# 3 Facing a Mirror: Philip Meadows Taylor's *Confessions of a Thug* and the Politics of Imperial Self-Incrimination

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Critics generally agree that Philip Meadows Taylor's 1839 *Confessions of a Thug* – the most popular and ideologically influential Anglo-Indian novel of the nineteenth century – constitutes a paradigmatic expression of liberal imperialism, a meditation upon the cultural, political, and psychological tensions between a Western self and an Indian Other. The former assistant superintendent of police in the Nizam in the late 1820s and early 1830s, Taylor presents his novel, which is based on his experience interrogating captured Thugs, as the jailhouse confession of Ameer Ali, a notorious north Indian Thug, who gives a vivid account of his life and the 719 murders he committed. His litany of crime, his occasional professions of remorse, and his defiant statements of self-justification are assiduously recorded by an anonymous colonial law enforcement officer, whom Ameer Ali obligatorily addresses as 'Sahib,' and who is, for the most part, silent, interrupting his loquacious interlocutor every few chapters with a bureaucratic 'tsk, tsk,' before receding with scientific detachment to the margins of the text. The novel's vexed self-Other opposition has attracted in the last two decades an increasing amount of critical attention. Writing in 1988, Patrick Brantlinger, one of the first critics to take *Confessions of a Thug* seriously, reads the novel as a propagandistic rallying cry for British imperialism, as an act of political and moral self-justification, with Thuggee, or *thagi* – a criminal cult devoted to the ritualistic robbing and strangling, according to British officials, of as many as forty thousand Indians annually – functioning as a stand-in for India itself.[1] Writing in 1996, in the wake of Homi Bhabha's work on colonial mimicry, Parama Roy reads the novel instead as an inherently anxious and ambivalent text, unsettled by the racial and cultural Otherness against which it falteringly strives to define a stable and knowable Western subject.[2] In a sign that the novel is inching towards canonicity,



towards interpretative inexhaustibility, Mary Poovey, writing in the post-9/11 environment of New York City, reads *Confessions of a Thug* as a devastating indictment by Taylor of Britain's imperial project, the novel tacitly encouraging its readers, Poovey argues, to identify with the Thug.[3] Poovey supplements her reading with a metacritical meditation upon the ease with which historicist interpretative strategies can fall prey to 'presentism,' to a critic's postcolonial sympathies, for instance. She demonstrates how one can convincingly historicize the text in such a way that it appears either decidedly anti-imperialist or decidedly pro-imperialist in its ambitions. Although she privileges the former reading over the latter, the fact that such radically irreconcilable interpretative outcomes are practicable, indeed, historically viable, should be a warning, she suggests, to us *all*.

What makes Taylor's novel so paradigmatic an expression of liberal imperialism, however, is not the irreconcilability of the divergent readings that it inspires, or its purported ideological undecidability, but the certainty, the confidence, with which it seamlessly reconciles the critique of imperialism with its valorization. *Confessions of a Thug* is a passionately anti-imperial text, as Poovey demonstrates, but it is also a passionately pro-imperial text, as Brantlinger contends. Imperialism becomes coterminous in the novel with its own critique. The novel's ideological two-facedness, then, its reconciliation of self-critique and self-justification, manifests itself not as ambivalence but as the self-congratulatory logic of liberal guilt, the ethic of self-incrimination that underlies and fuels the Victorian culture of liberal reform. With liberal guilt, one casts oneself as villain and hero of the same psychological-political narrative. Hence: *I will save you from myself.* Or, more specifically: *I will lift you from the poverty/oppression/injustice/bigotry that I have been complicit in perpetuating*. Take, for instance, the Christian socialist Romney Leigh in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 1856 *Aurora Leigh*. The mid-Victorian epitome of self-aggrandizing liberal guilt, of a guilt that is more performative than paradigm-shifting, he proposes marriage to a working-class woman whom he does not love – in the words of cynical Lord Howe – '*By symbol,* to instruct us formally / To fill the ditches up 'twixt class and class.'[4] Taylor's self-flagellating imperialism, his veiled attacks on British rule in India, the numerous parallels that he draws between the British and the Thugs, function not to destabilize imperial ideology from within, to radicalize his readers, but to inoculate imperialism and his readers against that very radicalism, and to position himself as the enlightened spokesperson for a more just imperialism.

Critics tend to gloss over the novel's carceral setting, reading it, if they analyse it at all, as a metaphor for the imperial relationship between the British

and their Indian subjects. This essay makes the case, however, that Taylor's employment of the confessional mode, specifically within the context of a prison, aligns his imperial novel formally and politically with contemporaneous liberal efforts to reform the Victorian prison system, to recast it as a site of confession, of reciprocal self-incrimination, in which prisoners contemplate their past crimes, and in which reform-minded prison administrators contemplate the sociological and structural conditions that produce those crimes – conditions which society and the prison system, it turns out, are complicit in perpetuating. The prisoner's confession becomes, as does Ameer Ali's in *Confessions of a Thug*, an opportunity for the prison reformer, or the imperial reformer in Taylor's case, to perform self-congratulatory self-blame, mirroring himself in the prisoner's face, taking guilty pleasure in the momentary resemblance. The fleeting sense of intimacy that is kindled rhetorically between prisoner and prison administrator – and by extension between the prisoner and society at large – masks the violence of the criminal justice system. Ethical self-reflection becomes a substitute for radical change, rather than its trigger. With its anti-imperial imperialism, *Confessions of a Thug* performs liberal guilt on a geopolitical scale, turns India into a kind of penitentiary.

At the novel's start, Ameer Ali sits in chains before the anonymous framing narrator, 'denouncing all [his] old confederates,' and giving a detailed account of his life, from childhood sorrows, through adolescent angst, to the glories of manhood.[5] Some readers have viewed Taylor's Thug as a transparent window onto Indian otherness, a window which renders visible, exposes, as Robert Williams puts it, the 'dark, inscrutable secret buried beneath the breast of India.'[6] Brantlinger, too, chooses to treat Ameer Ali as inherently 'transparent,' as a 'penetrated' surface, his 'hidden' and 'secret life' having been irradiated by the panoptic gaze of empire, and the '[a]uthoritarian silence' of the framing narrator having 'wrap[ped] a steel cage of implicit rationality around the Thug's irrational discourse.'[7] Rather than a window onto otherness, however, Taylor's Thug functions as a reflective surface on which the imperial subject confronts his own predatory designs on India. *Ameer* is *a mirror*: an apparatus of British self-recognition, a looking glass in which the scrutinized Other turns out to be none other than a distorted reflection of the Western self. In the unsettling figure of Ameer Ali, the Victorian reader faces a mirror. Taylor achieves this *trompe l'oeil* by cultivating in his reader, as Poovey demonstrates, identification with, indeed, sympathy for, his Thug protagonist. Taylor sustains this identification by anglicizing Ameer Ali, endowing him with an uncannily British temperament: a taste for domesticity and commerce; a disdain for native superstition and disorder; a tourist's fascination with the Indian landscape through which he travels; a subjugator's condescension towards the



population on which he preys. Indeed, so gentlemanly is the Thug, so congenial, so familiar, that the framing narrator finds himself – to his surprise – touched by Ameer Ali's pathetic accounts of his suffering: the death of his beloved wife, his father's brutal execution at the hands of corrupt local officials, the loss of his daughter.

At first glance, Taylor's anglicized Thug seems to illustrate perfectly Bhabha's notion of colonial mimicry: the 'process by which the look of surveillance returns as the displacing gaze of the disciplined, where the observer becomes the observed and "partial" representation rearticulates the whole notion of *identity* and alienates it from essence.'[8] Ameer Ali takes fetishistic delight in mimicking the British, whom he admits he 'respected,' praising them for being 'good and brave soldiers.'[9] Before strangling one of his victims, a notorious Pindharee soldier whom the British, too, sought to bring to justice, Ameer Ali offers the man some English wine and a decidedly English 'Hip, hip, hip!'[10] From our postcolonial vantage, what is *most* striking about *Confessions of a Thug* is not that it employs strategies of mimicry (which it does) to critique British imperialism, to induce epistemological slippage between self and Other, to discombobulate and unsettle its Victorian readers. On the contrary, what is most striking (and sobering) about the novel is the disturbing ease with which Taylor's very deconstruction of imperial logic, of racial superiority, indeed, of identity, functions paradoxically to inspire a new and improved imperial ideology, in which imperialism becomes interoperable with its critique, and in which the imperial subject is *strengthened* by any attempt to decentre or disorient it. Though Taylor was often critical of the East India Company, especially its policy of non-interference, whereby territory was conquered and neglected rather than emancipated and civilized, he remained a dedicated and committed colonial official. Taylor was never a direct employee of the East India Company per se, working instead as an administrator in various semi-autonomous client states. In exposing the violence inherent in imperial ideology, in encouraging the reader's identification with the predacious yet eerily familiar Ameer Ali, who evokes in turn the picaresque Newgate hero, the sentimental Victorian patriarch, the savvy capitalist entrepreneur, Taylor triggers in his reader self-reflection, a more enlightened, self-critical imperialism, in which liberal guilt functions as a built-in moral corrective, and in which a guilty deconstruction of the self becomes a substitute for radical action. In the end, of course, Taylor's reformist model of self-incriminating imperial subjectivity is as insidious as the jingoistic cultural supremacy it modifies. British imperialism is recast homeopathically as both the disease from which India suffers and its only possible cure. In Taylor's imperial psychodrama, the white man saves India not – as in Gayatri

Spivak's classic formulation – from India itself but from *himself*, from his own unconscious thuggishness.[11] Like Ameer Ali, the imperial subject serves as villain and hero of the same confessional narrative, redeeming himself by incriminating himself.

## The Politics of Self-Blame

Taylor's stated goal in writing *Confessions of a Thug* was to awaken his countrymen to an unseen enemy, to instigate a public outcry for the increased funding of counter-Thuggee operations. The most daunting obstacle to the eradication of Thuggee, however, was not the craftiness of the Thugs themselves, who proved relatively easy to neutralize with the requisite manpower and resources; rather, it was Britain's chronic indifference towards its Indian subjects and its reluctance to pay for their security. In his introductory remarks, Taylor laments the fact that '[t]hroughout the whole of India' 'only eighteen officers are employed as' 'agents for the suppression of Thuggee.' He goes on to 'hope … that *oeconomical* considerations do not prevent the appointment of others.' [12] Taylor frames his novel not so much as a confrontation between a Briton and a Thug but as a pitched battle between two imperial logics: his own liberal-reformist view, on the one hand, that Britain has a moral duty to bring enlightened justice to India, and the pragmatic-conservative view, on the other, which held that, because Indians are morally inferior to Europeans and thus incapable of justice, they should be left to their own peculiar devices, so long as they yield a steady stream of tax revenue and commerce. In Taylor's eyes, Britain's *own* predatoriness, its history of viewing the subcontinent – as do his fictional Thugs – as its divine prize, impedes the successful suppression of Thuggee. The company's 'questionable policy of non-interference,' as Taylor terms it in an 1843 article, its moral neglect, enables Thuggee to proliferate, creating a causal connection between the imperialist and the Thug, between British cupidity and Indian lawlessness.[13] Taylor's campaign against Thuggee is inseparable from his crusade against the British colonial government's often irresponsible and exploitative treatment of its Indian subjects. Taylor conceived of himself, in the words of his contemporary, Henry Reeve, as 'a protector and a friend' of 'the natives' of India, as a moral corrective to Indian self-destructiveness and to British exploitation.[14] Reeve even suggests that Taylor's 1877 autobiography, *The Story of My Life*, be assigned reading for any 'young Englishman' who 'enter[s] upon the duties of an Indian career.'[15] '[W]ith this book in his pocket,' Reeve waxes hyperbolic, a young man will surely 'develop and improve his own character and attainments,' learn 'to promote the welfare of the people committed to his charge.' Reeve presents Taylor's life story, then, as a model of ethical imperialism, and his autobiography as a pedagogical instrument for tempering and countering the potentially unethical imperial impulses lurking within every Englishman.



Taylor is not the only student of Indian history to discern a disturbing causal connection between Thuggee and British imperialism. The dramatic increase in Thuggee activity in the late eighteenth century, in fact, has been blamed, by some twentieth-century historians, on the British themselves, on the demographic displacement and economic turmoil unleashed by their incursive and annexational policies, by Britain's insatiable hunger for the rights of taxation that went with the ownership of territory. As Kate Teltscher reminds us, the East India Company's 'cruel negligence' of its Indian subjects in 1769–70 led to a famine of unprecedented proportions, with a quarter of the population of Bengal starving to death, and vast numbers of the survivors turning vagrant.[16] Although Thugs had been operating for centuries, their number swelled during this British-induced catastrophe. Nineteenth-century critics of the East India Company, too, saw causal connections – both direct and indirect – between British imperialism and Thuggee. Captain William Sleeman, for instance, who, like Taylor, was a committed reformer (and the target of Taylor's professional jealousy), suggests in his 1839 report, *The Thugs or Phansigars of India*, that the increase in Thuggee activity after 1808 in the territories 'of the Nizam and of the Mahrattas' is due, at least in part, to a growing number of Thugs abandoning their traditional hunting grounds in 'the Company's territories' and in 'districts' that have since been 'ceded' to the British.[17] Likewise, in *Confessions of a Thug*, Taylor conceives of the British as the unconscious accomplices, the unwitting enablers, of Thug gangs. Before Ameer Ali departs on his maiden Thug expedition, his adoptive father and fellow Thug informs him that their impending success is due to the social and political chaos unleashed by Britain's martial enterprises in India: '[W]e have determined to take advantage of the confusion at present produced by the wars of Holkar and Sindea with the Feringhees [or British][;] we anticipate much work and a stirring season, and the men are impatient for employment, after a long period of inactivity.'[18] The Thug is the shadow cast by the British imperialist, the spectre at his heels.

Even more biting a critique of company heavy-handedness and misrule is Sleeman's assertion that the 'ruthless vigilance of the Thugs' is fuelled, in part, by the fate of the once 'numerous' 'inns or serais in India,' which have 'gone entirely to ruin' '[u]nder the extortion of the earlier English government in India' 'and the consequent impoverishment of the country.'[19] In the seventeenth century, Sleeman explains, 'Mohammedan princes' and 'native rulers'

built a vast network of 'beautiful,' 'splendid' inns, in order to ensure the safety of their subjects, and to provide travellers with dependable shelter, where 'a regular establishment of guards and servants was maintained.' The company's virtual destruction of this paternalistic hospitality system – through extortion, neglect, and mismanagement – 'renders,' Sleeman concludes, 'the operations of the Thugs so practicable.'[20] Taylor and Sleeman are joined by other nineteenth-century experts on Thuggee in accusing the British themselves of either indirectly or unthinkingly enabling the phenomenon, of turning a blind eye to the unforeseen consequences of British imperialism. In his 1837 *Illustrations of the History and Practices of the Thugs*, Edward Thornton links the proliferation of Thuggee in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to the lackadaisical morality and bureaucratic lassitude of the conservative colonial government, who 'regarded' the 'evil' of Thuggee 'in much the same light as the fixed inconveniences of the climate, or the accidental inclemency of unfavorable seasons.'[21] Thornton claims that this 'languid and desultory' pragmatic-conservative approach, which he considers profoundly immoral, was 'at length succeeded by a better system' under the liberal-reformist administration of Governor-General Lord William Bentinck in the late 1820s.[22] Bentinck's efforts to eradicate both *sati* and Thuggee, as well as to neutralize the mercenary Pindharee armies that pillaged whole regions, 'indicat[e] an advancing regard to the principles of public morality in the Government.'[23]

Taylor, too, draws a sharp contrast between the 'humanity and benevolence' of Bentinck, a decidedly 'enlightened nobleman,' and the 'crooked and unworthy' 'political conduct,' indeed, the 'vices,' of conservative colonial officials.[24] In his autobiography, Taylor reserves special scorn for Governor-General Lord Ellenborough, for whom 'anything but fighting' seemed 'beneath his notice,' as well as for Ellenborough's controversial Major-General Sir Charles Napier, whose 'aggressive policy' towards the Sind in 1843 – deliberately engineering a war in order to destabilize and annex a region – constitutes, in Taylor's mind, 'a dark blot on the record of Indian history.'[25] For interventionary reformers like Thornton, Sleeman, and Taylor, the Thug serves as a powerful and sensational symbol not of the inherent immorality – as some twentieth-century critics suggest – of the Indian people, who were, after all, the Thug's unwitting victims, but of the East India Company's, and by extension the British government's, moral shortcomings: its failure to protect its subjects, its inability to resist the temptation to exploit the vast population over which it proclaimed itself steward. Taylor agreed with Sleeman, whose investigative efforts he admired, and whose fame he envied, that the 'members at the head of the [colonial] administration have always had a tolerably correct idea of the oppressive nature of the British rule in India, and of



the light in which it is held by the natives; but it has always been a primary object to prevent this knowledge from reaching the English public.'[26] With *Confessions of a Thug*, Taylor informs a vast middle-class readership, for the first time, of the existence and extent of Thuggee in British India, knowledge of which an uneasy and image-conscious colonial government prefers to conceal, lest it 'produce,' in Sleeman's words, 'a considerable sensation and excite inquiry' into its own complicity.[27] In betraying the secret of Thuggee, however, in exposing the company's dirty laundry, Taylor simultaneously exposes the thuggishness of the British colonial government: its moral neglect, its reckless expansionism, its role as Thuggee's catalyst rather than its antidote. As we shall see, Taylor's appreciation of the parallels between imperialist and Thug, his recognition of the interoperability of their predatory agendas, explains why he so aggressively anglicizes Ameer Ali, why he avoids overtly 'Othering' him, why he encourages his British reader both to identify with and to condemn his rapacious protagonist.

The extent to which Taylor's Victorian readers were cognizant of Ameer Ali's reflective function is of course difficult to verify. Poovey points out that early reviews of *Confessions of a Thug* 'hint ... at' 'resemblances' between Ameer Ali and the British but stubbornly resist reading the text as an indictment of English rule.[28] This, however, is precisely the *aim* of Taylor's brand of self-incriminating imperialism. His Thug's ability to decentre imperial subjectivity rallies rather than dampens the imperial spirits of his readers. The genius of *Confessions of a Thug* lies in its ability to appropriate in the name of imperialism imperialism's deconstruction. Destabilizing the self-Other opposition at the heart of imperial ideology, then, inspires rather than undermines imperialism. At the level of popular culture, this phenomenon is evidenced in the speed and enthusiasm with which the word 'thug' was incorporated into English, thoroughly anglicized, both lexically and psychologically. Within two decades of the publication of *Confessions of a Thug*, the word 'thug' had come to mean roughly what it means today, 'common criminal' or 'hoodlum,' its initial connotations of racial otherness having been gradually displaced and overwritten by connotations of class otherness. The foreignness of 'thug,' then, was not erased in the mid-nineteenth century so much as domesticated, redirected at the otherworldliness of the British underclass: hence, George Sala's burlesque 'The Key of the Street,' which was featured in the September 1851 edition of *Household Words*, and which playfully enumerates the 'recent achievements in the strangling line' of 'Tom Thug and his gang.'[29] Taylor's novel created an insatiable appetite for Thugs in British and Western European popular culture. As Wendy Jacobson has documented, Eugène Sue's *The Wandering Jew* (1844–5), Wilkie Collins's

*The Moonstone* (1868), Edward Bulwer-Lytton's 'A Strange Story' (1861–2), and Charles Dickens's *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), as well as works by lesser writers, contain blatant and veiled references to Thugs, the existence of Thuggee having become, by the early 1840s, thanks in part to Taylor, a source of lasting 'excitement' and 'common knowledge.'[30] By transplanting the Thug into a British context, shattering Thuggee's geographical boundedness, Dickens, for instance, reinforces the notion, with the mysterious figure of John Jasper, that the Thug's magnetism derives from his familiarity as much as from his foreignness, from his uncanny proximity to the British reader as much as from the unbridgeable distance between them.

Ever since Britain commenced its colonial project in India, Hindi, Persian, and Gujarati words and phrases had been shipped to Britain for domestic consumption. Words such as 'veranda,' 'sherbet,' 'pundit' (from the Hindi for 'learned man'), and 'shampoo' (from the Hindi for 'massage') imparted to their British users an air of cosmopolitanism. Over time, however, these alien words ripened into full-fledged English words, as awareness of their lexical origins faded with use. In general, Indian words with inanimate objects as their referents, such as 'pajamas' (from the Hindi for 'pants') and 'tank' (from the Gujarati for 'artificial pond'), were assimilated into English more seamlessly than words that had as their referents categories of people or social arrangements, such as 'thug' or 'mogul,' which were idiomatically embedded in cultural-historical contexts without parallel in English. The nineteenth-century term 'railroad mogul,' for instance, retains an aura of Oriental despotism, conjures images of India's Mughal emperors. The derogatory English word 'nabob,' which results from clumsily anglicizing *nawab* (Hindi for 'governor'), emerged in the early 1770s as a means of dismissing '*arrivistes*,' to quote historian Lawrence James, 'who had come home from India with a fortune' and 'thrust themselves into fashionable society and politics.'[31] The word suggests that the nabob's acquisition of wealth was somehow unwholesome or un-British, that it had blossomed unnaturally, in jungly profusion, beneath a tropical sun. The word also betrays the public's growing anxiety about the 'Oriental' changes that the imperial experience had wrought on the British psyche, the despotic impulses that it had brought to the surface. In 'nabob,' 'mogul,' and 'thug,' in these *foreign* words, the British confronted reflections of their own violent urges.

## Taylor's Anglicized Thug

In his introduction to the 1920 edition of Taylor's *The Story of My Life*, Henry Bruce, who met the author on a voyage to India in 1875, observes that Taylor



'dwells,' in his novels, 'upon the likenesses, not the unlikenesses, between his readers and his characters.'[32] This, despite the fact that Taylor's characters, who 'can never be white,' 'go about barefooted' and 'eat with their own fingers.' Through the fog of his racist condescension, Bruce nevertheless manages to put his finger on one of the salient features of Taylor's liberal-imperial representations of India: his strategy of anglicizing rather than 'othering' his native protagonists, underscoring his characters' familiarity, their function as sites of identification rather than contrast. It is no coincidence, therefore, that both Ameer Ali and the British imperialist view themselves as morally superior to India's largely Hindu population, or that both justify their exploitation of India on economic and religious grounds. Both the imperialist and the Thug survive, in fact, in a land where they are vastly outnumbered, by bribing local functionaries and dubious rajahs, whose friendship is seasonal, whose cooperation is always precarious. The Thugs and the British often find themselves in competition for partnership with the same native princes. Ameer Ali recounts with frustration how the Rajah of Jhalone scraps his 'confederacy' with the Thugs for a 'treaty' with 'the English Government.'[33] Both the British and the Thugs are forced to look constantly over their shoulders, in paranoid anticipation of the population turning against them. Both are masters, therefore, of dissimulation and inveiglement, of masking their true agendas with claims of friendship, with promises of security and profit.

Like the British colonist, the Thug is a foreigner in India. He faces inevitable language barriers. He gets entangled in embarrassing cultural misunderstandings. Confusions abound. Like the British, Ameer Ali relies upon native informants, collecting knowledge of local customs and notables in order to master his prey. Ameer Ali's displacement, his sense of being out of place, outside India's social fabric, is reinforced by the fact that he is adopted, raised by the leader of the Thug gang that murdered his wealthy parents when he was a child. Although he is gracious, courteous to the locals he encounters, he insists upon preserving his distance. Ameer Ali possesses all the qualities of an English gentleman: he has a 'polite demeanour,' a 'smooth tongue,' and an all-important sense of 'tact.'[34] Even the novel's framing narrator, the anonymous prison official who transcribes his confession, feels compelled to inform the reader, in a friendly aside, that Ameer Ali is not only physically attractive but that his noble good looks are decidedly European. We are made to understand that the Thug has a 'strikingly handsome' 'face,' a 'broad' 'forehead,' and a 'complexion' that 'is fair for a native.'[35] 'His manner,' the police officer adds, 'is graceful, bland, and polite, – it is indeed more than gentlemanlike.'[36] This portrait of Ameer Ali echoes Taylor's description six years earlier, in an 1833 article in *The New Monthly Magazine*, of the unexpectedly gentlemanly

bearing of the Thugs whom he had interviewed in captivity. 'Solicitous about their dress,' about maintaining a 'respectable' and 'decent appearance,' the Thugs, Taylor writes, 'seem to be men of mild and unobtrusive manners, possessing a cheerfulness of disposition entirely opposed to the violent passions and ferocious demeanour that are usually associated with the idea of a professed murderer.'[37]

Ameer Ali experiences India, in fact, as an English tourist would, or as a Victorian travel writer. His narrative is replete with visits to landmarks and monuments. He plays up their exoticism, sharing fragments of their lurid or tragic history with his British interlocutor. Haunted by the ambiance of the locales through which he passes, by an otherworldly energy to which he achieves only fleeting and partial access, Ameer Ali describes the sunlight dancing upon Hyderabad's 'hundreds' of 'bright gilt spire[s]' and 'slender white minarets,'[38] as well as the 'gloomy' song of the 'bats and wild pigeons, whose cooing re-echo[es] within the lofty domes' of the royal tombs at which he 'loiter[s].'[39] When his gang of Thugs approaches the 'stupendous' and 'extraordinary' rock formations that lie outside Hyderabad, shrouded in '[w]reaths of mist,' Ameer Ali turns eagerly to his Hindu guide, Bhudrinath, for a traditional Hindu account of their purportedly divine origin.[40] An amateur Orientalist, Ameer Ali takes periodic breaks from thugging to visit Mughal ruins, where he ponders, like Shelley in 'Ozymandias,' their warning to arrogant outsiders. 'Piles upon piles of old ruined palaces,' he reflects, 'in many places built upon the walls themselves, and all nodding to their fall,' 'were a lesson to humble proud man – to teach him that he too must moulder in the dust.'[41] He appraises the various vistas and views that the ruins afford, as if he were sharing vacation photos, rather than recounting his crimes, with his interrogator: '[F]rom the terrace out of which the huge dome proudly reared itself the view of the city was superb,' he earnestly explains, 'but it was not equal to the one I have before described to you, for we saw none of the white buildings.'[42] In his autobiography, Taylor describes touring many of the same attractions, and does so with the same enthusiasm, the same aesthetic sensitivity.

A decidedly European eye shapes Ameer Ali's descriptions of the Indian population, his accounts of the 'thickly peopled' towns, with their Eastern crowds.[43] In a passage reminiscent of De Quincey's agoraphobic hallucinations in *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, Ameer Ali recounts the 'sickening' sublimity of the festival of the Mohorum, which 'pour[s] through the narrow street' beneath his second-story window: a deindividuating chaos, a 'sea of human heads,' 'whirling' bodies 'closely wedged together,' with their 'strange and uncouth antics,' 'painted' torsos, and 'fantastic dresses.'[44] From the vantage of his window, above the 'agitated' and 'deafening' 'multitude,' above



the 'blaze of a thousand blue lights,' the Thug watches in horror as a 'maddened' elephant, scorched by a wayward torch, 'rush[es] into the crowd,' 'seize[s] an unfortunate wretch by the waist,' and 'dash[es] him against the ground.' Ameer Ali repeatedly contrasts his own bodily coherence with the herd mentality of the natives. As his gang push their way through the Mohorum crowd, their foreignness becomes manifest: they find themselves 'exposed' 'to the jeers and abuse of the multitude,' 'recognised' from their 'dress and language' 'as strangers.'[45] The deindividuating multitude, with its tendency to liquefy all distinctions, is literalized for Ameer Ali when he surveys a riverbank from atop a bridge, beholds 'the various and motley groups in the bed of the river': 'there were thousands assembled; the banks of the river and the bed were full, – so full, it seemed as if you might have walked upon the heads of the multitude.'[46]

Ameer Ali's foreignness is reinforced by his religion. He identifies, after all, not with India's predominantly Hindu population but with its Mughal invaders, the Muslim forerunners of East India Company bureaucrats. Ameer Ali's father even links the origin of Thuggee to the 'invasion by our forefathers of India.'[47] Sleeman, too, advances a similar theory of Thuggee's foreign origin: '[I]f, as I have been informed, Arabia and Persia be infested by Phansigars [or Thugs], little room is left to doubt that these murderers came along with the Mohammedan conquerors into India, and that they have followed the progress southward of the Mohammedan arms.'[48] Not surprisingly, Ameer Ali contrasts his own nobility with 'the present degeneracy,' with the 'mean and sordid' character, of 'the present miserable generation,' a 'degenerate race.'[49] He repeatedly laments the 'superstitious fear' plaguing not only the population at large but some of the less sophisticated members of his own gang.[50] He conceives of himself as 'a scourge' on India's 'wickedness,' an enforcer of divine law, for 'the hand of Alla,' he muses, 'was upon all our doings.'[51] Ameer Ali delivers 'retributive justice,' as he calls it, to a Pindharee soldier who brutally tortures an old man by meticulously wrapping the man's fingers and hands in oil-soaked cloth, before setting them on fire.[52] Like the British, in fact, who famously suppress the Pindharee armies during the Bentinck administration, Ameer Ali views Pindharees as a decidedly 'wicked set.'[53] Disgusted at the sight of native police officials torturing a bandit, who is forced to inhale 'burning-hot ashes' before 'both sinews of his legs' 'above the heels' are 'cut,' Ameer Ali and his comrade congratulate themselves upon their own relative humanity: '[I]t makes me sick; what a contrast this is to our work, where he who is to die scarcely knows that the handkerchief is about his neck before he is a dead man!'[54]

The line between Ameer Ali and the British all but disintegrates by novel's end, once the captured Thug turns informant and then undercover agent for the

British, leading a party of his captors to one of the secret 'lurking-places' of a notorious Thug.[55] Temporarily released from prison in order to lead his captors to the hideout, Ameer Ali, though shackled, is given a sword and six men with which to subdue the wanted man. In chains, with a weapon at his side, he is prisoner and police officer in one, an embodiment of the blurring line between British law and Thuggee. Likewise, the six soldiers, who have been carefully disguised as Thugs, guard Ameer Ali, prevent his escape, but also follow his orders. He aligns himself politically and psychologically with the counter-Thuggee enterprise, conflating himself grammatically with his British captors: if he 'ever escaped from *us*,' Ameer Ali assures his captors, 'I alone could tell where he was to be found.'[56]

Earlier in the novel, in a metafictional exchange between captive and captor, between Thug and framing narrator, Ameer Ali's mirror-like quality becomes manifest. Waiting for Ameer Ali to collect his thoughts, the narrator takes the opportunity to provide the reader with a detailed account of his prisoner's physical appearance, which, as we have already witnessed, is graceful and attractive. 'Reader, if you can embody these descriptions, you have Ameer Ali before you; and while you gaze on the picture in your imagination and look on the mild and expressive face you may have fancied, you, as I was, would be the last person to think that he was a professed murderer.'[57] Ameer Ali asks unexpectedly to hear the narrator's description. It is the only time during the interview that he has shown any interest in what his interrogator has written about him. His request granted, he compliments a momentarily disoriented and somewhat self-conscious narrator: 'It is a faithful picture, such as I behold myself when I look in a glass.'[58] For a fleeting moment – a moment, however, that reverberates throughout the text – Ameer Ali seizes hold of his own representation in the imperial metanarrative, turning his objectification at the hands of his captor into a vehicle for narcissistic reflection, a mirror in which his own physique and the narrator's descriptive powers are mutually flattered, affirmatively entangled, made to reflect each other. In a flash of self-recognition and guilty pleasure, the narrator sees in Ameer Ali's narcissism *himself* in the act of narrating, watches himself watching. Already hailed, the reader, too, is implicated in this hall of mirrors, for, in listening to the narrator's sketch, in scrutinizing Taylor's words, Ameer Ali becomes for an instant the text's audience, another one of its silent spectators.

## The Carceral Context

By way of concluding, I would like to turn our attention to the materiality of Ameer Ali's confession. What made *Confessions of a Thug* so popular with



nineteenth-century readers was its self-proclaimed realism, the aura of authenticity and urgency that accrued around its unknown author, who insisted somewhat disingenuously that he wrote the novel not to entertain, not to make money, but to alert the public to the reality of Thuggee. In the manner of a fictionalized 'leaked memo,' the novel recreates for its readers the sensation of perusing an official government document, and it replicates the formal and rhetorical conventions of two confessional genres that operated within the nineteenth-century British criminal justice system. First and foremost it is a deposition, the written record of a witness's out-of-court testimony. It will be used presumably to apprehend, prosecute, and convict other Thugs. In exchange for their cooperation, Thug informants or 'approvers,' as they were called, were often spared the death penalty. Second, it is a fictional example of the moral interrogations, the exercises in criminal self-analysis, that were adopted by an increasing number of British penitentiaries in the 1830s and 1840s to gauge the redemptive potential and moral self-awareness of hardened criminals.[59] Ameer Ali's narrative fluctuates stylistically between these two confessional genres. On the one hand, *Confessions of a Thug* is the blood-soaked deposition of a criminal, a litany of murder and braggadocio that takes the form of an adventure story. On the other hand, it is a conversion narrative, a *Bildungsroman* of sorts, in which a subject – almost in spite of himself – meditates upon the consequences of his life choices.

Taylor only fleetingly describes the material reality of the prison in which Ameer Ali is giving his confession. At the beginning of the text, for instance, the Thug asks for and is granted a drink of water. Swept up in the recitation of a childhood memory, Ameer Ali 'got up,' we are informed, 'and walked across the room, his irons clanking as he moved.'[60] As the novel progresses, however, Ameer Ali's irrepressible chattiness and the prison official's relative passivity have the effect of dematerializing the prison, drowning out its sights and sounds, including those irons, in the convivial and seemingly unmediated stream of discourse that flows for forty-nine chapters from Indian mouth to English ear. Perhaps because Taylor himself downplays the material reality of his novel's carceral setting, criticism on *Confessions of a Thug* tends to do so, too, either brushing past its meta-setting with a cursory nod of the head, or abstracting it even further, viewing Taylor's prison interrogation conceit as a metaphor for the panoptic logic of British imperialism. By reading the text not merely as an imperial novel but as a *prison* novel, by taking into account the historical particularity of confessional technologies in the context of British carceral reforms in the 1830s and 1840s, we can recapture the historical materiality of imprisonment in *Confessions of a Thug* – a materiality that operates, as I've said, at the level of *form* in the novel.

As Sean C. Grass has documented, in the wake of the Prisons Bill of 1839 – the year, not coincidentally, when Taylor's novel was published – new disciplinary technologies aimed at individualizing 'the reformative endeavor' were implemented throughout the British penal system. Prisoners were placed in isolation, encouraged to contemplate 'the origins of [their] criminality' and 'the commission of [their] crime[s].' Endless acts of self-narration would trigger (so the theory went) their 'moral reformation.'[61] If literate, they were asked to pen their own psychological-sociological self-studies. If illiterate, they recited their life stories to the prison chaplain or schoolmaster, who assiduously transcribed their words. The goal was to instil prisoners with an ethic of contemplation, an epistemology of the self, which would echo therapeutically in their heads, nurtured by the monastic silence of their cells. In the early and mid-1840s, the Reverend John Clay – a prison reformer and chaplain of Preston Gaol – collected hundreds of pages of these 'short narratives' of 'self-examination,' as he termed them, many of which were dictated to him, and which detail prisoners' 'lives, their delinquencies, their self-convictions, and their penitence.'[62] Needless to say, these innovations in incarceration did not extend to Britain's vast network of overseas colonial prisons and penal colonies. In India, captured Thugs met very different fates than the 'Anglo-Saxon' men from 'the labouring classes' with whom Clay worked. According to historian Clare Anderson, Thugs were either executed or 'transported' by the East India Company to the island of Mauritius, where they were 'employed within the expanding plantation economy,' in other words, where they served as slaves.[63]

That the reform-minded Taylor spares Ameer Ali this fate and instead subjects him to the regime of didactic self-contemplation that was foisted upon *British* convicts in *English* penitentiaries, has the *prima facie* effect not just of anglicizing the Thug but of suggesting, in the face of his stubborn incorrigibility, that even *he* is redeemable, that his criminality – and that criminality more generally – is the product of environment, of nurture rather than nature. Prison reform, indeed, the very logic of *reform*, is premised on the assumption that criminals are made not born, that improved material conditions, both in the prison and in society at large, will inevitably produce a better class of people. It is not that Taylor wants to reform Thugs. Nor does he want to implement in India Britain's penitentiary experiments. Rather, by imagining a scenario in which a Thug performs a carceral self-study, with its assumptions about the *social* origins of crime and the protean nature of man, Taylor launches a sweeping political attack against British mismanagement in India, shifting the debate from the Thug's moral character to the colonial conditions that cause Thuggee to proliferate in the first place. Though the purpose of the carceral self-study is therapeutic self-incrimination, ownership of one's crime,



the triggering of guilt *within the prisoner*, these documents also provide prison reformers with a vicarious and equally therapeutic experience of guilt. Reformers read in the faces of prisoners the fruits of their own broken criminal-justice system, of a flawed and mismanaged society. The prisoner's self-study, then, constitutes a site of guilty reciprocity, cathartic self-blame, between prisoner and prison administrator. Prisoners became, in the eyes of reformers, *reflections* of the failings of Britain's penal system, symptoms of its structural deficiencies, and opportunities for its redemption.

In his prison reports from the 1840s, Clay captures perfectly the self-flagellating yet messianic logic of reform that Taylor invokes in an imperial context. Clay's reports are not meditations upon the moral failings of criminals so much as passionate denunciations of the broken prison system that his reforms attempt at the local level to fix. He views prisoners as victims of a dubious philosophy of incarceration, their criminality the product of its implementation. Many of them had been inmates in the older penal institutions, in which prisoners, instead of being confined separately, were forced to live together, forming societies and gangs – one vast 'finishing school of crime,' a house of 'vicious education.' 'It was once a truth so fully recognized as to be proverbial,' he writes, that '*a criminal came out of prison worse than when he came in.*'[64] It is a favourite formulation of reformers. It echoes through the corridors of their writings. It makes an appearance, for instance, in Charles Reade's classic prison reform novel, *It Is Never Too Late to Mend* (1856): 'Under the old [system], the jail was a finishing school for felony and petty larceny. Under the new, it is intended to be a penal hospital for diseased and contagious souls.'[65] Prison is the disease from which the criminal suffers; it is his only hope for a cure. Such is the logic of liberal guilt. I oppress you; I save you. It is the logic, too, of Philip Meadows Taylor's *Confessions of a Thug*, of his imperial *prison* novel. In an Indian man's confession, in *a mirror*, a white man catches guilty glimpses of himself, then pledges to India: 'I will rescue you from myself.' I am your disease; I am your cure. Taylor's self-incriminating liberal imperialism is more dangerous, in some ways, than the genocidal logic of white supremacy to which it presents itself as moral corrective, as ideological antidote. *That*, at least, we do not mistake for progress.

## NOTES

1 See Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830–1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 86–90. From the Hindi verb *thugna* (to deceive), 'Thuggee,' as the British termed it, was a secret religious

cult whose adherents stalked unwitting wayfarers before strangling them with a silk handkerchief or *roomal*. Though victims, who bodies were expertly buried and often never discovered, were nominally sacrificed to Kali, the Hindu goddess of destruction, who was also called Bhowanee or Devi, Thuggee nonetheless attracted a significant number of Muslim adherents, Muslim Thugs purportedly believing that Kali functioned as an instrument of Allah's will. Though criminal gangs certainly existed in late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century India, some historians argue that Thuggee is more a colonial ideological construct than a historical reality, in much the same way that 'Islamic terrorism' functions today as an unparticularized catch-all, a convenient metaphor for any and all guerilla activity by Muslims against Western economic and military interests.

2 See Parama Roy, 'Discovering India, Imagining *Thuggee*,' *Yale Journal of Criticism* 9 (1996): 121–3. See also Shuchi Kapila, 'Educating Seeta: Philip Meadows Taylor's Romances of Empire,' *Victorian Studies* 41 (1998): 216, and Javed Majeed, 'Meadows Taylor's *Confessions of a Thug*: The Anglo-Indian Novel as a Genre in the Making,' in *Writing India 1757–1900*, ed. Bart Gilbert-Moore (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 86–110.

3 See Mary Poovey, 'Ambiguity and Historicism: Interpreting *Confessions of a Thug*,' *Narrative* 12 (2004): 4.

4 Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, ed. Kerry McSweeney (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 4.754–5; emphasis added.

5 Philip Meadows Taylor, *Confessions of a Thug* (1839), ed. and intro. Patrick Brantlinger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 15.

6 Robert Grant Williams, 'Shadows of Imperialism: Canonical Typology in Taylor's *Confessions of a Thug*,' *Dalhousie Review* 72 (1992–3): 485.

7 Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness*, 88–9.

8 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 127.

9 Taylor, *Confessions of a Thug*, 442.

10 Ibid., 393.

11 See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 93.

12 Taylor, *Confessions of a Thug*, 12.

13 Philip Meadows Taylor, 'The State of Thuggee in India,' *British and Foreign Review* 15 (1843): 279.

14 Henry Reeve, preface to *The Story of My Life* (1877), by Philip Meadows Taylor (London: Oxford University Press, 1920), xxxvii.

15 Ibid., xxxvi.

16 Kate Teltscher, *India Inscribed: European and British Writing on India, 1600–1800* (Delhi and Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1995), 127.



17 William Henry Sleeman, *The Thugs or Phansigars of India: Comprising a History of the Rise and Progress of that Extraordinary Fraternity of Assassins*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1839), 1:38.

18 Taylor, *Confessions of a Thug*, 36.

19 Sleeman, *The Thugs*, 1:51.

20 Ibid., 1:52.

21 Edward Thornton, *Illustrations of the History and Practices of the Thugs* (London: William H. Allen, 1837), 328.

22 Ibid., 334.

23 Ibid., 467.

24 Taylor, 'State of Thuggee,' 285.

25 Philip Meadows Taylor, *The Story of My Life* (1877) (London: Oxford University Press, 1920), 199, 230, 232.

26 Sleeman, *The Thugs*, 1:57.

27 Ibid., 1:58.

28 Poovey, 'Ambiguity and Historicism,' 14.

29 George A. Sala, 'The Key of the Street,' *Household Words* 3 (September 1851): 571.

30 Wendy S. Jacobson, 'John Jasper and Thuggee,' *Modern Language Review* 72 (1977): 527.

31 Lawrence James, *Raj: The Making and Unmaking of British India* (New York: St Martin's/Griffin, 1997), 45.

32 Henry Bruce, introduction to Taylor, *The Story of My Life*, xviii.

33 Taylor, *Confessions of a Thug*, 492.

34 Ibid., 90.

35 Ibid., 265.

36 Ibid., 266.

37 Philip Meadows Taylor, 'On the Thugs,' *New Monthly Magazine* 38 (July 1833): 286.

38 Taylor, *Confessions of a Thug*, 164.

39 Ibid., 227.

40 Ibid., 160.

41 Ibid., 238.

42 Ibid., 227.

43 Ibid., 164.

44 Ibid., 177–9.

45 Ibid., 166.

46 Ibid., 182.

47 Ibid., 48.

48 Sleeman, *The Thugs*, 1:48.

49 Taylor, *Confessions of a Thug*, 239, 226–7.

50 Ibid., 413.
51 Ibid., 72–3.
52 Ibid., 375.
53 Ibid., 388.
54 Ibid., 150, 152.
55 Ibid., 544.
56 Ibid., 544; emphasis added.
57 Ibid., 266.
58 Ibid., 267.
59 See also the contributions by Sean C. Grass and Anna Schur in this collection.
60 Taylor, *Confessions of a Thug*, 20.
61 Sean C. Grass, *The Self in the Cell: Narrating the Victorian Prisoner* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 31.
62 Walter Lowe Clay, *The Prison Chaplain: A Memoir of the Rev. John Clay* (1861; Montclair, NJ: Patterson Smith, 1969), 274.
63 Clare Anderson, 'The Genealogy of the Modern Subject: Indian Convicts in Mauritius, 1814–1853,' in *Representing Convicts: New Perspectives on Convict Forced Labour Migration*, ed. Ian Duffield and James Bradley (London: Leicester University Press, 1997), 164.
64 Clay, *The Prison Chaplain*, 272; emphasis in original.
65 Charles Reade, *It Is Never Too Late to Mend* (1856; Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2004), 113. See also the second part of Jeremy Tambling's contribution to this volume.

# 4 'Now, now, the door was down': Dickens and Excarceration, 1841–2

ADAM HANSEN

> Let it be impressed upon our readers that the existing question is, not between this system and the old abuses of the old profligate Gaols (with which, thank Heaven, we have nothing to do), but between this system and the associated silent system.[1]

By the time Charles Dickens published these lines in April 1850, it may have been true that he, like his country, had 'nothing to do' with the 'old profligate Gaols.' Yet nine years before, Dickens had issued *Barnaby Rudge*, a novel animated by the destruction of the typically 'profligate' Newgate Prison in 1780. Equally, along with many other commentators on penal policy, Dickens knew that in the 1850s the 'old abuses' still existed despite reforms, alongside many new abuses caused *by* reforms. Dickens's parentheses are therefore disingenuous: he seems to acknowledge and repress the awareness that while new prisons appeared to have spatial and moral integrity, they only partially solved a long-standing problem; similarly, despite Dickens's attempt to make the phases of penal practice discrete, he knew no such separation was possible.

The penal practice favoured by the British government from the mid-1830s onwards was termed the 'separate' system. This system was intended to keep prisoners in solitary confinement, while they studied the Bible or laboured. The authoritarian Dickens reviled it, not because of any mental anguish inmates suffered, but because it was insufficiently punitive. As he put it in 'Pet Prisoners,' the 'separate' system encouraged and indulged alienated egotism, 'pattern penitence,' and 'assumed repentance.'[2] By individuating prisoners, the system had deleterious consequences for their moral state and the possibility of their proper reformation:

> A strange absorbing selfishness – a spiritual egotism and vanity, real or assumed – is the first result. It is remarkable to observe, in the case of murderers who

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# Stones of Law, Bricks of Shame

## Narrating Imprisonment in the Victorian Age

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