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A club of “murder-fanciers”: Thomas De Quincey’s essays “On Murder” and consuming violence in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*

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In February 1827 Thomas De Quincey published the first of his famous “On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts” essays in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*. De Quincey’s ironically inflected essay on violence and aesthetics was to influence representations of crime in literature for the next century. Presented as a leaked monthly lecture from a meeting of the “The Society of Connoisseurs in Murder” and submitted by scandalised contributor “X.Y.Z,” the essay gives a history of the “art” of murder. De Quincey’s chosen venue for his “modest proposal on the aesthetics of murder” could not have been better selected (Burwick 1996, 83). As Mark Schoenfield (2013) has argued, De Quincey’s first essay “On Murder” engages with and reflects a period of sustained preoccupation with violence and criminality within the influential periodical *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*.

De Quincey’s essay, with its mixing of high and low cultural registers, also reflected the complex negotiation of readership identity which accompanied the birth of a new generation of periodicals in the first decades of the nineteenth century. *Blackwood’s* (first published 1817), its older Whig rival *The Edinburgh Review* (1802), and their peers of the 1810s, 20s and 30s, emerged at a key moment in the development of the magazine form. The expansion of the British reading public and the increasing affordability of print media offered opportunities and challenges for enterprising periodical publishers as they attempted to achieve wide readerships whilst maintaining an air of cultural exclusivity. Michael Allen notes,

All the major publishing ventures of the early nineteenth-century aimed at uniting the popularity which would attract readers of the first type (the “many”) with the prestige and “quality” which would retain the more influential readers of the second kind (the “few”). (1969, 23)

The rapidly evolving nature of the reading public was matched in speed of change by that of the author. Richard Cronin (2010, 123) has characterised the late Romantic period as one “in which writers both investigated and exhibited class insecurities.” This was the moment when the gentleman and amateur man of letters transformed into the

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professional writer. Ideas about the identity of the reader are therefore bound up in parallel concerns about the status of the writer.

These concerns can also be traced within the crime fiction published in the magazine. The group of texts which Harvey Peter Sucksmith (1971), and more recently Robert Morrison and Chris Baldick (1995), identify as tales of terror were a defining feature of early issues of the magazine. Short and sensational, the stories detail the terror and horror of a narrator undergoing an extreme experience. The tales of terror, like De Quincey's essays, mingle the rarefied and the sensational, and several popular examples combine these registers in their descriptions of violent crime or execution. Megan Coyer (2017) and Heather Worthington (2005) have convincingly argued that *Blackwood's* authors draw upon two influential extra-literary sources in these tales: the medical case study and the execution broadside. These sources offer two possible modes of observing the violent scene: that of the dispassionate expert witness and that of the emotional, excited crowd.

The following article contextualises De Quincey's 1827 and 1839 essays "On Murder" in a conversation about readership and authorship that was taking place within *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. In particular, I identify a shared approach to the consumption of spectacular violence in De Quincey's essays and the magazine's execution-themed tales of terror, where ideas of crowd, professional and amateur enthusiast operate as unstable and contested ciphers for the reader and the author. Both Henry Thomson and Robert McNish in their execution tales deploy the crowd and the expert/professional as two opposing images of readership, only to confound these delineations. De Quincey's essays participate directly in this same conversation; echoing the tale of terror's rejection of both crowd and professional as observer, De Quincey offers the figure of the amateur, a gentlemanly enthusiast, whose emotional investment and class position might seem to offer a more palatable model of readership. However, "the club of murder fanciers" prove no more capable of modelling an ideal form of readership. The act of consuming, and indeed selling, violence reveals the complex nature of authorship and readership in *Blackwood's* and in the rapidly changing Romantic periodical press.

Anxious texts?: readers and writers in the age of periodicals

At the heart of this article is the shifting nature of the Romantic literary sphere. As this is an area that has received extensive scholarly attention, in relation to both *Blackwood's* and De Quincey, it is productive to briefly position this article in relation to this conversation. During the early decades of the nineteenth century, revolutions in print production and literacy within the British population created new reading audiences, inaugurated new forms of publication, and allowed new ideas of authorship and readership to emerge.¹ The development of ideas of Romantic genius, and of the threat of an undefined mass readership, can be traced throughout the writing of the period. These texts often betray what Clara Tuite (2002, 186) has termed "the structuring anxiety of the Romantic literary marketplace": the fear that, in the age of growing access to print media, social status could be forged or imitated, rendering social boundaries permeable. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, the growing market for periodicals offered new opportunities for writers, but also sparked concerns about who was reading, and writing, these pioneering publications.

However, as David Stewart (2010) has highlighted, there is a risk in reading for the romantic writer's "anxieties" that we pathologise them and fail to fully acknowledge the self-conscious and deliberate engagement with the literary marketplace that underwrites periodical writing during this period. Far from unconsciously reproducing conflicting ideas of Romantic genius, and anxieties about the growing reading public, writers of this period are often engaged in complex negotiations of the ideas of literary production and consumption. This is an argument that Stewart has made in relation to De Quincey's magazine writing during the 1820s. Noting De Quincey's assertion of his own Romantic genius, Stewart argues against the "denial of his authorial agency" in constructing this idea of himself as an author (775). He notes that, "Historicist critics often represent Romantic writers as naively unaware of these circumstances. De Quincey's self-presentation, like those of other writers from the periodical press, is predicated on a clear understanding of the way the print market functions" (777).

Similarly, *Blackwood's* was a self-conscious participant in what Jon P. Klancher (1987) famously termed "the making of English reading audiences." The magazine adopts a series of strategies that draw attention to the acts of writing, reading, and publication themselves. Writers for the periodical knowingly play with existing conventions of periodical authorship to complicate and contest their role in literary production. The use of pseudonyms, personas, and fictionalised non-literary texts also force the reader to actively participate in the manufacture of meaning as they attempt to decipher authenticity from inauthenticity, play from reportage; in short to navigate what Schoenfield (2020, 116) has termed, "Maga's mixture of fiction and fact."² For example, *The Noctes Ambrosianae* published in the magazine between 1822 and 1835, were dialogues between a cast of real, fictional, and pseudonymous characters that appeared to offer a "behind-the-scenes look at the production of the magazine" (Woody 2020, 80). Frequently set in Ambrose's tavern, these scenes "purport to be records of conversations faithfully copied down by the journalist Gurney who is hiding in a cupboard during the whole series" (Manderson 2015, 89). They engender a feeling of readership intimacy, of going behind the curtain, whilst simultaneously emphasising the artificiality of that intimacy through their obvious fictionality. The *Blackwood's* reader is thus trained to read in a specific way, suspending any assumption of veracity and instead approaching the text with playfulness and incredulity. As Margaret Russett (1997, 102) has noted, these strategies are shared by a wider range of Romantic literary works that attempt to manage and manipulate an unwieldy new literary world: "the periodical essayists participate in the larger project of Romanticism: to create its own readership by inscribing the terms of its interpretation."

These "terms of interpretation" in the context of *Blackwood's* participate in a politically partisan literary rivalry. *Blackwood's* entered the growing marketplace for monthly magazines with a distinctive political perspective and adversarial agenda. Envisioned to act as a rival to the successful Whig publisher Archibald Constable's *Scots Magazine* and *Edinburgh Review*, *Blackwood's* positioned itself as a virulent and resistant Tory voice.³ This political position is not just apparent in the magazine's political writing but across the magazine's content. Gregory Dart (2008, 191) has suggested that in its use of satire *Blackwood's* aims to "preserve" literature as "a realm of pleasure" outside the "liberal utilitarian" ideals of its rivals. Contradictoriness, secrecy, and metafiction operate here to create a space that resists utility and reason, instead offering opportunities

for intellectual play and multivocality. Similarly, emotion is also often enlisted in this pursuit of a distinctive way of reading. If the liberalism that the magazine wishes to counter is committed to reason, then the provocation of strong emotion, be that terror or identification, becomes a potentially resistant force.

During the early decades of the nineteenth century *Blackwood's* contributors are consistently and self-consciously engaged in the formation of the new literary sphere. In particular, they are committed to problematising the acts of reading and writing themselves. As we will explore in the next section of this article, depictions of violence were to play a key role in both De Quincey and the tale authors' engagement with readership and authorship. Drawing upon existing genres of functional writing, authors' depictions of violence allow them to interrogate their relationship with a growing, unseen periodical readership.

The case study and the broadside: mediating violence in *Blackwood's*

From its earliest editions in 1817 *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* was strongly associated with textual and physical acts of violence. Schoenfield (2009, 187) summarises that "*Blackwood's* editorial coterie understood its acts of representation as violent reconstructions of reality, its attacks on individuals as assassinations, and its competition with other periodicals as fights, battles, wars, and usurpation." The scandal precipitated by the first edition of the new *Blackwood's* was largely due to the violent personal attacks contained in the "Chaldee Manuscript," a review of Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* and the first "Cockney School" article. Although the magazine temporarily backed off from such personal attacks following the widespread condemnation of the first edition, Tom Mole (2013, 92) has argued that *Blackwood's* maintained a commitment to the publication of defamatory "personalities." This tendency towards personal attack eventually led to a real scene of interpersonal violence when John Scott, the editor of *The London Magazine*, was killed in a duel with John Gibson Lockhart's agent Jonathan Henry Christie in 1821, following a war of words in the two periodicals. Incredibly, within two months of Scott's death *Blackwood's* was crowing that Lockhart was "wet with the blood of Cockneys" (Morrison and Roberts 2013, 3).

Alongside this concern with interpersonal conflict, the magazine rapidly developed a distinctive approach to sensation and violence in its short fiction. The classic tale of terror generally detailed "the recorded 'sensations' of a first-person narrator witnessing his own responses to extreme physical and psychological pressure" (Morrison and Baldick 1995, xiv). The reader's perspective on events in these texts rarely expands beyond the box, prison, or bell in which the protagonist finds themselves and readers are therefore limited to this subjective and extremely restricted perspective. The reader feels, for the period they are reading, to entirely inhabit the subjectivity of the protagonist.⁴ The signature style of *Blackwood's* terror fiction was one dedicated to the minute description of extreme emotional response and intense readerly identification.

Although, as Matthew McGuire (2012, 9) has noted, traditional accounts of nineteenth-century crime writing cast the genre as "essentially a Victorian phenomenon," the crime fiction published in *Blackwood's* during the 1810s and 1820s has in recent decades received increasingly critical attention.⁵ Similarly, the role of *Blackwood's* fiction in the development of the Gothic has received increasing acknowledgement.⁶

In both contexts, particular attention has turned to the employment of discourses drawn from non-literary sources. Morrison and Baldick (1995, xv) have commented that *Blackwood's* terror tales draw upon “the popular traditions of sensational “true crime” narrative often found in broadsheet, chapbook, and newspaper publications.” In her work on the emergence of detective fiction, Heather Worthington (2005, 2) has argued that *Blackwood's* played an important role in the adoption of the subject matter and approaches of crime broadsides into literary writing, participating in the “intellectual appropriation of crime.”

This “intellectual appropriation of crime” within the tales of terror is particularly noteworthy because it runs counter to wider contemporary discourses around middle-class cultural consumption (Worthington 2005, 2). As Rosalind Crone (2012, 2) has noted, the proliferation of ideas of “politeness, sensibility, humanitarianism, evangelicalism and respectability” within British society from the mid-eighteenth century onwards has been widely regarded as a key factor in changing middle-class attitudes to criminal narratives. Anxiety about the influence of “gallows literature” on the new reading public was pervasive by the late eighteenth century; V. A. C. Gatrell (1994, 161) describes chronic “concern about the quality of mass reading material of this kind” in contemporary commentary. Although they had been its main consumers during the eighteenth century, by the early nineteenth century middle-class readers were increasingly unlikely to purchase the *Newgate Calendar* (Walsh 2014, 65) and its readership shrank drastically as “the deeds of criminals were now regarded by the respectable as inappropriate subjects for literature” (Crone 2012, 78). Instead, the trade in cheap crime broadsides flourished with the majority of these publications purchased by working-class readers (Crone 2012, 96). At the same time, it was becoming increasingly unfashionable for genteel people, particularly women, to attend executions (Gatrell 1994, 261). A class distinction was rapidly emerging in the way that the public engaged with, or wished to be seen to engage with, crime and violence. In his journal entry for 31 January 1829, Walter Scott expresses his disgust at “the eager curiosity with which the public have licked up all carrion details” of the Burke and Hare Anatomy Murders, illustrating the increasing association of the consumption of crime reportage with the vulgar, general population (Scott 2013, 227). These changes in patterns of cultural consumption preceded the reduction in English executions that followed the repeal of the “bloody code” in the 1830s and the movement of executions from public to private prison space in 1868 (Gatrell 1994, 9–10).

Blackwood's was aimed at the elite and middle-class readership increasingly eschewing the *Newgate* and avoiding executions. It sought to engender a sense of exclusivity amongst its readership. However, the popular tales of terror which the magazine published were heavily influenced by popular criminal narratives, often detailing stories of murder, execution, and dissection. How could *Blackwood's* readers be differentiated from the “mob” as they “licked up” these “carrion details”?

To bring sensational stories of crime and violence into the parlour, writers often employ the professional expert as a mediating agent within the magazine's terror writing. There have been several studies which have drawn attention to the close relationship between the medical case study and the *Blackwood's* tales of terror.⁷ The fictionalised case study participates in a wider pattern of secrecy and revelation that was central to *Blackwood's* efforts to engage its readership and foster a sense of intimacy.⁸ Privileged

access to the prison cell, the confessional, or the asylum is offered through the stories' adoption of educated professional protagonists or frame narrators. The protagonists of these tales also use the "professional gaze" to focalise the reader's view of events, giving detailed clinical accounts of their experiences. The terror stories draw upon the emerging professions for their gothic potential, their implications of exclusivity, and, perhaps most importantly, their perspective. The employment of the "professional" gaze means that the text can model its own distanced reading; a way of looking which differentiates the narrator and reader from the "crowd" of general readers. These stories are not for the public at large but for educated insiders capable of viewing their contents dispassionately.

However, many of the tales of terror are sceptical in their representation of the possibility of an objective professional gaze. This scepticism is informed by the magazine's Tory politics and its rejection of the Enlightenment-inspired rationalism of its Whig competitor *The Edinburgh Review*. Coyer suggests that the tale of terror, rather than signalling objectivity by echoing the depersonalised narrative style of the medical case study, instead employs a fully developed first-person narrator and thus sets up "a dialectic between the empirical narrator's sensational relation of the events and the putatively authoritative medico-scientific narrative" (2017, 48). Whilst the medical register might offer the possibility of a more elevated perspective, this is challenged through the first-person voice of the narrator whose descriptions of their experiences can never be truly objective.

The crowd, the expert and the criminal: witnessing violence in *Blackwood's* terror fiction

The authors of the tales of terror were highly aware of their own texts' position within conversations about violence and readership. The execution scene provided several of these authors with an opportunity to explore what it means to deliberately watch or consume an act of violence. In Henry Thomson's "Le Revenant" (1827) and Robert McNish's "An Execution in Paris" (1828) depictions of the public execution explore the relationship between mass readership, spectacular violence, and the periodical press in the early decades of the nineteenth century. These tales, in their descriptions of violent public spectacle, toy with the ways in which they might differentiate the *Blackwood's* readership from the imagined, ill-informed, and emotionally incontinent masses even as they seek to engender crowd-pleasing, sensational thrills.

In his tale of terror, "An Execution in Paris," McNish describes the execution of a Parisian child-murderer from the point of view of a British visitor, contrasting the responses of crowd and expert. As a British man and a Tory, McNish's narrator's expectations of the execution are coloured by the cultural memory of the French Revolution: "when I thought of it, the overwhelming tragedy of the revolution was brought before my eyes – that Revolution which plunged Europe in seas of blood, and stamped an indelible impression upon the whole fabric of modern society" (1828, 785). He has in a way come to witness history, attempting to recreate the bloody scenes which Edmund Burke had emotively introduced to the British Tory consciousness some forty years before.⁹

His impressions of the crowd are therefore coloured by this context. Rather than focusing closely on the minute sensations of the condemned man, McNish's account describes those of the British narrator in tandem with those of the other spectators. The vast, foreign crowd is repeatedly described in the early passages as a force of nature or an amorphous monster:

The Place de Grève was literally paved with human beings ... men, women and children, were clumped together into one dense aggregate of living matter; and as the huge multitude moved itself to and fro, it was as the incipient stirring of an earthquake, or the lazy floundering of the sea, when its waves, exhausted by a recent storm, tumble their huge sides about, like the indolent leviathan which floats upon their surface. (785)

McNish's narrator imagines the French public as a threatening inhuman mob. Coyer has observed that the narrator distances himself from this monstrous mass but the narrator's disassociation from the crowd is gradually eroded by his observations of the reactions of the crowd and his own sensations (2017, 73). McNish's narrator becomes caught up in the emotional responses of those around him. At some points he is able to sympathise with and describe the thoughts of the mob and at others their collective violence and emotion becomes terrifying to him as an outside observer (1828, 787). In the final moments before the fall of the blade, the crowd fall silent, and the narrator himself experiences an involuntary physical response to the scene at the guillotine: "my respiration was almost totally suspended – my heart beat violently, and a feeling of intense anxiety and suffocation pervaded my frame" (787). Due to their recent political history, the Parisians become a symbol of the dangers of mob rule to the narrator, a terrifying image of the power of the masses. The object of terror is not the guillotine but the crowd and their effect on the author. Through participating in the emotional extremities of the crowd, the narrator has been transformed into one of them, experiencing the terrifying ease with which one can become part of the mob.

The story models another way of looking at the scaffold for *Blackwood's* professional audience. In his descriptions of the criminal's corpse, McNish's background as a surgeon informs his gaze; the descriptions of the body are detailed and clinical. The narrator's description of the corpse in the moments after the guillotine has fallen is observational rather than emotive: "I looked attentively to observe if there was any motion in the trunk – any convulsive start at the instant of decapitation, but there was none" (788). Moved by "the same curiosity which led me to witness this revolting sight," McNish's narrator attends the dissection of the body the next day (788). His description is again highly analytical and this tone places him amongst the "scientific men present":

There was no portion whatever of the neck remaining attached to the trunk. It, as well as the head, had been severed from the body. The axe had struck at its very root, and even grazed the collar bone where it is fixed to the sternum. This is not in general the case, the neck being in most instances pretty accurately cut through the middle-one half of it adhering to the head, the other to the trunk. (788)

Where earlier in the narrative the narrator is unable to maintain clinical distance from the crowd and the scene of violence he witnesses, here the body can be viewed with absolute emotional detachment. Where the crowd at the execution is threatening and terrifying, the dissection of the body within the anatomy theatre is not a gothic scene but a

professional one. The vetted audience of “scientific men” are capable of looking at the body with a professional eye, of resisting the emotional reaction which the corpse elicits.

However, the narrative is bookended with considerations of the appropriateness of the tale for publication. It opens with the narrator’s admission that he wished to see the execution, “to my shame be it spoken, I wished to see an execution by guillotine,” and this shame resurfaces in the final paragraph of the text (785). The tale ends on an ambivalent note, as the narrator expresses his uncertainty about what he has written:

I am not sure that I have done right in making such a scene as the above the subject of an article. There is something in the minute details of an execution, at which the mind shudders; and it is probable the reader may think that my impressions of the spectacle just related, should have been confined to my own bosom instead of being made public. (788)

This squeamishness about “the minute details of an execution” can signal the refinement of both reader and author differentiating them from the carrion hungry mob, but it may also reinforce the continued moral ambiguity of presenting spectacular violence to a faceless reading audience whose responses cannot be predicted or controlled. The reading public potentially resembles less the select gathering of medical men than the thronging “multitude.”

A similarly monstrous crowd, viewed from a different perspective, features in Henry Thomson’s “Le Revenant.” The story describes a condemned man’s miraculous survival of his own execution, using his account of his own death to self-consciously appraise the criminal narrative as an object of mass consumption. In Thomson’s tale readers are positioned, not as members of a crowd consuming a bloody scene, but with the condemned atop the scaffold. Looking out from this position, the condemned man describes the crowd that has gathered to witness his execution:

I saw the immense crowd blackening the whole area of the street below me. The windows of the shops and houses opposite, to the fourth story, choaked with gazers ... I see it all now – the whole horrible landscape before me. The scaffold-the rain-the faces of the multitude – the people clinging to the house-tops ... the waggons filled with women, staring in the inn-yards opposite-the hoarse low roar that ran through the gathered crowd as we appeared. (1827, 415)

Blackening every available surface like a swarm and roaring like a single great monster the spectators are entirely dehumanised. Those who wish to witness the violent spectacle form a mob, but the reader remains identified with the criminal. This creates a strange moment of potential self-identification where the intrigued and titillated reader looks upon their own bloodthirsty face.

Thomson’s tale signals this concern with readership and authority from its opening, a playful epigraph with no source but the narrator himself which reads, “there are but two classes of persons in the world – those who are hanged and those who are not hanged; and it has been my lot to belong to the former” (409). Having set up this dualism, in his first address to the reader the narrator adopts a tone which is simultaneously confident, knowing, and intimate. Every man, he asserts, has pondered his own mortality and felt a curiosity to “know what their sensations would be if they were compelled to lay life down” (409). The reader is implicitly included in this group, numbered amidst the “poets and painters” who depict condemned men, the thousands of young men “uneasy until they have mounted a breach, or fought a duel,” and the “footboys and

‘prentices’” who accidentally hang themselves in experiment (409). From this motley assortment of masculinity, the narrator differentiates himself as an expert, one who is “in a situation to speak, from experience upon that very interesting question” (409). The narrator begins his tale by displaying his own credentials as an expert witness, an authority on the experience of being hung.

However, the expert-in-hanging progressively loses authority over his observations and his laconic, playful tone dissolves into one which is far more fearful and scattered. This process reaches its zenith at the scaffold when the condemned man, unable to remember events beyond this point, refers to press accounts of his own experience, “I read in the daily newspapers, an account of my behaviour at the scaffold” (416). News accounts substitute the eyewitness account at the moment of greatest crisis. The hanged man is as much a spectator as his own readership.

Presented alongside, and in contrast to, the narrator’s increasingly emotionally fraught and chaotic impressions of the days and hours leading to his execution, is the mechanical and entirely disinterested process of the justice system. The courts and the prison are presented as a relentless inhuman counting house of crime, processing the clerk narrator for his execution as he would process the books: “the whole business of my trial and sentence, passed over as coolly and formally, as I would have calculated a question of interest or summed up an underwriting account” (410). The lawyers, gaolers and judge are professionals going about the business of the court; the judge speaking in “a tone which had neither severity about it, nor compassion – nor carelessness, nor anxiety – nor any character or expression whatever that could be distinguished” (410). The inexorable conveyor belt, progressing predictably towards death, provides a sense of sickening inevitability to the story, as the narrator’s ever vacillating state of mind makes no impression on the unvarying machine of justice. The reader cannot sympathetically engage with any part of this system. They find themselves tied to the human, if erring, narrator rather than any one of the detached professionals he encounters on his journey to the scaffold.

Like “An Execution in Paris,” “Le Revenant” is alive to the instability of status between author, narrator, and reader, between crowd, expert and criminal, and this shifting ground is explored in the story’s dense intertextuality. The early paragraphs of “Le Revenant” knowingly position it in relation to execution sheets and other sensation writing. The protagonist refers to his previous enjoyment of “extraordinary narratives,” before offering up his own:

But the cause which excites me to write is this – my greatest pleasure through life, has been the perusal of any extraordinary narratives of fact. An account of a shipwreck in which hundreds have perished; of a plague that has depopulated towns or cities; anecdotes and inquiries connected with the regulation of prisons, hospitals, or lunatic receptacles; nay, the very police reports of a common newspaper – as relative to matters of reality; have always excited a degree of interest in my mind which cannot be produced by the best invented tale of fiction ... I believe therefore, that, to persons of a temper like my own, the Reading that which I have to relate will afford very high gratification. (409)

The narrator’s personal reading list is one in which literary material is conspicuously absent. Instead, it gathers together the sorts of curious case studies and gutter reports that Coyer and Worthington have identified as sources for the realism of the tales of terror. Thomson’s story, in this reading, wears its influences on its sleeve. In attributing these reading practices to the narrator, and placing this story amongst these texts, the

author reinforces the association between criminal and *Blackwood's* reader. The narrator is at once both the subject of a tale and, like the *Blackwood's* audience, an enthusiastic consumer of such tales.

The protagonist's early playfulness in describing his experiences, and enthusiastic consumption of violent non-fiction, also hint at a third position between crowd and professional: that of the amateur enthusiast. The knowing tone of the early passages of Thomson's story is one that would be shared with De Quincey's narrator. However, Thomson's protagonist's criminality, and the breakdown of his enthusiastic but sardonic self-presentation, demonstrate the issues that also arise when this third figure takes centre stage in De Quincey's essays. To what extent can the amateur's enthusiasm be differentiated from the emotional excesses of the mob?

Amateurs and dilettanti: De Quincey's murder fanciers

De Quincey's essays also foreground the consumer of violence: imagining the proceedings of a murder appreciation society. In these texts the polar opposites of insatiable mob and emotionally ascetic expert are joined by the amateur connoisseur. Refined and removed from the uneducated mass of general readers, but enthusiastic and emotionally invested in the objects of his study, the amateur might seem to offer a human way to read, a suitable model for the *Blackwood's* reader.

The figure of the enthusiastic amateur was a recurring concept across *Blackwood's* and associated publications prior to 1827. The term dilettanti recurs in *Blackwood's*, often in reference to the Edinburgh Dilettanti Club, a society whose membership included prominent *Blackwood's* writers. Like the original Society of Dilettanti in London, the Edinburgh club's objectives combined the connoisseurly and social; Gillian Hughes (2006, xliii) has noted that the Edinburgh group's aim was "the diffusion of a love for the Fine Arts, and the cultivation of friendly intercourse with each other." The Edinburgh Dilettanti Club "met regularly at Young's Tavern in the High Street" where they drank "Edinburgh ale and whisky toddy" (Garside 2009, 30). The figure of the dilettanti or amateur is one we might associate with a third category of non-literary text with a strong presence in *Blackwood's* fictionalised world: the minutes or proceedings of a gentlemen's club or society. The magazine had featured notices for lecture series and essays written as lectures, such as John Wilson's "Lectures on the Fine Arts," prior to De Quincey's sketches. Perhaps most prominent though were the ongoing series of fictitious sketches the *Noctes Ambrosianae*.

Robert Morrison (2009a, 253) notes that De Quincey may have borrowed the central conceit of his first essay *On Murder*, the aesthetic appreciation of violence and suffering, from the April 1824 instalment of the *Noctes Ambrosianae*. Its extended, playful discussion of recent bloody crimes features a dialogue between the irreverent, cynical Tickler and North, and the credulous, shocked Shepherd, which rehearses the tension between connoisseur and crowd at the heart of De Quincey's essays. Most presciently for this article, it is also highly concerned with the permeability of these social categories. Whilst standing in the street appreciating a shop fire North, Tickler and the Shepherd are joined by another spectator.¹⁰ This additional figure asks if they are fellow "amateurs," describes his own appreciation of great fires, and then absents himself with the Shepherd's pocket watch, revealing himself not to be an amateur appreciator of fires

but a professional criminal (“Noctes” 1824, 366). This scene, with its knowing admission of the instability of social categories, lays the groundwork for De Quincey’s incisive commentary on periodical writing.

De Quincey’s 1827 essay “On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts” lays out a dialectic between the moral and aesthetic reader similar to the one imagined in the conversation between Tickler, North, and the Shepherd. The essay opens with a letter to the editor in which the submitter, “X.Y.Z,” describes the society from which he has sourced the lecture as one which encourages murder. However, this is followed by an editor’s note which responds sceptically to this claim, questioning the submitter’s interpretation of the lecture: “we cannot suppose the lecturer to be in earnest, any more than Erasmus in his Praise of Folly, or Dean Swift in his proposal for eating children” (De Quincey [1827] 2009, 9). Although Robert Morrison notes that this addition may have been inserted without De Quincey’s consent, it underlines a concern which is abundantly present throughout the essay (2009b, 168). The “lecture” itself reintroduces the problem of interpretation:

everything in this world has two handles. Murder, for instance, may be laid hold of by its moral handle, (as it generally is in the pulpit, and at the Old Bailey;) and *that*, I confess is its weak side; or it may be treated *aesthetically*, as the Germans call it, that is, in relation to good taste. (De Quincey [1827] 2009, 10–11)

From the earliest part of the text, its readers are faced with two possible ways in which to approach the text; on one hand the “lecture” is an earnest challenge to moral order, which in describing and celebrating violent crime promotes such acts; on the other it is a satire, a sophisticated play upon its subject matter to be read sceptically, in the tradition of fore-runners such as Swift’s “Modest Proposal” or Erasmus’s “In Praise of Folly.” Readers are split into those who like “X.Y.Z” credulously take the essay at face value and sophisticated readers who are capable of identifying and appreciating its irony. Readers are “in” on the joke or they are not; “informed readers” or moralists. In their intellectual appreciation of crime, the “connoisseurs” are marked apart from those who never move beyond a “moral” understanding of murder. The lecturer seeks to differentiate the spectator of sensibility from the wider collective of general readers: “as to old women, and the mob of newspaper readers, they are pleased with anything, provided it is bloody enough. But the mind of sensibility requires something more” (31).

The simple division of readers into connoisseurs and crowd rapidly disintegrates. The contemporary murders which the lecturer lauds are not necessarily the sophisticated pieces of artistry we might expect. In fact, behind the screen of erudite phrases and classical references, the lecturer’s accounts of modern murders have, like the tales of terror, more in common with contemporary broadside and newspaper content than high literature and are full of blunt violence. For example, in one scene of the 1827 essay a baker and an amateur murderer engage in twenty-seven rounds of bare-knuckle boxing described as if it is being reported in a newspaper sports column (27–28). This promiscuous integration of high and low culture recurs across the essays. Susan Oliver (2013, 44) has described the essays in the “On Murder” group as “agents in a ‘catastrophe’ of genre”; two disparate areas of the public sphere mix and mingle, confounding differentiations between high and low culture. The murder connoisseurs are revealed to be not so removed from the “mob of newspaper readers.”

De Quincey's representation of an execution scene also seems designed to interact with the figure of the detached professional we have identified in contemporary tales of terror. Just as the connoisseur is revealed to never be far removed from the mob, in this scene, so is the professional unmasked as a criminal. A hanging highwayman is cut down from the gallows early, not so that the anatomists can attempt to reanimate him, but to guarantee his "uncommonly fine" body for an ambitious surgeon's dissection table:

"... By the connivance of the under-sheriff he was cut down within the legal time, and instantly put in a chaise and four; so that, when he reached Cruikshank's, he was positively not dead. Mr.—, a young student at the time, had the honour of giving him the *coup-de-grace*,- and finishing the sentence of the law." This remarkable anecdote, which seemed to imply that all the gentlemen in the dissecting-room were amateurs of our class, struck me a good deal. (De Quincey [1827] 2009, 25)

The professional anatomist is transformed into an amateur murderer confounding the possibility of benign clinical detachment. The professional whose dispassionate reading practices the reader might try to mimic is revealed to be a killer.

The 1839 essay explores the same set of shifting social roles and identifications. It again opens with a direct address by an anonymous informant to the fictional editor of *Blackwood's*, Christopher North. The metatextual games begin at this juncture. The informant identifies himself through reference to De Quincey's previous essay over a decade before: "a good many years ago you may remember that I came forward in the character of a *dilettante* in murder" ([1839] 2009, 81). However, the informant mischaracterises the frame narrative previously employed in the 1827 essay, which was originally presented as a transcription of a lecture that had been leaked by the censorious "X.Y.Z." The new informant is quickly identified, not as "X.Y.Z.," but as the chair who delivered the previous lecture and has since been "outed" to his disapproving neighbours by its publication. He humorously bemoans the misinterpretation of the previous essay by readers and enters into a spirited justification of the lecture and his membership of the club, complaining that "a man is not bound to put his eyes, ears, and understanding into his britches pocket when he meets with murder" (81). De Quincey quickly creates a complex interpretative space where the reader's capacity to suspend conventional morality and draw upon previous reading is essential to their appreciation of, and capacity to participate in, the game. They must relinquish the perspective of the neighbour and take on that of a connoisseur.

The tone of the narrator's address remains consistent across the two essays. Both the 1827 lecture and the 1839 letter to the editor employ copious references to classical tradition and playfully attempt to assemble an antiquarian account of historical murder. However, where the 1827 lecture is an uninterrupted opportunity for the lecturer to showcase this erudition and learning, the 1839 letter describes a far more challenging exchange between the lecturer and his fellow connoisseurs. The speaker was previously able to assemble his account of aesthetic murder uninterrupted but now he is unable to contain the enthusiasm of the increasingly boisterous club for drink, song, and violence: "I made again a powerful effort to overrule the challenge. I might as well have talked to the winds" ([1839] 2009, 89). The perilous relationship between speaker and audience has grown even more tenuous than in the previous lecture and the connoisseur finds himself,

not the arbiter of the joke, but at risk of himself being rendered ridiculous as his soliloquies are continuously interrupted and undercut by his audience, who also wish to be heard. If these two figures articulate the positions of writer and readership, then their relationship is here understood in more antagonistic terms.

The ongoing invocation of the missing “reporter” in the second essay is also important to understanding this more troubled and shifting dynamic. The narrator notes that he has kept a record of events because the previous reporter is “missing – I believe murdered” ([1839] 2009, 87). Throughout the dinner a Latin song celebrating a member of the party, Toad-in-the-Hole’s, rumoured murder of the reporter punctuates and interrupts the speeches. A sort of death of the author has already been enacted on the previous record keeper by the connoisseurs and is repeatedly invoked to disrupt his successor. The pedantic narrator is eventually even forced to cease his homilies on classical murder in order to eject Toad-in-the-hole who seems intent upon again enacting the real murder of his fellow connoisseurs:

Toad-in-the-hole had become quite 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 weary of life, he had resolved to go off in a general massacre. This we could not think of allowing. ([1839] 2009, 94)

As Oliver puts it, “the essay ends amidst a riot of pistol fire, in effect shooting to pieces all semblance of order and decorum” (46). The meeting of connoisseurs dissolves into a mob despite the lecturer’s earlier claims to elevation and satire. The club and their responses to the lecture cannot be controlled or predicted just as the neighbourly reader cannot be forced to read the 1827 essay in the way that the lecturer might desire.

Identifying the murderer

This narrative pattern in which learned discussion and discourse in a club-like environment descends into debauchery and humorous farce is similar to that which was often employed in the Blackwood’s *Noctes Ambrosianae*. In fact, the “Paper” with its dense Latin quotation, homo-social setting, heavy drinking, and inset songs is remarkably similar in tone and style to a scene from the *Noctes*. *Blackwood’s* presented itself as a select gentleman’s club and used features like the *Noctes Ambrosianae* to engender readership intimacy even as its terror fiction steered towards the violent and sensational. De Quincey’s gathering of murder fanciers can be read as a parodic reflection of this contradictory representational strategy. What differentiates the *Noctes* from De Quincey’s essays is only that where the *Noctes* detail the gathering of a semi-fictitious periodical staff and readership, the essays describe the gathering of a fictitious murder appreciation society. They are, in this reading, a mirror held up to the *Noctes* and to *Blackwood’s* itself, which reveals the famously bloodthirsty magazine to be a thinly disguised murder appreciation society meeting intent on murdering the “reporter.”

Although the revelation of the true nature of Blackwoodian community throws the contradictory ideological forces at play within the magazine into sharp relief, De Quincey never conclusively rejects the patchwork of morality and violence, and street and salon which his essays identify. His rendering of the world of the murder connoisseurs is, in the words of Robert Morrison, “both disturbing and seductive” (2009a, 254).

De Quincey's own journalistic career and literary output illustrated a personal fascination with the very types of crime which his connoisseurs pore over. If De Quincey is indeed attempting to critique a culture of violent voyeurism amongst *Blackwood's* readers and contributors, then it is a culture which he himself is complicit in creating and feeding.

Even as he picked apart the members club conceit at the heart of *Blackwood's* self-presentation, De Quincey's perspective on the reading public was also conflicted. Morrison notes that "as early as 1822 he had complained of the 'stupidity' of the reading public, and throughout his career his efforts to engage a wide audience put intense pressure on his conception of himself as 'a scholar and gentleman'" (2009a, 348). However, his literary career continued to be characterised by an ongoing fascination with violence, a commitment to shock value which sat uneasily alongside his erudition. De Quincey was thus himself a murder fancier. The incisiveness and ambivalence of his portrait of the *Blackwood's* "connoisseurs" can perhaps be attributed to the fact that it is a critique of not just the magazine he was writing for but his own practices as man of letters. Similarly, we might think of the shifting identifications of Thomson and McNish's fiction in a similar way. This instability of association between reader and narrator complicates the allegiances of gothic writing and serves to reveal the instability of the relationship between the terror tale author and the periodical's mass readership.

To understand this, we might turn to the "Postscript" that De Quincey wrote to his essays in 1854. De Quincey returns once again in this essay to Swift, the spectacle of a public fire, and the Ratcliffe Highway murders, but the uncertain relationship between author and narrator, and the sense of a secret history revealed, that characterised the 1827 and 1839 essays, are lost. This is a more conventional piece of storytelling that is less concerned with problematising its own production and consumption than in exploring the intimate details of crimes that had fascinated De Quincey throughout his career. Rather than divide an unseen audience into minds "of sensibility" and mob, De Quincey addresses an already thinned and selected readership:

Fortunately, after all such churls have withdrawn from my audience in high displeasure, there remains a large majority who are loud in acknowledging the amusement which they have derived from a former paper of mine, "On Murder considered as one of the Fine Arts." (De Quincey [1854] 2009, 95)

There is no uncertainty here about the identity of the reader or narrator, and no attempt to play the complex metatextual games of the earlier essays. De Quincey speaks in his own voice to an audience aware of his previous work. There are a range of factors that may inform this fundamental change in tone and focalisation. The "Postscript" is the product of a different literary world, a different publishing venue, and, to an extent, a different author. De Quincey did not publish his "Postscript" in *Blackwood's*. Instead, it formed one of the pieces of new material included in *Selections Gay and Grave*, the first collected anthology of De Quincey's work. On a practical level, De Quincey could anticipate a defined and self-selecting readership. Additionally, the very publication of *Selections* can be understood as a clear articulation of De Quincey's status in 1854 as man of letters rather than periodical hack, a mark of the "unexpectedly triumphant end" of De Quincey's struggles to survive within the literary marketplace (Dart 2008, 187). Renowned enough to warrant the publication of a collected works, De Quincey's

status as Romantic genius is to an extent assured. A different type of writing about crime and violence is possible.¹¹

What this shift in style signposts for this article though is the way that publishing venue and period inform the use of the three figures of crowd, professional and amateur in the earlier texts we've examined. De Quincey's personal ambivalence about his status as a periodical writer is indicative of a tension that lies at the heart of the *Blackwood's* authors' engagements with violent spectacle and the crowd. Like Thomson and McNish's tales with their ambivalent narrators and shifting ideas of audience, De Quincey's 1827 and 1839 essays register the fractious nature of early-century periodical production and consumption. Only by differentiating their readership from the mob could authors differentiate themselves from the hawkers selling their wares at the foot of the scaffold. When these categorisations prove unstable so too does the authority of the author himself.

However, there is also a sense that this instability is not an anxiety but a strategy. In encouraging the reader to engage with the uncertain and shifting allegiances of these texts, periodical writers, to paraphrase Russett (1997), "inscribe the terms of their own interpretation." These authors draw upon the conventions of contemporary functional writing even as they reject that functionality through the use of satire and emotion. A new space is created outside of reason, and a different mode of reading is modelled that does not assume veracity. Responding to a specific contemporary literary context, the periodical essays and tales employ the figures of crowd, expert, and connoisseur to participate in a complex negotiation of the new roles available within literary life and furnish a space apart, where these roles can be interrogated, and problematised, within the pages of the periodical.

Notes

1. See Richard Cronin *Paper Pellets: British Literary Culture after Waterloo* (2010) and Jon P. Klancher *The Making of English Reading Audiences* (1987) for fuller accounts of the development of Romantic print culture.
2. For more discussion of these strategies see Christine Woody (2020) "Performing Personae in Blackwood's and Romantic Periodicals."
3. This is discussed in the majority of accounts of the inception of *Blackwood's*. See for example Robert Morrison and Daniel Sanjiv Roberts' Introduction to *Romanticism and Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (2013).
4. Hege Segerblad (2010) discusses how this strategy represented an innovation in Gothic writing and engages interestingly with the politics of this identification in her Master's thesis, *Transcending the Gothic: "The Extravagancies of Blackwood."*
5. Examples include Heather Worthington's (2010) chapter "From the Newgate Calendar to Sherlock Holmes" in *A Companion to Crime Fiction* and Stephen Knight's (2010) survey work *Crime Fiction Since 1800: Detection, Death, Diversity*.
6. For example, Yael Shapira (2018) engages with the tale of terror as a successor to the *The Monk* and *Zofloya's* sensational body horror.
7. Morrison and Baldick comment that "the more direct realism of Blackwood's terror fiction seems to be derived from the popular traditions of sensational 'true crime' narrative often found in broadsheet, chapbook, and newspaper publications" (1995, xv). Heather Worthington has argued that the magazine's crime stories drew upon the conventions of street literature whilst adapting them to suit a more socially elevated audience (2010, 23). Most recently, Megan Coyer (2017, 36) highlights this relationship, describing the

emergence of a register termed by physician and contributor David. M. Moir as the “medico-popular” within the magazine.

8. This aspect of *Blackwood's* self-presentation is explored in Mark Schoenfield's 2020 essay “‘Some Grand Secreter’: Secrecy and Exposure in *Blackwood's*.”
9. The scene echoes Edmund Burke's (2009) revolutionary writings of the 1790s. See *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.
10. This scene is echoed in De Quincey's 1827 essay.
11. See Gregory Dart's (2008) discussion of the essay's relationship with the Newgate Novel.

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