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Shadows of Imperialism: Canonical Typology in Taylor's *Confessions of a Thug*¹

Although over the last decade much of the discussion concerning the canon's boundaries has examined how ideology, cultural hegemony, and other forces of marginalization and centralization inform the philological curriculum, a more textual approach reveals that rhetorical figures operating within literature—canonical or non-canonical—also promote and perpetuate the prominence of institutionally celebrated writers and writings.¹ Virtually untouched by contemporary English studies, a once popular but now peripheral nineteenth-century crime novel about India's underworld illustrates the subtle, almost undetectable, manner in which a marginalized work can contribute to canon formation. Rather than isolating canon formation as a political activity taking place outside the literary text, my reading outlines a particular novel's discursive strategies in order to demonstrate that, even within the non-canonical literary text, typological structures observe and justify the logic of canonicity which, in turn, advances British imperialism's rule over India.

Selling out quickly when first published in 1839, Philip Meadows Taylor's *Confessions of a Thug* no doubt achieved the author's stated purpose of awakening British public vigilance in the suppression of Thuggee—a pseudo-religious sect of Indian highwaymen who ruthlessly and surreptitiously strangled thousands of travellers. Taylor, himself an assistant Superintendent of the police and a member of the Nizam's army in Hyderabad and Hingolee, started to investigate mysterious murders in 1829, and in 1833 began collecting evidence from groups of testifying

Thugs who later furnished him with the material for a short ethnological article. Its publication later that year motivated him to refashion his material into a novel based on the testimonies of a notorious Thug.

Yet despite this formalistic shift from exposition to novel, Taylor's polemical introduction boldly understates his text's literary mode: "what there is of fiction has been supplied only to connect the events and make the adventures of Ameer Ali as interesting as the nature of his horrible profession would permit me" (1). Likewise, *The Literary Gazette's* review of *Confessions of a Thug* reads the text as if it were strictly an anthropological account:

the sketches of Oriental manners, customs, and society are alone a high recommendation to this publication. We know not when we have seen them better depicted. . . . Romance could invent nothing so hideous and contradictory, and were not the whole system discovered, revealed, and corroborated by unquestionable proof, it would be impossible for the mind to believe that such things could have been. (466-68)

The reviewer ignores the question of literary form altogether, probably because the text seems to have an unmediated relationship with India. So what at first may appear to be a Bildungsroman or even better yet a parody of a Künstlerroman, a novel which traces the development of a writer or other artist from childhood to intellectual maturity, is written and read as a documentary authentically narrated by Ameer Ali, a captured Thug turned informant who relates his life story to a British police official. Ameer Ali, the flamboyant protagonist, assumes the position of first-person narrator from the novel's beginning and, over the course of 550 pages, is only interrupted occasionally by remarks from the British officer, the Sahib meta-narrator who records Ameer Ali's testimony. Since the reader has little contact with the British, how could an ethnography be more accurate and more immediate than one delivered by an individual indigenous to that particular ethos?

Nonetheless, *Confessions of a Thug*, for all its anthropological ambitions, keeps directing the reader back to literature. While half of the chapters begin with descriptive headings, the other half begin with epigraphs taken from canonical English writings. And out of these twenty-four epigraphs, sixteen belong to the corpus of Shakespeare. Why would a text play down its fictional mode and yet quote passages from

the English literary canon? And why should Shakespeare be invoked as a knowledgeable guide to help the reader wend his or her way through a travelogue of the Indian underworld? The epigrammatic voice can hardly represent Ameer Ali, who knows nothing about English letters. As innocuous and insignificant as they may seem in relation to the text proper, the quotations suggest that *Confessions of a Thug* is not so much an ethnography—a writing of or about a culture—as a kind of epigraph—a writing upon or across a culture.

Mostly from the tragedies when quoting Shakespeare, the epigraphs sound out in the text a register of interpretive possibilities which might never have been considered had they been omitted. For instance, chapter XXX's heading is Othello's firm resolution to kill Desdemona before he talks to her for the last time in Act V: "Yet she must die, or she'll betray more men" (308). Written by an unidentified meta-narrator or perhaps secretly written by the listening Sahib, this quotation compels the reader to find in the narrative traces of *Othello*, providing an exegetical grid with which to situate the chapter's basic action. Accordingly, when Ameer Ali's lover discovers his secret identity as a thug captain and uses the information in the hopes of blackmailing him to marry her, Ameer Ali—much like the self-absorbed Moor—has no choice but to sanction her murder so as to protect himself and his men from the law. Xenophobic stereotyping from Renaissance England helps guide the reader through India in that the epigraph grafts the monstrously foreign passions of Othello onto the motivations of Ameer Ali and urges the reader to understand both murders in terms of racial difference. But the subtle correspondences between *Othello* and *Confessions of a Thug* are by no means confined to chapter XXX. Just as the handkerchief plays an intensely symbolic part in Othello's transformation into a jealous monster, the roomal or Indian handkerchief is the device with which the thugs strangle their unsuspecting victims and, as the text moves from one mass killing to another, becomes a crucial element in the episodic—even ritualistic—structure of the narrative. So each time the roomal surfaces in the text, *Othello* exerts a certain amount of exegetical pressure on the reader's interpretation of the scene: the villainous duplicity of Iago colors the Thugs and the innocence of Desdemona accompanies their strangled victims, transforming the Indian countryside into a stage for a revenge tragedy.

Indeed, while *Confessions of a Thug* quotes more and more from *Richard III*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear*, the entire corpus of Shakespearean tragedies begins to resonate throughout Ameer Ali's adventures inasmuch as Thuggee machinations exploit dissembling and play-acting. The word "thug" means a "deceiver," originating from the Hindee verb "thugna," "to deceive." When Thugs encounter in a town or along the road another smaller party, they persuade the travellers to join their group for mutual protection. Commonly called inveiglers, the special kind of Thugs who wheedle their way into rich men's confidence masquerade as nobility, treasure bearers, soldiers or whatever personae the situation demands. Usually in the evening after the travellers have eaten, the two parties exchange stories, as the listening Thugs inconspicuously arrange themselves behind the victims, three Thugs for every victim. The Thug leader then shouts a cue, such as "Bring me tobacco," and the murderers whip out their handkerchiefs, quickly but silently strangling their unsuspecting companions, whom they promptly bury to hide any evidence of the crime. Because the narrative consists of a series of episodes in which Ameer Ali and a few henchmen dupe bankers, merchants, or con artists into travelling with the thuggee caravan, dramatic-like irony arising from the interaction between the inveiglers and their innocent victims accesses an entirely different field of signification when the reader takes into account the epigraphs. King Richard III, Iago, and Edmund—to name but a few characters—also don various roles for the purposes of hiding and promoting their schemes and, through their respective quotations, enter the novel to overshadow the Thug's every move, affording the reader familiar reference points with which to anchor the meaning of Ameer Ali's oriental customs and culture.

Because the Thuggee problem extends beyond the underworld into mainstream culture, Shakespearean tragedy equips the reader with an interface for understanding the entire colony. By no means an ordinary highwayman in the everyday sense of the word, the Thug, as the text would first have him, signifies a dark, inscrutable secret buried beneath the breast of India: Taylor wonders how the "system of Thuggee could have become so prevalent, unknown to and unsuspected" by the colony's people for so long (1). The solution to the mystery seems to be that all Indian people shroud their identities in the garb of misleading roles. Peer

Khan, a leader in the Thuggee gang, comments on one particular money-grubbing traitor:

These fellows are never to be trusted; they exist everywhere, in all shapes; they are zemindars and potails of villages; they are fakeers and bhuttearas; they are goosaens, sahoukars, servants, and mutsuddees; nay the Rajah of Jhalone is one himself. (417)

Instead of differentiating the criminal from the public, instead of analysing the process by which the criminal becomes a social aberration or a cultural exception, the text treats the Thuggee problem as if it were intimately bound up with every level of Indian society. Unlike Western criminals who are often depicted as remaining outside the organized social system, the Thugs, we are told, are cultivated by a decadent culture:

there is no doubt that wherever one well-initiated Thug exists, he will among the idle and dissolute *characters* which everywhere abound in the Indian population find numbers to join him. (italics mine 9)

Constructing the colonized as characters, personae, and villains whom the Western reader can decode if he consults or remembers his Shakespeare, the epigraphs thus continue and develop the social criticisms the introduction polemically raises.

Now the epigraphs should not be seen as a mere catalyst for the detection of allusions, since an allusion, no matter how oblique and obscure, always directs the reader to a specific intertext, by pointing not to the intertext's title but to its many signatures—characters' names, place names, quotations, motifs, etc. In *Confessions of a Thug*, the text does not allude to canonical writings in that neither Ameer Ali nor, for that matter, any other character employs intertextual signatures from English literature. Had the epigraphs been left out of the chapters or overlooked by the reader, the text's ethnographical agenda would never have facilitated a reading that involves itself so closely with Shakespeare's corpus. Furthermore, to approach the text in terms of a figure of speech as imprecise and vague as the allusion only manages to render one possible exegesis, whereas to explicate how Shakespearean drama hermeneutically interferes with the ethnography sketches the limits of many exegeses and unravels for us the logic of canonicity. Rather than

signalling the reader to search for a handful of allusions, the epigraphs install within the text-proper another rhetorical structure, much more complex and certainly more pervasive. They open up the ethnography as a field of types, traces, shadows.

But keep in mind that the connection between typology and *Confessions of a Thug* is neither an imagined pattern nor a random meeting. In organizing the Thuggee problem around an Indian narrator who relates his villainies to a nameless Englishman, Taylor's imperialist project also places India within an occidental discourse considerably older than an anthropological one but no less manipulative. As its title and frame story indicate, *Confessions of a Thug* aligns itself with confessional discourse, "one of the main rituals," Foucault says, Western societies have relied "on for the production of truth" (*History of Sexuality* 58). Like a priest during the sacrament of penance, the hidden, listening presence of the colonizer is required to extort the so-called "true" information from the colonized. More specifically, Ameer Ali's confessional, pseudo-autobiographical narrative represents a strange rewriting of Augustine's *Confessions*, by tracing the thug from childhood to adulthood and by casting the Sahib in the role of God, the silent omnipotent interlocutor. Since anthropology, claims Edward Said, "has been historically constituted and constructed in its point of origin during an ethnographic encounter between a sovereign European observer and a non-European native occupying, so to speak, a lesser status and a distant place" (211), Taylor's novel hyperbolically anticipates later anthropological studies insofar as it allocates the respective roles of colonized and colonizer according to the hierarchical relationship between confessor and silent, omnipotent interlocutor, establishing the ethnographer as an irreproachable force above and beyond the colonial context. And it is precisely through reading Augustine's autobiography that we may expose the hidden relationship between confessional and typological discourses in the novel, for both discursive practises have long been implicated with Catholic theocracy and theology.

Because of the ubiquity of biblical hermeneutics, numerous typologies have proliferated in a diversity of disciplines from the early Middle Ages to Victorian times.² Yet the model upon which successive typologies draw is the ancient method of reading—or writing—the Bible through which Old Testament types are realized by Christ in the New Testament, the

anti-type being that which is prefigured by a type. Differing slightly from scriptural typology, *Confessions* does not convert the genealogy of the tribe and the nation into types for the New Testament, but the history of the individual saint-sinner into types for the overall Bible. Through its own typological structure, *Confessions* imparts historical significance to the level of the writing self, in effect constituting the autobiography as a dense micro-genealogy and saving the individual confessor from the danger of straying outside the biblical canon. If to confess means to make one's life a typology for a ruling narrative, then *Confessions of a Thug* does not permit Ameer Ali to have his own intertextual representation—such as the Koran—for ethical and philosophical support. Whereas Augustine directly quotes passages from the Bible and, in doing so, signals to the reader the opening up of a typological field, an English meta-narrator superimposes upon Ameer Ali's narration quotations from Shakespeare and, consequently, the narrative speaks through a typological discourse foreign to Ameer Ali, but familiar to Westerners. The quotations sustain a pithy ongoing reflection upon the moral and psychological states of Indians strictly for the reader's benefit. At a glance, it seems that Taylor's first-person narrator provides a space for the Indian voice, but after closer inspection this space echoes with the voices of the colonizers.

Part of the reason Ameer Ali functions like a ventriloquist's puppet obviously stems from his subordinate position within a Western discourse. Whether a sacramental rite of the Catholic church or an act of writing in the Augustinian mode, confession usually marks the incipient stage in an elaborate process of moral transformation: "Accept my confessions, O Lord. . . . Heal all my bones and let them say *Lord, there is none like you*" (*Confessions* 91). Through the self-exposure of his sins, Augustine offers up a sacrifice to God which will facilitate a change in his character, a change which will also solidify the faith of the church body. Opposed to typical Christian procedures and autobiographical forms, the confessional discourse framing the stories of Ameer Ali does not belong to a process of private and public healing that will reform the Thug and cleanse Indian society of Thuggee. Blinded by his solipsism, he boasts at the onset, "I cannot help looking back with pride and exultation on the many daring feats I have performed" (11). A study in self-aggrandizement, the hollow confession only underscores the unrepentant, incorrigible nature of the Thug, as though Calvinistically damned he could never

be reformed. The Sahib interlocutor breaks his silence to marvel at how Ameer Ali can recount his past with satisfaction and pleasure without succumbing to the pangs of remorse (262–63). By way of a quotation from *Paradise Lost*, Taylor even goes so far as to compare him with Milton's Satan whose deep despair relinquishes any possibility of redemption:

So farewell hope, and with hope farewell fear;
Farewell remorse; all good to me is lost.
Evil, be thou my good! (506)

Just as Ameer Ali possesses no knowledge of the canonical epigraphs which adorn his narrative, he participates in a Western discourse without having learned its rules and so, with each boast, unwittingly incriminates himself for the British readership. But how can the Sahib expect a muslim Indian to conform to the precepts of a ritual rooted in ancient Catholicism? If to confess means to make one's life a typology for a master narrative, the text does all the confessing, for Ameer Ali does not know the narrative.

Notwithstanding its religious vestiges, Taylor's act of ventriloquism serves political ends. Diverging even further from Augustinian confessional discourse, *Confessions of a Thug* manifests a point where imperialism quite conveniently intersects with the secularization and institutionalization of ecclesiastical practices. The discursive place of confession for Taylor exists as a legal apparatus supported not by theological considerations but by empirical presuppositions. Similar to case studies and demographic reports, which arose in the eighteenth century as a means of controlling and normalizing the British populace ("Panopticism" 207), the text's introduction has recourse to a statistical chart that slots Thugs into specific stages of the legal-bureaucratic process (*Confessions of a Thug* 8) and, in effect, draws India into a Western form of power which Foucault calls "discipline." Numerically fixing these criminals as a distinct social group, the chart affords a pretext for establishing a network of imperialist surveillance to lay bare, monitor, and regulate Indian society: Taylor complains that there are not enough superintendents to supervise the enormous provinces and divisions and, after citing in a footnote that Captain Malcolm alone presides over the "whole of the territories of H. H. the Nizam," recommends that the

Government must extend to every part of the colony "an extreme attention and scrutiny" in order to "put an end to this destructive system" (9). Through the chart as well as a map, the threat of the Thug becomes a quantifiable unit with which to gauge the cultural unknown—an unambiguous moral imperative crying out for imperialist expansion. Hence it should be no surprise that the confession claims to communicate the legal truth straight from the horse's mouth, so to speak—the most reliable and direct source. And it should be no surprise that Taylor's bureaucratically-based ethnology obscures its active typology, striving for empirical detachment while assuming that the only danger to Indian culture comes from Indian society itself.

Conversely, in *Confessions*, the autobiographical typology does not hide its rhetorical status, never allowing the reader to forget intertextuality—that unrelenting return to another writing. Books XI, XII, and XIII of *Confessions* go so far as to integrate actual commentaries on Genesis, chapter one, into the autobiography and, consequently, suggest that reading the confessor's life is a matter of rereading the same scriptural intertext from the beginning. So throughout the narrative, even seemingly minor episodes carry major typological significance. When Augustine notices along the street a poor beggar who is laughing and joking, he turns to his learned companions and delivers a homily on the misery caused by a wise man's folly. Not only describing a particular incident from Augustine's miserable condition before his conversion to Christianity, this episode also typifies the Teacher's exhortations from Ecclesiastes: "The fate of the fool will overtake me also. What then do I gain by being wise?" (2.15). Augustine as a frustrated pre-Christian becomes a type for a cynical Old Testament preacher who looks forward to the redemptive knowledge of the gospel. In shadowing forth Adam, the psalmist, Solomon, St. Paul, and the like, he continually confesses how his life deviates from or corresponds to the sacred narratives of these figures. *Confessions*, thus, postfigures and reconfigures the scriptures to such a degree that the linear, chronological movement of the autobiography spins backwards as much as forwards.

In contrast, the quotations in *Confessions of a Thug* appear outside the narrative and usually precede their related typological fields, as though these epigraphs were accidents or additions to the confession, and, therefore, the canonical typology does not announce itself as rhetorical

postfigurement but as a happy discovery of Shakespeare in the Orient. Confessional discourse and typological structures no longer operate together openly. How, for example, is the reader to negotiate a passage from Macbeth's floating dagger soliloquy and Ameer Ali's subsequent encounter with a malevolent omen? When Ameer Ali is plotting to kill a woman for her magical amulet, a hare bounds across his path, a Thuggee portent which almost stops his blood cold (465). Disregarding the supernatural warning, he carries out the plan only to learn much later that he unknowingly killed his sister. Despite the spatial distinction between epigraph and text, to ask when Taylor first brought the English canon to his interviews with Ameer Ali or when Taylor first noticed similarities between the tragedy of *Macbeth* and Thuggee India seems like a futile question. How could Taylor's writing ever be uninformed by Shakespeare? Even before listening to Ameer Ali's confessions, had not Taylor in his every action, word, and gesture written all of Shakespeare over India? If the reader decodes the canonical typology for the rhetorical structure it is, then the difference between Ameer Ali's narrating voice and the meta-narrator's epigraphical voice blurs.

Although *Confessions of a Thug*—unknown in Victorian studies—does not belong to a list of literary "masterpieces" which English teachers are obliged to champion, the typological field the epigraphs generate in the ethnography exhibits the subtle exegetical interference the canon radiates in marginal texts. Canonicity, far from defending its rule by drawing hard and fast boundaries, insinuates itself into newer discourses and contexts. Along these lines, the musical canon, derived from the same root as the biblical canon—meaning "rule" or "law"—displays a structure that furnishes us with an appropriate analogue to Taylor's seemingly innocent ethnography. Just as his text writes the epigraph across Ameer Ali's narrative, the musical canon plays one theme against variations of itself, by engendering one or more additional voices from a single ruling theme. Every additional voice preserves all the information from the master theme in the sense that the theme may be recovered from any of its copies. An even better analogue, the Netherlands canon from the late fifteenth century strove to conceal the key voice from its listeners; similarly, in *Confessions of a Thug* no narrator mentions the relationship of the epigraphs to the confessional ethnography, even though the

epigraph to chapter XLV, a quotation from *Richard III*, hints at the text's typological structure:

My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,
And every tongue brings in a several tale,
And every tale condemns me for a villain. (495)

Every tongue, tale, and villain sing variations on the canonical melody. Through the simple looking quotations, the typological field plays itself off as discovered or uncovered parallels between the West and India, deeply entrenched patterns which celebrate not only the insight and foresight of the colonizer in regard to the colonial predicament, but also canonical works in their timeless ability to speak about any kind of predicament. *Confessions of a Thug* diverts the reader from rhetoric, encouraging him or her to trace in the Indian landscape platonic-like patterns. Yet these archetypes have always just been types—as if Shakespeare in the inexhaustible wealth of his corpus determined the universal elements underlying all criminal activity in all cultures.

Besides hiding behind the archetype, canonical typology enables certain privileged texts to reproduce and renew their significance. The structural relationship between type and anti-type consolidates the patriarchal relationship between non-canon and canon, and the imperialist relationship between colonized and colonizer. Because a typological field provides a completely new assortment of signs for the anti-type, the canonical anti-type increases the boundaries of its signifying domain, while simultaneously relegating the potential meaning of a text to mere typological figures of itself. It does not matter how distant or different a text is from a canonical intertext, a typological reading can still reduce a type to the anti-type, thereby expanding the range of the anti-type's relevance, thereby contracting the range of the type's signification. And so canonicity does not simply stop at the hegemonic forces bearing down on literature; canonicity may operate on the rhetorical level within a text, colonizing texts with the rule of other texts. Regardless of the contemporary state of the British empire, canonical typology ensures that the sun will never set on Shakespeare, for shadows will always lead us back to the Bard.

NOTES

1. This article is based on a paper given at the conference "Firing the Canon: The Future of Literary Studies," held at McMaster University on 28 Sep. 1991.
2. See *Canons*, ed. Robert von Halberg (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1984), a collection of articles based on *Critical Inquiry* 10 (1983): 1-223.
3. An extensive scholarly survey by Paul J. Korshin, *Typologies in England, 1650-1820* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982) investigates the widespread influence of typology on literature and informs contemporary critics of the need to take into account this often neglected semiological system.

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