best. De Quincey himself was not insensible of its value as such, when he tells us in "winding-up" of his narrative of his unwillingness "to injure its effect as a composition" by introducing further details. Certainly it is not a model of narration, on the contrary it is far from faultless.

But it has its own peculiar merits, and every student of literature would do well to give it an attentive examination. The author deals with his subject interestingly and lightly, and his narrative is thus rendered most attractive. We become deeply interested in the matter, but we are not less charmed by his beautiful language, and throughout we must admire the simple but yet most skilful manner in which he manoeuvres his expressions. The rhythm and majesty of his diction together with the stately tread of his well constructed periods cannot escape our notice. But these are merits to which we shall refer later on.

We are indebted, it is said, to pecuniary embarrassments of its author for this work. In fact most of De Quincey's productions were given for publication only when he found himself in such circumstances. This, however, should not lead us to depreciate the value of the work before us, nor to suppose that he had, in this case, no other end in view than mere relief from temporary distress. He had also at heart the welfare of his fellow-sufferers or participators like himself in opium, whom he had the intention of benefiting by establishing "for their consolation and encouragement, the fact that opium may be renounced and without greater suffering than an ordinary resolution may support, and by a pretty rapid course of descent." This we might say is the moral of the narrative, throughout which we believe he has not lost sight of the benefit he is conferring on others. Whether he has succeeded in this respect we are not in a position to judge, but we should have no hesitation in passing sentence on what he would term an "inferior consideration," that is, whether