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Rudyard Kipling unburdened

by [Roger Kimball](#)

On the much-abused imperial poet.

It is no use pretending that Kipling's view of life, as a whole, can be accepted or even forgiven by any civilized person.

—George Orwell, 1942

My childhood home did not boast many literary accoutrements. Apart from an imposing set of “World’s Classics,” what I chiefly remember is a framed copy of (Joseph) Rudyard Kipling’s poem “If—.” It was printed with impressive gilt filigree on a sheet of foolscap and, together with a portrait of my Guardian Angel, it presided in quiet admonition on my bedroom wall.

I never memorized the poem, though I internalized its cadence while nervously savoring the impossible combination of virtues it pleaded:

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or, being lied about, don’t deal in lies,

Etc. Tough for an impatient eight- or ten- (or fifty-) year-old. There were thirteen such conditionals to be fulfilled before arriving at the consummating apodosis: “Yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it,/ And—which is more—you’ll be a Man my son!”

“All well and good,” I remember musing, “but what ‘if not’?”

“If—” is probably Kipling’s most famous poem. As recently as 1995, a BBC poll named it Britain’s favorite. Written in 1895, when Kipling was thirty and crossing the threshold to international celebrity, it was published as part of *Rewards and Fairies*, a set of historical stories, in 1910, when his reputation was already on the wane. In a celebrated essay on Kipling from 1942, George Orwell dismissed the poem as the sort of thing (about the only sort of thing) Colonel Blimp would like.

Today, I suspect, Kipling is regarded chiefly as that most anodyne of literary practitioners: a *children’s children’s author*, creator of the boy Mowgli, Kaa the python, and Shere Khan the Tiger, the genial-looking, pipe-puffing genius who wrote *Kim* and populated the imaginations of boys and girls with the sultry weather of the Raj, explained how the elephant got its trunk, and decorated it all with fastidious (little) poems that rhymed and scanned. Kipling was picturesque. He was born in romantic-sounding Bombay, and he got his precocious literary start in India after a decade of schooling in England. (His parents chose “Rudyard,” by the way, after a lake in Staffordshire where

they courted.) If his stories are exotic, even scary at times, they are nonetheless wholesome or at least susceptible to Disneyfication.

How different it once was. Around the turn of the last century, at the apogee of Kipling's fame, Mark Twain wrote that he was "the only living person not head of a nation, whose voice is heard around the world the moment it drops a remark, the only such voice in existence that does not go by slow ship and rail but always travels first-class by cable." In Kipling, the zeitgeist briefly found its impresario. For a time, his authority was as much political as literary. Kipling gave speeches advocating British supremacy in India and South Africa. He opposed the suffragettes and home rule for Ireland. He could be downright strident. It was Kipling, one of his biographers speculates, who popularized the metonymy "Huns" (actually, he insisted on "huns" with a small "h") for "Germans," a subject on which he grew increasingly ferocious. By 1915, Kipling was insisting that there were "only two divisions in the world ... human beings and Germans." Kipling consistently refused state honors (a knighthood, the Order of Merit, the post of poet laureate) but by the late 1890s he was the undisputed if unofficial laureate—but also, which is sometimes forgotten, the Jeremiah—of Imperial Britain.

True, Kipling's celebrity was never universally applauded. Most literary folk instinctively disliked him. Henry James gave away the bride at Kipling's wedding, but he could be magisterially tart about Kipling the writer: "great talent," he wrote in a letter of 1897, but "almost nothing civilized save steam and patriotism." Oscar Wilde described Kipling as "our first authority on the second-rate," "a genius who drops his aspirates." And for Wilde's disciple Max Beerbohm, Kipling always exercised "the fascination of abomination": he was the man in whom "the *schoolboy*, the *bounder*, and the *brute*" found "brilliant expression."

This was, I've always felt, a bit stingy of Max, who ought to have harbored some gratitude to Kipling for providing him such valuable fodder for his own caricatures and parodies. Particularly choice is *P.C.*, X, 36, in which a Kiplingesque constable collars Santa Claus emerging from a chimney on Christmas Eve:

"Wot wos yer doin' hup there?" asked Judlip, tightening the grip.

"I'm Santa Claus, Sir, p-please, Sir, let me g-go."

"Hold him," I shouted, "He's a German."

For his part, Kipling cordially returned the animus, writing about the "brittle intellectuals,/ Who crack beneath the strain" ("The Holy War") and "the flanneled fools at the wicket" ("The Islanders"). In 1889, shortly after returning to London from his apprenticeship in India, Kipling published "In Partibus" in (note the venue) the *Civil and Military Gazette*:

But I consort with long-haired-things,

In velvet collar-rolls,
Who talk about the Aims of Art,

And "theories" and "goals,"
And moo and coo with womenfolk

About their blessed souls.

Kipling was pals with H. Rider Haggard. Arthur Conan Doyle came to visit and give Kipling a golf lesson when he was ensconced with his American wife in Brattleboro, Vermont, in the early 1890s. But by and large, he consorted with politicians, generals, and magnates. George V was a close friend, so were Cecil Rhodes and Viscount Milner. When he won the Nobel Prize in 1907—the first English-language laureate, and still the youngest—the citation mentioned not only his “power of observation” and “originality of imagination” but also his “virility of ideas.” By then, in the aftermath of the Boer War, the “virility” of Kipling’s ideas was already a stumbling block; by the time the First World War was over—a war that Kipling had foretold with uncanny accuracy and in which he lost his only son, John—the nation was in wholesale retreat from Kiplingesque virility. (Today, of course, it is unimaginable that a Nobel citation—or most any other, for that matter—would commend someone for his “virility of ideas.”) When Kipling died, in January 1936, age 71, his pallbearers included the Prime Minister, an Admiral, a General, various other friends, but no literary figures.

It would be instructive to trace the process that de-clawed and domesticated Rudyard Kipling, that gradually diminished that brusque and imposing giant to an entertaining homunculus. When the zeitgeist shifted, Kipling’s politics suddenly became a popular as well as an elite embarrassment. (“Poetry,” T. S. Eliot, noted, “is condemned as ‘political’ when we disagree with the politics.”) Typical was Orwell’s savage outburst: “Kipling *is* a jingo imperialist, he *is* morally insensitive and aesthetically disgusting.” It got to the point where people who had absorbed Kipling unwittingly suppressed his authorship. Orwell notes that Middleton Murry, quoting Kipling’s famous lines “There are nine and sixty ways/ Of constructing tribal lays,” mistakenly attributed them to Thackeray. Kipling might have written good poetry, but it wasn’t good for poetry to have been written by Kipling. Sanitizing Kipling, segregating his political and social opinions from his literary accomplishment, has had the unfortunate effect of diminishing the appreciation or even the knowledge of that accomplishment. A slim but representative selection of his poems in the attractive Everyman series offers a welcome occasion to return to that unfairly diminished master. [\[1\]](#)

In 1941, T. S. Eliot edited and wrote an introduction for a plump collection of Kipling’s poems. It was partly, but only partly, an effort at rehabilitation. Eliot noted Kipling’s uncanny “second sight,” his seeming ability to lift and peer beneath the curtain of history, also his habit of writing “transparently, so that our attention is directed to the object and not the medium.” He spoke warmly of Kipling’s “consummate gift of word, phrase, and rhythm” and praised his technical mastery: “no writer has ever cared for the craft of words more than Kipling.” Kipling’s prosody was generally so regular that it is easy to miss the subtlety of his music and rhythmical variation. Eliot singles out “Danny Deever,” a typical Kipling “soldier’s poem” from *Barrack-Room Ballads* (1892), that tells the story of the hanging of the eponymous Danny who “shot a comrade sleepin’.” The poem begins in matutinal confusion—the bugles are blowing, but why? Eliot points out how Kipling insinuates a dread sense of acceleration and tautening step-step focus:

“What’s that so black agin’ the sun?”

said Files-on-Parade.

“It’s Danny fightin’ ’ard for life,”

the Colour-Sergeant said.

“What’s that that whimpers over’ead?”

said Files-on-Parade.

“It’s Danny’s soul that’s passin’ now,”

the Colour-Sergeant said.
For they're done with Danny Deever,

you can 'ear the quickstep play,
The regiment's in column,

an' they're marchin' us away ...

Eliot is all admiration for the seemingly effortless prosodic mastery Kipling displays. But (and it is a large “but”) his essay turns on a distinction between “verse”—at which Kipling is said to excel—and “poetry,” which, says Eliot, he approaches but rarely and then only by accident. In other words, Kipling, though good at what he does, isn't really playing in the big league. Eliot doesn't put it like that, not quite. He even notes that Kipling “is so different from other poets that the lazy critic is tempted merely to assert that he is not a poet at all and leave it at that.”

Eliot forbears to make that assertion. He nonetheless manages to leave it echoing in the reader's mind. His essay is sensitive, intelligent, and a subtle masterpiece of deflation. The deflation operates primarily by apophasis. Eliot notes that one is usually called upon to defend modern poetry from the charge of excessive obscurity: with Kipling the culprit is “excessive lucidity.” Similarly, where one hears of complaints about the metrical chaos of modern poetry, Kipling is so regular he can be accused of writing “jingles.” Much modern poetry seems caught up in a sort of cosmic privateness: Kipling, who starts with “the motive of the ballad-maker,” seems all too involved with the events of the day. In short, Eliot wants to preserve a place for Kipling, but he also wants to put him in his place— *not*, we are meant to understand, the same (and higher) place occupied by Eliot himself.

A good deal of intelligent commentary on Kipling operates like this. Irving Howe, for example, in his introduction to the Viking Portable Kipling, begins with the obligatory condemnation of Kipling the “tub-thumper” for imperialism, etc., but then proceeds to find numerous things to praise. His denouement is the conclusion that Kipling was “a brilliant if unacknowledged fellow traveller of literary modernism.”

This strikes me as completely wrong. Kipling was in a different game altogether. Yes, he was *sui generis*, but only in the way—or rather, to the extent—that Eliot himself or other “strong voice” poets (Wallace Stevens, for example) are *sui generis*. You can't imagine Kipling beginning a long poem with the observation that “April is the cruellest month” (to say nothing of “Complacencies of the peignoir”). But then you can't imagine Eliot or Stevens writing “Now this is the Law of the Jungle—as old and as true as the sky;/ And the Wolf that shall keep it may prosper, but the Wolf that shall break it must die.” Which is better, more important, more serious?

I am not sure those are answerable questions. But if Auden is correct in defining poetry as “memorable speech,” what Kipling wrote is surely poetry. Orwell lists several phrases that have entered the language:

“East is East, West is West.”

“The white man's burden.”

“Paying the Dane-geld.”

“The female of the species

is more deadly than the male”

“He travels the fastest who travels alone.”

To which we might add (to show that Kipling had a sense of humor) “A woman is only a woman, but a good cigar is a smoke.”

Writing about Auden, Edward Mendelson distinguished between the “vatic” and “civil” traditions in poetry. The former aspires to the splendid isolation of aesthetic autonomy, the latter to a more public vocation: “poets,” says Mendelson, “who write as citizens, whose purpose is to entertain and instruct, and who choose subjects that would interest an audience even if a poet were not there to transform them into art.” That, I believe, brings us to the neighborhood where Kipling flourished. Although possessed of prodigious gifts of verbal and rhythmic invention, Kipling sought not the lyric moment but a more didactic end. I know that “didactic” is not what Stephen Potter would call an “O.K. word” these days. We resist the presumption that art should aspire to teach almost as much as we resist the idea that we might be in need of tutelage. It is worth noting, then, that Kipling’s didactic designs were, at least in part, capacious. As has often been pointed out, in much of his work, he sought to give memorable voice to segments of society (even of animal society) hitherto lost in inarticulacy: the Indian beggar, the uneducated soldier, the hard-bitten colonial administrator. Kipling was especially good at capturing the sweaty rage of pride affronted, as here, in “Tommy”:

Yes, makin’ mock o’ uniforms that guard you while you sleep
Is cheaper than them uniforms, an’ they’re starvation cheap;
An’ hustlin’ drunken soldiers when they’re goin’ large a bit
Is five times better business than paradin’ in full kit.
Then it’s Tommy this, an’ Tommy that, an’ “Tommy, ’ow’s yer soul?”
But it’s “Thin red line of ’eroes” when the drums begin to roll ...

I have always greatly admired “Tommy,” not least for its psychological acuity. The good citizens of Berkeley, California, would profit from taking its message to heart. They might also get outside “The Gods of the Copybook Headings,” a poem that is full of sage but perpetually forgotten advice:

They swore, if we gave them our weapons, that the wars of the tribes would cease.
But when we disarmed They sold us and delivered us bound to our foe,
And the Gods of the Copybook Headings said: “*Stick to the Devil you know.*”

But Kipling was not all barracks-room bluster or overt moralizing. Far from it. As Robert Conquest notes in his excellent “Note on Kipling’s Verse,” if Kipling’s was a “poetry of clarification rather than of subtlety and suggestion,” you could also easily make a selection of his poems that would show him to be “a poet of sensitivity and sorrow.” “The Way Through the Woods,” a haunting, Hardy-esque lyric, reveals another, less declamatory side of Kipling:

They shut the road through the woods
Seventy years ago.
Weather and rain have undone it again,
And now you would never know
There was once a road through the woods
Before they planted the trees.

In fact, Kipling was a poet of considerable emotional range and conspicuous majesty. “Recessional,” the poem that catapulted Kipling from mere fame to nationwide celebrity, was written in 1897 for Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee. It is an ever-pertinent masterpiece about hubris and the evanescence of power. Instinct with Biblical echoes, it issues a lofty call to humility and awe; it also contains one of the two most politically incorrect lines in all of Kipling:

If, drunk with sight of power, we loose

Wild tongues that have not Thee in awe—
Such boasting as the Gentiles use

Or lesser breeds without the Law—
Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
Lest we forget — lest we forget!

As Orwell noted, the line about “lesser breeds” “is always good for a snigger in pansy-left circles.” But it doesn’t refer, as Orwell also noted, to “coolies” being kicked about “by pukka sahib in a pith helmet” but rather to the awe-less multitudes “without the Law,” Germans, first of all, but also anyone who glorified power without restraint or obeisance. (The other gem of political incorrectitude, for the record, is “the white man’s burden,” title and recurrent phrase of another famous poem: “Take up the White Man’s burden—/ And reap his old reward:/ The blame of those ye better,/ The hate of those ye guard—.” How we squirm at that today! But as David Gilmour points out in *The Long Recessional: The Imperial Life of Rudyard Kipling*, the word “white” “plainly refers to civilization and character more than to the colour of men’s skins. The ‘white men’ are those who conduct themselves within the Law for the good of others: Gunga Din may have a ‘dirty’ hide, but he is ‘white, clear white, inside.’”

The key word is “civilization.” Kipling was above all the laureate not of Empire, but of civilization, especially civilization under siege. Henry James once sniffed that there was only one strain absent in Kipling: that of “the civilized man.” It’s a frequent refrain. But in a deeper sense, Kipling was about almost nothing else—not the civilization of elegant drawing rooms, but something more primeval and without which those drawing rooms would soon be smashed and occupied by weeds. Kipling, Evelyn Waugh wrote toward the end of his life, “believed civilization to be something laboriously achieved which was only precariously defended. He wanted to see the defenses fully manned and he hated the liberals because he thought them gullible and feeble, believing in the easy perfectibility of man and ready to abandon the work of centuries for sentimental qualms.” Kipling endeavored to man those defenses partly through his political oratory, but more importantly through a literary corpus that taught the explicit lessons and the implicit rhythms of emotional continence and restraint.

Notes

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1. *Kipling: Poems*, by Rudyard Kipling, selected by Peter Washington; Everyman’s Library, 255 pages, \$12.50. [Go back to the text.](#)

Roger Kimball is Editor and Publisher of *The New Criterion* and President and Publisher of Encounter Books. His latest book is *The Fortunes of Permanence: Culture and Anarchy in an Age of Amnesia*, forthcoming from St. Augustine's Press.

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