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Tea, Fiction, and the Imperial Sensorium

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Abstract

This article explores a cultural paradox in nineteenth-century England: that tea, a colonially sourced comestible, was figured as a curative for the exhaustions incurred by building and administering an empire. Pursuing the idea that colonialism reconfigured the sensorium of both colonised and coloniser, I trace how tea – as a stimulant and a palliative – was an agent in mediating the highs and lows of imperial feeling. I correlate sitting down and tea-drinking with the settlings of colonial annexation and with the consumption and production of fiction, specifically the genres of fantasy and sensation fiction. Writers engaged include Wilkie Collins, Thomas de Quincey, J. M. Barrie, and Thomas Macaulay.

Keywords: colonialism, fantasy, stimulants, comestibles, tea, sensation

London, Mayfair, February 2020. The plate-glass shop window of the East India Company asks its passers-by, ‘Would you like an adventure now? Or would you like tea first?’ The company, now owned by Gujarati businessman, Sanjiv Mehta, is a remnant of the corporation, founded in 1600, that colonised India. The question is adapted from J. M. Barrie’s 1911 novel *Peter and Wendy*: “‘Would you like an adventure now’, [Peter] said casually to John, “or would you like to have your tea first?’” (107). Peter and the Darlings are flying over Neverland, their progress slowed

by the sense, thickening the air around them, that its inhabitants do not want them to land. The Neverlanders (described as ‘pirates’, ‘redskins’, ‘piccaninnies’, and ‘beasts’) send up clouds of anti-settler feeling that resist Peter’s violent plans: he wants to kill a pirate who is slumbering in what Peter calls the ‘pampas’, although he explains he is a good sport and always wakes his victims before he slaughters them (Barrie 100, 110, 116, 106, 107).

This ‘adventure’, then, is the project of imperialism; ‘palefaces’ assume a bird’s-eye view of a land they plan to occupy and people they plan to kill, while imagining themselves to be the honourable ones (Barrie 173).¹ So far, so familiar. But what of the other option Peter offers: tea? It seems like the tamer choice, and the nervous Darlings seize on it with relief. Tea is not a substitute for imperial violence, though, but a prelude; ‘tea *first*’. As in ‘I would wake him *first*, and then kill him. That’s the way I always do’ (Barrie 107; emphasis added). For Peter, killing and colonising is as habitual as the taking of tea: indeed, having tea and adventuring are circular undertakings. Tea, adventure, tea, adventure – before you know it, tea is itself the adventure. As indeed, it was. For the English, tea was itself the product of colonising activities, a fact which turns ‘adventure or tea first?’ into a chicken-and-egg question. Across the nineteenth century, tea became folded into the English day as both respite and spur to further action. The English habit of taking tea to offset ‘the sinking feeling’ that comes at 4 o’clock partakes in what Parama Roy calls ‘the psychopharmacopoeia of empire’ (7).² Tea is the palliative required by the sensorium of the coloniser, which tilts between soaring (like Peter over fantastical lands) and sinking (to kill or do paperwork). Focusing our attention on the tea break and its naturalisation to the English is to focus on the colonisers’ sensorium; how does being imperial feel, affectively and somatically?

Peter Pan proposes a tea-break that will trigger an eternal adventure. The Neverlanders would like to stop being colonised. These are two very different sorts of hiatus. The cloud barrier the Neverlanders send up turns their country’s name into an imperative: ‘never land’. The tea break, on the other hand, revives imperial vigour, and the promise that adventure awaits; ‘the sun that *never* sets’ will always break through the clouds of indigenous resistance, and Peter will, ‘as I always do’, land and kill the pirate (Barrie 107; emphasis added). ‘Never’ and ‘Always’ are what is at stake here, and the *durée* of tea break revives the eternal boyhood of imperial adventure. Without it, exhaustion looms. An early title for *Peter Pan* the play was *The Great White Father*, and like his idol Rudyard Kipling, Barrie worried about Britons’ loss of

imperialist stamina, the 'weariness', in Kipling's words, that results from carrying the 'White Man's Burden'. Barrie ventriloquised Kipling's jingoism in 1914: 'Britain's part in the world's making is done [...] Britain has grown dull and sluggish: a belly of a land, she lies overfed, no dreams within her such as keep Powers alive' (*Tag* 6). Peter's tea break is a bid to refresh the 'dull and sluggish belly' of white imperialism; his adventures are the 'dreams' that might stitch a body back on to the driftless shadow the British Empire had become. Together, bellies, lands, and dreams make up our sensorium; the apparatus by which sense, perception, and environment co-constitute each other. And colonialism, as we know from scholars such as Roy, reconfigured 'the fantasmatic landscapes and the sensorium of colonizer and colonized' (7). Roy shows that the alimentary habitus of the colonised subject has been highly contested terrain. For this reason, it is worth reversing the gaze and asking penetrating questions about the sensorium of the coloniser too; what apparatus of feeling is engaged when the coloniser sits down to a refreshing cup of that most colonial of pleasure comestibles, tea?

In the Western imagination, tea is equated with Englishness to a peculiar degree; England without tea is 'unimaginable', says Sidney Mintz (264). But the shrub *camellia sinensis* is not indigenous to English soil, and '[n]ot a single tea plantation exists within the United Kingdom' (Hall 48).³ The story of how the East India Company employed a horticultural spy, Robert Fortune, who donned racial disguise to smuggle tea plants out of China, delivering them to English hands for planting in India, is a story of multiple translocations to secure British control of production.⁴ For the English, tea is a thoroughly transplanted taste, and to think of tea as English is an effect of what anthropologists have called 'commodity indigenization'.⁵ The history of the English taste for tea is, in fact, a history of the English appetite for colonisation.

Roy notes that tea was considered more 'salubrious' than the opium and sugar that were its intimates in a trade chain (6). Whilst tea might seem benign, its plantations 'borrowed forms of coercive labor, corporal punishment, and legal exceptionalism from the sugar and cotton plantations of the Americas' (Roy 6). Tea was made culturally and politically analgesic. The cup of tea is 'that English signifier of reconciliation' (Ahmed 181). Tea, which has no caloric benefit, is an empty or dislocated signifier that can be pushed across a table to the dispossessed by the perpetrators of that dispossession.⁶ The English 'tea time' (invented in the eighteenth century) or 'tea break' (extended to the lower classes in the nineteenth) looks like relief from labour, strain, or lassitude. But since the cup of tea is deployed to de-sensationalise and

soothe the nerves of the aggressed and aggressor alike, and, as a way to resume order, it is arguably no relief at all.

The tea times that the English programmed into leisured and, later, working life were a way of conquering both geographic and chrono-somatic limits. 'Wherever the British found themselves, they could always find comfort in a cup of tea', writes James Walvin (171), and Marxist scholars such as David Harvey and Bill Maurer argue that in the nineteenth century '[t]ea [...] remade time; the new daily ritual was itself the material instantiation of new regimes of work discipline and abstract, universal time' (Maurer 21).⁷ When the whistle of the kettle harmonised with the whistle of the factory shift, the tea break perpetuated the rhythms of alienated labour. If we extend this Marxist analysis to enfold the question of affect, it means good feelings and the taste of rest are conscripted by the cup of tea, and even that conscription feels good. Tea-drinkers want to be beholden to the tea hour. Tea becomes both the cause and the curative of being bound to empire. You enslave labourers to produce a luxury comestible that you make so essential to your leisure experience that you then imagine (or make) yourself enslaved to it.⁸ I am aligned here with scholars of ecology and capitalism such as Jason Moore, who argues that 'the emergence of a pan-European world-economy [...] was at once the cause and consequence of an epochal reorganization of "world ecology"' (312). It is the self-perpetuating circuitry of Moore's formulation 'cause and consequence' that I wish especially to hold onto. I am influenced, too, by Elizabeth Hope Chang when she tracks botanical transportations and transformations in Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868), and 'the opiate tinctures and syrups upon which Jennings (and Collins himself) depend to alleviate the pains of global modernity' (*Novel Cultivations* 31). The quest to profit from the poppy seed caused one strain and stress enough to need a dose of the poppy seed.

The Sit-Down: Tea, Reading, and Writing

One such consumer of the poppy, Thomas De Quincey, considered tea to be the 'favourite beverage of the intellectual' (*Collected Writings* 3:408). He described his love for it as a perpetual circuitry of ingestion and desire, imagining 'an eternal teapot – eternal *à parte ante*, and *à parte post*; for I usually drink tea from eight o'clock at night to four o'clock in the morning' (*Collected Writings* 3:409).⁹ For De Quincey, tea's *durée* reaches beyond itself. Tobacco and tea (and of course the other pleasure comestible that De Quincey eats, opium) also have the capacity to transport; they help their consumers exceed their temporal, geographic,

and intellectual limits and reach toward authorial greatness. Tea does for the writer what it does for Peter Pan; otherwise trapped in the temporality of adulthood, consuming this colonial product helps De Quincey soar across the midnight hour and spurs the cycles of intellect, what Peter Pan calls 'adventures'.

The language of both writing and 'adventuring' is to be found at the historical root of the establishment of the East India Company. On 22 September 1599, a group of merchants stated their intention 'to *venture* in the pretended voyage to the East Indies [...] and the sums that they will *adventure*' (Anon., *Calendar* 99; emphasis added). The merchants are routinely referred to in the colonial papers as the 'Adventurers'. Their language of 'pretending' (meaning to propose) and 'adventuring' (meaning to hazard) makes their mercantile speculation sound, if only in hindsight, like fiction-making (Anon., *Calendar* 99–101).

Literary and colonial venturing often shared a desk. The East India Company maintained a raft of junior clerks who made copies of its correspondence and wrote up accounts of the company's activities; these clerks were known in the Company as 'Writers'. For some, like Charles Lamb, an East India Company writership was the prelude, or prop, to their literary careers. Lamb used the solitude of his clerk's desk in East India House to conduct his life as an essayist and poet; in an 1818 letter to Mary Wordsworth, Charles Lamb says he is writing 'in the midst of Commercial noises, and with a quill which seems more ready to glide into arithmetical figures and names of Goods, Cassia, Cardemoms, Aloes, Ginger, Tea, than into kindly repose and friendly recollections' (126). Lamb's apology is rhetorical. His quill, of course, has made a list of spices sound more like lyric than inventory; the business of book-keeping for the empire 'glided' readily into the business of book-making. Not only should the business of 'writing for a living' be more prominent in the history of authorship, but we should also ask how imperial book-keeping related to developing literary forms and genres. Due to the work of scholars like Gauri Viswanathan, we are now well versed in how the export and study of English literature was a key tool in the British imperial arsenal in India. What we can see here is a pre-formative stage of the relationship between fiction and imperialism; the East India Company turned clerks into authors, adventuring into pretending.

Some commentators worried that the drinking of tea turned ruddy, roving Englishmen into pallid readers. In 1834, the author Leigh Hunt observes that 'the introduction of tea-drinking followed the diffusion of books among us, and the growth of more sedentary modes of life. The breakfasters upon cold beef and "cool tankards", were an active,

horse-riding generation. Tea-drinking times are more domestic, given to reading' (113). Hunt, who was likely Charles Dickens's model for Harold Skimpole in *Bleak House*, might be relied upon to know a thing or two about inactivity and how to profit from it. He certainly highlights the latter portion of the idiom 'a cup of tea and a sit down'. The *sitting down*, as Hunt perceives it, is about turning inward, toward domesticity and passive reflection. Together, leaves of tea and leaves of books sever the Englishman's relation to English turf; instead of being conjoined with the English landscape, the tea-drinker and book-reader wafts off, via both media, to foreign regions. Hunt marvels that 'all of a sudden the remotest nation of the East, otherwise unknown, and foreign to all our habits, should convey to us a domestic custom which changed the face of our morning refreshments' (113). The worlds contained in both books (or book-keeping) and the teapot are not English, but are made English through the reworldings and rewritings involved in empire-building. There is, therefore, a relationship between 'sitting down' with a cup of tea and the 'settlings' of colonial annexation. Those who tucked their knees 'under the mahogany' at the tea hour, together with the East India Company's army of deskbound clerks, turned sitting into the work of empire.¹⁰ In contradiction to its inaugurating language of 'adventuring', the imperial enterprise reoriented the English sensorium towards rest and refreshment.

Trading Tea for Sensation

Before Wilkie Collins became a published author, he was a clerk in a tea-broker's office. Collins's father hoped that tea-clerking would displace Collins's inclinations towards 'tale-writing', providing him with discipline, respectability and income.¹¹ In January 1841, Collins was apprenticed to Antrobus & Company, 'Teaman to Her Majesty', at 446 Strand. Bored by his job, Collins turned his 'prison on the Strand' into an incubator of fiction, writing his first novel while sitting at his tea-clerking stool (qtd in Pykett 6). He recalls: 'While in the tea-merchant's office, I completed a wild extravagant story, the scene of which, I remember, was laid in Tahiti before its discovery by the English' (qtd in Anon., 'Our Portrait' 281). This novel was titled *Ioláni, or Tahiti as it Was: A Romance* (written in 1844 but not published until the 1990s), and it was roundly rejected by publishers. Collins lamented: 'Everybody seemed to conspire to shut the gates of the realms of fancy in my face' (qtd in Anon., 'Our Portrait' 281). My interest, here, is the nature of the 'realms of fancy' into which Collins makes his first foray and from which he feels barred. And my emphasis is this: these realms are pre-colonial. He writes of Tahiti

'before its discovery by the English', his subtitle underscoring the point: 'as it Was'. Collins's first novel is about a place where English colonialism had not (yet) happened. He writes it amidst the dreary ledgers of empire, gloomily surveying the commodities that are its spoils and concluding, 'Tea [...] seemed to lead to nothing' (qtd in Anon., 'Our Portrait' 281). Collins's 'youthful imagination ran riot', as he wrote, 'among the noble savages' (qtd in Pykett 7), by rising up amidst and against the too-sober commerce of the tea business. He was not, he concluded, 'teaman' to her majesty or to his father; he was an author and of the kind of fiction that stirs the senses.

This is not to claim that Collins's doomed Tahitian Gothic romance is anti-colonial in any ethical or political sense, although we do know that later in his writing career Collins tried to temper Dickens's genocidally imperial rages. If Collins had anything like an ethics for his fiction-writing, it was the renunciation of evangelisms for the sake of fun. And *Ioláni*, with its maelstrom plot of infanticide, high priests, and tribal violence, might be better described as primitivist fantasy run rampant. But I am still interested in Collins's imaginative reach to a time before English presence and colonisation reduced 'wildness' to bureaucracy. Taking a prompt from Leela Gandhi and others, who have demonstrated the importance of charting all nature of anti-colonial politics and sentiment, I would like to propose that Collins's fantasy of pre-colonialism be taken slightly seriously. Being bored with imperial pursuits is one way of being opposed to them.

Collins found the tea trade staid and stuffy. His character Zack Thorpe in *Hide and Seek* (1854), who also works at a 'Tea Broker's office', rebels against it: '[they] all say it's a good opening for me, and talk about the respectability of commercial pursuits. I don't want to be respectable and I hate commercial pursuits' (31). Neither Zack nor Collins want a 'good opening' (31); the phrase is adjacent to Collins's complaints that commercial life 'shut the gates' of fancy and that tea didn't 'lead to' or 'open' anything. Collins found that fiction, however, specifically sensation fiction, could definitely take him places. In an 1842 letter to his father, Collins describes a kind of primal scene in which he realises the satisfying effects of telling sensational stories. Like *Ioláni*, he wrote this letter from his tea-clerking desk in the Strand, and the scene of production (Collins turning his back on tea chests and ledgers, airily committing wage-theft) is pertinent to the story. Collins's letter describes visiting some country relatives and deciding to enliven the tea-time gathering: 'I sat with my back to the window, and my hand in my pocket, freezing my horrified auditors by a varied recital of the most terrible portions of the Monk and Frankenstein [...] None of our country

relations I am sure ever encountered in their whole lives before such a hash of diablerie, demonology, & massacre with their Souchong and bread and butter' (*Letters* 14). The punchline to this story about story-telling is the varietal of tea drunk by the boring relations: Souchong. Collins recognises what Wolfgang Schivelbusch describes as happening to exotic comestibles upon importation; they become 'habitual or domesticated', losing their 'novel' appeal (Schivelbusch 223). The Souchong has become, to Collins's eyes, lamentably deracinated, an exotic agent that has become normalised amidst the bread-and-butter blandness of the English tea-table. Collins therefore puts the 'novel' back into the tea hour. He casts himself as a diabolical messenger, delivering his literary digest for the most sensational effect, then points out to his father that the teapot was the advance messenger. It is a way of showing that the priggish relatives, shocked by stories of diablerie, might be the real devils. The Chinese, after all, called the first European tea-seekers 'ocean devils', 'red devils', and 'foreign devils' (Hohenegger 64–6). This scene, in which Collins uses the power of gothic horror fiction to blow the lid off the teapot sitting on the English tea-table, foreshadows how, twenty-six years later, *The Moonstone* would mobilise a stolen Indian jewel to disclose the corruptions of the English country home and the thievery of empire.

In *Ioláni*, however, Collins had tried to avoid empire altogether. Writing about pre-settler Tahiti had been a turning away from respectability, tea, and the colonial pursuits of which it was both a product and a metonym. The 'romance' at the heart of *Ioláni* was Collins's romance with what he imagined to be a pre-colonial, pre-tea-table world of sensations. We should therefore ask whether sensation fiction also had a capacity to deflect – or provide alternate pleasures – to commercial and colonial pursuits. We can lay this question alongside what we know about Collins's thoughts on the value of other types of pre-colonial literature. In 1858, Collins wrote an essay called 'A Sermon for Sepoys', which was published in *Household Words*, despite its mood and message contrasting starkly with Dickens's own violently imperial feelings. 'Sermon' suggests that Indians did not need Christian missionaries because they could receive 'excellent moral lessons' from their 'own books[, ...] own Oriental literature [and] ancient parables, once addressed to the ancestors of the Sepoys' (244). After just one paragraph in his own narrative voice, Collins then offers up one such 'Oriental apologue' (244) which comprises the entire rest of the article, with Collins giving himself just one more line by way of conclusion: 'Surely not a bad Indian lesson, to begin with, when Betrayers and Assassins are the pupils to be taught?' (247).

I am certainly not going to claim that 'Betrayers and Assassins' is the language of the enlightened. But it is the language (it mirrors the 'human tigers' in the opening line of the essay) of sensation fiction. And the Indian fable Collins delivers has a mandate embedded within it that a ruler should 'excite [others] to deeds of benevolence' ('Sermon' 247). Collins waves aside the moralising sermons of the English missionaries and (more covertly) the murderous statement that Dickens wants 'translated into all native dialects' to instead give column space to literature native to India that 'excites'. By delivering a story about Vizirs and the 'mysteries of Heaven' and supernatural voices, Collins creates a hiatus from pro-imperial genres (Collins, 'Sermon' 246). Like Scheherazade, Collins uses a sensational story to defer the murderous retributions of the English imperialist and missionary.

In essence, Collins began his literary career by turning his back on imperial commerce and turning instead toward Orientalist fiction. He rejects the teapot in favour of the lamp and the genie. But he later learns that he can make the teapot his aide to disrupting the complacencies of the English colonial scene. The tea that had bored him in his clerking life turns into an agent provocateur in his plots. In *The Moonstone*, Gabriel Betteredge says he relies on the teapot as an 'ally' to his own investigations: '(For, *nota bene*, a drop of tea is to a woman's tongue what a drop of oil is to a wasting lamp.)' (129; original emphasis). In *The Black Robe* (1881), Collins's narrator tut-tuts about the over-stimulating effects of tea on the novel's hero, Lewis Romayne: 'Those late hours of study, and that abuse of tea [...] had sadly injured his stomach. The doctors warned him of serious consequences to his nervous system, unless he altered his habits' (3). In *Basil* (1852), the mysterious Mr Mannion who suffers the surely unique literary fate of having his face macadamised, is also 'an epicure in tea' (99). In two plots, *The Guilty River* (1886) and *The Law and the Lady* (1875), Collins uses a poisoned teacup. In *No Name* (1862–3), Collins describes the cantankerous scholar, Mr Clare, as 'sitting in studious solitude over his books and his green tea, with his favourite black cat to keep him company' (40). It was while writing this novel that the gout-beset Collins began taking the laudanum to which he would spend his life addicted. Writing about tea while taking opium literalised the exchange value of the two substances that had been engineered by the East India Company. It was England's high consumption of Chinese tea and the desire to balance out the costs of this import which had spurred the English to addict the Chinese consumer to opium that the English exported to them from India. On the world market, tea was turned into opium and opium into tea. For Collins, tea (shadowed by opium) gets turned into text.

Stolen Tea, Stolen Fiction: Thomas Macaulay and
Charles Lamb

I have proposed that the sensation fiction of Collins, and the way he turns tea from commodity to fantastical agent, might have intriguingly anti-colonial energies. But it could be objected that dreams of discovering physical forms for the fanciful have always been at the root of Europe's taste for exotic botanicals. Spices were a 'fantasy substance' (Morton 8) and 'emissaries from a fabled world' (Schivelbusch 6). They were a way of tasting paradise, encountering the plant life of myth and legend, and experiencing sensations that were fantastic and fictional. The infamous promoter of English style Thomas Macaulay certainly opposed both tastes for the fanciful and whimsies about tea. In his *History of England* (1848), Macaulay attacks not tea itself, but tea services. He denounces the designs on Chinese tea services that were so popular in England, a popularity that he dates back to Queen Mary, wife of William III. He writes:

[Queen] Mary had acquired at the Hague a taste for the porcelain of China, and amused herself by forming at Hampton a vast collection of hideous images, and of vases [...]. In a few years almost every great house in the kingdom contained a museum of these grotesque baubles. Even statesmen and generals were not ashamed to be renowned as judges of teapots and dragons; and satirists long continued to repeat that a fine lady valued her mottled green pottery quite as much as she valued her monkey, and much more than she valued her husband. (1:683)

Macaulay's portrait of green Chinese porcelain sharing domestic space and affection with a pet monkey anticipates Sheridan Le Fanu's green-tea quaffing narrator in his 1869 story 'Green Tea', who is possessed by the vision of an evil monkey. It is also an accurate citation of an eighteenth-century satiric tradition.¹² Macaulay uses the creature to demonstrate absurdity, mania and – most of all – erroneous 'valuation'. The fashion for china/China, which was by no means confined to women, but often portrayed as feminine or effete, produces a derangement in aesthetic and economic judgment, culminating in a disoriented sense of value; the 'fine lady' diverts both money and affection from her English husband, sending English silver flowing into Oriental coffers.

A misguided woman, then, is to blame for this draining of English resources. But what, exactly, made her misguided? Macaulay, whom Karl Marx called that 'systematic falsifier of history' (877), has an emphatic answer: perspective. Macaulay derides these Chinese tea-sets as ugly and frivolous, but becomes most thunderous about the 'laws' that

they 'defy': the laws of perspective. This is a brass-necked objection for a man who was himself possessed by what even admiring biographers admit was a 'love of sweeping comparisons and rhetorical exaggeration' (Masani 99). Indeed the arc of this *History of Britain* passage reaches from the 'defiantly' scaled decorations on the china to the Queen's lack of correct distinction between the value of her pottery, her monkey, and her husband. In one swoop, Macaulay topples a king with a teapot. It is no surprise that Asian aesthetics were not to the taste of the man who infamously declared, in his *Minute on Indian Education* (1835), that he would rather have 'a single shelf of a good European library' than 'the whole native literature of India and Arabia' (*Speeches* 349). Reading Macaulay's protest against Chinese porcelain alongside his *Minute* draws fresh attention to the perspectival nature of the image of the shelf.¹³ As Gauri Viswanathan and others have shown, Macaulay and British administrators who turned their attention to literary study in the colonies launched objections to Indian literatures on the grounds of genre; allegories lacked the 'stabilizing' logic and literalism required by British authorities.¹⁴ Macaulay's *Minute* pits Eastern fantasy against European realism. But his imperial methods of reading also demanded perspectival shenanigans in which one shelf could outscale an entire subcontinent and peninsula.¹⁵

In an essay called 'Old China' (1823), Charles Lamb had written fondly of 'those little, lawless, azure-tintured grotesques, that under the notion of men and women, float about, uncircumscribed by any element, in that world before perspective – a china tea-cup' (194). The aesthetic atmosphere is, he claims, 'lucid', and when he tries to use prepositions to describe a painted scene, he comes – to his delight – a little undone: 'if far or near can be predicated of their world' (195). As Collins's first novel had imagined a world before colonialism, here Lamb revels in the prospect of a 'world before perspective'. Lamb seems to feel the stricture of bureaucracy, of Macaulay-esque (self-deluding) principles of rationality and realism. The 'optics' and 'angles' of British perception rudely intrude on the romantic, friendly feelings that this China produces in him, and the passage ends with him putting an arm around the shoulder of the reader, inviting them into this pleasantly fanciful world: 'And now do just look at that merry little Chinese waiter holding an umbrella, big enough for a bed-tester, over the head of that pretty insipid half-Madonnaish chit of a lady in that very blue summer-house' (Lamb 202). Lamb's focus is very much on the feelings that old china gives him, and he wants others to share in these feelings too. The essay makes the case for practices of diversion and distraction. Chang argues that Lamb 'reminds his readers that even Chinese objects as

familiar and common as blue and white teacups relay an entirely disruptive worldview to British viewers, and by extension, that looking at and writing about these teacups can call into question logical processes of speech and narrative' (*Britain's Chinese Eye* 15).

On occasion, these teacups even speak for themselves. Chang calls attention to an article on Staffordshire china that Dickens co-wrote with H. W. Wills for an 1852 issue of *Household Words* in which a personified, speaking willow-pattern plate promotes 'that amusing blue landscape, which has [...] in defiance of every known law of perspective, adorned millions of our family ever since the days of platters?' (90). Just as the old china is a diversion for Lamb, and the fantasies it offers are a source of pleasure, here the willow pattern is a welcome relief from commerce and the stultifications of the English dinner table. Like Collins, both Dickens and Lamb trivialise the Asian aesthetics and cultures that they are enjoying (the willow pattern is 'amusing'), but they are simultaneously attracted to triviality and fantasy for providing pleasurable relief from boredom and stricture. The relief that a cup of tea brings is often thought of as fantastical; in Beatrice Hohenegger's account, the sweet tea enjoyed by the working classes in the nineteenth century 'offered the temporary illusion of a hot, nutritious meal' (100). As many other scholars have pointed out, the 'empty calories' provided by the sugar could fuel the worker through their factory shift, but not beyond. However, that tea also had the mnemonic function of reminding the consumer that there is comfort to be found in illusion; the willow-pattern cup of tea, or the tea-break itself, provides escapism and an opportunity to change perspective.

The question might then be asked: do sensation fiction and related genres become implanted in England in the wake of British bureaucrats shutting down 'fantastical' or 'allegorical' literatures and ways of reading in the colonies? Could we say that sensation fiction springs into life in an English setting right at the time that fairy tales and allegory are being legislatively foreclosed in the colonies, much in the way England imported tea – but tea grown in the colonies, rather than in China? Was it a way of 'growing our own', a method of importation that stole the seeds and the plants along with the profits? Was this a literary form of extractive colonialism? To invoke a piece of British rhyming slang: to be a 'tea-leaf' is to be a 'thief' (Ayto 95). Erika Rappaport confirms this relationship between tea and stealing, arguing that 'tea was a thief or a pirate, appropriating Eastern treasures for the benefit of the West' (6).¹⁶

To venture an answer to my question about literary genre and extractive colonialism, we can return to Macaulay and his own genre preferences. Much is often made of Macaulay's classical reading tastes

and writing style – not least by Macaulay himself. Macaulay's editor George Otto Trevelyan emphasises Macaulay's reading notes, which claim that he ploughed back and forth through a classical canon both on the four-month journey out to India and during his thirteen months in residence there. George Levine observes that if he had turned his hand to novel writing, Macaulay 'would have wanted it to have the classical pretensions of Fielding and the symmetry and precision of Jane Austen' (117).¹⁷ Macaulay loved Austen and thought 'there are in the world no compositions that approach nearer to perfection' (qtd in Trevelyan 249). Macaulay even out-perfected Austen when he corrected her punctuation in the first paragraph of *Persuasion*; he turned a full stop into a comma, a correction that Austen's publisher adopted in all later editions.¹⁸ Publicly, Macaulay was a pedantic reader of already-crisp prose. But the fiction that Macaulay read in private was not so poised; in his letters, particularly those to his sisters, we learn that he maintained a down-low novel-reading life. Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Alice*, for example, 'affected [Collins] much' even though '[Bulwer-Lytton's] taste is bad' (qtd in Trevelyan 43). It was Bulwer-Lytton who coined the incipit 'it was a dark and stormy night' (amongst others), and his 1838 novel *Alice or the Mysteries* is a romance involving illegitimacy, revenge, villainy, insanity, incest, and the occult. Elsewhere, we find Macaulay sipping madeira and reading William Ainsworth Harrison's 1837 novel *Crichton*, which Macaulay does not like as well as *Rookwood* (1834). Both are gothic historical romances. To his sisters, Macaulay reveals not only his love of 'trash' fiction (qtd in Trevelyan 269), but also the guilt and disgust that accompanies this love: 'I dined by myself, and read an execrably stupid novel called Tylney Hall. Why do I read such stuff?' (qtd in Trevelyan 37). Macaulay might be embarrassed by the literary tastes he indulges when alone, but it is worth looking at what it dished up. Thomas Hood's only novel is powered by death, duels, fratricide, and illegitimacy; 'mind my wurdz bloods [sic] the thing blood Blood Blood', as one character helpfully summarises it (282). If we allow that Macaulay was influenced by his classical reading, we must also allow that potboiler fiction influenced him too; he is, after all, the historian who would write lines like 'The warm blood of Italy boiled in the veins of the Queen' (*Speeches* 326). Not only can we see sensation fiction shadowing Macaulay's own prose, but we also know that he desired literary popularity. Not unlike another seemingly sober arbiter of literary taste and designer of curricula, Matthew Arnold, Macaulay craved the popularity of the circulating library. 'I shall not be satisfied', he declares, 'unless I produce something which shall for a few days supersede the last fashionable novel on the tables of young ladies' (qtd in Trevelyan 326).

He aimed to write history that was stirring: 'A perfect historian must possess an imagination sufficiently powerful to make his narrative affecting and picturesque' (Macaulay, 'History' 331). Macaulay uses the term 'picturesque' as often and as variously as he uses the word 'trash'; he had a love-hate relationship with popular writing. He was jealous that fiction had 'usurped', as he calls it, the 'attractions' of a good story and intended to wrest some of that romance back from novelists and restore history as the ruling power ('History' 364).

Macaulay wanted young English women to turn away from popular novels and Indian readers to turn away from 'monstrous superstitions', but he himself loved to curl up with a trashy novel. Accompanied, it turns out, with a cup of tea. Writing to his sister Hannah, Macaulay describes a day during which he reads Parliamentary papers and 'claims of money-lenders on the native sovereigns of India', then goes home to 'end the day quietly over a basin of tea and a novel' (*Complete Works* 495). The elements here – colonial clerking, tea, sensation fiction – are the same that were so formative for Collins. For both writers, sensation fiction is the escape from the drudgery of colonial ledgers. The difference, however, is that Collins's relish for sensation fiction was unrepressed; it was imperialism that he tried to wish out of existence. For Macaulay, the reverse was true and the consequences dire.

If sensation fiction was Macaulay's guilty, after-hours pleasure, he borrowed from its lexicon to understand his day-job in India. He describes the East India Company, for example, as a 'political monster of two natures' (qtd in Trevelyan 291), and the resultant 'strange imperial system', as Trevelyan puts it, had attempted to bring about 'the reconstruction of a decomposed society' (291). He thought of his work in India, then, as dealing with monsters who had themselves revived zombies. When in his own hands, though, with his basin of tea, the un-dead were a comfort: 'What a blessing it is to love books as I love them', he writes to his friend Thomas Flower Ellis, 'to be able to converse with the dead, and to live amidst the unreal!' (*Complete Works* 554). Jonathan Arac rightly reminds us to attend to the grief that shadows these words; literature was 'desperate compensation' for Macaulay's loss of one sister to death and another to marriage (197). It is the glorious unreality – of his trashy fiction, his basin of tea, and sitting down at the end of a working day – that beckons him back into loving relation with lost sisters. His sensorium is in disarray, and what he seeks, what he wants to feel restored to him, is 'blessed' comfort. Together, the tea and the fiction provide cheer and relief, and are antidotes to his imperial work of robbing India of its tea and its fiction.

In Le Fanu's 'Green Tea', Mr Jennings comments, 'I believe that anybody who sets about writing in earnest does his work, as a friend of mine phrased it, *on* something – tea, or coffee, or tobacco' (Le Fanu 109; original emphasis). This passage is interesting not only because it makes very early use of the idiom 'to be *on* drugs', but also because it describes literary production as dependent on colonial stimulants: the theft of land, culture, and sovereignty does not then enable a simple return – the importation – of colonial products, but rather stimulates a circular logic of dependency. Richard Klein proposes that Columbus brought tobacco from the New World as an antidote 'against the anxiety' that his discoveries of 'a great unknown world' occasioned in the 'Eurocentered consciousness of Western culture' (27). This claim lies on a continuum with other work examining the affective effects of the colonially produced commodity. Charlotte Sussman shows that colonial products like tea and sugar made consumers anxious that the violence involved in their production would be imported into the English home (13–14). Elaine Freedgood argues that Victorians were neither stupid nor ignorant about the provenance of their stuff, and she finds in colonial products a 'return of the imperial repressed' (3). Both scholars direct us to understand that comestibles of empire threaten to repeat on you.

In Conclusion

We arrive, then, at a rousing paradox: the cup of tea is an imperial curative for the exhaustions incurred by building and running an empire. The stress of trading tea and managing its plantations makes you want a cup of tea. Imperial commerce (and the divisions it makes between possession and dispossession) produces feelings that require an imperial commodity that itself can produce feelings that ameliorate the feelings of commerce. Tracing the complex import-export, turns and returns of colonial trade, involves, at the very least, some arresting tautologies and potentially some time-travel trickery. Patrick Brantlinger has written of extinction discourses in which 'the future-perfect mode of proleptic elegy mourns the lost object before it is completely lost' (4). The 'will-have-died' enacts the violence that it pretends merely to describe. And if we return to Richard Klein's notion that tobacco was the cure for anxiety produced in discovering the land of tobacco, the twist is the anxiety might be anterior to the product. The colonial product, in other words, relieves the adverse effects of the colonising impulse on the part of the coloniser.

FEB. 22, 1890 THE ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS 249

UNITED KINGDOM TEA COMPANY'S TEAS.

USED ALL OVER THE WORLD!
NOTHING LIKE THEM ANYWHERE!!!

1/3, 1/6, 1/9, & 2/- a lb.

For Sale Direct from the Mincing Lane Market.

Supplied to the Members' Refreshment Rooms of the Houses of Parliament.

7, 10, 14, and 20 lbs. packed in Canisters without extra charge.

Delivered to any Address Carriage Paid.

STANLEY: "Well, Emin, old fellow, this cup of the United Kingdom Tea Company's Delicious Tea makes us forget all our troubles."
EMIN: "So it does, my boy."

UNITED KINGDOM TEA COMPANY, LIMITED.
Offices: 21, Mincing-lane, London. Duty-paid Stores: Imperial Warehouse, Leman-street, London.

Figure 1 'United Kingdom Tea Company', *Illustrated London News*, vol. 96, no. 2653, 22 February 1890, p. 249. Public Domain. Digital image from the Internet Archive. <https://archive.org/details/sim_illustrated-london-news_1890-02-22_96_2653/page/248/mode/2up> 4 April 2022.

In 1890, *The Illustrated London News* ran an advertisement for the United Kingdom Tea Company (Fig. 1). The caption reads: 'Stanley: 'Well, Emin, old fellow, this cup of the United Kingdom Tea Company's Delicious Tea makes us forget all our troubles'. Emin: 'So it does, my boy'.¹⁹ In *In Darkest Africa* (1890), Henry Morton Stanley describes the provisions he packed for the expedition, embedding into his narrative product endorsements for the companies that supplied and gifted him equipment. Each firm is described by name and location, and their goods are praised: 'Messrs. Burroughs, Wellcome & Co., of Snowhill Buildings, London, the well-known chemists, furnished gratis nine beautiful chests replete with every medicament necessary to combat the endemic diseases peculiar to Africa' (Stanley 38). After listing tents and guns, Stanley notes: 'Messrs. Fortnum & Mason, of Piccadilly, packed up forty carrier loads of choices provisions. Every article was superb, the tea retained its flavour to the last' (39).²⁰

The dialogue is set in a capacious tent: Stanley perched on a crate, Emin Pasha slung in a camp chair. The tent flaps are theatrically drawn

apart to reveal that this tea-break is occurring against a backdrop of native people who continue to labour, unrefreshed themselves by this brand of tea that prides itself on cutting out the middle man. The mood of the advert is very white-man's-burden: these imperialists are fatigued by imperialism, but they are getting on with it anyway ... after a nice cup of tea and a sit-down. The punctum, revealed just beyond the tent flaps, is that the work in which the native labourers are engaged is the carrying of boxes of the same tea being served inside the tent. This imperium is circular. Stanley is getting high on his own supply.

So which comes first: the anxiety or the curative? 'Would you like an adventure now [...] or would you like to have your tea first?' (Barrie 107). If the anxiety is produced by the business of producing the curative, and if Stanley and Emin need a nice cup of tea because it is hard work ensuring you have colonised workers producing your tea, could we not just call the whole thing off? One thing is for sure: it is this circularity that is the actual threat to 'logic' and 'perspective' for which we have seen willow pattern, or green tea, be blamed. The mania attributed to consuming these commodities in fact describes the mania of procuring and controlling them, the mania of imperialism itself. A tea-leaf is a thief not through rhyme alone.

Notes

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1. For a discussion of Peter Pan's imperialist pedagogy, see Laura E. Donaldson.
2. The phrase 'the sinking feeling' originates with Anna, the seventh Duchess of Bedford, who is commonly credited with having invented the repast. See Chatterjee (41).
3. Subsequent to Hall's essay, Tregothnan estate outside Truro in Cornwall has started to produce commercially available tea from what it unreflectively calls its 'Tea Plantation'.
4. See Chang and Voskuil.
5. The term was coined by Marshall Sahlins to describe how non-Western cultures integrated European commodities, but is now commonly used in reverse.
6. Ahmed makes the observation while recounting how a Dean told a victim of sexual assault to 'have a cup of tea with this guy to sort it out' (Ahmed 181; 188). Later on in *What's the Use?*, the cup of tea returns as a hovering adjunct to the sexism of faculty meetings (Ahmed 165).
7. See also Harvey (741).
8. For a history of how metaphors of enslavement have attached to a similar comestible, tobacco, see Tate. De Quincey also describes his addiction to opium as 'slavery' (*Collected Writings* 3:72).
9. In an 1857 essay, De Quincey warns that without tea, 'the social life of England would receive a deadly wound' (*Uncollected* 26).

Tea, Fiction, and the Imperial Sensorium

10. The phrase 'under the mahogany' is a synecdoche for a parlour table and was commonplace in the nineteenth century (Brontë 135–6).
11. In an 1887 interview, Collins recalled: 'I told my father that I thought I should like to write books [...] I began to scribble in a desultory kind of way, and drifted, I hardly know how, into tale-writing' (qtd in Pykett 6).
12. The relatively commonplace presence of the monkey in the bourgeois household is a distinctive eighteenth-century phenomenon' (Brown 104). Brown notes the 'tradition of dramatic social satire' in which 'monkeys and marriage are consistently connected' (94).
13. Alfred Tennyson had his own version of Macaulay's racialised relativism, which he penned in the same year – 1835: 'Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay', he wrote in 'Locksley Hall' (published 1842). And Macaulay tried out his formulation ahead of his *Minute*. Writing to his friend and law reporter Thomas Flower Ellis in 1834, Macaulay advised him to not to write on aboriginal peoples: 'I would not give the worst page in Clarendon or Fra Paolo for all that ever was, or ever will be, written about the migrations of the Leleges and the laws of the Oscans' (qtd in Trevelyan 372).
14. See also Singh and Sunder Rajan.
15. Macaulay championed the narrative power of the small detail: 'The perfect historian is he in whose work the character and spirit of an age is exhibited in miniature' ('History' 364).
16. Thieving can also be counter-colonial when done by the enslaved. Writing about tea's intimate companion, and fellow colonial comestible, sugar, Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley asks, '[H]ow can an imagination of emancipation not include many ways of thieving sugar?' (3).
17. Levine points out Macaulay's self-deception when he disavows the role of 'imagination' and the 'fanciful' in other historians' work (125), while using romance and escapism to make his own histories read 'like a novel' (118).
18. See Bertelsen.
19. The 'troubles' experienced by Stanley and Emin were a Victorian *cause célèbre*: Emin was the besieged governor of Equatoria who wanted it to be made a British protectorate. In 1887, Stanley led a rescue expedition that was bloody and litigious, and it became the last major European venture into Africa. For accounts, see Newman and Youngs.
20. For more on how Stanley had a 'vision of Africa subjugated by the commodity', see Richards (129).

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