



Ambiguity and Historicism: Interpreting *Confessions of a Thug*

while narrative is "a desiring subject's confrontation with the threat or promise of transformation, or one might say the threat *and* promise of transformation, which the subject struggles either to withstand or to bring about." One consequence of these definitions is that they allow for the decoupling of the two concepts: one can have definitions in that they allow for the decoupling of the two concepts: one can have story without narrative (as in a newspaper's report of an event) and narrative without story (as in some experiments by the $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ poets). The Dialogue considers further implications and consequences of these definitions—how is Antin's conception of narrative different from what most people would call lyric?—and moves on to consider numerous other issues, including narrative across the media and the concept of irony.

Daniel P. Gunn's essay takes up the question of the relation between the technique of free indirect discourse (FID) and the authority of Austen's narrator in *Emma* and, by extension, the authority of other heterodiegetic narrators. Through skillful analyses of FID in *Emma*, Gunn counters theory and criticism advancing the position that FID is a technique that subverts the narrator's authority; he contends instead that the technique is part of Austen's careful modulation of voices, a modulation that enhances rather than undermines the narrator's authority.

Susan M. Griffin's essay identifies a significant strain of anti-Catholicism in the work of Wilkie Collins and uses her demonstration to add a new dimension to our understanding of the rise of the sensation novel in nineteenth-century England. Griffin's work, in other words, combines historical, cultural, and formal analysis to contribute to our understanding not only of *The Woman in White* but also of the history of the English novel.

Finally, Eliana Gommel's essay provocatively considers the way in which Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* anticipates—and works through in its own way—recent theoretical debates about authorship. The essay both offers an original look at Wilde's narrative and suggests that our debates about authorship have a kind of Gothic dimension that we rarely acknowledge.

James Phelan

One of the sensations of the 1839 London literary season was a three-volume novel, published in plain brown boards by the respected house of Richard Bentley and written by a previously unknown writer, the self-styled "Captain" Philip Meadows Taylor.¹ Entitled *Confessions of a Thug*, this novel purported to be the transcript of an actual Indian murderer's confession, as dictated to an unnamed English narrator. As we will see, the novel does not precisely specify the relationship between this narrator, who seems to be a servant of a large administrative organization like the East India Company, and the author, who was employed, as the title page proclaims, "in the service of H. H. The Nizam" of Hyderabad.² The novel capitalized on a series of revelations about the secret Indian religious society known variously as Thuggee, Thagi, and Phansigar. This organization had first attracted attention in England in 1836, when William H. Sleeman, an officer in the Company, published an exhaustive guide to Ramaseeana, the "peculiar language of the Thugs." Widespread English notice of Sleeman's Calcutta-published book had to await its first review, which appeared in the *Edinburgh Review* in early 1837, and the publication in that same year of Edward Thornton's *Illustrations of the History and Practice of the Thugs*, which was largely taken from Sleeman's book.³ By the time Taylor's novel hit the bookshelves, then, the public was already fascinated by this mysterious Indian organization, and they embraced the novel with an ardor that surprised its author. "I found my book, 'The Confessions,' had been received with much greater interest and success than I had ever ventured to hope for," Taylor recalled, "and not only did the London papers and periodicals take it up, but the provincial press teemed with flattering reviews and long extracts from it. It was curious to hear people wondering over the

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book and discussing it, and evidently the subject was a new sensation to the public. It passed rapidly through the first edition, and a second was in preparation" (Taylor, *Story* 109).

As is frequently the case, these public discussions are preserved primarily in the reviews that appeared in various periodicals in the months and years following the novel's release. If these reviews are a reliable indication, English readers viewed *Confessions of a Thug* as a relatively truthful account of a characteristic—but horrifying—subgroup of Indian society and, more importantly, as proof that the English presence in India was fully justified. As the anonymous writer for the *British and Foreign Review* explained in an early response, the novel proved "the influence which the energy of our government in India has had in extinguishing crimes which appeared to be indigenous in the soil. . . . [W]herever the power of England extends, we trust that some sufficient marks are discernable of the progress of Christian civilization" (554). Writing in 1841, Frederick Holme, the well-known Greek scholar, was even more emphatic that Thuggee justified English rule: "To the vigilance of the British Government in India, has been due the first complete detection of Thuggee, in its real character of an organized and systematic fraternity; and, if under the same sway, this monstrous hybrid of superstition and cruelty is destined to be finally eradicated, a title will thus be earned to the gratitude of the natives of India, which will alone make the benefits of our later administration more than atone for the injustices and rapacity which marked our early acquisitions of Indian territory" (244).

In the century and a half since these comments were written, the meaning and the implications of *Confessions of a Thug* seem to have undergone a dramatic change. It is now possible to read the novel not primarily as an indictment of Thuggee—and certainly not as an unequivocal justification for British rule in India—but as an oblique critique of the East India Company and everything it represented: assumptions about the racial superiority of the English, the conviction that Christianity is morally superior to various Indian religions, and the belief that Western bureaucracy is more efficient and rational than its Eastern counterpart. It is possible to read the novel this way, moreover, on the basis of both textual evidence and biographical and historical information about Taylor and the cultural situation in which the campaign against Thuggee unfolded. While such a reading is not the only interpretation of *Confessions of a Thug* now available, the fact that this reading depends upon—is derived from—the theoretical categories by which contemporary academics interpret narratives invites us to ask a series of questions that various historicisms (including New Historicism) have failed to answer.⁴ These questions have to do with the claims we can make about interpretation. When our theory-driven interpretations conflict with the interpretations of past readers, can we say that one reading is superior to the other? If so, on what grounds? If not, then how can we choose between one interpretation, which may tell us as much about ourselves as the work at hand, and another, which now seems to be based on assumptions that are obsolete or frankly offensive?⁵ In this essay, I use the example of *Confessions of a Thug* to explore such questions. While the conclusions I reach are not definitive, they do suggest that this theoretical question is more complicated than it might initially seem.

THROUGH THE LENS OF MODERN THEORY: HOW I READ *CONFESSIONS OF A THUG*

When I first read *Confessions of a Thug*, I had never heard of *Ramaseema*, and my only exposure to Thuggee came from passing references in other, more canonical Victorian novels, like *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* and *The Moonstone*. I thus approached the novel as I would any narrative, through a combination of modern formalist categories like voice, focalization, and mode of address and a curiosity bred of the context-sensitive historicism associated with academic journals like *Representations*. Read through formalist categories, the novel seems odd in several interesting ways, not least of which involves the similarities between the Indian who narrates the vast majority of the novel and his English interlocutor, who only occasionally comments on the confession he transcribes. Sensitive to textual features that depart from a narrative's dominant conventions, I began with the passages that seem to underscore these similarities, especially the ones in which the Indian provokes the English officer to speak. Passages that encourage the reader to view the two narrators as similar depart from the narrator's explicit norms because the English narrator specifically tells us that Thugs are unlike the English in every way—especially in the former's inability to suffer remorse, even for atrocious crimes. Indeed, like the novel's reviewers, the unnamed English narrator invokes this moral difference to justify British rule: the British need to govern India because, as Thuggee so amply shows, even Indian religions encourage natives to indulge in barbaric acts that no self-respecting Briton can countenance.

Two passages in particular underscore the similarities between Amree Ali, the narrating Thug, and his English auditor. In the first, Ali is telling the Englishman, whom he addresses as "sahib," about his response to one of his victims, whom he has subsequently discovered to be his sister:

To most I appear calm and cheerful, but the wound rankles in my heart; and could you but know my sufferings, sahib, you would perhaps pity me. Not in the daytime is my mind disturbed by the thoughts of the past; it is at night, when all is still around me, and sleep falls not on my weary eyelids, that I see again before me the form of my unfortunate sister: again I fancy my hands busy with her beautiful neck, and the vile piece of coin for which I killed her seems again in my grasp as I tore it from her warm bosom. Sahib, there is no respite from these hideous thoughts. . . . You know the worst, sahib—think of me as you will, I deserve it; I cannot justify the deed to myself, much less to you; and the only consolation I have—that it was the work of fate, of unerring destiny—is but a weak one, that gives way before the conviction of my own guilt. (432–33)

In this passage, the Indian narrator explicitly expresses the remorse that the Englishman elsewhere claims Thugs cannot feel.⁶ When Ali does so, a reader trained, as I am, to look for narrative patterns must decide how to interpret this blatant contradiction of the Englishman's claim: does this suggest that the Thug is insincere and manipulative? That the Englishman is less reliable than he seems? Or that the two

narrators resemble each other—either in being insincere and manipulative or in their unreliability?

A second passage—one of the few in which the English narrator directly addresses Ameer Ali—further complicates the relationship between the two narrators. It does so explicitly when the white narrator admits the sympathy he feels for Ali, then implicitly when the white narrator appeals directly to the (presumably white) reader, thus enlisting the reader's sympathetic engagement. Having just provided a description of the Thug, which codes Ali as quasi white (he has a "broad forehead" and "he is fair for a native" [240]), the narrator directly addresses the reader: "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" (211). Asking the reader to "embody" Ali imaginatively implicitly implicates the reader in the exchange that is being recounted, for the white narrator imagines his white reader imaginatively and bodily taking the Indian into himself. When the white narrator addresses Ali, in the next sentence ("Now, Ameer Ali, said I . . ."), he asks Ali to imagine the reader imagining him, as the narrator reads Ali the description the reader has just read:

At every sentence the expression of his face brightened. When I had concluded he said, It is a faithful picture, such as I beheld myself when I look in a glass. You have omitted nothing, even to the most trifling particulars; nay, I may even say my lord has flattered me; and he arose and made a profound salaam. No, said I, I have not flattered your external appearance, which is prepossessing; but of your heart I fear those who read will judge for themselves, and their opinions will not be such as you could wish, but such as you deserve. You think my heart bad then, sahib?

Certainly I do.

But it is not so, he continued. Have I not ever been a kind husband and a faithful friend? Did I not love my children and wife while He who is above spared them to me? And do I not even now bitterly mourn their deaths? Where is the man existing who can say a word against Ameer Ali's honour, which ever has been and ever will remain pure and unsullied? Have I ever broken a social tie? Ever been unfaithful or unkind to a comrade? Ever failed in my duty or in my trust? Ever neglected a rite or ceremony of my religion? I tell you, sahib, the man breathes not who could point his finger at me on any one of these points. And if you think of a moment, they are those which, if rigidly kept, gain for a man esteem and honour in the world. (211–12)

The narrator is completely silenced by the Thug's observations, and the reader is left free to see—and judge as she will—the resemblance between the Englishman who claims to revere life and the Thug whom he has described as taking it so lightly.

Such passages seem to cry out for some interpretive category that can defy the little hobgoblin of consistency without completely sacrificing narrative coherence. Such an interpretive category would make it possible to locate a level of meaning

that lies "deeper" or "outside" of the white narrator's explicit agenda, for this would allow us to make sense of contradictions that otherwise seem uninterpretable. Wayne C. Booth's concept of the implied author permits precisely this hermeneutic move: this concept allows us to infer a presence, whom we can call "Philip Meadows Taylor," that is not identical to the white narrator (Booth 71–77, 151–52, 157). This "Taylor" appears to be the origin of the criticism implicit in the contradictions of the narrator's claims about the Thugs and in the similarities that link the Thug and the sahib. The presence of the implied author, in other words, transfers the criticism the English narrator explicitly directs toward Ali to the English narrator himself. By so doing, the implied author encourages the reader to qualify any judgment of Ali by the judgment the novel allows us to pass on the Englishman.

In his discussion of the implied author, Booth is careful to limit the nature of the evidence by which readers can assess the "sincerity" of this narrative presence: "we have only the work as evidence for the kind of sincerity that concerns us," Booth declares. "Is the implied author in harmony with himself—that is, are his other choices in harmony with his explicit narrative character? If a narrator who by every trustworthy sign is presented to us as a reliable spokesman for the author professes to believe in values which are never realized in the structure as a whole, we can then talk of an insincere work. A great work establishes the 'sincerity' of its implied author" (75). In this statement, we see the influence of New Critical formalism, which still cast its shadow over Booth in 1961: Booth assumes that "great" literary texts constitute organic wholes whose parts are in "harmony" with one another, and he also assumes that the only evidence by which we can stabilize the meaning of a text is found in the text itself—even when, as is the case here, the textual feature (the implied author) has to be inferred by a discerning reader.

If Booth's interpretive category helps me separate the novel's white narrator from the implied author who seems to judge him, then his elaboration of the concept also assists my attempt to interpret *Confessions of a Thug*. Once I have distinguished between the white narrator and "Philip Meadows Taylor," I can interpret the similarities that link the Indian and the English narrators as implicit expressions of a criticism that encompasses both. Having made this distinction, I can come to terms with the "values . . . realized in the structure [of the novel] as a whole": the numerous graphic descriptions of the murders the Thugs commit seem unambiguously to condemn the Thugs as inhumane, barbaric, and cruel—qualities that the text does not associate with the English narrator. If the passages that link the two speaking narrators and that imply the presence of an implied author at some distance from both Ali and the white narrator are credible, then this implied author-narrator presumably has some implicit norms that are part and parcel of our recognition of the distance between him and the two speaking narrators. These norms, while never directly stated, echo the white narrator's abhorrence of the Thugs' barbaric behavior and condemn those aspects of the white narrator that make him resemble the Thug in other respects.

Since 1961, of course, the kind of formalism Booth practiced has been supplanted—some would say displaced—by various modes of historicism that look outside the text for evidence that can also (but sometimes differently) stabilize interpretation. They do so primarily by expanding the analytic object, so that the

"text" encompasses not just the physical book that Booth privileges but also the culture in which the book was produced and received.⁷ If I suspend the limitation that Booth imposed upon evidence, I get a picture of *Confessions of a Thug* that, in many ways, corroborates the interpretation Booth helped me reach. In one sense, however, the extratextual evidence complicates the picture. For, on the one hand, biographical and historical details support the thesis that Booth's category anchors—that "Philip Meadows Taylor," the implied author, is critical of the English presence in India. Indeed, these details encourage me to equate the implied author with the real Philip Meadows Taylor and to argue that Taylor—not just "Taylor"—was actually critical of the East India Company.⁸ But, on the other hand, contemporary readers obviously did not interpret the novel this way, and they embraced the actual Taylor as one of their own. Confusingly, it seems as if historical research leads in two different directions, one that corroborates the textual interpretation that Booth's formalism enforces, and another that contradicts it. This suggests that the conflict I am tracing might not simply divide a modern interpretation from its nineteenth-century counterpart or New Historicism from formalism. Instead, it might separate one use of historicism from another.⁹

My thesis that the implied author highlights a resemblance between the English narrator and the Thug is supported by what we know of Philip Meadows Taylor himself.¹⁰ Taylor, the son of a failing merchant from Liverpool, went to India in 1824 at the age of fifteen. Like other contemporary English boys, he was forced to emigrate to find work, but unlike luckier youths, whose family connections secured places with the Company, Taylor had to settle for the Nizam's service in Hyderabad. The Nizam was one of about six hundred Indian princes who ruled the provinces that lay outside the three British-ruled presidencies in India. Yet, like all the Indian princes, the Nizam was actually a puppet of the British government in India, for he had to answer to the British resident, who, in turn, answered to the English governor-general, who was appointed by the ministry in London.¹¹ In fact, the government in Hyderabad was even more compromised than most of the other principalities because the Nizam's administration was divided from within as well as split between the British and the prince. Mooneer-ool Moolk, the uncle of the Nizam's wife, was nominally in charge, but the real local power was exercised by Rajah Chundoo Loll, who owed his authority entirely to the East India Company (*Papers* 30). This meant that, in his capacity as military, then civil, servant of the Nizam, Philip Meadows Taylor owed his immediate allegiance to an Indian prince who only nominally ruled and to a divided and politically contentious Indian ministry. Within this service, his advancement was blocked both by Taylor's Englishness and by the superior position held by other Englishmen who worked for the Company or the Crown. Unlike the limitations placed upon a white man serving an Indian prince, in either of the two British parts of the Indian government, even a young man who was not a resident had numerous opportunities for advancement and personal gain, for the Company encouraged its civil servants to set up independent trading concerns, and, by necessity, both India House and Parliament delegated considerable authority to their military and civil agents in the field.

This complicated political situation helps explain Taylor's relation to Thuggee.

While modern historians may debate whether Thuggee actually existed, especially in the form the English officials said it did, it is undeniable that the nineteenth-century Anglo-Englishmen, like Taylor, believed that it was real.¹² References to Thuggee appeared in the official documents of the East India Company as early as 1810, when an official of the Company explained his decision to issue sepoy's wages in the form of bills of exchange rather than cash by citing what seemed to be organized robberies of furloughed soldiers. By 1816, at least one article about Thuggee had been published in the Anglo-Indian press. Its author, Captain Richard Sherwood, insisted that Thuggee was an ancient religious practice, in which Hindus and Muslims alike expressed their devotion to Bhavane, the ancient goddess of destruction, through the ritual strangulation of travelers.¹³ According to Sherwood, these murders were preceded by elaborate gestures of obedience and attention to omens, they were carefully plotted (often by Thugs disguised as beggars or soldiers), the weapon of choice was a scarf called a *rommal*, and the plunder the murders yielded was precisely divided among the Thugs, according to the latter's rank in an elaborate hierarchy of status and function. In 1829, two other Company officials, T. C. Smith and William Sleeman, were given official permission by the India Office to carry on the campaign they had already begun to systematically round-up and prosecute the Thugs. Between 1826 and 1832, under the direction of Sleeman, the division that later became the Thuggee and Dacoity Department captured and tried 1,562 men for the crime of Thuggee. Of these, 1,404 were hanged or transported for life.¹⁴ In 1835, Sleeman was elevated to the position of general superintendent of the Thuggee Department, and in 1836, as we have seen, he published *Ramaseewana*, the book that became the source for nearly everything subsequently published about Thuggee, including Taylor's novel.¹⁵

Even before the Company's Thug trials had begun, Philip Meadows Taylor had encountered the mysterious gangs that were to so engage the Company during the next two decades. In 1826, in his newly acquired position as assistant superintendent of police in the southwest district of the Nizam's territory, Taylor had stumbled across a series of disappearances and murders whose most puzzling aspect was the thoroughly respectable nature of the only available suspects:

The police, and chiefly my faithful Bulram Sing, had reported some very unusual circumstances. Dead bodies, evidently strangled, and in no instance recognized, were found in the roadside, and no clue could be discovered as to the perpetrators of their death. . . . The whole country was in alarm, and the villagers had constantly patrolled their roads, but as yet in vain. All we could learn was, that some time before, two bodies of men had passed through the district, purporting to be merchants from the north going southwards, but they appeared quiet and respectable, above suspicion. . . . Who could these [men] be? Day after day I tried to sift the mystery, but could not. But as the monsoon opened that year with much violence, I was obliged, most reluctantly, to go back to my bungalow at Sudasheepett. (Taylor, *Story* 54–55)

Three years later, in 1829, Sleeman solved Taylor's mystery when he announced the

discovery and initial prosecution of the Thugs. Despite his relief that the killers had been identified, Taylor also felt jealous when he learned that a Company official, who enjoyed so much more power than he did, had earned the "fame" of the discovery: "I felt sore that it had not fallen to my lot to win the fame of the affair," he wrote (*Story* 73). Frustrated, Taylor set out to achieve in writing the autonomy he had not been able to exercise in fact. While temporarily indisposed with fever, he began to combine some of the materials in Sleeman's *Ramaseena* with transcripts of the interviews he had conducted with captured Thugs into the novel I have been describing.

Taylor thus had personal reasons for feeling ambivalent about—if not openly critical of—the Company and its privileged officials, especially William Sleeman. He also had personal reasons for not identifying unequivocally with other English men and thus for not simply dramatizing himself as the white narrator. Indeed, as an English servant of an Indian prince, Taylor self-consciously positioned himself somewhere between the Indians and the English. We know that he prided himself on the affection the sepoys under his command felt for him, for he wrote to an English friend that the Indian soldiers called him "'Mahadev Babu, Little Father Mahadev'" (*Cadell* xiv).¹⁶ We also know that Taylor married the daughter of a racially mixed marriage: his wife's father was an Englishman who adopted Indian manners (the financier William Palmer) and her mother was an Indian of high status; thus Taylor's children would have been one-quarter Indian by blood.

Additional support for the thesis that Taylor was implicitly critical of the Company comes from what we know about the Company's activities in the 1830s, especially in the years during which Sleeman was pursuing Thuggee. Sleeman's campaign was mounted in the wake of parliamentary debates about the renewal of the Company's charter and the appointment, in 1828, of William Bentinck as governor-general of India. The debates about charter renewal, which were extensively reported in the English press between 1825 and 1833, explicitly turned on whether the Company should continue its dual roles as administrator for British India and as the chartered (monopoly) trading interest there. Implicitly, the debate turned on the cost of the Indian government, which by 1825 had amassed an alarming debt that was not being offset by the profits the Company derived from trade.¹⁷ Criticisms of the Company were repeatedly voiced in newspapers and on the lecture circuit, particularly by opponents like James Silk Buckingham, whose anti-monopoly, pro-free trade tirades fell on the receptive ears of Manchester and Liverpool merchants when Buckingham toured England in 1828. On the floor of the Commons on 10 July 1833, Buckingham and other critics of the Company clamored for reform, retrenchment, and some measure of accountability, lest the debt the Company continued to accumulate fall with full force upon English taxpayers.

It was in the context of these criticisms that Sleeman pursued his "Providential" campaign against Thuggee. As early as 1825, the duke of Wellington had secretly informed the Company directors that the monopoly over the China trade would have to go, but Wellington held out the possibility that the administrative function of the Company could survive if—and only if—Company officials increased administrative efficiency and produced measurable results. This was the mandate that William

Bentinck, the new governor-general, took with him to India in 1828. There is no record of the India Office, much less Bentinck, explicitly ordering Sleeman to find some cheap way to display the Company's administrative prowess, but the Court of Directors did welcome the initiative Sleeman proposed in 1829, for, in its early stages, the campaign against Thuggee promised exactly the kind of fiscal and judicial efficiency that the English government was demanding of the Company. In the long run, Sleeman's campaign against Thuggee became as cumbersome and expensive as most of the rest of the Company's operations, but by the time this happened—in 1835, when Sleeman was appointed general superintendent of the Thuggee and Dacoity Department—the Company's charter had been renewed, and its administrative function had been saved. Even after the debate about the charter died down in England, the campaign against Thuggee raged on, for although it had failed to attain efficiency, the campaign could still be represented as necessary to the security of the Indian government and the extension of legal reform. Indeed, one of the first Indian laws enacted after the charter renewal, as a first step toward the legal reform that the renewed charter required, was Act XXX, the so-called "Thuggee Act." This act promised greater judicial efficiency by permitting Company officials (like Sleeman himself) to try the so-called "Thugs" in any Company court regardless of where the offense had been committed.¹⁸

Adopted in 1836, Act XXX also permitted the Company to convict an individual of the crime of Thuggee solely on the testimony of a convicted accomplice, called an "approver." This is the role Ameer Ali plays in Taylor's novel: he is an approver, captured by officials who presumably represent the Company, and forced (or permitted) to use his "confession" to indict other Thugs. By the end of the novel, Ali has done just that: he has fingered the Thug Ganeshra, who was responsible for murdering Ali's mother and kidnapping Ali when he was a child. Thus, Ali uses the position the English impose upon him to take revenge upon the man who indirectly made him a Thug.

The conceit that Ameer Ali is an approver, the position created by Act XXX and enforced by juridical representatives of the Company and the Crown, is the novel's most explicit reference to the East India Company and the English government in India. If other references to these authorities are not so explicit, however, they are ubiquitous, and they further support the likelihood that the novel's unnamed white narrator represents the English government—either as an official of the Company, as William Sleeman was, or as some functionary of the Queen's administration. Neither of these two positions, of course, was ever held by Philip Meadows Taylor, who always served the Nizam. Like the similarities between the Thug and the English narrator, the parallels between the novel's depictions of the Thugs and contemporary descriptions of the Company are striking. Thus, for example, Ali repeatedly refers to the activities of the Thugs as "business," "trade," and a "profession," and he relishes the Thugs' ability to disguise themselves as merchants (i.e., to make them resemble Company representatives). In his account, the Thugs act like Company merchants even when they are not in disguise: they calculate their business opportunities in terms of "risk"; they steal and convert bills of exchange (the common currency of the Company's traders); and they negotiate wages and discounts just as Company mer-

chants did. In a conversation Ali recounts with another gang of robbers, he even calls the Thugs "free traders," as Company officials called themselves. "Oh, we are free the Thugs, who help ourselves to what we can get with a strong hand" (349). Like the Company's merchants claimed to do, the free-trading Thugs obey a strict set of laws intrinsic to their trade, they follow established trade routes (because this is where plunder is likely to be), and they keep their own trade secrets, both through disguise and through the language unique to their community.

Just as the narrative presents the Thugs as practicing a version of the "business" the Company conducted, so it presents the Thugs' activities as not only legitimate but fair, as Company officials claimed their business was. When the Thugs capture someone who has violated their complex system of laws, they inflict a justice that Ali represents as exact and swift. In one especially resonant passage, Ali's father represents him that the Thugs have managed to accomplish what all the efforts of the English have failed to do: they bring the Hindus and the Muslims into a working relationship with each other. This passage appears early in the novel, when Ali's adoptive father reveals that he is a Thug:

Thus far, my son, have I related some events of my life for your instruction, and I have little more to add. I need hardly now mention that I am a Thug, a member of that glorious profession which has been transmitted from the remotest periods to the few selected by Alla for his unerring purposes. In it, the Hindoo and the Muslim both unite as brothers; among them bad faith is never known: a sure proof that our calling is blessed and sanctioned by the Divine authority. For where on this earth, my son, will you find true faith to exist, except among us? I see none in all my dealings with the world; in it, each man is incessantly striving to outwit and deceive his neighbour: and I turn from its heartlessness to our truth, which it is refreshing to my soul to contemplate. From the lowest to the highest among us, all are animated with the same zeal. . . . Could this be without the aid of God? So clashing are human interests, and so depraved is the social state of our country, that I own no such feeling could exist without the Divine will. Some repugnance you will feel at the practice of the profession at first, but it is soon overcome, for the rewards held out are too glorious to allow us to dwell for a moment on the means we use to attain them. Besides, it is Fate—the decree of the blessed Allah! And who can withstand it? (16–17)

This passage suggests to me that the implied author allows criticism to be directed not only at one white man (the narrator) but at the entire English government in India, for when I read the passage mindful of details about the East India Company, it is difficult for me to believe that the novel is not indicting the Company alongside—or even instead of—the Thugs. Critical allusions to the Company include Ali's father's reference to competition ("each man is incessantly striving to outwit and deceive his neighbour"), and, more indirectly, his presentation of the Thugs as experts at the very game the Company so ineptly played. The Thugs are organized into groups more orderly and systematic than the Company's overlapping and sometimes competing military and civil units; they take their profit consistently and with mini-

mum effort, and they claim that the violence their business entails is "sanctioned by the Divine authority." This last comment precisely echoes William Sweenan's repeated references to the Company's prosecution of the Thugs as a "Providential" enterprise.

With such extratextual corroboration for the thesis I have advanced, it seems reasonable to argue that *Confessions of a Thug* is—and was—a thinly veiled critique of English rule in India. From this thesis, it is only a short leap to declare *Confessions of a Thug* an example of what Homi Bhabha has called hybridity. "Hybridity," Bhabha explains, "unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power [the demand that the native reflect, through abjection, the colonial's authority] but reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power" (154). With "Taylor"/Taylor, the implied and real author, using narrative parallels and textual contradictions to encourage readers to subvert the white narrator's "eye of power," *Confessions of a Thug* appears to me to be one of the earliest and most forceful criticisms of the East India Company and the nation it claimed to represent. Even so, I must admit, nothing in the text or the historical record leads me to think that "Taylor"/Taylor was sympathetic to Thuggee, which victimized the very Indians the Nizam (and Taylor) sought to preserve. Thus, I must conclude, the novel's thinly veiled critique of white rule in India exists in some uneasy relation to the more typical British view of the Indian situation—a view, as we will see, that did not include the sympathy the implied author expresses for some Indians but not others.

VICTORIAN INTERPRETATIONS: THROUGH THE EYES OF EMPIRE

The more typical British view of the Indian situation, of course, did not encompass sympathy for any Indians and, predictably, it led contemporaries to see *Confessions of a Thug* very differently from the way I have interpreted it. Without exception, the novel's early reviewers treated the novel as if it was exactly what the white narrator says it is—an unambiguous indictment of Thuggee and a defense of English rule. When reviewers criticized the novel (as many did), they did so either because it failed to meet the criteria they associated with good fiction or because the novel's use of the "facts" of Thuggee did not drive home the point they assumed the novelist was trying to make.¹⁹ These two complaints were linked in a brief notice published in the *Examiner* on 29 September 1839. In this review, the author begrudgingly admits that the novel "may be termed an exciting book," but he attributes its excitement to the details about Thuggee that are more effectively narrated in Sweenan's "official" report; when Taylor departs from these details, the reviewer charges, he entraps his readers "into a poor love-story, manufactured according to the most commonplace fashion" (613).²⁰

While the authors of such brief notices tended simply to summarize the novel's content or the "facts" it conveyed, two longer reviews engaged some of the issues that interest me; indeed, in doing so, they cite the very evidence I have used to infer

similarities between the white narrator and the Thug and between the Company and Thuggee. The reviewer for the *British and Foreign Review*, for example, hints at such resemblances when he notes that some of Ali's qualities are "universal passions." Even though this reviewer does not explicitly link the Indian to the white narrator, his elaborate discussion of the various guises assumed by the human appetite for "pursuit" implicitly ties the Thug and Thuggee to the white narrator: the novel's (white) readers, and the East India Company (534–36). Even if such observations acknowledge these similarities, however, the reviewer immediately curtails the implications they suggest when he aborts his "self-searching" (538) with the same apology for English rule that Trevelyan expressed in 1837: "If there be a subject to which an Englishman may look with pride, it is to the influence which the energy of our government in India has had in extirpating crimes which appeared to be indigenous in the soil. . . . Wherever the power of England extends, we trust that some sufficient marks are discernable of the progress of Christian civilization, in the unflinching defence of the rights and duties of humanity, and in the slow but certain defeat of the worst forms of superstition" (554).

Even more interesting is the long review of Taylor's novel published in the (Protestant) *Dublin University Magazine* in 1840. The title of this review, "Thuggee in India, and Ribandism in Ireland, Compared," points to the theme of innate human depravity that rings throughout the article. In this author's account, Indian Thuggee and Catholic Ribandism demonstrate that anyone—even white Westerners—can commit the kind of atrocities Taylor describes, for without the guiding light of Christianity, every soul is blighted. Thus, according to this writer, the novel shows "the state of brutal degeneracy to which we, any of us, might be reduced, were we deprived of that guidance from above, which we have in the holy Scriptures" (59).²¹

This reviewer may acknowledge that Ameer Ali and the white narrator resemble each other, but this resemblance inspires very different conclusions from the ones that I have drawn. The first difference between our interpretations, of course, has to do with the fundamental nature of and initial evidence for the resemblance itself: whereas I infer this resemblance from recurring images in the text and describe it as the propensity to manipulate or deceive, this reviewer infers the resemblance from Scripture and describes it as human nature. But the nineteenth-century reviewer does note that the Thug has a tendency to manipulate or deceive. Specifically, he notes Ali's ability to present himself as "tender" and "heroic" in order to curry favor with his interlocutor (and the reader): "it was most natural that he should endeavour to lighten the obloquy under which he lived, by sundry touches of the tender and the heroic, which were calculated to invest him with no little interest in the eyes of many a gentle reader" (64). Instead of drawing the conclusion I do from the white narrator's overt sympathy for this self-presentation—that the implied author, "Taylor," is criticizing the white narrator—this reviewer concludes that Taylor is the white narrator, and that he has simply committed an aesthetic and moral error in failing to comment upon Ali's ruses. "Captain Taylor may have been aware of them, but there is no collecting that he was so from any part of the work before us; and we cannot but regard it as a serious defect, not to have endeavoured, at least, to mark the line of distinction between Ameer Ali as a narrator of appalling facts, and Ameer Ali as a mere

impostor" (64). This reviewer cannot "collect" the evidence that "Captain Taylor" was aware of the complexities of his depiction of the Thug *even though* he quotes at considerable length two of the same passages in which I find evidence for just such an interpretation: the description of Ali that solicits the reader's engagement (53–54) and the adoptive father's descriptions of Thuggee, which so eerily conjure up the Company (54–55).

The salient difference between the two interpretations, which turn on identical textual passages, derives from the discrepant assumptions about the nature and purpose of fictional narratives with which readers approach *Confessions of a Thug*. Whereas I assume that fictional narratives constitute a complex, sometimes self-contradictory, tissue of rhetorical engagements with social and literary issues, all of which leave traces in the text that require theoretically informed interpretive paradigms and that benefit from historical research, the *Dublin Magazine* reviewer assumes that fictional narratives should be unambiguous, morally efficacious exempla of some universal truth that lies outside the text but that needs no theoretical explanation—like, for example, that Christianity can (and must) save fallen (or "barbaric") souls. Such unambiguous exempla would presumably require no interpretive paradigms or historical evidence—apart, of course, from the knowledge that enables a reader to distinguish good from evil and to identify the truths set out in Scripture. This assumption that the proper social use of fiction is moral—and thus that the evaluation of any novel should judge its moral efficacy (not its formal qualities)—leads this reviewer to fault Taylor for not making the factual basis of *Confessions of a Thug* more prominent. He criticizes the novel, in other words, for the very moral complexity and ambiguity that provoke my interpretive energy and that lead me to explore the novel's biographical and historical context. He criticizes it for being *too* imaginative, for, in his account, the author's imaginative energy threatens to distort the facts, which, in his account, are less ambiguous than what the novel presents. As I have done, this reader turns from the text to the context in order to stabilize interpretation. Whereas my interpretation of the historical materials confirms my sense that the novel is challenging contemporary commonplace, however, his interpretation of the historical materials corrects what he can only see as the novel's shortcoming—its failure to be absolutely clear about the barbarity of the Thug:

Nor do we think the form of narrative, under which Captain Taylor has conveyed his disclosures, the best calculated for impressing them, as *undoubted realities*, upon the minds of his readers. They come before us with the air of fiction. It requires an habitual reference to other documents, not to believe that the whole is a work of imagination. . . . [Whereas Defoe] causes his fictions to pass for facts, the *Captain* causes his facts to pass for fictions. . . . In our judgment, the Captain would have done better, had the communications with which he has favoured the public, appeared in a graver and a more authentic form; nor can we believe that, in such a shape, they would have had any less numerous or less earnest readers. Nor should he have confined himself, professedly, to the disclosures of a single informer. As he has availed himself of the confessions of many of the tribe, so he should have accompanied their statements, wherever it

could be done, by such corroborating circumstances as might lend them credit, always holding the principle in view, that the more atrocious the narrative, the more powerful the evidence by which it should be sustained, in order to its being credited by reasonable hearers. (64–65 emphasis original)

In this reader's interpretation, as in mine, the ambiguities of Taylor's novel are clearly visible, but far from subverting the "eye of power," as my invocation of hybridity suggests they do, the ambiguities seem to this reader simply to mar the moral efficacy of the novel. The presence of these ambiguities requires the reader to go beyond the pages of the text—not in order to substantiate Taylor's ability to depart from the English orthodoxy about racial superiority, as I have done, but to put an end, once and for all, to any suggestion that these atrocities are not real, and thus conclusive, evidence that English rule in India is necessary and sanctioned by God.

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

What can we conclude from juxtaposing these two interpretations of *Confessions of a Thing*? Can we say that my interpretation is better than those of the novel's contemporaries—either because mine is more responsive to textual and nontextual evidence or because it critiques Victorian racism, which now seems so offensive? Or should we say that the nineteenth-century interpretation is better because it is true to the spirit—not to mention the culture—in which the novel was received?

Instead of choosing between the two interpretations, I want to think for a moment about what the difference between them tells us about literary interpretation itself. The chief lesson I take from this juxtaposition involves interpretation's sensitivity to the assumptions through which it is produced. These assumptions are of at least three kinds: assumptions about the social function of literature; assumptions about the particular institutions in which interpretations are generated; and assumptions about what kind of knowledge literary interpretation should produce. In each instance, my assumptions differ from those presumably held by the nineteenth-century reviewers I have cited. I assume that the social function of literature is to elicit imaginative reflection, whereas early Victorian readers assumed that literature should adduce moral truths. I generate my interpretation from within an institution (the university) culturally associated with professionalism and with a form of knowledge that aspires to be comprehensive (to explain all of the relevant data), precise (to give not just a general but a specific explanation for the data), and coherent (the account itself should conform to recognizable generic conventions for narrative). The nineteenth-century reviewers occupied a socially more marginal status, for literary reviewing in the 1830s, which was not associated with the university, carried primarily the negative connotations of hack writing, and, because almost all reviews were published anonymously, it could not even borrow the prestige of a respected writer's name (Woolford 112). Without a socially recognized or institutionally specific position, the nineteenth-century reviewers did not benefit—or suffer—from sharply defined criteria for explanatory adequacy that reflect back upon the institu-

tion that houses them. Their criteria for explanatory adequacy reflected back upon society in general and drew upon the discourses, primarily religious and moral, that equated adequacy not with explanation but with demonstration (of larger, supra-institutional truths). Finally, I assume that literary interpretation should produce knowledge about how texts work, both as linguistic systems and in relation to the culture in which they were produced, whereas Victorian reviewers assumed that literary interpretation should help legislators and the public decide how to act, especially in situations like the one described in *Confessions of a Thing*, which seemed to speak so immediately to contemporary concerns.

Even if some version of these admittedly oversimplified differences do obtain, is it sufficient to say that literary interpretation is always a function of the assumptions that govern it? Is literary interpretation always *only* (or *ever* only) a function of the context in which it is produced? And what do we make of the fact that the extratextual materials with which both the nineteenth-century reviewers and I have supplemented textual analysis do not stabilize the meaning of the text, much less adjudicate the differences between our interpretations? If we accept the claim that interpretation is only a function of its context and governing assumptions, as Stanley Fish has so tirelessly argued, then the slippery slope of relativism seems ready to engulf the literary critical enterprise. If we admit that examining a text's social and cultural contexts only extends the task of interpretation—or that it requires interpretation itself—then we seem to be confronted with a never-ending project undertaken either to confirm what we already believe or simply for its own sake (to keep us employed, perhaps).

While I cannot answer these questions even to my own satisfaction, I do recognize their importance. I also recognize the persistence of the theoretical dilemma they raise. For, if some literary critics, including myself, turned to historical research in the 1980s in order to counteract the discipline's drift toward relativism and solipsism, then what have we gained by doing so? If we are not willing to make the kind of truth claims that the nineteenth-century reviewers made on behalf of our interpretations or our historicism, then why is this work not simply relativist and solipsistic? I obviously believe that my interpretation of *Confessions of a Thing* is both plausible and based on reliable evidence, both textual and nontextual, but I also can't help but see that other readers thought the same thing about their interpretations. In some ways, in fact, these readers enjoyed an advantage over me, for they were able and willing to argue that their interpretations and the historical research they consulted proved enduring truths that needed no explanation. These readers could judge this novel, as well as interpretations of it, by a standard that could not be considered relative because they did not believe it was subject to change. If, by the end of the nineteenth century, all this had begun to shift—both the certainty and the modes of textual and nontextual interpretation readers used—then have we won or lost by our modernity?²²

These are the questions that seem to me to need answers now: if we are not willing to make truth claims about interpretation, even within an understanding that those claims may need to be revised as more research is conducted, then how can we defend our work? If historicism is an important supplement to textual analysis, then

why is this so? Do interpretations speak only to (and of) their time, or do some interpretations deserve to endure—because they are better (on what grounds?) or more convincing (to whom? and why?)? Do the meanings of texts really change? Or are these apparent changes simply the effect of changing the readers and the occasions for which we read?

Answering these questions will require a degree of honesty and a measure of modesty that have been rare in our discipline in recent decades, for we will have to give up both the fantasy that the interpretations we devise are self-evident to any intelligent reader and the self-important notion that critique ennobles literary study. While much work still needs to be done, I think that one promising approach to these questions has recently been taken by George Levine. Levine cites the role that narrative played in nineteenth-century scientists' quest to answer similar queries about the knowledge they produced about nature, and he usefully reminds us of narrative's ability to counteract all claims about universal truth: narrative "requires attention to embodied particulars and can make no universal claims," he writes (8). Following this logic, I will conclude this essay with a statement that may seem neither modest nor free of the pretensions of critique. I do so, however, because I believe that literary critics need to balance personal modesty with assertions that our discipline can and does produce positive knowledge, knowledge we are willing to defend even as we recognize its limitations. Thus, I will risk asserting that the interpretation that we construct a narrative from research patiently and painstakingly undertaken—in this case, the interpretation built on the historical details of Taylor's life and the situation of the East India Company in the 1830s—is superior to the interpretation that proves what its author assumes—the self-evident virtue of the English and the Company. While the narrative I have constructed is undeniably an interpretation too, I did not know when I began the research what I would find. If there's virtue in not knowing (at least in the beginning)—and I think there is—and if there's virtue in narrative—and I think that too—then I will stand behind this kind of work and risk the criticism it may incur.

ENDNOTES

1. Taylor did not achieve the rank of captain-commandant until 1843. The title of "colonel," which was often affixed to his name later in life, was also not an earned rank, since captain-commandant was the highest rank one could achieve as a local officer of the Nizam. See Cadell xxxix–xxxi.
2. A copy of the first edition of the novel is held by the Fales Library at New York University. Thanks to Marvin Taylor and the Fales Library for permission to consult this edition. In the introduction to this 1839 edition, Taylor states that he "became acquainted" with Amcer Ali in 1832 and that he "listened to" Ali's stories with "careful interest" (1:ix). While such comments might be taken as proof that the author of this introduction, who is explicitly Taylor, is the white narrator in the story, the introduction also notes additional sources for Ali's confession, including William Steeman's writings. The reference to multiple sources suggests that the English narrator is a composite of several individuals, including—but not limited to—Taylor. This ambiguity seems more pronounced when contrasted to the preface Taylor added to the 1873 edition. The 1873 preface ends with Taylor's statement that the novel relates Ali's story "without exaggeration, or any suppression of its enormity,—as indeed, I myself

self heard it told" (xix). After the Indian Mutiny in 1858, Taylor might well have wanted to efface any trace of the criticism of English rule in India that I identify in my interpretation. One way of effacing this criticism would have been to assert that the narrator and the author are identical, as Taylor's 1873 statement does. All references in this essay are to the 1873 edition.

3. The first review of Steeman's book, published anonymously, was by Charles Trevelyan. The full title of Thornton's book, which was also published anonymously, is *Illustrations of the History and Practices of the Thugs. And Notices of Some of the Proceedings of the Government of India, for the Suppression of the Crimes of Thuggee*. In 1833, Taylor had also published an article on the Thugs which appeared in *New Monthly Magazine*.
4. A symptomatic modern interpretation can be found in Brantlinger, who alternates between aligning Taylor with the English and suggesting that he was critical of English rule in India. For an alternative interpretation of the novel, see Majumel.
5. See Anger.
6. "These Thugs are unlike any others [murderers]. No remorse seems to possess their souls" (208).
7. A convenient summary of the New Historicist assumptions, at least as they were implemented in the influential journal *Representations*, can be found in Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt. I have argued elsewhere that this critical practice constitutes another mode of formalism. See Poovey.
8. Booth would presumably sanction this move since he refers to the implied author as the real author's "second self."
9. I thank Jules Law for this insight.
10. For Taylor's biography, see Cadell and Reeve.
11. A useful snapshot of the structure of rule in British India can be found in Phillips xxv–xxviii.
12. Some historians have argued that Steeman and others exaggerated the threat (or even the existence) of Thuggee in order to enhance their own authority in India. See Singha, Gordon, and Gupta.
13. Sherwood's article is reproduced in Bruce 13–26. The history of the various references to Thuggee appears in nearly all of the early materials on this subject. See, for example, Steeman, *Ramasesana* 17n; and Trevelyan 367–68.
14. See Steeman, *Rambhates* 1:109–110n1; and Bentinck 2:836 (a letter dated 20 June 1832, from T. C. Smith to the chief secretary to government, Fort William).
15. Taylor acknowledged Steeman's work in the introduction that he added to the second edition and which was reproduced in all subsequent editions (*Confessions* xii).
16. Mahadev was the name of an Indian deity.
17. See Alborn 28–29 and Dut xv–xix.
18. For a discussion of the legal dimension of the Thuggee campaign, see Singha.
19. While only a short notice, the review in the *Athenaeum* criticizes the novel for being monotonous (595).
20. The reviewer for the *Spectator* agrees that Taylor has overstated the factual basis for his narrative, but he does not conclude that this undermines the novel's effect: "Whether the fiction be much or little, the substance of the book shows a knowledge of the subject it treats of, and we have no doubt convey a true enough picture of Oriental life and character, forming a sort of Indian Gil Bias of blood" (805).
21. In novels of the 1850s, Catholics are frequently referred to as "Thugs" (Susan Griffin, private conversation at Narrative Conference, March 2003).
22. See Herbert 71–104.

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