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From Propaganda to Private Grief: Rudyard Kipling and World War I

Abstract I: Come molti suoi contemporanei, quali Rupert Brooke, Jessie Pope o Ian Hay, allo scoppio della Prima Guerra Mondiale Rudyard Kipling scrisse con fervore della necessità di combattere gli "Unni […] alle porte" ("For All We Have and Are"). Il 'Grande Imperialista' collaborava attivamente con il primo organo ufficiale di propaganda governativa, Wellington House. Con il progredire della guerra, tuttavia, il tono delle sue opere cambiò radicalmente dopo l'ottobre 1915, quando ai coniugi Kipling fu comunicato che il loro unico amato figlio maschio, John, diciottenne, era morto sul campo, e le sue spoglie non erano state trovate. Questo saggio partirà dalle poesie scioviniste di Kipling precedenti al 1915 fino a includere il racconto "The Gardener" (1925). Si metterà in luce come nonostante il suo estremo patriottismo, Kipling diede una dimensione universale al proprio personale dolore, nella speranza che "I loro nomi vivessero per sempre".

Abstract II: Like many of his contemporaries such as Rupert Brooke, Jessie Pope or Ian Hay, at the outbreak of World War I Rudyard Kipling wrote fervently about the need to fight against the "Hun […] at the gate" ("For All We Have and Are"). The 'Great Imperialist' collaborated actively with the first official government propaganda organization, Wellington House. As the war progressed, however, the tone of his works changed, most notably after October 1915, when he and his wife were told that their beloved only son John, aged eighteen, was missing, believed dead. This essay will move from Kipling's pre-1915 jingoistic poems to his short story "The Gardener" (1925). I will show that notwithstanding his extreme patriotism, Kipling gave his private grief a universal dimension, in the hope that "Their Name [would live] Forevermore".

The outbreak of the World War I, in August 1914, marked the beginning of a new age, one of total warfare, although it was believed the conflict would not last long. In Britain recruitment relied on mass public propaganda, which was officially promoted by Wellington House, the organization led by C. F. G. Masterman. The common aim of its

collaborators was to counter anti-British propaganda, spreading the image of Germany as the target enemy, while Britain was "the imperial protector of her allies" (Bick 2013: 2). As a firm promoter of the superiority of action over knowledge and a committed spokesperson for ideology, Rudyard Kipling the *homo faber* (De Zordo 2008: 9) was famous for his strong imperialist views and because of his propaganda during the Boer War. The 'Great Imperialist' felt deeply compelled to rely on his fame to call Britain and its allies to serve their countries and fight heroically, since he was firmly convinced that the Germans were fierce barbarians who threatened the power of the British Empire. He believed that his country fellows were destined to a supreme mission of command, and that hierarchies mattered more than individuals. His creed was to 'serve and obey', and domination was of the utmost importance, intended both as domination of the enemy and as self-regulation. In Kipling's *Weltanschauung*, which he derived from the Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle, the continuous changes to which the world was submitted were the result of a single mysterious principle, both creator and dominator of the universe, that was inherent in every man and that everyone should rely on, since 'might' was 'right'. This implied the exclusive survival of spiritually superior beings who left an imprint on reality, titanic heroes whose mission was to guide mankind, because they were a living manifestation of God on Earth.

Kipling the *Homo Faber*

There are several ways in which Kipling spread war propaganda, the principal one being pamphlets, whose rhetoric was reminiscent of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim Progress*, with its "ideas of sacrifice and spiritual progression" which appealed emotionally to the British population (Bilsing 2000: 76). Among others, *The New Army in Training* (1914) was very successful in helping recruit men for the army, reinforcing the idea that those who did not fight for their country were mere cowards. Kipling depicted war as "a crusade for civilization" (Buitenhuis 1989: 37), thus firing the imagination of the British "through the manipulation of civil emotion" (Bilsing 2000: 76). In his fervent pro-war campaign, Kipling, like other intellectuals, contributed to creating an image which did not take into account the degradation of the trenches, "the best kept secret of the war" (Buitenhuis 1989: 79). His tour of France at war, in August 1915, filled him with excitement, as shown by a letter addressed to his 18-year old only son John – destined to die in the battle of Loos within a few weeks – in which he spoke of "a grand life" without "a dull minute" (Birkenhead 1978: 266). John had failed his army medical examination on account of his short-sightedness, but his father applied to Lord Roberts to ensure the boy would be enrolled in the Irish Guards. This decision revealed itself to be "a deferred death warrant" (Brogan 1998: 4) and was destined to remain a heavy burden for Kipling, whose only consolation was that John died like a man, for a cause in which he and his parents believed.

The poem "For All We Have and Are" was first published in September 1914, only one month after the outbreak of the World War I, and it was later included in the collection *The Years Between* (1919). This call to arms was issued after the bad news from every front, when Liège, Brussels, Lille and Amiens had succumbed to the enemy, and it seemed that Paris would follow suit, no more than six weeks after the German mobilization. Noticeably, Kipling chooses to identify England with decadent Rome. On the one hand, since the Boer War he had seen his country as unprepared for the war to come, and was therefore calling for a reform. On the other hand, Rome can be seen as "the embodiment of order and law", or "law as opposed to simple force" (Ragen 1996: 3):

> Once more we hear the word
> That sickened earth of old: –
> "No law except the sword
> Unsheathed and uncontrolled".
> Once more it knits mankind,
> Once more the nations go
> To meet and break and bind
> A crazed and driven foe (Kipling 2009: 268).

Kipling equated Germany's policy of *Schreklichkeit* (frightfulness) in Belgium with the collapse of civilization. As Rodney Atwood points out, the atrocities committed by the Germans included the killing by firing squads "of over 600 men, women and children in the main square at Dinant, and […] one other event, which may have triggered Kipling's poem. Roughly a week before [its] publication, German forces burnt down the centre of the mediaeval city of Louvain with its priceless library of manuscripts" (McGivering 2011). The brutal rape of Belgium confirmed that the Germans had to be resisted and that war was a matter of honour. "Who dies if England live?", asks Kipling in "For All We Have and Are". "Answer: hundreds of thousands of young men, among them the prophet's only son" (Brogan 1998: 10), but Kipling never swerved from believing in the tit-for-tat brutality of war. Until his death in 1936 he never ceased "to urge the importance of *keeping faith with the dead*" (Brogan 1998: 12, my emphasis).

A crescendo of rage: post-1915

In Kipling's *oeuvre* of the war period there is a crescendo of rage against the Germans. Two of his short stories are particularly relevant in this context, "Swept and Garnished" (January 1915) and "Mary Postgate" (September 1915). The first story takes place in the Autumn of 1914: Frau Ebermann is a wealthy elderly lady in bed with flu. The tidiness of her immaculate Berlin flat constitutes her only comfort while her servant updates her on the war in Belgium: "another victory, many more prisoners and guns" (Kipling 2009: 228). Suddenly five young children stand before her in the room. When she tells them to go

home, they reply: "There isn't anything left" (Kipling 2009: 230), and the woman realizes that their villages have all been "wiped out, stamped flat" (Kipling 2009: 231). Her son had written letters to her from the front, saying that many Belgian children were hurt and maimed in war, so she is haunted by the presence of these little visitors, who show her their wounds and tell her that there are many more of them. After they bid her goodbye, the story closes with Frau Ebermann –- a Lady Macbeth figure – frantically trying to clean the blood stains on the floor. The ghostly apparition of the Belgian children has destroyed the aura of safety she relies on, and her space becomes politicized as its safety is shattered by war.

"Mary Postgate" is a story equally steeped in the savagery and brutality of the Great War. Its protagonist is a repressed middle-aged woman, who becomes the surrogate mother of Miss Fowler's orphaned nephew Wynn. After joining the Flying Corps, the young man does not die in action but on a trial flight. Following the tragic news, the two ladies decide that Mary should get rid of Wynn's personal belongings in the garden incinerator. As she is going to buy paraffin, she sees a small girl die after a bomb is dropped from a German plane on the village. Soon afterwards, as she is burning Wynn's personal effects, she witnesses a second death, this time of the German airman who, after the bomb was dropped and his plane crashed, was slowly dying. The woman watches the scene with undisguised pleasure.

Literary critics have offered various interpretations of this short story. For J. M. Tompkins both "Swept and Garnished" and "Mary Postgate" "assault the mind", because "[t]hey are the utterances of deep outrage. Both have […] the quality of a hardly suppressed scream, […] both describe a repressed horror that in the end breaks out" (Tompkins 1959: 134-135). Drawing on psychoanalysis, Randall Jarrell comments on "Mary Postgate":

> This truthfully cruel, human-all-too-human wish fantasy is as satisfying to one part of our nature as it is terrible to another. What happens is implausible but intensely actual: the German is not really there, of course, except in our desire, but his psychological reality is absolute, down to the last groan of the head that moved ceaselessly from side to side. […] we are forced to believe in him just as Freud was forced to believe in his first patients' fantasies of seduction (Jarrell 1980: 85).

"Mary Postgate" is a whole-heartedly pro-British piece of propaganda, and the protagonist is the epitome of British womanhood represented in the recruiting posters. This de-sexed pseudo-mother is like a soldier who transforms death into a quasi-religious offering. The haunting ceremony of disposing of Wynn's possessions is reminiscent of Kipling's own ritual for the dead. He too eliminated anything, which could remind him of the physical existence of those he had loved and lost. In the same way, Mary and Miss Fowler eliminate Wynn's personal effects, material objects permeated by memory. Taking

advantage of the vulnerable state of the German soldier, Mary is tempted by "sadism and self-indulgent aggression" (Ruddick 1993: 119). A "militant" surrogate mother (Marcus 1989: 142), she has triumphed over the enemy and proved more deadly than the male. Rejecting her former domestic ritual for "the ecstasy of war", she returns home and takes "a luxurious hot bath before tea" (Marcus 1989: 142). Violence and war are seen through the filter of the home front, and horror is expressed in a domestic language. The story offers "an understanding portrait of the pathological behaviour of a repressed woman under the impact of war's horrors" (Wilson 1978: 310). Kipling is not saying that this is a natural reaction to the brutality of war, but he is considering that however inhuman, the desperate revenge of this woman is as *schrechlich* as the enemy.

The *Epitaphs of the War*: 1919 and Beyond

Some of the most tragic echoes of the 1914-18 conflict may be found in the *Epitaphs of the War* (1919), which were written after Kipling was appointed to the board of the Imperial War Graves Commission. Highly praised by T. S. Eliot and modelled on the Greek Anthology, Kipling's lines are reminiscent of Simonides' epitaph dedicated to the 300 Spartans who were killed at Thermopylae: "Go tell the Spartans passerby / That here obedient to their laws we lie" (translated by W. L. Bowles). But the Greek model was even more in the mind of English poets during the World War I "because of the tragic campaign at Gallipoli, where British and Australian soldiers died near the battlefields where their Greek, Persian and even Trojan predecessors perished" (Ragen 1996: 8). Kipling dealt with various aspects, not only of the war, and many of the epitaphs are either meditations on loss or explorations of the meaning of existence. Although his patriotism remained unaltered, his writings became works of contemplation, committed to creating a worthy legacy of the war and its dead. As Buitenhuis has it, "the war, which had begun for Kipling in a gust of exultation and relief and continued in a barrage of revenge propaganda, fiction and verse, concluded for him in *artistic versions of emotions too deep for tears*" (Buitenhuis 1989: 85, my emphasis). Although none of the epitaphs is openly on John, some of them are about "A Son": "My son was killed while laughing at some jest. I would I knew / What it was, and it might serve me in a time when jests are few" (Kipling 2009: 321). Here suffering is counterbalanced by restraint.

"The Beginner" too may refer to John:

> On the first hour of my first day
> In the front trench I fell.
> (Children in boxes at a play
> Stand up to watch it well) (Kipling 2009: 322-323).

John, too, died on his first day, and although Kipling proudly believed that he had done his duty, it is impossible not to feel a silent grief in lines such as the following:

> "R. A. F. (Aged Eighteen)"
> Laughing through clouds, his milk-teeth still unshed,
> Cities and men he smote from overhead.
> His deaths delivered, he returned to play
> Childlike, with childish things now put away (Kipling 2009: 323).

If the lines quoted above may express the disillusionment of a mourning father, in the extraordinarily piercing epitaph "Common Form" (1919) Kipling speaks in the voices of the dead: "If any questions why we died, / Tell them, because our fathers lied" (Kipling 2009: 324). This two-line poem is about "the angry and defrauded young", as Kipling called them in another 'epitaph' ("A Dead Statesman"). Carol Rumens (2008) points out that "[p]robably nothing else he wrote is as simply, bluntly angry as that couplet" (Rumens 2008). Kipling the propagandist had to balance the "public figure, who could not retract the 'old lies' with the intensely private man, who with all his might wanted his child alive again" (Bilsing 2000: 74). Although pacifism is not the lesson Kipling takes from history, because until the end of his life he felt the unending need for struggle, for guarding the frontier of civilization, he gave his personal grief a universal dimension. This is best expressed in the poem "The Children" (1917, later added in *Verse*, 1919), in which he does not suggest that the enemy should be forgiven, or that the war, despite its evident miscalculations, should not have been fought. The poetic persona asks for atonement, knowing that it will never be adequate. The refrain "Who shall return us our children?" "becomes a chorus that speaks almost impersonally for all parents bereaved by war" (Rumens 2008). The bereaved mother Helen Turrell, in Kipling's short story "The Gardener" (1925), finds the only consolation for the loss of her son in a ritual that Kipling was denied:

> The body of Lieutenant Michael Turrell had been found, identified, and reinterred in Hagenzeele Third Military Cemetery – the letter of the row and the grave's number in that row duly given. So Helen found herself moved on […] to a world full of exultant or broken relatives, now strong in the certainty that there was *an altar upon earth where they might lay their love*' (Kipling 2009: 315, my emphasis).

Although no "altar upon earth" could console Kipling's private grief, because John's body was never found, his legacy of the World War I is enclosed in the biblical words he chose for the Stones of Remembrance: "Their Name Liveth for Evermore".

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