EMPIRES AND WORLD LITERATURE

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CONTENTS/ÍNDICE

Piero Boitani, Sapienza - Università di Roma
Preface p. 9

1. Suzanne Saïd, Columbia University
Empires Before Imperium: Herodotus on Asian Empires and
Thucydides on Athenian Empire p. 11

2. Piero Boitani, Sapienza - Università di Roma
Res memoratae Divi Augusti p. 37

3. Franco Marenco, Università di Torino
Elizabeth I as Imperial Icon: Two Footnotes p. 55

4. Chiara Lombardi, Università di Torino
The Sublime and the Rotten: Imperium and
Empire in Shakespeare p. 67

5. Peter Madsen, University of Copenhagen
Auf, Auf, ihr Christen – Representing the Clash of Empires,
Vienna 1683 p. 83

6. Paulo Horta, New York University Abu Dhabi
Camões as World Author: Cosmopolitan Misreadings p. 97

7. Dominique Jullien, University of California, Santa Barbara
Empire of the Mind: Reading Kipling through Borges’s
Renunciation Stories p. 115

8. Stefan Helgesson, Stockholm University
Pessoa, Anon, and the Natal Colony:
Retracing an Imperial Matrix p. 135

9. Djelal Kadir, Pennsylvania State University
Imperium Century XXI p. 149

10. Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, Aarhus University
11. Giorgio Mariani, Sapienza - Università di Roma
Resisting the Empire’s “Military-Literary Complex”:
Brian Turner’s Poetry

p. 175

12. Azadeh Yamini-Hamedani, Simon Frazer University
The Enlightenment as Empire:
On the Roots of the Islamic Revolution

p. 189

Preface

This book ranges from the ancient empires of Persia, Greece, and Rome to modern realities like the United States, China, and the Islamic revolution. The focus is not merely historical or political, but also literary. What interests contributors is the way in which writers have talked about empire, or the way in which an actual empire has shaped the cultural and literary production of writers. For instance, Giorgio Mariani looks at the way in which American literature has dealt with the Iraq War; Stefan Helgesson at the relationship between language and the making of postcolonial literature; Mads Rosendahl Thomsen at Don DeLillo’s anti-imperial visions. Suzanne Said and Piero Boitani concentrate on Greece and Rome. Again, their effort is to see the empires of Persia and Athens as depicted by Herodotus and Thucydidès (Said), and that of Rome as described by Augustus himself (in fact by the host of poets and historians surrounding him). Likewise, the two essays devoted to the beginnings of the English Empire under Queen Elizabeth (by Franco Marenco and Chiara Lombardi, nicely complementing each other) ultimately rely on literary or artistic evidence — a quote from Giordano Bruno and illustrations on the title page of Samuel Purchas’s *Hakluytus Posthumus* for the former, Shakespeare’s works for the latter.

Altogether, this is a very exciting book, where oblique approaches face more direct historical and cultural reconstructions. As splendid examples of the former one could quote Dominique Jullien’s treatment of “empires of the mind” by reading Kipling through Borges; Peter Madsen’s analysis of Abraham a Sancta Clara’s book *Auff, Auff ihr Christen* in the context of the ‘Clash of Empires’ at Vienna in 1683; and Azadeh Yamini-Hamedani’s reading of Ale-Ahmad’s *Gharbzadegi* (‘Westoxification’ or ‘Occidentosis’, itself a mistranslation of Heidegger’s *Weltverdunkelung*) as an anticipation of the ideology that was to inform the Islamic Revolution in Iran. More direct historical and cultural reconstructions are represented by Djelal Kadir’s magnificent *Empire of Liberty* (a theme first sounded by Thomas Jefferson) and Paulo Horta’s subtle *Cosmopolitan Empire*, where the theorist of cosmopolitanism, Kwame Anthony Appiah, is set side by side with one of the men he admires as a model of cosmopolitanism, the Victorian explorer Richard Burton.

Piero Boitani
Empire of the Mind: Reading Kipling through Borges’s Renunciation Stories

Dominique Jullien

The British Empire (q.v.) is, in a sense, an aspiration rather than a reality, a thought rather than a fact; but, just for that reason, it is like the old Empire of which we have spoken (1911 Encyclopaedia Britannica).

I. A Lifelong Companion

Rudyard Kipling was for Jorge Luis Borges a key reference, read and enjoyed from childhood into extreme old age, alluded to and commented on multiple times throughout his work, in both fictions and essays. Borges also translated several of the tales: some of the Just So Stories, “The finest story in the world”, “The Gate of a hundred sorrows”, “The House of Suddhoo”, among others. However, the references, although numerous, are dispersed, brief, allusive, with the exception of three book reviews (a review of Edward Shanks’s Rudyard Kipling: a Study in Literature and Political Ideas, one of Sir George McMunn’s Rudyard Kipling, Craftsman and one of Kipling’s own posthumous autobiography, Something of Myself for My Friends Known and Unknown). Borges did not devote entire essays to Kipling as he did for so many other writers, despite Kipling’s importance for his own creative process, or indeed perhaps because of this. The majority of Borges’s comments on Kipling throughout his texts tends to follow a very


clear pattern: Borges insists that Kipling's political ideas (his imperialism and racial bigotry) matter less than his craft as a writer, that Kipling should be judged not as a propagandist but as a maker of complex, highly wrought, even secret fictions.

Borges was all too well aware that Kipling's reputation had suffered a precipitous decline, and he wrote to correct what he considered the crude and misleading view of Kipling as the brassy, jingoistic bard of the empire. He wrote in defense of Kipling's artistry, his "craftsmanship" (an ideal common to both writers), and the real complexity of his stories hidden under a deceptively simple surface that fooled inattentive readers. This formal, even formalist line of defense is found everywhere, from his earliest to his latest essays. Here is a typical passage culled from his review of Edward Shanks's book, _Rudyard Kipling, a Study in Literature and Political Ideas_.

In art nothing is more secondary than the author's intentions (...) For glory, but also as an insult, Kipling has been equated with the British Empire. The partisans of that federation have venerated his name (...) The enemies of the Empire (partisans of other empires) refute or ignore it (...) whether detractors or worshippers, they all reduce him to a mere apologist for the Empire (...) What is indisputable is that Kipling's prose and poetic works are infinitely more complex than the theses they elucidate (...) [Kipling, Borges concludes, was above all] "the experimental artist, secret, anxious, like James Joyce or Mallarmé. In his teeming life there was no passion like the passion for technique".

That Borges was so devoted to defending Kipling the craftsman over Kipling the ideologue tells us how attuned he was to the current literary debates of his time, for a tide of political hostility had swept over Kipling starting before World War I. Edmund Wilson's essay "The Kipling that nobody read", also published in 1941, which like Borges prioritizes technique over ideology, opens with the acknowledgment of "the eclipse of the reputation of Kipling" long before 1910. Here is a sample of a negative review by the Socialist writer George Orwell, showing the disrespect into which Kipling fell: "Kipling is a jingo imperialist, he is morally insensitive and aesthetically disgusting". He is also out of touch: "The mass of the

7. George Orwell, "Rudyard Kipling", in Rutherford (ed.), _Kipling's Mind and Art_, cit., pp. 70-84 (pp. 70; 75; 81; 84).
8. _Selected Non-Fictions_, cit., p. 526. In his preface to Kipling's tales published in _Biblioteca personal_, Borges reveals that he has read each selected tale over a hundred times (Obras completas, cit., IV, p. 615).
10. As noted by Edmund Wilson: "It appears that up to the age of six Kipling talked, thought and dreamed, as he says, in Hindustani, and could hardly speak English correctly." ("The Kipling that nobody read", in Rutherford (ed.), _Kipling's Mind and Art_, cit., p. 18. On "the fascination for multi-lingualism and translation" that both writers shared, see Robin Fiddian, "What's in a title? Political critique and intertextuality in 'El Informe de Brodie'". _Varaciones Borges_, 28 (2009), pp. 67-84 (pp. 83-84).
Another feature that endeared Kipling to the young Borges is that he wrote thrilling children’s books. Along with *Kim*, *The Jungle Books*, and the *Just-So Stories*, some of which he would later translate, Borges devoted Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*, and the stories of R. L. Stevenson, who was to become one of his lifelong models as a writer, as is well known. His devotion to Kipling and other authors of adventure stories was very much a sign of the times—a generation of English readers were raised on Kipling and other boys’ stories, including, interestingly, Edward Said himself, from whom we had every reason to expect a scathing indictment of Kipling and Kim, but who, in his introduction to the 1987 Penguin edition of *Kim*, reprinted in *Culture and Imperialism*, is surprisingly forgiving toward Kim, his boyhood love.

Much scholarship has been devoted to showing the link between adventure novels and imperialist ideology. In his landmark study *Dreams of Adventures, Deeds of Empire*, Martin Green observes that adventure tales “formed the energizing myth of English imperialism”.[13] For Borges, however, the connection ran deeper, tapping into a major vein of inspiration: the epic, virile, adventurous heroes of so many of his fictions, and the autobiographical connection that gave life to Borges’s personal mythology, the admiration for his own military ancestors who fought gallantly in Argentina’s historic battles.[14] The stories of conquests and victories, no less than those of brave deaths, the archetypal characters of Argentina’s violent mythology—the gauchos, the tango dancers, the outlaws such as Martín Fierro, who populate Borges’s fictions and poetry—can be traced back, at least in part, to adventure stories and to Kipling. The macho mystique at the heart of both the culture of tango and Kipling’s *Kim* is stressed in the 1955 essay “A history of the tango”; in *Kim*, Borges reflects, “an Afghan states flatly—as if the two acts were essentially one—‘When I was fifteen, I had shot my man and begot my man’.[15]

These themes, then, he owed in large part to Kipling, who was, not unlike

Borges, a physically unimpressive, weak-sighted intellectual[16] singing of heroic deeds and strong men of action. With this Kipling, Borges could identify, as he could not with either Jack London or Ernest Hemingway: “Kipling and Nietzsche, sedentary men, longed for the action and dangers that their fates denied them; London and Hemingway, men of action, were attached to it.”[17] Stories about the conquest of savage lands would also resonate with a particularly acute meaningfulness for Borges. The confrontation of civilized vs. barbaric is one of Borges’s key themes, evident in the semi-autobiographical nightmare “The South”, in which a bookish man from the city confronts his fate in the brutal, manly South.[18] It is evident too in the “Story of the Warrior and the Captive Maiden”, a double story pairing a sixth-century Barbarian who dies defending the Roman Empire and an Englishwoman gone native in the wilds of Argentina (I shall return to this parable later on in my essay).

The dichotomy between civilization and barbarism is also a founding topos of Argentina’s literature and national identity.[19] The dichotomy shaped Argentina’s literary canon and its political self-image from its earliest texts, straddling racial, political, social and cultural lines. Esteban Echeverría’s 1837 epic poem *La cautiva* tells the story of a white woman taken by Mapuche Indians. In “El matadero” (written in 1839), the chilling story of a political murder, Echeverría recasts the opposition between civilization and barbarism in political terms as the conflict between conservative thugs (the Federalistas) and progressive martyrs (the Unitarios). Domingo Sarmiento’s classic, *Focundo, o civilización y barbarie en las pampas argentinas* (1845) describes the essence of Argentina, both naturally and culturally, in terms of the dichotomy. Thus Borges is writing back to this tradition—both within and against it—in his own texts on civilized vs. barbarian:[20] but he is also,

118

19. See María Rosa Lojo de Beut’s seminal study, *La ‘barbarie’ en la narrativa argentina, siglo XIX*, Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 1994. Although her study focuses on 19th century texts, she stresses the continuation throughout the entire 20th century of “la ‘barbarie’, verdadera obsesión argentina que la historia ha encarnado en diversas manifestaciones” (p. 182).
characteristically, complicating the national debate by overlaying it with an entirely foreign historical and cultural context (Kipling’s India), and intersecting the foundational Argentine topos with Kipling’s portrayal of English imperialism as an attempt to impose civilization.

It is clear that Borges’s identification with Kipling is nothing if not complicated. From the point of view of imperialism and colonial discourse, the position of Jorge Luis Borges is richly ambiguous—as an Argentine he is both colonized and colonizer. His historical and cultural situation is postcolonial with respect to the Spanish empire, while as a descendant of white settlers it is that of a colonizer with respect to the native population, which his ancestors helped subdue (and indeed eliminate). In this ambiguity Borges resembles Kim, who, as an Irish character, is also both colonized and colonizer. Analogies were repeatedly drawn between Ireland and India in nineteenth-century imperial culture, where the same decades saw the founding of the Indian pro-Independence Congress party; the debates over the Irish Home Rule Bill, the creation of Sinn Fein and the proclamation of Queen Victoria as Empress of India. Nationalist movements were ruthlessly suppressed by England. Yet, as oppressed as they were by the English domination over Ireland, within the context of the British Empire the Irish could become the equals to Englishmen, and enjoy the imperial status of Sahibs, as Kim discovers for himself.

II. Imperialism vs. Nationalism

I therefore want to make a case for opposing imperialism and nationalism in Borges. As a half-foreigner, English on his father’s side, raised for seven formative years in Europe, Borges was attuned to English culture, including to Kipling’s celebration of the British Empire, and to European cultural references more generally. Although Borges devoted much of his early poetry to a celebration of Buenos Aires, and although typical Argentine themes were prominent in much of his later fiction as well, his outlook was and remained unmistakably cosmopolitan, and this did not endear him to nationalists. In the often xenophobic cultural climate of Argentina, Borges’s perceived foreignness set him apart from and often against his fellow countrymen, whose intransigent nationalism was not receptive to cosmopolitanism, much less to European sympathies. The famous essay “The Argentine Writer and Tradition”, first given as a lecture in 1951, was written in the spirit of defending Argentine literature from a narrow nationalism. Borges’s strategy in the essay is to rethink the nationalist debate that goes on within Argentine culture through analogies with other national contexts, allowing him to broaden his focus and take things beyond the national. In his essay Borges refers to the 1926 Argentine novel worshipped by nationalists, Ricardo Güiraldes’s Don Segundo Sombra, pointing out its intertextual debts to two famous adventure novels from other cultures, Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn and Kipling’s Kim. By mentioning Kipling and Twain in the same breath as Güiraldes, Borges is already making a supra-nationalist point: the comparison is itself a polemical gesture.

It is easy to account for the comparison in terms of the plot: in all three novels, the protagonist, an orphan boy, is raised by strangers, attaches himself to substitute fathers who are poor, wise and nomadic (Kim’s Lama, Jim the runaway slave, Don Segundo Sombra the gaucho), and the narrative follows their wanderings along a sort of road (the Mississippi in Mark Twain’s story, the Grand Trunk Road in India for Kim, the Argentine pampa in Güiraldes). All three coming-of-age narratives end in an emotional parting of ways between the boy and the old man: Huckleberry heading toward the West and the manifest destiny of the American empire, Kim going into the Great Game as an informant for the British Empire, and the Argentine orphan Fabio belatedly acknowledged as the son of a local land owner who bequests his immense estate to him, an ending commonly understood in allegorical terms as the shadow (sombra) cast by its gaucho past over Argentina’s national identity and destiny. Arguably then, all three stories, which rely on the Bildungsroman and the quest romance to convey an image of national identity formation, share an imperial subtext of some sort—I shall return to this point. Yet Borges’s consistent analogy between these three novels—one Argentine, one English, one American—also tells us something else. It is noteworthy that the analogy is most fully developed in one of Borges’s most foundational essays (“The Argentine writer and Tradition”), an essay absolutely crucial for the understanding of Borgesian aesthetics. Although it is hailed by Argentine nationalists as the archetype of the Argentine novel, so goes the argument, Don Segundo Sombra is indebted to both Twain and Kipling, yet it is no less Argentine for it. Confronting literary nationalism as provincial and narrow-minded, Borges makes a now famous case for Argentine literature’s right to tackle any theme or subject it chooses. “I believe that our tradition is the whole of Western culture (...) we must believe that the universe is our birthright (patrimonio) and try out every subject” (p. 427). The word patrimonio (inheritance, patrimony), here translated as “birthright”, is a significant choice since these coming-of-age novels are all stories of inheritance: the outcome reveals what these orphans need 36.


"We result a of the empire"28. The Empire of the Mind

Borges states unambiguously: "We are a result of the Roman empire."

The corollary of this conception of empire is that once again, marginality is transformed into a cultural advantage. Borges quotes a line from a famous or notorious Kipling book exactly where he says: "What do they mean?" (Kipling, 1899). Interestingly, Borges misquotes from both his own book which Kipling England only. (p. 32). Interestingly, Borges misquotes from

English Flag: "The Empire of the Mind"29. The Empire of the Mind

In his essay on "The Empire of the Mind", Borges explores the idea of empire, particularly the British Empire, and its influence on literature and culture. He discusses the role of English literature in the development of modernist thought and the impact of English culture on other countries. Borges's essay is a reflection on the various ways in which empire has been represented in literature and the ways in which it continues to influence contemporary thought.

III. In Praise of Empires

Borges's unqualified praise for the British Empire is found in an article for The English Language and the British Empire. Borges writes: "To say that Rome has triumphed, it's a footnote further British Empire's.

In his essay, "The English Language and the British Empire", Borges celebrates the influence of the British Empire on the development of the English language and its impact on literature. He argues that the British Empire was a major force in the development of modernist thought and the rise of the novel as a literary form. Borges's essay is a reflection on the various ways in which empire has been represented in literature and the ways in which it continues to influence contemporary thought.

In Macaulay's "Lays of Ancient Rome" (asified by Arnold, Rome is almost a metaphor for England, the feeling of an identity between the two is.

Borges's essay on "The Empire of the Mind" is a reflection on the various ways in which empire has been represented in literature and the ways in which it continues to influence contemporary thought.

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25. In part because they are children's books, all three stories share a utopian view of the world where the characters are free to roam across national boundaries, just as Kipling, Kim and Tabo wander across the globe. In a late interview, entitled "Kipling, colonialism and style", published in Pulpworks,


play on words.31

(The same idea is articulated once again in the same terms forty years later in the Pulpsmith interview, as we saw). This analogy between the two empires was of course recurrent throughout the nineteenth century; it could be found for instance in Carlyle (another important reference for Borges who prefaced The Cult of Heroes in 1949): “The stream of World-History has altered its complexions; Romans are dead out, Englishmen are come in” (“Chartism”). Breathing new life into the old metaphor, Borges now recasts it as the opposition between a contrived, unconvincing reenactment (Mussolini’s inept and farcical imitation of ancient Rome) and the authentic continuation that was the anti-fascist British Empire.32

However, the allusion Borges makes in the article “A Note on the Peace”, to the 1906 children’s book Puck of Pook’s Hill, written by Kipling five years after Kim to inspire in young readers love of and duty toward the Empire, is interesting because it showcases once again the essentially hybrid and supranational nature of the imperial condition. The hero, Parneses, is a third generation British-Roman soldier, who despite having never been to Rome, feels a sense of duty toward her as he commits to defending an increasingly unraveling Roman Empire and Hadrian’s Wall against both the local Picts and the “Winged Hats” (the Viking invaders). His peculiar predicament is articulated in the poem “A British-Roman Song, AD 406” which accompanies the narrative:

My father’s father saw it not,
And I, belike, shall never come,
To look on that so-holy spot—
The very Rome—

Crowned by all Time, all Art, all Might,
The equal work of Gods and Man,
City beneath whose oldest height—
The Race began34

Two important themes are connected in the character of Parnesius. On the one hand, Parnesius is loyal to Rome yet culturally very removed from it; on the other hand, his heroism lies in a duty to defend, not in a greed to conquer. As

32. Quoted in Green, Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire, cit., p. 288. Borges wrote the preface to an edition of Carlyle’s On Heroes. Hero-worship and the Heroic in History, underscoring the affinities between Carlyle’s ideas and the theses of a recently defeated Nazism: see Selected Non-Fictions, cit., pp. 413-418.
34. “A British-Roman Song”, in Collected Poems of Rudyard Kipling, cit., p. 572.

late as 1981, in the Pulpsmith interview, Borges once again develops the greed vs. duty dichotomy, defending Kipling’s ardent love for the British empire as stemming from a sense of duty, which differentiates it from both fascist empires, Mussolini’s Impero and Hitler’s Reich: Kipling, Borges writes, “did not see that Empire as an embodiment of greed but rather as a duty” (p. 32). If empires can be good, for Borges, it is clearly because they act as historically creative forces, and they create something worth defending. The same idea is articulated one last time in one of Borges’s very last texts, dated 1986, shortly before his death, which is a Prologue to Virgil’s Aeneid published in A Personal library: “Virgil. Of all the poets of the Earth, there is none other that has been listened to with such love. Even beyond Augustus, Rome, and the empire that, across other nations and languages, is still the Empire.”

Not coincidentally, this assimilation of the two empires—Roman and British—and beyond both, of “The Empire” with Western civilization itself, brings us closer to another important Borges intertext, T.S. Eliot. During the war years, Eliot published both an essay on Kipling (1941) and his celebrated wartime essay on Virgil, “What Is A Classic?”35, a lecture initially delivered to the Royal Virgil Society in 1944 as German bombs were falling on London. The political line Eliot takes in his Kipling essay is identical to Borges’s: it is a defense of Kipling’s imperialism as antithetical to totalitarianism. It involves, he claimed, “an awareness of grandeur certainly, but (…) much more an awareness of responsibility.”36 This defense of Kipling’s imperialism dovetails exactly with Eliot’s defense of latinitas in “What Is A Classic?”. There, Eliot equates latinitas with civilization itself: modern European cultures are the beneficiaries of Rome, its language, and its poets, especially Virgil as the most “universal” poet, by which Eliot means the poet who best understood and articulated Rome’s imperial destiny.37 The civilized world in general, and England in particular, are indebted to Virgil for his comprehensiveness, “due to the unique position in our history of the Roman Empire and the Latin language: a position which may be said to conform to its destiny” (p. 70). In the final pages, Eliot underscores the relevance and vital importance of Virgil’s Aeneid to the current time: “The maintenance of the standard is the price of our freedom, the defence of freedom against chaos” (pp. 73-4). Just as Aeneas fulfilled his imperial destiny out of a sense of pious duty, not out of powerlust, Europe had a spiritual obligation toward Virgil and Virgil’s sense of empire. In his pursuit of empire, Aeneas looked beyond any personal success or happiness, intent on fulfilling a duty greater than himself, self-sacrificially compliant to his destiny: “His reward was hardly more than a narrow beachhead and a political marriage in weary middle age.”38 The
character of Aeneas the duty-bound, the image of Rome as uniquely central to European civilization, the figure of Virgil as “the consciousness of Rome”, the writings of Kipling the resigned imperialist, are all interwoven in Eliot’s defensive view of the Empire: the Empire (Britannia, heir to Rome) stands for the defender of the civilized world, in opposition to the barbaric Fascist empires built on greed and conquest.

This view of England as the spiritual continuation of Rome, revived so critically in the context of World War II where it would serve to redefine the conflict between liberal forces and totalitarian forces along literary and cultural lines, would align Borges with T.S. Eliot and supporters of the Allies, and also, once again, in opposition to many of his fellow Argentines, many of whom sympathized with the Axis. (The irony of enlisting the notoriously right-wing antisemites Kipling and Eliot in a cultural war against Mussolini and Hitler is an additional benefit of Borges’s complex and shifting alliances; another irony is the fact that Borges’s enthusiastic defense of the British Empire in the 1981 Pulpsmith article was published just months before the Falklands War, which Borges famously derided as a fight of two bald men over a comb)39.

IV. King and Ascetic

Clearly, then, Borges’s take on Kipling and Kipling’s imperialism needs to be read in its historical context. And yet, at the same time, I would now argue, it goes far beyond cultural politics, it is also, more profoundly, a view of empire abstracted from historical particulars, a decontextualized, ahistorical view of empire sub specie aeternitatis.40 This is where I want to take my argument now, returning to the dichotomy at the heart of Kim, the tension between the Lama’s quest for his river, which will free him from the Wheel of Things, and Kim’s adventure story in the Great Game that pits the British Empire against Tsarist Russia for the control of Asia. Praising Kipling as the inventor of “extraordinary plots”, Borges singles out the masterful interweaving of the two main plotlines, Kim’s destiny and the Lama’s destiny, culminating in “the Lama’s vision in which he perceives that both of them have been saved: one through a life of contemplation and the other through a life of action”41.

Notably then, what Borges finds most remarkable is the ending that has divided and/or baffled critics ever since Kim’s publication, the fact that the dichotomy between the Lama’s choice and Kim’s choice never results in an open conflict. In Edmund Wilson’s critical reading: “What the reader tends to expect is that Kim will come eventually to realise that he is delivering into Commager (ed.), Virgil: a Collection of Critical Essays, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1966, pp. 155-167.


bondage to the British invaders those whom he has always considered his own people, and that a struggle between allegiances will result (...) but the parallel lines never meet, the alternating attractions felt by Kim never give rise to a genuine struggle32. Conversely, for Irving Howe who defends Kim, “The parallel lines cannot meet because they are not two systems of political beliefs but two ways of apprehending human existence (...) [the concluding chapters are] a climax of rapacious union, but only of the boy and the old man, not of the two Ways43. For Borges, whose reading is metaphysical rather than political, there is no conflict but a brilliant interweaving of the two life choices, and a dual salvation44.

Another Kipling story where this choice between two lives is dramatized is of course “The Miracle of Purun Bhaghat”, another children’s story included in The Second Jungle Book (1895). It tells the story of a Westernized Indian official, Sir Purun Dass, who at the height of his power in the colonial administration decides to leave everything behind, takes up the walking stick and begging bowl of a wandering mendicant, and disappears into the Himalayas, leading the life of an ascetic under the name of Purun Bhaghat. His solitary hermit’s life ends abruptly when he decides to come down and warn the villagers below of an impending flood. Although by Hindu standards he has failed to free himself from the Wheel, this ultimate display of empathetic attachment to his fellow men is a triumph by Western standards, since he dies a heroic, sacrificial death, saving the villagers’ lives at the price of his own. Similarly in Kim, the Lama’s failure to sever emotional ties to his disciple — “What shall come to the boy if thou art dead? (...) I will return to my chela, lest he miss the way” (p. 337) — jeopardizes his quest for freedom from the Wheel of Things but endears him to his readers, ultimately ensuring that he finds his River and achieves salvation after all, while also looking out for Kim. In “Purun Bhaghat”, anticipating Kim, a happy balance is achieved between “the Hindu way of life and the Western code of action”45. Edward Said...
draws an interesting parallel between the lama’s “encyclopedic vision” of all the land in his epiphanic moment (in Borgesian terms, an aleph-like vision), and Colonel Creighton’s Indian Survey in which every camp and village is duly noted. Kim too—this is a children’s book after all—gets to have it both ways, since there is barely a trace of conflict between his allegiance to the Lama and his allegiance to the Empire. Just as there is no oppressive heat, disease or squallor in Kim, written ten years after Kipling left India, in the idealized afterglow of memory, there is no agonizing conflict, no wrenching identity politics. “I am not a Sahib, I am thy chela”, Kim cries at a climactic moment (I am not a white man, I am your disciple, p. 319): but this anguished cry of self-discovery does not lend itself to painful inner conflict—unlike say Rabindranath Tagore’s 1910 novel Gora where a less fortunate Kim figure, an Irish orphan whose father was killed in the Great Mutiny of 1857 and who was raised by natives, becomes a fervent Hindu nationalist, only to be faced with agonizing mental chaos when his identity is revealed to him. For Kim the pain is short-lived; the resolution, unproblematic.

The intertwined narratives of an imperial boy, Kim the Irish orphan raised as a native, who grows up to serve the Empire, and of a Tibetan Lama who professes the renunciation to worldly power, would prove powerfully appeal-

46. Said, introduction to Kim, cit., p. 19.

foreword to the late collection of stories, Brodie’s Report (1970); “Kipling’s last stories were no less tortured and labyrinthine than Franz Kafka’s or Henry James’s, which they unquestionably surpass”53. My hypothesis is that the unexpected connection Borges makes between Kipling and Kafka goes deeper than technical complexity, and in fact informs (and transforms) the very notion of empire. In an essay on Argentine individualism, “Our poor individualism”, written in the aftermath of the war (1946), the same intriguing pairing of Kipling and Kafka comes up again. The main subject of the essay is a discussion of Argentines’ essential distrust of the State, which makes Argentine nationalism a contradiction in terms. Argentines, Borges contends, do not believe in the order of a Hegelian state; for them the universe is not a cosmos but a chaos; their heroes, “lone men who quarrel with the group”. Against this background, the comparison between Kipling and Kafka is a sort of subplot:

Consider, for example, two great European writers: Kipling and Franz Kafka. At first glance, the two have nothing in common, but Kipling’s subject is the defense of order, of an order (the road in Kim, the bridge in The Bridge-Builders, the Roman wall in Puck of Pook’s Hill); Kafka’s the unbearable, tragic solitude of the individual who lacks even the lowest place in the order of the universe52.

Kipling and Kafka, the writer who extolled the imperial order and the writer who exposed the empire’s nightmarish face of chaos, Borges implies, are two sides of one coin. In this intriguing paradox, we sense that Borges’s Kipling, the craftsman of complex stories, the “secret artificer”, is not the brassy imperialist reviled by superficial critics but a skeptical imperialist, whose vision of empire incorporates the Kafkaesque potential for chaos at the heart of order.

The very examples Borges gives in this passage (Kim, “The Bridge-Builders”, Puck of Pook’s Hill) lend themselves to overlaying one over the other. In Kim, as we saw, the imperial story, the story of the imperial grip over the native land—through British road, rail network, surveillance—is inseparable from its flip side, the heroes’ haphazard meandering through “great, grey, formless India”, the lama’s renunciation to worldly empire as one of the illusions of the Wheel of Things. In the early story “The Bridge-builders” (from The Day’s Work, 1898), the plot hinges on a similar tension between the imperial order of the bridge and the chaotic power of the river. The British engineer Findlayson is building the giant Kashi bridge over the Ganges, when his work is threatened by an early monsoon flood; in the terrifying night that follows, he is tormented by opium-induced nightmares of “Mother Gunga’s” anger against his aggression and of Hindu gods destroying his bridge, as he himself nearly drown in the Ganges. In the end, the flood destroys the village but not the bridge: arguably then (if we read this as an imperialist story), imperial order triumphs over the chaos of Indian nature. But what to make of the chaos of floodwaters roaring through the tale? What of the opium given to the Englishman by his Indian assistant Peroo, which almost kills him, yet the same Peroo also saves him from drowning? What to make of the Englishman’s fall into the Ganges—are we to read it as an accident due to drugs, or as an unconscious immersion into Indian ritual which enables his salvation?54.

In Puck of Pook’s Hill’s “On the Great Wall”55, the wall is a symbol of the increasingly shaky hold on the land by the Roman empire. The Anglo-Roman soldier Parnesius, caught between Picts and Scandinavian raiders, carries out his futile duty, defending Hadrian’s wall, a lonely outpost of Pax Romana in a savage land where Barbarians may well prevail in the end. The mood is melancholy, even pessimistic: Kipling, in his later imperial stories, “introduces an elegiac tone into his tales that muffles his imperial point”56. Time and again, in the Kipling stories that Borges singles out for special admiration, we discern the same features, the same skeptical view of empire, which I propose to call the Kafka side of Kipling. In the late story “The church that was at Antioch”, from Kipling’s last collection Limits and Renewals (1932), the Roman officer Valens, sent to Syria in 49 AD, dies trying to mediate between Jews and Christians. The analogy with the early story about English soldiers trying to intervene in a Sikh-Muslim riot, “On the city wall” (from In Black and White, 1888), was not lost to readers, not for that matter the analogy with Parnesius guarding the wall from Picts and Vikings. In “The gate of a hundred sorrows” (from Plain Tales From the Hills, 1888), an early story translated by Borges57, the narrator’s dying rant tells a tale of lost empire—a tale of an Englishman brought low by opium, whose ambition extends only to the next pipe. In “To be filed for reference” (from the same collection), the hero, McIntosh Jellaludin, is both a Kipling figure gone bad (he is Irish like Kim, has gone entirely native, knows his India inside and out, and lives with an Indian wife in squalid poverty) and

54. All of Kipling’s stories and poems can be found online, on the Kipling Society website, along with notes, summaries, introductions and other critical data. In the absence of a recent scholarly edition of Kipling’s complete works, the Kipling Society website remains the best resource for the Kipling scholar: http://www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/. All the stories and poems discussed in this essay can be found there, although some are also collected in the Oxford anthology.
56. See Efraim Kriss’s analysis of the translation in Invisible Work, cit., pp. 34-35.
the flip side of Richard Francis Burton, another one of the great Victorian figures that haunt Borges’s imagination. McIntosh Jellaludin was, earlier in his life, an Oxford man of high prospects, a brilliant scholar and a proud Sahib, but opium and alcohol have robbed him of his empire, of which the only trace left is an unfinished manuscript. This he bequeaths to the narrator on his deathbed: but his great novel about India turns out to be a hopelessly illegible chaos of mixed-up pages that will be “filed for reference” by the authorities. It is difficult to miss the resemblance to Borges’s own iconic story, “The Garden of Forking Paths”, which also features an apparently illegible manuscript held in contempt by Ts’ui Pien’s heirs as “a contradictory jumble of irresolute drafts.”

Cross-reading Kipling and Kafka, as Borges proposes in an interpretive gesture reminiscent of his famous essay “Kafka and His Precursors” (1951), exposes an unexpectedly elusive and skeptical view of empire. Indeed, one could argue that the ‘wall stories’ bring together Kafka, Kipling and Borges in an exemplary display of Borgesian triangulation. Kafka’s famous parable “The Great Wall of China” tells of the wall built to contain the barbaric hordes from the North; but this giant undertaking, consuming thousands of lives and millions of acres of forests and mountains, was built on a “principle of piecemeal construction”, so that “naturally in this way many great gaps were left”, some never to be filled at all. As a result, the Great Wall is ultimately, absurdly, ineffectual. Stories about walls that try but fail to contain chaos are prominent in Kipling as well—Hadrian’s wall in Puck of Pook’s Hill, or the wall that runs around Lahore in “On the city wall”, from which the haplessly naive British narrator fails to master, or even understand the Muslim-Sikh riot. Borges’s own parable “The Wall and the Books” is a meditation on Emperor Shih Huang Ti’s contradictory acts: he built the Great Wall to protect China against the barbarians, but he also ordered all the books destroyed, both preserving civilization and destroying it.

That these two vast undertakings—the five or six hundred leagues of stone against the barbarians, and the rigorous abolition of history, that is, of the past—were the work of the same person and were, in a sense his attributes,

inexplicably satisfied me and, at the same time, disturbed me”, Borges begins.

The meaning of this double and incompatible legacy baffles the mind: the parable, Kafka-style, receives no simple moral, remaining enigmatic.

Let us return, to conclude, to Borges’s own imperial parable, “The Story of the Warrior and the Captive Maiden”. In form and spirit, it is appropriately kafkaesque: an enigmatic first story (the story of Drocul the sixth-century Barbarian who experienced a moment of conversion upon discovering the city he had come to destroy, and died defending Ravenna against his own fellow Barbarians) leads to a second story misleadingly presented as an elucidation of the first one (“I was struck by the sense that I was recovering (...) something that had once been my own”, p. 209), the story of an encounter between Borges’s English grandmother and an English woman taken in an Indian raid as a child and raised by the tribe, who resists the grandmother’s entreaties to return to civilization. The Barbarian is “blinded” by the revelation of imperial order (“an aggregate that is, multiple yet without disorder”), and conversely, the Englishwoman has made hers the “savage and uncouth life” of the Indians. The two stories are paired up as mirror images of each other, undermining any real explanatory efficacy. Instead, Borges concludes, they are interchangeable sub specie aeternitatis: “The figure of the barbarian who embraced the cause of Ravenna, and the figure of the European woman who chose the wilderness—they might seem conflicting, contradictory (...) It may be that the stories I have told are one and the same story. The obverse and reverse of this coin are, in the eyes of God, identical.” A story of loss is contained in a story of tenure, conquest is read as the flip side of dispossession, renunciation as the other face of entitlement, the king and the ascetic as fundamentally interchangeable, chaos as the mirror image of order, imperial civilization and barbarian wildness as two sides of one coin, and in the eyes of Jorge Luis Borges, Franz Kafka is the dark twin of Rudyard Kipling.

58. Intriguingly, McIntosh Jellaludin’s unfinished manuscript bears the title of Kipling’s own first abandoned novel, Mother Marten, which tells the story of an Irish woman who ran an opium den in Lahore. See Kaori Nagai’s analysis of McIntosh Jellaludin as Kipling’s “sinister alter ego”, Empire of Analogies, cit., pp. 33-34.
63. “Story of the Warrior and the Captive Maiden”, Collected Fictions, cit., p. 211.