"Thuggee in London!": Metropolitan Sensationalism and the Invention of the Thug

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IN November 1856 panic tore through the middle classes of London as the press teemed with sensational reports of an overwhelming rise in garrote robberies (violent muggings by means of strangulation). The supposed upsurge in these crimes is now widely understood to have been fabricated by the newspapers, yet the ensuing moral panic was pervasive—altering the operations of the Metropolitan Police force, instigating new legislation, changing public behavior, disturbing social representations.

In the aftermath, several small clay figurines depicting so-called Indian thugs engaged in their profession (murder and highway robbery) were removed from public display in the British Museum and placed in a private room. "[T]he reason of their withdrawal," the American novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote in his December 7, 1857, notebook, "is, that, according to the Chaplain of Newgate, the practice of garroting was suggested to the English thieves by this representation of Indian Thugs."[1] The thugs were, allegedly, a cult of religiously motivated highway bandits that operated throughout the Indian subcontinent, preying upon travelers and engaging in *thuggee* (ritual strangulation with a *rumal*, a silk scarf, in devotion to the Hindu goddess of death, Kali). The roots of violent metropolitan crime, it was widely held, were to be found in these inebriate Indian practices; the British center was in some sense being altered, contaminated, by contact with the imperial periphery.

The perceived contaminating influence of colonial disorder upon metropolitan society had been discussed at length in wider reportage.[2] On July 19, 1851, under the sensational title "THUGGEE IN LONDON!", *The Times* published a letter from "a gentleman who was nearly strangled";[3] in November 1856 *The Globe* reported that "Street Bedouins lurk in the highways";[4] in the same month, *The Times* claimed that "metropolitan and provincial Thugs" were "waging a predatory war

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against society";[5] in 1857 a parliamentary debate reported in *The Times* held this "new species of offence" to be more "allied to the Thug system than anything else."[6] This "anything else" had, at turns, taken the form of French Jacobinism or of the nebulous contaminating influences of Continental Europe more generally; in a section entitled "The Ruffian," for instance, Dickens wrote in *The Uncommercial Traveller* (1860) "of that solitary mountain-spur of the Abruzzi, the Waterloo Road," "long infested" by criminal gangs.[7]

This sensationalized interchange between metropolitan discourse and imperial-national anxiety forms the governing concern of this essay. I chart a literary and cultural history of the Indian (and thereby metropolitan) thug as the figure emerged within the culture of London. In this case a most consequential text—which translated the thug into a roaring sensation throughout its middle- and upper-class readership—was the first British novelization of thug society: self-styled "Captain" Philip Meadows Taylor's *Confessions of a Thug* (1839). The novel is presented as a found manuscript, the detailed confessions of a "real-life" thug, Ameer Ali—captured, and so become informant in a bid to avoid the hangman's noose.[8] For Ali's ethnographic narration of his life of murder and thievery, the novel became a literary sensation of such prominence that not only did its avid readership include Queen Victoria, but, as Taylor recalls in his autobiography, the monarch even requested early sight of the proofs before publication.[9] *Confessions*, as such, provides insight into the peculiar origins of the thug as figured in British accounts—more specifically, as the figure arose within a popular literary, political, social, and medico-philosophical culture of metropolitan sensationalism.

It requires little work to identify something of this sensationalism in *Confessions*. The novel is replete with descriptions of a land covered in wild jungle, "thick and dangerous" (292); a land in which one might, at a moment's notice, be attacked by a hyena, panther, buffalo, bear, wolf, tiger, or, indeed, murderous fanatic. The pretense of any ethnographic reality in *Confessions* is belied by what Patrick Brantlinger has rightly called the mingling of "pornographic, aesthetic pleasure with ugly violence."[10] Ali sensationally recounts that he was as a child kidnapped by a gang of thugs and initiated into the cult, whereupon he subsequently rose through the ranks. His narrative therein expounds the structure of thug society, customs, and religion, together with the logistical workings of ritual attacks—how victims were selected, how bodies were disposed, how *thuggee* intersected with religious practices.

The title itself promises an insight into exotic and ulterior ways of being—ones that, by their nature, may only be "confessed" rather than discovered. The word "thug" conjures a sensational spectacle of theater: the reader may anticipate gruesome tales of "real-life" inebriate criminality yet simultaneously find assurance in the qualifying "Confessions" that this spectacular violence may be consumed through the lens of a British investigative (and so distanced) narrative.

One might, then, already suspect this sensationalism of constituting constructed categories of imperial alterity that, of course, were consequential. Yet the organizing argument that follows is that "sensationalism" in this case should be understood not only in its colloquial sense—an affective, dramatic, public spectacle (as manifest both in *Confessions* and in the anxieties of metropolitan contamination above)—but also as a legacy of its more specific, eighteenth-century meaning: that is, invocative of sense perception and interrelated ideas of sensibility. (Although, as we shall see, the interchange between these two meanings is a constant one.)

There are a number of corollaries that stem from this base case, relating to the origins, employment, and legacy of this sensationalism. In particular, many late eighteenth-century literary, philosophical, and medical formulations of sensibility, taste, and modes of consumption—in frequent discursive employment to construct and mediate sensationalist discourse in London (associated, in particular, with categories of class, gender, and criminality)—came to inform and be projected onto these imperial contexts. In many ways, then, the thug has less to do with Indian than with British culture. Yet this interchange between metropolitan and national discourse speaks not only to the "cultural mobility"[11] or discursive reciprocity (or, from another view, constructed difference) between India and London in the period—and thus to the analytical limitations of strict structuralist binaries between center and periphery—as many have already instructively mapped.[12] It also speaks to the specific discursive and rhetorical formulations that came to coalesce around a commercialized metropolitan curiosity about Indian culture and social practices—informed by, and developed within, this existing literary culture.

The sensationalized threat of contamination from without not only produces a heightened and affective mode of engagement with other cultures, lands, and people but also suggests the rhetorical underpinnings of interdependent categories of social and national difference that began to take form at the turn of the nineteenth century. These

categories, in particular, began to be understood through developing medico-literary ideas about physiology, sensibility, taste, and modes of consumption—something of a precursor to the racial categorizations and hierarchies of the nineteenth century. The thug is, then, not only an archetype of amalgamated and mutually constitutive criminal and colonial alterity (and so, for metropolitan readers, a literary and cultural object of curiosity) but also an archetype of the metaphorical employment of the language and conceptual functioning of human physiology and sensibility as a mediating category through which cultural difference became conceptualized, represented, assimilated, and popularly sensationalized.

Discovering the Thug

From the outset, the thug system was itself almost a sensational invention. The term was first "uncovered" by an East India Company (EIC) official in the newly acquired frontier region of north-central India.[13] Between 1808 and 1809, some sixty disfigured corpses were found strewn across the Chambal Badlands, particularly in Parihara (Sandaus), in the district of Etawah.[14] Since his appointment, the new judge and magistrate of Etawah and Mynpoori, Thomas Perry, had been confronted with widespread civil disobedience and the regular looting of local temples. Upon hearing news of the corpses, he therefore acted quickly to obtain information on the murders.[15] The local revenue functionaries (*daroghas*, *chowkidars*, and *patwaris*) spoke of bandits, patronized by local Rajput *zamindars* (landowners), who fell in with travelers and then murdered and mutilated them. Of the eight men whom Perry subsequently arrested, one—a twenty-year-old agricultural laborer—confessed his crimes: "My name is Gholam Hossyn. And I am a Thug."[16]

Hossyn's "confession" is the first record of an EIC official encountering the Hindi word *thag* (merely "robber" or "deceiver"; derived from the Sanskrit *sthaga*, "cunning," "fraudulent").[17] The extent to which Hossyn and his companions would have understood the term as a general moniker for banditry rather than the organized assembly the British took it to be is unclear. Yet the very fact that the word was buried in Indian society and excavated by British officials represents a sensational transferal of discursive authority—an acquisition of imperial "knowledge" that (whether accurately interpreted or otherwise) could be used to subdue the Indian subcontinent. Upon discovery of the cult, British administrators launched a fierce campaign against both the thugs and the contiguous

group of armed bandits known as dacoits, which came to be formalized as the Thuggee and Dacoity Suppression Acts, 1836–48. These acts applied to territories outside of the EIC's then jurisdiction, effectively widening their authority. John Marriott notes that dacoits, thugs, and tribals "were singled out as objects of particular concern, and attracted the most vicious forms of racial coding."[18] From 1831 to 1837, Taylor informs us in the introduction to *Confessions*, 3,266 thugs were imprisoned, many of whom were transported, hanged, or imprisoned (11).

Yet much revisionist scholarship has questioned both British imperial attitudes and the motives of the EIC in this early nineteenth-century "discovery." The entire cult, the argument has run, was a figment of the imperial imagination: a manufactured product of Saidian Orientalism,[19] a Foucauldian "monster,"[20] a specific policy to quell movement in the Indian interior,[21] a discursive strategy to justify British imperialism.[22] Recent alternative etiological suggestions have also been made: variously, that the cult was a result of the collapse of the Mughal Empire, a product of structural and societal dysfunction, a product of India's incorporation into capitalist world-markets, a response of internal violence to imperial violence, or a product of the changing nature of the Indian "state" and the codification of the disparate legal procedures of the EIC's administrative presidencies.[23] Kim A. Wagner has provided substantial evidence that some kind of organized banditry did indeed exist in parts of the Indian subcontinent but that this was considerably less than the widespread, caste-based, religiously motivated, sacrificial cult that British colonial officers alleged it to be, yet something more than the fantastic origins suggested in the postcolonial revisionism.[24]

The immediate historiography surrounding the cult belonged firmly to colonial state functionaries (in particular, to the colonial administrator William Sleeman) who alleged that the cult was born in the Middle Ages, a result of Indian ways of being and the moral bankruptcy of Hinduism. Sleeman published a number of works on the subject in London, whipping up a sensational fervor in the capital. During the 1830s he gathered together the so-called "*thuggee* archive," as Parama Roy has termed it—a group of texts comprising the EIC's original understanding of the thugs, generally understood to include Sleeman's published works, together with a vast array of derivative secondary literature.[25] Yet it was only as early as 1816 that the thug cult had taken form in British accounts as a complete, extant system of beliefs and ideologies. Dr. Richard Sherwood, a surgeon based at Fort St. George in Madras, had been the first to center the cult on the act of sacrificial devotions to Kali, detailed

in an essay published in the *Madras Literary Gazette*: "Of the Murderers Called P'hansigars" (the southern-India epithet for *thuggee*, derived from the Hindi *phansi*, "noose").[26]

This notion of *thuggee* as a religiously motivated practice was subsequently developed in an anonymous letter since attributed to Sleeman.[27] Sleeman wrote of Kali's temple at Bindachul (near Mirzapore on the Ganges), claiming that it was constantly filled with murderers from every region who traveled there to offer their plunder to the priests of the temple. The priests themselves, he claims, were complicit in these crimes.[28] Both Kali and the thug, then, were depicted as culturally systemic and direct threats to the Indian populace. Prior to this, as Wagner has identified, only one reference had been made in official EIC records to the idea of the thug as a Hindu cult,[29] and there had been a distinct lack of direct testimony as to the notion that all thugs worshipped Kali (in fact, several of those arrested explicitly denied it) or to the claim that Brahmin priests profited from the practice.[30] Many of those arrested as a result of the Suppression Acts were Muslim,[31] many of whom, as Cynthia Ann Humes has pointed to, invoked the Islamic concept of fate (*Iqbal*) as reason for their banditry rather than Kali, who was only mentioned in response to Sleeman's leading questions.[32] Still others claimed that it was the Hindu thugs who were mistaken, as Kali had been conflated with Fatima, the daughter of Muhammad, the true object of the cult's devotion.[33]

The realities of Indian syncretism at the time are well documented,[34] yet the British confusion (and enduring interest) in the seemingly bizarre reconciliation of, to borrow from *Confessions*, "the faith of Unbelievers and that of the blessed prophet" is explicit (44). The issue is considered at length within Sleeman's interviews, within the wider histories, and indeed almost at once within *Confessions* itself. As others have noted, the character of Ameer Ali is likely, at least in part, based on an infamous thug known as Feringhea (also known as Syeed Amir Ali). Feringhea was a "Thug leader of some note," to borrow Sleeman's words, whose capture represented something of a major coup for Sleeman.[35] Yet, intriguingly, where Feringhea stated that he followed Hinduism, Taylor explicitly reconstitutes Ali as a Mohammedan thug. In the practice of *thuggee*, "the Hindoo and the Moslim both unite as brothers," Ali's father declares (33).

As in Sleeman's early investigations, much is made throughout *Confessions* of how a Muslim might come to engage in acts of devotion to a Hindu deity. Ali's father claims he "cannot pretend to solve the difficulty" yet goes on to note that "as their religion [Hinduism] is far

more ancient than ours [Islam], and no doubt had a divine origin, there are many points in it which one of the true faith may follow without offence" (44). The description is not, then, something exclusively like the Orientalist frameworks that many have attributed to Sleeman's earlier inquiries—that is, that both Hindu and Muslim are so morally corrupt that they easily misplace their religious integrities, or that there is no real distinction to be found between the two equally depraved religions. It is also an exposition of a sublime encounter with the ancient and divine aspects of Hinduism (even if Taylor intends the European reader to disagree with, or even disbelieve, Ali's father on the subject).

Although many travel narratives were laden with negative value judgments of Hinduism, Europe had, across the eighteenth century, seen a storming interest in Indian art and architecture, literature and language, religion and culture, paralleling much of the Romantic revivals of the Greek and the Gothic.[36] Srinivas Aravamudan has noted the interconnectedness of the rise of the English novel and eighteenth-century Orientalist literature—a cultural relationship founded on fascination, sympathy, and in many ways criticism of European practices.[37] Taylor, in his status as Anglo-Indian, might too be better understood through this lens of cultural appreciation: he first entered India in 1823 at the age of fifteen and was subsumed in Indian culture for sixteen years before publishing *Confessions* while on furlough in London.

This appreciation is apparent in the reactions of a set of Britons in India. On February 22, 1825, for instance, the Right Reverend Reginald Heber, Lord Bishop of Calcutta, had encountered a devotion to Kali in a small Shaiva temple in the Chittoor district of Rayalaseema in Andhra Pradesh. The stone chamber surrounding the statue was stained with blood, and the skin of a tiger had been stretched before the Mother Goddess. In his widely read *Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Provinces of India* (1829), Heber recounts how dim lamps lit the "frightful figure of the blood-drinking goddess, with her lion, her many hands full of weapons, and her chaplet of skulls." Ostensibly, Heber's terror might reveal the imperialist attitudes through which he confronts the extreme other of Kali. Yet, perhaps surprisingly, Heber gave a rupee in alms to the "very handsome" blind Brahmin who presided over the "very beautiful" temple. "A Gothic or Grecian building of the same size," he writes, "would merely have been beautiful, but these [Shaiva temples], small as they are, are aweful."[38]

In much similar fashion, the Kali inhabiting Taylor's imaginary also bestrides the boundary between sublimity and terror—"splendid and

terrific," to borrow a description of the goddess by Ali's father (45).[39] The constructed confusion surrounding Ali's syncretism, then, acts as a device on both sides of the coin: on one is a sublime exposition of ancient Eastern religious practices that speaks to Nigel Leask's designation of a late eighteenth-century middle- and upper-class European "curiosity" toward other cultures—that is, a cultivated appreciation for the exotic, mediated by taste and sensibility;[40] on the reverse is a sensationalized (and, as we have seen, affective) British alarm that Kali and her devotees might contaminate those who belong to a different religion altogether, that they might infect "the true faith."[41] There is, then, an inherent tension in the discourse—between curiosity and contamination. Yet, as we shall see, this tension serves to heighten both.

Throughout his confessions, Ali trades in both this curiosity and this contamination. He boasts in the opening pages that "so long as one [thug] exists, he will gather others around him" (16). Taylor corroborates such notions in his introduction: "[T]here is no doubt that wherever one well initiated Thug exists, he will among the idle and dissolute characters which everywhere abound in the Indian population find numbers to join him" (12).[42] The author's motivation for writing, the reader is told, is not "to gratify a morbid taste in any one for tales of horror and of crime" but rather "to awaken public vigilance in the suppression of Thuggee" (13). Speaking to conceptions of what Montesquieu called "Oriental despotism" (of inherent disorder, of something like a precursor to Marx's later notion of "Asiatic modes of production"), Taylor claims that the conditions which allow the thugs to operate "are intimately connected with, and grow out of, the habits of the people, [and] have caused Thuggee to be everywhere spread and practised throughout India" (7).

The conceptual functioning of infectious disease here (an amalgamation of the contemporary miasmic and contagionist theories of disease) is further substantiated by the language of epidemiology: Ali's adopted father cries, "I am a Thug, a member of that glorious profession which has been transmitted from the remotest periods" (32).[43] This sensational notion is used to emphasize the authority of thugs and their patron goddess: "[W]e [thugs] are under the especial protection of Providence; and it would be sinful to question the propriety of any usages which have been transmitted from a period so remote" (46). Toward the end of the novel, Ali discovers that he was only taken in as an orphan by thugs because his parents were themselves murdered by thugs. The testimony of the novel is plain: *thuggee* breeds *thuggee*.

In an uncommon direct address at the midpoint of the novel, this contagion is taken to its logical conclusion. The "Englishman" (the unnamed English interlocutor to whom Ali is confessing) admits his empathy for Ali's condition and sensationally declares: "Reader, if you can embody these descriptions, you have Ameer Ali before you" (131). This request for the momentary dismantling of imagined national boundaries (or indeed the boundaries between the physical and the imagined, the senses and the sensible, the object and the subject) follows a passage in which the English narrator describes Ali as "fair for a native; his face is . . . strikingly handsome," "his waist tightly girded with an English shawl or a gaily dyed handkerchief," "[h]is forehead high and broad; his eyes large, sparkling, and very expressive, especially when his eloquence kindles and bursts forth in a torrent of figurative language, which it would be impossible to render into English" (258); "his nose is aquiline and elegantly formed, and his mouth small and beautifully chiselled and his teeth are exquisitely white and even" (259). The portrait—much as the Roman nose of the noble Oroonoko—belies any phrenological or cultural expectations the reader might harbor.[44] It speaks of similitude, of the thug momentarily entering the British metropolis, albeit in the imaginary.

The sensationalized notion of British contamination enveloped many of the early official accounts of *thuggee*. These often depicted the practice as arising by association or accidental "complicity." For instance, in order to quell the perceived threat of a mysterious and conspiratorial cult that, by its nature, left no victims, the British required inside knowledge. To this end, thug "approvers" (informers), such as Ali, were selected from gang leaders or long-standing criminals.[45] In addition to the approver network, EIC officials created a complex system of ransoming captured thugs as a fine for immoral, and eventually illegal, behavior.[46] Tales abounded in official circles of released prisoners who engaged in *thuggee* only in order to pay the fine from their previous transgression. The approver system also gave itself to instances of abuse, in which criminals stole government badges and marks of identity in order to pass themselves off as officials to aid their banditry.

Rumors spread of officials themselves lured into *thuggee*. In the course of one investigation, for instance, the Court of Directors of the East India Company wrote to the Bengal government:

> It is proved that the head of the gang who perpetrated the Lucknadoon, and so many other murders, was a police officer, who was actually sent in search

> of a thug who had broken prison, and took that occasion of going himself on a thug expedition.[47]

Such allegations of complicity and contamination not only threatened the stability (and purpose) of the British administration, but they also distorted the perceived boundaries between European and Indian.

This catalog of a permeable body in constant jeopardy is figured explicitly in the alleged stories surrounding *thuggee*. In his "confessions" to Sleeman, Feringhea spoke of a ceremony (*Tuponee*) undertaken by the thugs in the aftermath of each murder. The ritual consisted of the consumption of a piece of *gur* (jaggery, unrefined sugar—also *goor* or *ghur*) that had been consecrated by a thug priest:

> . . . the goor of the Tuponee changes our nature. It would change the nature of a horse. Let any man once taste of that goor, and he will be a Thug though he know all the trades and have all the wealth in the world. . . . My father made me taste of that fatal goor when I was yet a mere boy; and if I were to live a thousand years I should never be able to follow any other trade.[48]

Upon bodily consumption, Feringhea sensationally instructs, this innocuous foodstuff would contaminate any individual—nation, class, caste, or indeed species notwithstanding—metamorphosing all to inebriate criminal. "I have eaten the Goor," corroborates Ameer Ali, "and cannot change" (30).

This contamination might also afflict bodily sense and sensibility. Feringhea later goes on to recount an episode in which he and a gang took a boy of fourteen on his first thug expedition. On sight of the strangled victims, "[the boy] was seized with a trembling, and fell from his pony; he became immediately delirious . . . we were very fond of him, and tried all we could to tranquilize him, but he never recovered his senses, and before evening he died."[49] The language of bodily process in "tranquilize" here speaks to a binding together of physiological process, sensibility, and moral arbitration. In the very act of reading (or consuming) these tales of inebriate criminality, the sensational implication ran, one must be careful not to collapse into emotional or moral inebriation—each might be fatal.

This imagery of insensibility and inebriate modes of consumption also enveloped much of the colonial discourse surrounding Kali herself—in particular, much of the commentary surrounding the first English translation in 1823 of the *Devi-mahatmya*, the sacred Hindu

religio-philosophical text on Mahadevi (or Durga, Devi, among others; the supreme goddess, of whom Kali is one form or aspect). The text recounts the myth of the demon Raktabija, whom Durga fought as part of a great battle. Shiva had granted a power to the demon whereby upon a drop of its blood falling on the ground, another Raktabija would rise from the vital fluid, constantly multiplying:

> Out of the blood that streamed upon the earth from the relentless wounds of spear, lance, and other weapons, asuras sprang up by the hundreds, / and those demons born from this one demon's flowing blood pervaded all the world. Utter terror seized the gods. / Candikā burst into laughter at their despair and said to Kālī, "O Cāmundā, open wide your mouth / and quickly drink in the drops of blood from my weapons' blow and the great asuras born therefrom / . . ." / . . . Having spoken thus, the Devī attacked Raktabīja with her lance, / while Kālī avidly lapped up his blood. . . . / . . . From his beaten body blood flowed copiously / in every direction, and Camunda engulfed it with her mouth. And within her mouth those great asuras who sprang into being from the flow, / those she now devoured, even while drinking Raktabīja's blood. / . . . / The gods attained immeasurable joy, O king, and the band of Mothers born from them danced above, intoxicated with blood.[50]

Much was made of Kali's blood-drinking insensibility in British accounts: a fascination that would last far into the twentieth century.[51] A version of this tale became a central element of the thug myth (alluded to in *Confessions*, 45), in which Devi is said to have created the thugs and instructed them in the art of *thuggee* in order that the demon might be slain without spilling a drop of its blood.

Metropolitan Etiology

This binding together of consumption and contamination, as we shall see, had already long been in use in existing metropolitan culture. Throughout British engagement in India, a sensationalized engagement with Indian ways of being was accompanied by a long-held anxiety that the British were in some sense losing themselves to India—"going native" or being morally (or indeed literally) contaminated. Alan Bewell has charted the seminal influence of the first cholera epidemic of 1817—the "Oriental disease," as it came to be known—on British perceptions of India as a pathologized space.[52] Yet a moral or ideological version of this contamination had been a long-standing topos throughout the wider discourse—from the early engagements between the EIC and the Mughal court, to the eighteenth-century proliferation of nabob

literature, to the sensationalized 1787–95 trial of sometime governor-general of Bengal, Warren Hastings (impeached on allegations of maladministration and corruption), to much conservative discourse of the 1790s, to much Romantic Orientalism, to much of the jingoistic literature of the nineteenth century.[53]

The 1770s and 1780s had seen a slew of East India bills—a largely Whig offensive—directed against the perceived illicit practices of the EIC and the contaminating effects of nabob wealth on the moral and constitutional fabric of Britain. For Edmund Burke, who in this period emerged as something of a chief critic of EIC abuses, the force of this contamination was such that it might overwhelm the immunogenic capacity of British virtue: "I dread more from the infection of that place, than I hope from your virtue," he declared before the Commons.[54] Burke was, to borrow Michael J. Franklin's words, "horrified by its virulent potential to infect public life" and would go on to classify the virus as one of "two great evils" that threatened to penetrate the discursive boundaries of Britain and contaminate the interior: Jacobinism and what he termed "Indianism." The locus of the infection was EIC officials themselves—long exposed to mercantile commerce and Eastern luxury, too far gone from British virtue. Burke employed this discourse of disease to maintain a careful rhetoric of paternalistic humanism, something of which would later be echoed both in Sleeman's moralistic discourse on the thug and in Taylor's appreciation for Indian tradition and institutions.

"The riches of Asia have been poured in upon us," William Pitt, Earl of Chatham declared in an earlier speech, "and have brought with them not only Asiatic luxury, but, I fear, Asiatic principles of government." Chatham equated the "influx of material goods" with a corresponding invasion of knowledge, of ways of being—of "private corruption" and a "notorious decay." The terror of this "decay" was employed to construct a "regular, natural" Britain, a result of the sweat and toil of native labor. Chatham contrasted this production with unnatural wealth, with corruption, with decadent "Asiatic luxury," with an essentialist view that "Asiatic principles of government" are inferior to the rational organization of Britain.[55] A common association between the imperial taxonomies of "Oriental splendor" and "Oriental despotism" is evident in the speech—once again, an example of the conflation between the figured influx of physical and ideological foreign relics.[56]

London, in particular, became a crucible of such ideas and representations. The increasingly cosmopolitan center was, to use Bewell's

phrase, a "simulacrum of the periphery": the imagined surface of a newly constituted notion of a global nation, wherein developing ideas of nationhood and identity "jostled for ground with the foreign."[57] As Pramod Nayar has noted, the traffic of physical goods from the Indian subcontinent to the metropole led to a perceptible change in British cultural identity toward the beginning of the Victorian era. The presentation of British cosmopolitan taste began to project something of a metropolitan cultural superiority over the "parochial and primitive" colonies—an "imperial cosmopolitanism," as Nayar has termed it. Leask similarly argues that cultural "curiosity" amounted to something commensurate to imperialist attitudes as emotional and aesthetic interactions often came to be constructed at the expense of social or political engagement.[58] Yet the thug provides a case study of how this curiosity and cosmopolitanism were also entangled with—and developed within—existing class-based tropes, categories of difference, discursive frameworks, stock characters, modes of individual self-fashioning, and commercial literary cultures.

In particular, the literary landscape of London had seen a long-standing interest in the heightened depiction and discursive remediation of "real-life" crimes. Metropolitans avidly consumed glamorized tales of criminality in Newgate novels alongside sensational vignettes of violence in "penny bloods" and their successors, "penny dreadfuls."[59] These tales were frequently accompanied by a similar sensationalized anxiety: that exposure to such texts was in some sense contaminating middle-class readers. As John Springhall has rightly suggested, "penny dreadfuls" morphed into scapegoats for working-class criminality, with suggestions made (as with the thug) that this cheap print culture of sensational violence was instigating copycat crimes.[60] These were interclass anxieties as they fed into notably similar apprehensions regarding the delicate sensibilities of middle-class consumers and the effects of increasing exposure to sensation fiction and newspaper reportage on working-class crimes and trials. Middle-class readers (women, in particular) were warned of the dangers of acquiring knowledge concerning the criminal mind and were frequently reminded to constrain excessive emotional response in the face of these sensational spectacles.[61] Sensibility, then, had already long been in use as a mediating prophylaxis—a bounding distinction between middle class and lower class, between refinement and inebriation, between upstandingness and criminality, between citizenry and vagrancy.

Much scholarship has mapped the ways in which taste and modes of consumption became important arbiters in the construction of both

local and national identities in the Romantic period and indeed earlier.[62] Even before the thug, such perceived distinctions between the refined "citizens" and inebriate "vagabonds" of London had already been mirrored in India: in the early concerns exhibited by Mountstuart Elphinstone (the governor of Bombay) and John Malcolm (who had been given political and military command of Central India by the marquess of Hastings) toward the "thievish habits" of "wild and predatory tribe[s]."[63] In the opening decades of the nineteenth century, British missionaries produced a flood of documents, pressing the EIC to take action against the many perceived-inebriate self-mutilations of the Indian body: *sati*, female infanticide, exposure on the Ghats (two converging mountain ranges in southeastern India), Cadak Pujā,[64] self-flagellation, human sacrifice, and, perhaps most infamously, the cult of the thug.

Taylor, too, of course, draws on an existing history of confessional writing, a literary mode that had undergone significant revival in the Romantic period. De Quincey's autobiographical accounts of his opiate-induced fever dreams in *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821) are an archetype of the consumption and contamination that would subsume much discourse surrounding Eastern social practices. De Quincey recounts how the opium drove him "into an oppression as of madness," manifesting a bitter concern of assuming Oriental identity as he consumed Oriental product. In his seminal "psychopathology of imperialism," *The Infection of Thomas De Quincey* (1991), John Barrell catalogs De Quincey's representations of "an unending and interlinked chain of infections from the East, which threatened to enter his system and to overthrow it, leaving him visible and permanently 'compromised' and orientalised."[65] Characterizing *Opium Eater* as an account "in a considerable degree useful and instructive" of "excess, not yet *recorded* of any other man," De Quincey makes clear from the outset his preoccupation with both discursive contamination and remediation. He employs a slew of epidemiological terms to categorize his abject terror of a flattened and essentialized Orient—the "plague of Cairo," "oriental leprosy," "oriental cholera," "oriental typhus fever," "cancerous kisses."

Much like *Confessions of a Thug*, *Opium Eater* is also replete with a discursive connection between metropolitan and foreign contamination. Barrell notes how in one vision De Quincey seems to transmogrify the great masses of the London poor into the "abominable head of the crocodile . . . multiplied into ten thousand repetitions."[66] This generalized terror of the East is amalgamated by De Quincey with a generalized

terror of the metropolis. Specifically, repeated imagery of the violation of a female victim by an Oriental criminal runs through the text. Reading this terror as racialized paranoia and imperial aggression, Barrell draws on Barthes to examine De Quincey's own designation of his opium addiction as something of an "inoculation" against the East—that is, as Barthes writes, "one immunizes the contents of the collective imagination by means of a small inoculation of acknowledged evil; one thus protects it against the risk of a generalized subversion."[67] In De Quincey's words, "for the general benefit of the world, [I have] inoculated myself, as it were, with the poison of 8000 drops of laudanum per day (just for the same reason as a French surgeon inoculated himself lately with cancer—an English one twenty years ago with plague—and a third, I know not of what nation, with hydrophobia)."[68]

Something akin to this inoculative formulation would come to form a central discursive strategy of *Confessions of a Thug*. While simultaneously raising a potentially indigestible threat of contaminating curiosity by detailing the society of thugs, *Confessions* similarly appeals to these oft-used discursive modes of consumption in order to maintain a managed distance between criminal and spectator. The reader is offered two ways in which the events of the novel might be "consumed," in the two spectator positions afforded: Ameer Ali's confession and the Englishman's reception. The latter, with his generic designation, both provides a convenient point of departure from which an English audience might approach the novel and functions as a distancing technique, protecting the reader from Ali's "Indianness." The Englishman's dispassionate cataloging of Ali's crimes provides an exemplar of the refined sensibility with which one should absorb the text. In contrast, the novel portrays the thugs as inebriate consumers—consumers of opium and ganja, worshipers of a depraved, blood-drinking goddess, partakers of *gur* and other intoxicants following every ritual murder.

The literary exposure to these constructed Indian practices—to Oriental deviancy—is transmuted to prophylaxis by these narrative techniques. The novel affords two subject positions: the inebriate mob and the refined spectator, the former characterized by their inordinate appetites and the latter by their sensibility. (Once again this was a common metropolitan trope: the oft-depicted drunkenness of the revolutionary mob or the Gordon rioters, for example.) Taylor manages the distance between these modes of consumption both through narrative boundaries and through the intense literariness of *Confessions*, with approximately half of the chapters commencing with an epigraph from the English

canon (Shakespeare, Milton, Byron). Four interpretative boundaries provide a cultural *cordon sanitaire*: Ali's remembrance of events, Ali's faithful narration of these events, the Englishman's accurate detailing of Ali's confessions, and finally Taylor's investigative oversight. Taylor constructs himself and his metropolitan reader as refined consumers of Indian exoticism—able to observe and appreciate sublime tales of deviant criminality while yet maintaining composure. The delicate balance between consumption and contamination heightens the effect.

The *ephemeral* reversal of power, then, is the foundation upon which the affective discourse of *Confessions* rests. This, once again, was a long-standing rhetorical strategy in the literary and social culture of London. In much sensationalist discourse (for instance, surrounding the Gordon Riots) the metropolitan criminal is momentarily in sway yet inevitably subdued by civil authority, much as Ameer Ali speaks of his fugacious former power but inevitably surrenders the last vestiges of control by confessing all to colonial authorities. In one opening scene in which Ali and his band of thugs encounter a tigress in the jungle, the reader is immediately reassured that the novel will indeed employ such vignettes of violence. One of Ali's accomplices is subsequently mauled in the most sensational manner—his body "a fearful spectacle, his face all bitten and lacerated, and the blood pouring from wounds in his stomach!" The threat is immediately thwarted by Ali, with "but one stroke" (41).

This ephemeral threat was the foundation of much of the metropolitan discourse of the 1780s and 1790s—identified by Ian Haywood in his *Bloody Romanticism* (2006) as "spectacular violence." This, in Haywood's study of a multitude of intensely violent Romantic-period events, constitutes visual, hyperbolic, and sensational representations of violence, commonly founded on a configuration of multiple points of view that provide a range of subject positions.[69] This usually is a tripartite relationship between a body suffering, a body in power, and a spectator observing the scene. Josephine McDonagh has noted a similar "triangle of violator, victim and spectator" in eighteenth-century depictions of infanticide, which produces an "intricate network of identifications" for the reader, who often becomes the fourth position in the subject relation.

A comparable subject triangle is employed in *Confessions*: a primary subject (the thug in momentary dominion), a secondary subject (the victim in distress), and a spectator position (the British investigator observing the scene). The spectator might imagine themselves as either victim or power-bearer, allowing for the sublime experience of ephemeral terror,

yet a simultaneous disassociation from the moment. The stereotypical colonial triangle is inverted: of powerful European, helpless savage, and imagined English spectator. The sublime terror of both metropolitan and colonial criminal is that the reader might easily imagine themselves as victim or criminal; correspondingly, the momentary dominion of the thug requires of the reader an—albeit fleeting—imagined fracturing of imperial power (through similitude, contamination, and inversion). The sublime terror of the moment is heightened by this theatrical collapse of British authority.

The novel deftly speaks to the loss of control through two methods. First, for approvers such as Ali, it is in their interests to represent their crimes as horrifically as possible, to increase their value as informants. There is, then, both an underlying anxiety that Ali is not telling the truth (and thus holds discursive power) and that, as above, the British are in some way complicit in the very discourse that might undermine their authority. Second, Taylor explicitly discusses the truth of the novel, as recounted from his own investigations (and, as we have seen, many of the events in *Confessions* are ostensibly based on Sleeman's interviews),[70] yet, perhaps surprisingly, the "Englishman" narrator is kept generic, ontologically separate from Taylor. The subject relationship borrowed from metropolitan discourse—the body in power, the body in distress, and the body spectating—is again replicated here in an ephemeral, inverted form. The body in power becomes Ali (as the narrative, and so the discursive authority, is his), the body in distress becomes the Englishman (as he is compelled to trust Ali), and the spectator becomes Taylor. The sublime terror of metropolitan violence and contamination finds a heightened form when combined with this imperial anguish.

A Unitary Field of Analysis

In 1828 then-Governor-General Lord William Bentinck introduced a comprehensive policy of westernization in the EIC's Indian territories: English became the official language of law, administration, and education, and "inebriate" Indian customs such as *sati* were outlawed. In 1833 Thomas Babington Macaulay would come to spearhead the Government of India Act, which sought to systematize and codify the disparate legal procedures of the EIC's administrative presidencies in order to stamp out such perceived deviants. Passed in 1834, the Charter Act created the post of governor-general of India and laid the groundwork for a pan-Indian juridical system, which for the first time allowed for the

identification of marginal groups that operated outside of EIC law, the most high-profile of which was the thug. Yet the movement between India and metropole was bidirectional. Much of the understanding of how criminality in London should be suppressed was first tested and symbolically rehearsed in the "blank canvas" of the colonies; in turn, much of this rehearsal was based on the preexisting literary, social, and political representations of the metropole.

Confessions is a case study par excellence of a requisite scholarly imperative of the period: "that metropole and colony have to be seen in a unitary field of analysis," to borrow from Bernard Cohn.[71] Marriott's seminal development of this line of thinking has instructively shown the discursive continuities, in particular, between colonial subjects and the metropolitan poor of London.[72] We have seen contamination and prophylaxis as one rhetorical formulation of these continuities, mapped from commercialized medico-literary conceptions of cosmopolitan sensibility to imperial curiosity. Sensibility, in this formulation, is a seminal mediating category through which to conceptualize and assimilate national identity—a process deeply rooted in existing categories of class and criminality.

This is not, of course, to argue against a notion that the British Empire itself, together with much of its contiguous discourses and literary representations, was not organized around a specifically racial divide, but rather the opposite: a charting of one tributary of the emergence of discursive physiological categories. The conceptualization and assimilation of this divide was here based on preexisting frameworks of difference that, at turns, emphasized both othering and saming, curiosity and distance, contamination and prophylaxis—the dialectic between these modes serving to construct and heighten.[73] The depicted interchange is something like a sameness of sensation (such that the middle-class body politic is susceptible to the discursive *infection*) but a difference of sensibility (such that a prophylaxis is provided, and pathogenesis—the manifest *disease*—is isolated to particular insensible individuals, classes, or cultures). In a sense, then, these popular and affective frameworks simultaneously confound and produce categories of difference.

"I feel sore that it has not fallen to my lot to win the fame of the affair," Taylor bemoans in his autobiography, recounting the celebrity that Sleeman had achieved through his writings on the thug.[74] One might, then, read the marketable spectacle of the novel (founded on this existing commercial literary culture) as a self-fashioning, an attempt to recapture something of this fame by appealing to his readers' own self-

fashioning. These confrontations with the sensational violence of the thug and Kali construct the sublime consumption of quotidian metropolitan criminality *nonpareil*. Moreover, the thug is a totem of the heightened discourse of middle-class contamination, mapped onto a sensationalized imperial setting.

The heightening juxtaposition between reverse colonization and criminal threat would come to proliferate through Victorian literature. The figured surface of an organic body in danger of being disrupted would form a famous mainstay of much of the imperial gothic that littered the fin de siècle—and, indeed, much of the discourse that continued to circulate around the thug: "a race of vampires undeserving of the name of man," as James Stevenson put it in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* in 1834.[75] Yet it would also buttress many political, social, and cultural frameworks of contamination and national boundaries, becoming consequential for both metropolitan and colonial categories of difference.

The word "thug" has now, of course, reverted to something more like Hossyn's (conceivable) original usage. Yet the term has also evolved alongside its metropolitan-colonial roots to take not only the weight of a nebulous set of disorderly activities or personal and group characteristics but also the burden of both metropolitan class typecasts and a generalized and sensationalized notion that the character of the nation was and is being contaminated from without.

The final scene of *Confessions* is the height of this sensational contamination for a metropolitan readership. Ali witnesses the hanging of his adversary, Ganesha, together with twenty other thugs. The British here suppress the threat by employing the selfsame methods that criminalize the thugs in the first place—a twisting of the neck with a strangling "noose." To avoid "the polluting touch of the [lower-caste] hangman," Ganesha and his companions "adjusted the ropes round their own necks—and exclaiming 'Victory to Bhowanee!' seized each other's hands, and leaped from the platform into eternity" (534). The British are transmuted to thugs, and the Indians emerge as refined, unpolluted, class-constrained consumers of eternity.

Notes

[1] Hawthorne, "7 December 1857," 2:381.

[2] Indeed, the word "garotte" has its roots in the Spanish method of capital punishment, *garotta*, which entered the English language

following the execution of General Narciso López in September 1851 in Havana and later came to hold a generalized reference to what we would now call "mugging"; prior to this, violent street robbery had been referred to in the British press as "thuggee" (see Sindall, "London Garotting," 352).

[3] "THUGGEE IN LONDON!" Letters to *The Times*, July 19, 1851.

[4] *The Globe*, November 1856, quoted in Godfrey, *Masculinity, Crime and Self-Defence*, 25; and Sindall, "London Garotting," 353.

[5] *The Times*, November 1856, quoted in Godfrey, *Masculinity, Crime and Self-Defence*, 25.

[6] *The Times*, 1857, quoted in Godfrey, *Masculinity, Crime and Self-Defence*, 25.

[7] Dickens, , *Uncommercial Traveller*, 295–96.

[8] Taylor, *Confessions of a Thug*. Hereafter referred to as *Confessions*. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.

[9] Taylor, *Story of My Life*, 164.

[10] Brantlinger, "Introduction," in Taylor, *Confessions of a Thug*, edited by Patrick Brantlinger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), ix.

[11] "Cultural mobility" is Stephen Greenblatt's term; see, Greenblatt, *Cultural Mobility*.

[12] See, for example, Cannadine, *Ornamentalism*; Leask, *Curiosity*; Nayar, *Colonial Voices*; and Green, "Among the Dissenters." In particular, John Marriott's *The Other Empire* argues that discursive homologies between metropolitan poor and colonial subjects began to erupt at the beginning of the nineteenth century, in which both imagined groups came to be seen as equal threats to imperial progress. Over the course of the nineteenth century, Marriott argues, depictions of both groups began to take on racial coding; the colonies became a "mirror" for metropolitan anxieties and concerns, and in turn categories of difference within the metropole began to take on racial discourses associated with colonial alterity.

[13] British contemporary usage often has Etawah as northwestern India (relative to the centers of British power in Bengal).

[14] Hamilton, *East-India Gazetteer*, 174.

[15] Recounted by Perry as quoted in Bayly, *Empire and Information*.

[16] Dash, *Thug*, 28.

[17] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "thug" (n. & adj.), etymology," September 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2647644982; Pathak, *Bhargava's Standard Illustrated Dictionary*.

[18] Marriott, *The Other Empire*, 227.
[19] For a full account of the development of the thug (and *Confessions of a Thug*, in particular) in the Orientalist gaze, see Van Woerkens, *The Strangled Traveler*; and Macfie, "Thuggee."
[20] Bhattacharya, "Monsters in the Dark."
[21] See Wagner, *Thuggee*, 92.
[22] See Roy, "Hindu-Muslim Syncretism in India."
[23] See, for example, Gordon (1969). For further notable readings of *Confessions* in some of these veins, see Chatterjee, "Thugs"; Brantlinger, "The Ends of (the British) Empire"; and Williams, "Shadows of Imperialism."
[24] Wagner, "Thuggee."
[25] See Burman, "Hindu-Muslim Syncretism," 41.
[26] The essay is reproduced in Bruce, *The Stranglers*, 13–26.
[27] See McDermott and Kripal, *Encountering Kali*, 158.
[28] The letter is reproduced in Bruce, *The Stranglers*, 83.
[29] Wagner, *Thuggee*, 137.
[30] McDermott and Kripal, *Encountering Kali*, 159.
[31] Peers, *India under Colonial Rule*, 57. Dash has suggested up to a third were Muslim; see Dash, *Thug*, 89.
[32] McDermott and Kripal, *Encountering Kali*, 159.
[33] Wagner, *Thuggee*, 141.
[34] See, for example, Burman, "Hindu-Muslim Syncretism"; and Parel, "Religious Syncretism in India."
[35] Sleeman, *Ramaseeana*, 28.
[36] See Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters*, 126–45; Schwab, *Oriental Renaissance*; Fulford and Kitson, *Romanticism and Colonialism*.
[37] Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism*.
[38] Heber, *Narrative of a Journey*, 60. For more on Taylor's background and his perception of India, as mainly recounted in his autobiography and letters, see Poovey, "Ambiguity and Historicism."
[39] A note on translations: I use standard romanizations throughout (for instance, "Kali"), though Taylor and other sources use a variety of spellings, translations, and naming conventions: for instance, "Kalee," "Devee" (in Sanskrit simply meaning "goddess"), or "Bhowanee" (the form of Durga whom thugs were more likely to invoke despite, as we have seen, the early British reports that transmuted the cult to an explicitly Kali-worshiping one); as Wagner notes, Kali "was well-known, and much-maligned, in colonial discourse" (Taylor, *Confessions*, 560). Ali's father skips over these

difficulties in *Confessions,* claiming conflation: "she is known under these names and many others" (45).

[40] Leask, *Curiosity.*

[41] John Masters's 1952 novel, *The Deceivers,* depicts a similar anxiety: "Has God arranged it, so loathing Kali, that even to know her was to know Death, become Death?" (185).

[42] The introduction was added to the second edition of the novel (July 1839) and reproduced in all subsequent editions.

[43] The contagionist theory postulated diseases to be confined to bodies—manifested by physical contagion, in which the vectors of disease are infected material (people or objects—in this case, thugs). This framework implies a need for isolation or quarantine of the source; as a result, the model came to be associated in the nineteenth century with authoritarian and state-interventionist approaches to containment: lazarettos, quarantine, controlled movement of goods, limitations of civil liberties, and so on. The miasmic theory, however, proposed diseases to be environmentally localized (caused by rot, pollution, noxious air, fog, or "miasmas"—in this case, the perceived disorderly and corrupt social and political environment of India). Any epidemiological defense in this model required changes to the "epidemic constitution of the atmosphere." This, then, came to be associated with more liberal or reformist approaches to containment.

[44] For more on phrenology and *thuggee,* see Wagner, "Confessions of a Skull."

[45] For an excellent exposition of the East India Company's use of approvers, see Dash, *Thug,* 145–65.

[46] F. C. Smith, agent to the governor-general in the Saugor and Nerbudda territories, wrote: "Without intending it, the British authorities . . . have made themselves accessories to the subsequent thuggies, which the liberated thugs committed to pay for their ransom." Quoted in Maunder, *Victorian Crime,* 33.

[47] Quoted in Maunder and Moore, *Victorian Crime,* 35.

[48] Sleeman, *Ramaseeana,* 216–17.

[49] Sleeman, *Ramaseeana,* 149.

[50] *In Praise of the Goddess: The Devīmāhātmya and Its Meaning,* translated by Devadatta Kālī (Maine: Nicolas-Hays, 2003), part 2, chap. 8, ll. 8.51–8.63.

[51] See, for instance, the mind-altering contaminant known as "The Blood of Kali" in Steven Spielberg's *The Temple of Doom* (1984).

[52] Bewell, *Romanticism and Colonial Disease,* 242–76.

[53] See, for example, Juneja, "Native and the Nabob."
[54] Edmund Burke, "18 December 1772," *Parliamentary History, 17*, 672–73. Quoted in Koehn, *Power of Commerce*, 213.
[55] *Correspondence of William Pitt*, 3:405.
[56] See, for instance, Said, *Orientalism*, 4.
[57] Bewell, *Romanticism and Colonial Disease*, 13.
[58] Leask, *Curiosity*, 299–314.
[59] For a comprehensive examination of early Victorian literature and criminality, see Maunder and Moore, *Victorian Crime*.
[60] Springhall, "'Pernicious Reading'?"
[61] See Madden, "Victorian Sensibility."
[62] See, for example, Morton, "Let Them Eat Romanticism," in *Cultures of Taste*, 259–65; and Bewell, *Romanticism and Colonial Disease*, 131–60.
[63] Elphinstone, *Report on the Territories*, 2–3.
[64] An annual festival in which one engages in "hook-swinging"—quite literally swinging hooks that are attached to one's flesh—in devotion to a deity (usually Shiva).
[65] Barrell, *The Infection of Thomas De Quincey*, 15.
[66] Barrell, *The Infection of Thomas De Quincey*, 17–18.
[67] Barrell, *The Infection of Thomas De Quincey*, 15–16.
[68] De Quincey, *Confessions*, 58.
[69] See Haywood, *Bloody Romanticism*.
[70] Taylor directly notes Sleeman's works in his introduction, and several sections of the novel paraphrase Sleeman's recordings of his interrogations.
[71] Cohn, *Colonialism*, 24.
[72] Marriott, *The Other Empire*.
[73] For a condensed discussion of the formation of racial coding in British–India relations, see Marriott, "Metropolis and India."
[74] Taylor, *Story of My Life*, 73.
[75] *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 1, no. 2 (1834): 283.

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