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NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction

Addiction, Empire, and Narrative in Arthur Conan Doyle's The Sign of the Four

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"It is not I who become addicted, it is my body."

—Jean Cocteau

The degree to which British imperialism of the nineteenth century was invested in and maintained by the global traffic in addictive substances is well documented. At mid-century, for example, opium was a major export commodity for Britain's largest colony, India, and the British government was very sensitive to the profits that could be realized through the sale of the drug. The single largest market for opium and its derivatives was China, with whom Britain had an increasingly precarious trade imbalance. The Chinese had a long-standing distrust of doing business with the Europeans, and would only accept gold in trade for such in-demand goods as tea and silk. When China attempted to limit the flow of Indian opium into its domestic markets through trade barriers and tariffs, the British government exerted enormous political pressure to maintain its access to those markets. The Royal Navy backed up the British commercial interests, resulting in the so-called "Opium Wars" of 1839-42 and 1856-58, and the virtual surrender of the Chinese economy to a British stewardship.¹

It was, however, not only the imperial economy, but the imperial imaginary, the ensemble of images and narratives that mediated the social relations of empire, which was caught in a violent cycle of dependency involving the orient. As critics and historians such as John M. MacKenzie, Robert Opie, and Thomas Richards have shown, the commodity culture of mid- to late-Victorian Britain consumed images of British colonization as greedily as its industrial manufacturers gulped up tea and silk. This fascination with the orient soon grew to such an extent that it threatened to consume the very subjects for whom it had been produced. "By the end of the century," writes Anne McClintock, "a stream of imperial bric-a-brac had invaded Victorian homes. Colonial heroes and colonial scenes were emblazoned on a host of domestic commodities, from milk cartons to sauce bottles, tobacco tins to whiskey bottles, assorted biscuits to toothpaste, toffee boxes to baking powder" (219). The bric-a-brac to which McClintock refers—like the countless novels, novellas, short stories, poems, and other forms of narrative that also recorded the heroic personages and events of the empire's history—represents the uncanny return of the narcotics which Britain produced and exported, to places like India and China. That is to say, the stories which the empire told to itself constituted the active agents of a kind of addiction, the transient satisfactions by which the imperial imaginary sought to confirm its mastery over the

¹ On the history of the Opium Wars, see Booth 103-173.

troubling problem of alterity. But in their sheer multiplicity, in the compulsive need to reiterate the signal events of the empire's triumphant progress, such narratives also attest to the fundamental incapacity of British culture to expel from its unconscious that tincture or trace of the poisonous other upon which it had come so crucially to depend, not only for its economic well being, but also in its claims to moral and racial superiority.

The relationship between the imperial imaginary and the psychic economy of addiction is most complexly imagined by Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Sign of the Four*, particularly in its deferred engagement with what was arguably Britain's most traumatic imperial encounter, the Indian Mutiny of 1857. The text traces an implicit homology between the punctured body of the great English detective and the body politic of England itself. Just as the nation struggles with a foreign conspiracy that has been belatedly released into its blood stream by the events of 1857, so too Holmes is represented as dangerously "occupied" by a drug with distinct orientalist overtones, one which threatens his physical health as surely as the Mutiny threatened the health of the empire. The homology, however, is at best imperfect, leaving *The Sign of the Four* scarred by a constellation of conflicted histories, ambiguous identifications, and violent sublimations. The result is a text which must be read precisely at those points where Doyle's scenes refuse to cohere into any simple pattern of symbolism or meaning, and reveal their significance palimpsestically through the trace of that which they substitute for or displace. *The Sign of the Four* is not only in this sense a punctured text; it is also about the act of puncturing, about what it means to break the skin of culture that protects the addict from alterity.² A puncture is not simply a wound; it is also a form of punctuation, a way of writing, of separating lexical elements into the epistemes of the symbolic order. We will be concerned with four scenes from Doyle's novel. Recalling the sequence of four linked crosses that form the cryptogram at the heart of this mystery, these four literal or metaphorical scenes of puncturing provide a means of articulating some of the connections that the novel reveals between addiction, empire, and narrative.

First Puncture

Sherlock Holmes took his bottle from the corner of the mantelpiece, and his hypodermic syringe from its neat morocco case. With his long, white, nervous fingers he adjusted the delicate needle, and rolled back his left shirt-cuff. For some little time his eyes rested thoughtfully upon the sinewy forearm and wrist, all dotted and scarred with innumerable puncture-marks. Finally, he thrust the sharp point home, pressed down the tiny piston, and sank back into the velvet-lined armchair with a long sigh of satisfaction. (3)

² We have assumed for the purposes of this discussion of the addict a male subject for two reasons. Firstly, the specific object of our analysis is a male addict, the character of Sherlock Holmes. Secondly, the homology we are sketching out between addiction and empire depends in part upon the concerns for bodily integrity which Silverman has shown to be particular to male subjectivity and its defensive relationship to lack.

Pressing the hypodermic into his flesh, Holmes gives us our first scene of puncture, one which serves to connect addiction to the policing of otherness that occurs through the “science of deduction.” While the use of the coca leaf as an intoxicant had been known to Europeans since their first encounters with the Peruvian Indians, the alkaloid cocaine was only distilled by Albert Niemann in 1860. Interest in the drug remained dormant for two decades until the young Freud, striving to establish his reputation as a physician, published his review of the literature on cocaine together with the results of his own experiments. In “Uber Coca,” Freud argues that “a first dose or even repeated doses of coca produce no compulsive desire to use the stimulant further,” and enthusiastically endorses its therapeutic value in the treatment of fatigue, nervousness, neurasthenia, and morphine addiction (62). Much to the young physician’s disappointment, it was not this article but that of his partner, Carl Koller, on the use of cocaine as a local anaesthetic in eye surgery that attracted wide-scale interest in the drug. By the mid-1880s, British medical journals were overflowing in their praise of cocaine’s medicinal properties and Conan Doyle, himself a practicing physician at the time, is also known to have experimented with the drug. According to Virginia Berridge and Griffith Edwards, “There were sixty-seven separate pieces about it in … the 1885 volume of the *British Medical Journal*. Its utility as a local anaesthetic in operations on the vagina and urethra, in dentistry, ophthalmic surgery, in vaccination, in operations on the nose and larynx, vomiting, mammary abscess, in cancer, scalds, circumcision, neuralgia, hay fever, senile gangrene and even the removal of a needle from a foot were all canvassed. Nymphomania, sea-sickness—there seemed no limit to the possibilities” (221). Cocaine’s medical popularity had its corollary in the commercial sector: the alkaloid was added to wines, sherries, ports, teas, lozenges, and soda drinks—Coca Cola included cocaine as an active ingredient until 1903.

By the 1890s, however, the medical establishment had performed a remarkable *volte face* concerning the therapeutic value of the drug. As its addictive properties became better known, cocaine was increasingly associated with the degenerative effects of opium use. The alkaloid effectively went from being a miracle of modern medicine to a vestigial horror of Europe’s colonial enterprise. One of its earliest and most vocal champions, Dr. Albrecht Erlenmeyer, came out strongly against the drug in 1888, describing it as “the third scourge of mankind” (qtd. in Berridge and Edwards 222). Freud’s reputation was seriously damaged by the changing fortunes of cocaine and he turned away from medical research to begin his investigations into the unconscious.³ *The Sign of the Four* is situated just at this turn of fortunes in the cultural meanings of cocaine. Finally working up the nerve to confront his roommate concerning his pharmacodependency, Watson asks, “Which is it to-day [Holmes] … morphine or cocaine?” (3). He then proceeds to undercut the distinction between the two drugs, claiming that substance abuse of any kind is a “pathological and morbid process, which

³ On Freud’s early research into cocaine, and its subsequent effect on the development of psychoanalysis, see both Freud and Jones.

involves increased tissue-change and may at least leave a permanent weakness" (4).⁴

Watson's pairing of cocaine with morphine, the idea that the addict might use the one as easily as the other, was part and parcel of the "orientalization" of the coca plant: though technically a stimulant, medical textbooks of the turn of the century classified it as a narcotic and thus relegated it to a sub-category of opium, a move which not only elided the bio-chemical differences between the drugs, but the cultural and historical differences as well. In much the same way that the "Orient," as Edward Said has shown, could refer to any culture from North Africa, India, China, or Japan, so too the term "narcotic" effectively effaced the distinction between a drug that traced its origins to a Spanish colony in South America and one that came from British colonies in Asia and India. Cocaine is, in this sense, the archetypal colonial product: it traces an arc from raw substance originating on the ill-defined periphery of empire to the imperial center where it is refined and sold for profit in the domestic marketplace. The alkaloid, as distinct from the coca leaf from which it is distilled, signifies the mastery of empire over its colonial possessions: the domestic consumer injects not the raw substance of "nature" but that which is manufactured from it—it is "culture" that ensures the drug's medicinal or therapeutic effects. But, in the insatiable craving for more and more of the temporary pleasures it provides, cocaine also masters its user. No amount of purification and refinement, it seems, can finally remove the threat of the foreign from the commodity in its imperial guise; its insidious, primitive, and dangerous essence threatens to reduce the user to a mere "slave," and reverse the relationship of colonizer to colonized. Narcotics, then, are to Britain what cocaine is to Holmes—the enormous cost to the nation's constitution that is entailed in any investment in the eccentric.

But when Watson implores Holmes to "Count the cost!" of his intravenous drug use, the detective seems more than willing to write it off as a necessary expense in the larger project of selfhood (4). Cocaine, we are told, serves not to dull the pain of the detective's acute *ennui*, but as a way of approximating the stimulation, the excess of feeling he feels when confronted with a problem:

"My mind ... rebels at stagnation. Give me problems, give me work, give me the most abstruse cryptogram or the most intricate analysis, and I am in my own proper atmosphere. I can then dispense with artificial stimulants. But I abhor the dull routine of existence. I crave for mental exaltation." (4)

Holmes's notable choice of terms here, his "craving" for "mental exaltation," undoes the putative distinction between "work" and its substitute, "artificial stimulants." Such a position stands in marked contrast to that of the foremost Victorian advocate of work, Thomas Carlyle, with whose writings both Watson and Holmes are familiar.⁵ Work, for Carlyle, is a "purifying fire, wherein all poison is

⁴ For a discussion of how the Sherlock Holmes stories reflect the medical establishment's changing perceptions of cocaine use, see Berridge and Edwards, 223-24.

⁵ When Holmes asks Watson if he is familiar with Johann Paul Friedrich Richter (here referred to simply as "Jean Paul"), Watson replies, "Fairly so. I worked back to him through Carlyle."

burnt up, and of sour smoke itself there is made bright blessed flame" (169), but for the detective, work is another form of the wonderful "poison" that he is addicted to—Holmes is perhaps never more hedonistically abandoned to the pleasures of "artificial stimulation" than when he is "on the case." Thus, where Carlyle sees the value of labour precisely in its capacity to burn out the debased passions of animal savagery and indolence, Holmes represents work as itself a form of excess that allows him to accede to his "own proper atmosphere" even as it testifies to the fundamental incompleteness of that sphere. Only by virtue of that which exceeds the precincts of selfhood, that which in effect insistently signals the irremediable poverty of selfhood, can Holmes claim to be himself. The detective both is and is not himself when the substance of his addiction is coursing through his veins; the drug divides him from selfhood even as it returns him to it.⁶

In "Plato's Pharmacy," Derrida describes this doubleness as the defining characteristic of the *pharmakon*, the drug which is both remedy and poison. As a remedy, the *pharmakon*, like the act of writing to which Socrates compares it, is a substance that adds itself to the body only in order to repair some prior damage, or to extend its natural faculties. This very act of addition or enrichment, however, is also a form of subtraction or dilution: in substituting itself for the body's own functions, the *pharmakon* diminishes the body's self-sufficiency, forcing it to admit the constitutive gap or absence which would require such prosthetic aid. The *pharmakon* intervenes or insinuates itself into the body proper, and takes up residence there as the necessary addition, the poison, upon which identity itself now depends. "The *pharmakon*," Derrida concludes, "is that dangerous supplement that breaks into the very thing that would have liked to do without it yet lets itself *at once* be breached, roughed up, fulfilled, and replaced, completed by the very trace through which the present increases itself in the act of disappearing" (110). The addict's body thus becomes a particularly intense site of semiotic over-coding. The track marks left on the detective's sinewy forearm are a kind of excess, the traces not only of one man's addiction, but of the very process by which signs pass into and out of legibility.

Second Puncture

The second puncture occurs with the appearance of a mysterious oriental parchment in the enclosed and carefully guarded domicile of Englishness, 221B Baker Street. On "paper of native Indian manufacture," tantalizingly marked by a red "X," Mary Morstan presents the detective with an "abstruse cryptogram" (41).

Holmes is notably unimpressed by both Watson's reading method and Carlyle. He responds to Watson, "That was like following the brook to the parent lake" (58).

⁶ Kestner similarly notes the "profound ambiguity" of Holmes's argument that cocaine is but a substitute for work. "[I]t is only crime," Kestner notes, "which enables existence to have meaning for Holmes, for only then can he exercise his powers and construct his own heroism" (62). For a very different reading of Holmes's dependence on work, one which unproblematically associates the detective with the rise of the middle-class professional, see Rye.

Holmes describes it as "a curious hieroglyphic like four crosses in a line with their arms touching. Beside it is written ... 'The sign of the four—Jonathan Small, Mahomet Singh, Abdullah Khan, Dost Akbar'" (18). These men, Holmes soon discovers, first met during the turbulent days of the Indian Mutiny. The four formed an alliance to first steal and then share the Agra treasure, a horde of jewels that once belonged to a rajah of a northern Indian province. When the conspirators are caught and tried for murder, the treasure remains secure in its hiding place; an attempt to recover it, however, goes bad, and the result is the mysterious appearance of single parts of the loot in Morstan's mail, and the dead bodies of two British military officers who had fallen in league with the original band.

The sheer excessiveness of the Agra treasure, its power to attract, to kill, and to elude capture, and, perhaps most significantly, its imminent return to the shores of Great Britain in the form of a murderous conspiracy, is symptomatic of its origin in the discursive unmanageability of the Mutiny. As Patrick Brantlinger observes, the latter half of the nineteenth century produced "at least fifty" Mutiny novels, and "at least thirty more" were published in the first half of the twentieth. He also notes "a deluge of eyewitness accounts, journal articles, histories, poems and plays" in the decades following the 1857-58 revolt (199). Conan Doyle's novel was one of many such tales that appeared during a renewed fascination with the Mutiny in the 1890s. Kaye and Malleson's complete six-volume history was published in 1896, re-issued in '97, and reprinted in '98. Shorter histories were published by Malleson, T.R.E. Holmes, Lt.-General Innes. Witness accounts, such as Lady Inglis's 1892 diary and Lord Roberts's 1897 memoir, continued to appear. H.M. Greenhow, J.E. Muddock, and G.A. Henty produced two Mutiny novels each during this decade. Nisbet's *The Queen's Desire* (1893), Merriman's *Flotsam* (1896), and Flora Annie Steel's *On the Face of the Waters* (1896) also deserve mention as notable popular additions to the fictional archive.

The compulsive, almost obsessional need to bring the Mutiny to account, to register every detail of its origins and to explain what could have brought about such unimaginable "treachery" and "villainy," is indicative of the extent to which the uprisings of 1857-58 challenged British claims to colonial authority. From the mid-nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, the Indian uprisings have been insistently portrayed as "mutiny," as a revolt against a putatively legitimate, military authority. Yet, the insurrection of Indian troops against their British officers rapidly gave way to various, more broadly based manifestations of social and political unrest. Indian nationalist historian Sashi Bhushan Chaudhuri was the first to give due emphasis to the rebellion's non-military, populist and regional aspects, which the name of "Mutiny" effaces. And, as Eric Stokes points out, a few of the earliest writers did perceive "a formidable civil rebellion"; others decried "a Mohomedan conspiracy" (5-7). Stokes himself argues for a "peasant revolt," one that is energized, most notably, by the British government's disruptive transformations of longstanding local systems of property (9-12). Just as for Holmes, whose "work" of deduction is never completed but only diverted through cocaine, so too the cultural work performed by Mutiny narratives remained necessarily unfinished. The insurrection, as history, resisted

British attempts to contain it within an all-encompassing account, to generalize upon an event that seemed so unignorably plural in its meanings.

"The Mutiny" is, then, an *exorbitant* wager of imperial discourse, an oft-told but nonetheless unsettling tale that puts British culture outside and beyond its "proper" sphere of dominion and self-control. In Small's account, "[o]ne month India lay as still and peaceful ... as Surrey or Kent; the next there were two hundred thousand black devils let loose, and the country was a perfect hell" (97-98). The "eye-witness" goes on to recall that "[n]ight after night the whole sky was alight with the burning bungalows," detailing as well the body of a British woman, "all cut into ribbons and half eaten by jackals and native dogs," the body of her husband, buried beneath four rebel corpses with empty revolver in hand (98). Next follows the house of Small's employer—the aptly named Abel White—ablaze and surrounded by "dancing and howling" rebel "fiends" (98). Neatly capturing the horrific, inassimilable aspect of the 1857 uprisings, Small concludes: "It was a fight of the millions against the hundreds; and the cruellest part of it was that these men that we fought against, foot, horse, and gunners, were our own picked troops, whom we had taught and trained, handling our own weapons and blowing our own bugle-calls" (99). The Mutiny, as rendered by Small, brings imperial power into confrontation with its uncanny doubling, with its reproduction as iteration and difference within the agonistic space of colonial encounter. Imperial authority, he argues, is challenged and undermined not by the concerted political and religious imperatives of a dominated people, but rather by its own instruments and practices.

The disruptive force of the Indian Mutiny is signified in this novel not only by the murders apparently committed by the group that signs itself with four crosses, but by its capacity to dramatically transform the space of the metropole, of London itself, into a version of its unmapped and unknowable place of origin, the colonial periphery. Morstan, Watson, and Holmes are led by a "street arab" to a waiting carriage and blind-folded. Holmes's cartographic memory, however, allows him to trace their descent into the obscure nether regions of London. "I lost my bearings," Watson reports, but, "Holmes was never at fault ... he muttered the names [of the streets] as the cab rattled through squares and in and out by tortuous by-streets 'Wordsworth Road,' said my companion. 'Priory Road. Lark Hall Lane. Stockwell Place. Robert Street. Cold Harbour Lane. Our quest does not appear to take us to very fashionable regions'" (20-21). Holmes is thus able to track, on the map of his mind, the precise geographical location of their destination, but not their cultural location, their place within the semiotics of empire itself. For all that this quest leads them into the deepest recesses of what William Booth, writing in very same year, would describe as "Darkest England," it also leads them out of the British Isles all together, or rather, to the point at which the distinction between occident and orient is so radically confused as to trouble any fixed sense of "being in place." Behind the doors of "a third-rate suburban dwelling house" (21), the trio discover the "oasis of art" maintained by Thaddeus Sholto:

The richest and glossiest of curtains and tapestries draped the walls, looped back here and there to expose some richly-mounted painting or Oriental vase. The carpet was of amber and black, so soft and so thick that the foot sank pleasantly into it, as into a bed of moss. Two great tiger-skins thrown athwart it increased the suggestion of Eastern luxury, as did a huge hookah which stopped upon a mat in the corner. (22-23)

Occupying a midway point between West and East, Sholto's apartment functions as a kind of portal through which the three step into a confusing world of free-floating signs of race and nationality, in which the "suburban" becomes the "exotic" and vice versa. In such a space, the comforting distinctions between occident and orient collapse, showing the former to be always already occupied, like the body of the detective, by an eccentric influence that is, in some way, the very embodiment of its own desire for domestic security.

Third Puncture

The sense of geographical and cultural disorientation induced by our second puncture is amplified by the third, the murder of Bartholomew Sholto, son of Major John Sholto and brother of Thaddeus, by a poison dart that has been "driven or shot with no great force into the scalp" (43). Like Holmes's cocaine, the poison that kills Sholto is a "powerful vegetable alkaloid" imported from the colonies. Holmes quickly realizes that this murder was carried out not by an ordinary Englishman, but by some as yet unglimped foreign accomplice. He tells Watson: "I fancy that this ally breaks much fresh ground in the annals of crime in this country—though parallel cases suggest themselves from India and ... Senegambia" (41). Small's mysterious ally turns out to be a native of the Andaman Islands, where the British built a prison to accommodate the prisoners of war captured during the Indian Mutiny. Watson describes him as a "little black man—the smallest I have ever seen—with a great, misshappen head and a shock of tangled, dishevelled hair His small eyes glowed and burned with a sombre light, and his thick lips were writhed back from his teeth, which grinned and chattered at us with half animal fury" (86-87). Tonga's sunken eyes and "animal fury" are a complex distillation of contemporary accounts of the murderous rage exhibited by the Sepoys during the Mutiny, the maddened features of the cocaine addict, and late-nineteenth-century fears concerning devolution and degeneration.⁷ As such, he recalls other such retrograde characters that crowded the literature of the *fin-de-siècle*. But where Wells's devolved Morlocks are safely transposed into the distant future and Haggard's atavistic She-who-must-be-obeyed never escapes her African hideaway, Tonga has arrived in England and brought with him the sheer excessiveness of the colonial world.

The expelled elements of the Indian Mutiny distort not only the physical space of the metropole, as we have seen with the blind journey through London, but somatic space as well. The roll-call of the various characters that are either a part

⁷ On late-nineteenth-century fantasies and fears of degeneration, see Chamberlin and Gilman, Greenslade, Harpham, Hurley.

of the sign of the four or are in some ways connected to it reveals a frightening array of eccentric bodies. Tonga aside, there is his master, Jonathan Small, the one-legged man whose "bearded, hairy face" and "wild cruel eyes" nearly frighten Major Sholto to death (28). Then there are the Sholto brothers themselves, identical twins, each of which sports a "very high head, a bristle of red hair all 'round the fringe of it, and a bald, shining scalp which shot out from among it like a mountainpeak from fir-trees" (22). Thaddeus Sholto's bizarre appearance is complemented by a notable lack of motor control over his limbs and muscles, as if his body were foreign even to himself. The bald-headed man is repeatedly described as jerking, writhing, and convulsing, and his persistent queries concerning the state of the mitral valve of his heart lead Watson to dismiss him as "a confirmed hypochondriac" (31). And finally there are Mahomet Singh and Abdullah Khan, the giant Sikhs who conscript Small into their conspiracy. Taken together, these eccentric figures transform the world of the novel into a kind of drug-induced hallucination, as if we were witness not so much to a sobering series of events supplanting Holmes's cocaine-fueled reveries, but to the sustained extension of those reveries. The metropole here seems turned inside out, and reveals itself to be always already inhabited by its colonial other and governed by a dream logic that both is and is not its own.

Associated with the dejected, the abjected, and the rejected, Tonga, Small, and the others are aspects of what Bakhtin calls the grotesque. The classical or normative body is, as Mary Russo writes, "transcendent and monumental, closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical and sleek" and is associated with "rationalism, individualism, and the normalizing aspirations of the bourgeoisie" (8). It is this body, the classical body with its symmetrical form, that Holmes assumes in his practice of detection. And it is, moreover, the association of the classical body with a specific set of worldly experiences that allows him to move from simple observation to deduction, to move from observed details to the reconstruction of a life story, as he so notably demonstrates in decoding the sad story of Watson's brother from the marks left on a watch. The grotesque body, by contrast, is "open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing" (Russo 8). Where the classical body separates itself from the world, the grotesque body is connected to it; it is a point of transit or exchange between what is properly within normalizing assumptions of the bourgeoisie and what is without. As a result, the grotesque body neither leaves the normative traces of the classical body, nor conforms in any simple manner to the demands of individualism and rationalism predicated on its form. Holmes thus struggles with the case brought to him by Mary Morstan not for a lack of clues but for the ways in which these clues, such as Tonga's foot prints, and the muddy marks left by Small's wooden stump, will force him to abandon the traditional categories of analysis that assume a normative body. When Watson, for example, concludes from the creosote marks left by Tonga in the attic of Pondicherry Lodge, that the murder must have been committed by a child, even Holmes loses his self possession. "I was staggered for a moment," he confesses, before recalling the case's connection with the Andaman Islands and thus the possibility that the perpetrator is one of its dwarfish inhabitants (42). Tonga's dart thus reveals Holmes's resolute empiri-

cism as a kind of cultural imperialism, an attempt to eradicate the radical alterity within the metropolis as opposed to without, and a way of accounting for the loss of spatial and ontological integrity that is indicated by the proliferation of the text's grotesque bodies.⁸

Fourth Puncture

In the fourth and culminating instance, the site of puncture is the literal and discursive body of the nation itself, as it struggles to expel the colonial other, Tonga. At the climax of the novel, Watson and Holmes board a police-boat and chase Small and his Andaman ally down the Thames as they attempt to escape with the Agra treasure. When the police-boat finally draws close to the fugitives, "the unhallowed dwarf" raises his blow-gun. Before he can shoot, Holmes and Watson fire their pistols in unison (87). Tonga is knocked overboard, Watson catching one last "glimpse of his venomous, menacing eyes amid the white swirl of the waters" (87). Tonga's death precipitates the taking of Small, whose peg-leg now buries itself in the English mud of the Thames's banks, effectively pinning him down for capture. The case seems closed: Holmes has fully disinterred the meaning encrypted in the sign of the four, and discovered its origins in a plot first conceived during the chaos of the Mutiny. He has, moreover, captured the plot's sole remaining engineer, and disposed of the text's most visible emblem of colonial alterity. The science of deduction, together with a measure of sheer British ingenuity and courage, has effectively restored the spatial and ontological integrity of the imperial centre.

Such, at least, has been the view of most of the text's recent critics. Examining several Holmes narratives, including *The Sign of the Four*, Rosemary Jann focuses on Holmes's commitment to positivist science, arguing that Conan Doyle employs "nineteenth-century typologies" of gender, class, and race, and thus creates a detective designed to "enforce the fixity and naturalness" of established social order (686-87). While acknowledging "the incompleteness of Doyle's positivistic enterprise" (687), Jann does not challenge the coherence of his works, but rather points to their inadequacy as representations of the late-Victorian social world and to the sociogenetic anxieties and insecurities that presumably determine Conan Doyle's narrative articulation. Jaya Mehta provides a thorough reading of *The Sign*, duly emphasizing the decisive importance of its Mutiny narrative and, by extension, its "colonial context." Concerning the resolution of the Holmes-

⁸ Russo also notes the connection between the Holmes stories and the grotesque, but sees in them a second form of the grotesque, one that is aligned with but distinct from Bakhtin's emphasis on the outward forms of the corporeal. This second form is associated with inward experience, and thus with Freud's notion of the "uncanny." "Emerging with the concept of the romantic sublime," she writes, "the category of the uncanny grotesque is associated with the life of the psyche, and with the particular 'experience' of the 'strange' and the 'criminal' variety described by Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson" (8). *The Sign of the Four*, however, demonstrates that, under the sign of addiction, the grotesque is neither "properly" within or without the body, but rather is that point of transit in which the psyche is fully opened onto the experiential world and vice versa. The addict's hallucinations are as fundamentally "in the world" as they are "within the mind."

dominated detective plot, however, Mehta discerns "a successful purging of the novel's 'wild, dark' Indian elements from its national and narrative borders" (635).⁹ Jon Thompson comes to a very similar conclusion: "Inasmuch as the novel's mystery is rooted in the murderousness and treachery of the Indian Mutiny, Holmes's resolution of the compound mystery ... symbolically vanquishes the exotic but violent element of the Orient within Victorian England" (72). In Thompson's view, Conan Doyle's novel achieves a victory of style, combining "ideologically charged conventions from adventure, detective, and sensational literature" with carefully managed "strategies of exclusion," which narrow the fiction's engagement with various troubling aspects of the social real (73). Holmes's work first traces, then contains and controls, the disruptive colonial contaminations of metropolitan space; this mastering of disorder is signified, most notably, by the detective's production of narrative closure.

The text's efforts to foreclose on the colonial infection, however, are not as entirely successful as its critics have suggested. Consider Watson's final reflection upon Tonga's fate: "Somewhere in the dark ooze at the bottom of the Thames lie the bones of that strange visitor to our shores" (88). The doctor's sudden and singular use of a present-tense verb emphasizes Tonga's enduring presence, his insubordinate relation to the over-and-done-with of Conan Doyle's tale. Unlike the bodies that are inevitably pulled from the Thames in Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861) and *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), Tonga's body never returns to the surface and thus seems stubbornly beyond recuperation. Moreover, the Thames's depths claim not only Tonga's body, that figure of "intractable" colonial alterity, but also the Agra treasure, the raw material which is never distilled into its alkaloid form as profit or wealth. Both remain as *submerged* presences, stubbornly inhabiting—indeed, haunting—the detective's final production of empirical and imperial order. The treasure, moreover, is not simply dumped; it is scattered, disseminated, in a deliberate action which intends, as Small affirms, to foreclose upon the possibility of search and recovery.

The Thames waterway is the portal, the threshold, of empire—the orifice of output and input, expenditure and accumulation, venture and gain. It is the empire's place of exchange, the fluid link between metropole and periphery. To evoke the "dark ooze" of its murky depths is to suggest a Thames that exceeds and eludes the controlled circulation of objects and commodities, a Thames that slips the grasp of the empire's regulatory systems of power and knowledge. "Ooze" is entirely immeasurable and unaccountable, thoroughly indeterminate in constitution and structure, and multidirectional in its extensions. Conan Doyle's Thames thus marks a notable turn away from the Dickensian image of the waterway as a kind of archival resource that obligingly offers up its holdings to the empirical gaze, and takes a first step toward the dark, brooding, inassimilable Thames that dominates the opening and closing passages of Conrad's *Heart*

⁹ Mehta makes some qualifications when evaluating the close of the detective plot, noting the loss of the treasure and, in more detail, the points of resemblance that tend to associate both Watson and Holmes with the colonial criminal Small. Mehta's argument remains true nonetheless to the notion of a successful purge, rather than striving, as we do, to put the articulation and narrative function of the plot resolution more radically into question.

of *Darkness* (1902). The "solution" to the case, like Holmes's own seven per cent solution with which the story begins, is thus notably impure and receives its value precisely from that necessary fraction that is the most foreign and disolute.

The resolution of the detective plot thus signals its incapacity to "purge" (Mehta 635) or "vanquish" (Thompson 72) the novel's disruptive colonial contents. The notion of a narrative "purge" comes closest to the mark, evoking in its figurative resonance an intervention within a *bodily* economy. However, the nature of this intervention conforms much more tellingly to the logic of the *pharmakon*. The text once again presents a surplus, or an enriching addition, but one that tacitly acknowledges its lack. Killing Tonga, capturing Small, and solving the mystery of the cryptogram are somehow insufficient—the text requires, seemingly, another story, the confession of Jonathon Small, in order to effect closure. Narrative thus substitutes itself for the unrecuperated aspect of the case, becoming the domain in which the cultural imaginary accounts for the loss of the real, or for that for which it cannot fully account. Holmes maneuvers a substitution as curious as the one which makes cocaine a stand-in for work, calling upon Small to deliver the Mutiny narrative, which the detective has determined to accept in lieu of the credit for solving the case—the due reward for his labors.

This move toward narrative, to narrative as a form of *pharmakon* for the unfinished practices of imperial management, recalls recent work such as Nicholas Thomas's *Colonialism's Culture*, which stresses the importance of examining modern colonialism as "cultural process," arguing that colonialism's "discoveries and trespasses are imagined and energized through signs, metaphors and narratives; even what would seem its purest moments of profit and violence have been mediated and enframed by structures of meaning" (2). From Conan Doyle's handling of "the Mutiny" as a master narrative of imperial history, one may conclude that it is not British imperialism's accomplishments that sustain the empire's stories of itself, but that the stories are supplements to histories in which British imperial power never discovers its fullest measure, never achieves sure mastery of its domains and subjects. The imperial grand narrative appears then not as a coherent, stabilized structure that can be countered critically only by the besetting of its margins or by the retrieval of its necessary exclusions. On the contrary, it is precisely the puncture as ineradicable trace of such exclusions that constitutes the grand narrative, that, in effect, opens the very space in which narrative comes into being. The puncture can never fully be sutured or closed, but rather must remain as the condition of the text's emergence as narrative.

The centrality of narrative within the text's economy of addiction is further reinforced through the conclusion of its romantic subplot. As many critics have noted (Thompson 73, Mehta 634-35), the novel opens Victorian domestic space to imperial interventions and then finally secures it, reestablishing it as a site of experience opposed to imperial ventures, closed against the disruptions these may entail. A retired army surgeon of modest means, Watson proposes to Mary Morstan only when her expectations are ruinously reduced, when the Agra treasure, which would place her among the nation's most brilliant heiresses, is

definitively lost. This condition imposed upon the lovers's meeting lends support to Mehta's sense of the novel's eventual purging of its colonial contents: the loss of Indian treasure enables the comedic move to English betrothal. More revealing than the contingency marking the romance subplot's happy-ending, however, is Holmes's intransigence to the novel's thematics of secured domesticity. Having tracked Indian treasure but not recovered it, having pursued two colonial criminals and captured one, Holmes must face at last Watson's unwelcome engagement announcement and his naive query, "pray what remains for you?" Without hesitation, the detective replies, "For me ... there still remains the cocaine-bottle." Following the final gesture of Holmes's "long white" outstretched hand, one may say that the text reaches beyond itself, breaks its bounds and extends toward yet another scene of puncture, another dose of exalting remedy and debilitating poison (119). *The Sign of the Four* thus closes upon an opening, a constitutive breach in its body. It returns in the end to the troubling image of the addict, who forgoes the safe and sanctioned pleasures of professional reward or heterosexual domesticity and chooses instead a needle and an orientalized pollutant produced by and within the economy of empire. Holmes's final gesture, his return to his drug, thus confirms rather than corrects the unsettling, doubled logic of the *pharmakon*. The detective moves from the drug, to work, to imperial narrative, and back to the drug. Even as one substitutes the drug for work, so the Mutiny narrative, the story of empire, stands in for the work of imperial management, which is only ever partially fulfilled even after the fullest enactment of the detective's powers.

Sir John Seeley's often quoted claim that the British "seem, as it were, to have conquered and peopled half the world in a fit of absence of mind" is perhaps not wholly inaccurate (12). At very least, it directs attention to the role of the unconscious in the project of empire, the ways in which the "civilizing mission" seems to have obeyed the logic of dreams as much as the enlightened rationality with which it is most often associated. But a "fit of absence of mind," still seems somehow incommensurate with the compulsiveness, the obsessiveness, the sheer energy which informed the imperial project. Reading the tracks marks of Conan Doyle's *The Sign of the Four*, and noting in them the close relationship between addiction and empire, we might want to rephrase Seeley: the British seem, as it were, to have conquered and peopled half the world in search of a fix, a way of fulfilling a desire that in turn only creates further desire, which addicts its user to the very fact of desire. Holmes's pharmacodependency may serve then as a model of the addiction of empire to narrative, of its need to authorize, legitimize, and mythologize its campaigns of material and economic exploitation through the endless telling and retelling of its signatory events. But just as Holmes's seven per cent solution can never wholly substitute for his detective work, so too the narratives that sought to represent the events of the Indian Mutiny register the deep psychic trauma of that event without finally cathecting it. The trail of punctures that mark *The Sign of the Four* provides an index to the elusive desire for wholeness and self-sufficiency that drives the imperial unconscious to always seek another campaign, another case, another story.

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