

A SHORT WALK ON THE WILDE SIDE: KIPLING'S FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF JAPAN

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As one of Kipling's biographers, I am fascinated by the Kiplings we have chosen to preserve, those we have allowed to slip away. I am fascinated too by how much of his work continues to be underread or ignored. A single poem or short story – often the same poem or story – will be routinely trotted out as evidence to support some predetermined argument or position. I am no gung ho apologist for Kipling – like George Orwell, I admire him well this side of idolatry; but it seems worth reaffirming that he could be a subtle and complex writer, the inclusiveness of whose work, read at large and without too many preconceptions, can still surprise. Few who readily quote, as evidence of his racial and cultural essentialism, his younger self's confident claim "Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet" would think to qualify it by also quoting the older self's more challenging observation:

All good people agree,
And all good people say,
All nice people, like Us, are We
And every one else is They:
But if you cross over the sea,
Instead of over the way,
You may end by (think of it!) looking on We
As only a sort of They!

Few, unless told, would imagine that in his fifties Kipling read Lytton Strachey

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with keen, if guarded, attention, and expertly parodied Ezra Pound's Chinese translations. Or that, as a young writer in India, he assiduously kept up with the current literary play, reading and imitating French writers like de Maupassant and Zola. Or that, in early 1889, he read as a matter of course Wilde's dialogue-essay 'The Decay of Lying', and, only weeks later, himself took a short walk on the Wilde side, making witty use of 'The Decay' to frame his own first impressions of Japan.

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First, though, some minimal background. Kipling left India permanently on 9 March, 1889, after six-and-a-half years as a full-time journalist. He had by then also written or co-written ten books of stories and poems, including *Departmental Ditties*, *Plain Tales from the Hills*, and *Soldiers Three*: he was 23 years old. He was en route to London, travelling with his friends Professor and Mrs Hill. He was helping to pay for his ticket by knocking off travel letters for the *Pioneer*, his old newspaper in Allahabad. He was in love with Mrs Hill, though that, as the narrator of *Plain Tales* would no doubt have said, "is another story".

After regular stops along the way – at Rangoon, Penang, Singapore, and Hong Kong – Kipling and the Hills reached Nagasaki on 15 April, 1889. For the next month, they explored Japan at leisure, visiting most of the main tourist spots: Kobe, Osaka, Kyoto, Otsu, Nagoya, Miyanoshita, Kamakura, Nikko, Tokyo, and Yokohama. They potted about temples and shrines, strolled round gardens and lakes, admired Mount Fuji, roasted in the thermal area of Owakidani, ate in tea-houses, lounged in mixed bath-houses, investigated factories, watched a cherry-blossom dance, attended the Japanese theatre and, everywhere they went, enthused about the landscape.

But what of Kipling's first impressions of Japan, and what has Wilde to do with these? Up to this point in his travel letters, when he wanted to focus a particular scene or response, he would often cite a favourite author. Penang, for instance, had brought on a mini literary bonanza with references to Tennyson, Walter Besant, Zola, and De Quincey. Now, trying to frame his first impressions of Japan, he used as an epigraph an evocative quatrain from Emerson's poem 'Woodnotes II':

Thou canst not wave thy staff in air
Or dip thy paddle in the lake,
But it carves the brow of beauty there,
And ripples in rhyme the oar forsake.

That final line incidentally should read: "And the ripples in rhymes the oar forsake". But to my ear Kipling's version is an improvement, giving the line a slightly 17th-century, Marvellian cadence and avoiding the tongue-twisting sibilants of "ripples in rhymes". At any event, there are no big surprises here: Kipling had been enjoying Emerson since schooldays and had already

parodied him in *Echoes*, the collaborative volume he and his sister Trix published anonymously in 1884 – when he was 18 and she 16. More unexpectedly, he immediately followed the epigraph with a breezy allusion to Wilde and to the recently published ‘The Decay of Lying’:

Mister Oscar Wilde of the *Nineteenth Century* is a long-toothed liar! He wrote an article some short time back on the ‘decay of lying’. Among other things he, with his tongue in his brazen cheek, averred that there was no such a place as Japan – that it had been created by fans and picture-books just as he himself had been created by pottery and fragments of coloured cloth. Never believe anything that Mister Oscar Wilde tells you.

Kipling was, in fact, no stranger to Wilde’s work. In 1882, as a 16-year-old schoolboy at Westward Ho! in Devon, he had written an imitation of Wilde’s poem ‘Ave Imperatrix’ with the same title, metre, quatrain form, and idiom. So close is the imitation in places that I am not sure that most readers could confidently pick whether Wilde or Kipling wrote this quatrain:

For southern wind and east wind meet
Where, girt and crowned by sword and fire,
England with bare and bloody feet
Climbs the steep road of wide empire.

Or this:

And some in Russian waters lie,
And others in the seas which are
The portals to the East, or by
The wind-swept heights of Trafalgar.

Actually, this is a mild tease, since although both quatrains could easily have been by Kipling, both were, in fact, written by Wilde. Here, for comparison, is a quatrain from Kipling’s ‘Ave Imperatrix!’:

Such greeting as should come from those
Whose fathers faced the Sepoy hordes,
Or served you in the Russian snows,
And, dying, left their sons their swords.

I should perhaps add that Kipling’s Imperatrix is Queen Victoria; he wrote the poem after an assassination attempt on her life in March 1882. Wilde’s Imperatrix, on the other hand, is England – and an England, what is more, that he hoped would eventually become a republic.

Despite this early literary interest in Wilde, to find Kipling, post-India, wrangling in such a chummy manner with the doyen of the aesthetes does, I think, come as something of a surprise. The particular passage in ‘The Decay of Lying’ which Kipling was explicitly evoking here occurs towards the end of Wilde’s dialogue-essay, where Vivian quietly explodes Cyril’s contention that “for the visible aspect of an age, for its look ... we must of course go to the arts of imitation.” Not so, says Vivian, “what the imitative arts really give us

are merely the various styles of particular artists, or of certain schools of artists.” And he continues a few lines further on:

I know that you are fond of Japanese things. Now, do you really imagine that the Japanese people, as they are presented to us in art, have any existence? If you do, you have never understood Japanese art at all. The Japanese people are the deliberate self-conscious creation of certain individual artists. If you set a picture by Hokusai or Hokkei, or any of the great native painters, beside a real Japanese gentleman or lady, you will see that there is not the slightest resemblance between them. The actual people who live in Japan are not unlike the general run of English people; that is to say, they are extremely commonplace, and have nothing curious or extraordinary about them. In fact, the whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people ... the Japanese people are, as I have said, simply a mode of style, an exquisite fancy of art.

Why in giving his first impressions of Japan did Kipling bring in Wilde’s little lecture on aesthetics? In part, of course, he was simply showing off to his Anglo-Indian audience back in India, parading his familiarity with the latest London literary fashion. (Since ‘The Decay of Lying’ had only appeared in the *Nineteenth Century* in January, he was indeed *au fait*.) In addition, by apparently pooh poohing Wilde’s witty proposition that “In fact, the whole of Japan is a pure invention”, he was deliberately playing up to his *Pioneer* readers’ more Philistine inclinations.

At the same time Kipling was, so he passionately hoped, on his way to fame and fortune in those very salons where Wilde held court. And just as, in anticipation of a more sophisticated London readership, he had been carefully working oblique literary references into several of the stories written during his last year in India (the Tennysonian echo at the end of ‘With the Main Guard’, for instance), here we catch a glimpse of him brushing up on his literary shadow-boxing in preparation for the real thing. That said, he could not have imagined in his ‘wildest’ dreams that in a year’s time the great Oscar would be subjecting him and his work to a combination of witty jabs in the very same *Nineteenth Century*: “As one turns over the pages of his *Plain Tales from the Hills*, one feels as if one were seated under a palm-tree reading life by superb flashes of vulgarity ... Mr. Kipling is a genius who drops his aspirates ... Mr. Kipling ... is our first authority on the second-rate.”

In fact, Kipling’s Wildean opening paragraph was the first, knockabout stage of a rather elaborate game he was playing. The first stage was to pretend to call Wilde’s bluff: “Mister Oscar Wilde ... is a long-toothed liar ... Never believe anything that Mister Oscar Wilde tells you.” The second stage was subtler: because what Kipling then immediately did was to turn his own first glimpse of the country into a perfect demonstration of Wilde’s claim. Each meticulously delineated feature of the scene he went on to describe in his

second paragraph made Japan sound exactly like “pure invention’, exactly like a work of art:

This morning, after the sorrows of the rolling night, my cabin port-hole showed me two great grey rocks studded and streaked with green and crowned by two stunted blue-black pines. Below the rocks a boat, that might have been carved sandalwood for colour and delicacy, was shaking out an ivory-white frilled sail to the wind of the morning. An indigo-blue boy with an old ivory face and a musical voice was hauling on a rope. Rock and tree and boat made a panel from a Japanese screen, and I saw that the land was not a lie And I was in Japan – the Japan of cabinets and joinery, gracious folk and fair manners. Japan, whence the camphor and the lacquer and the sharkskin swords come; among – what was it the books said? – a nation of artists.

Having playfully dismissed Wilde’s aestheticised version of Japan with a *faux naïf* display of Anglo-Indian literalism, Kipling now made it his own. With deliberate irony, his descriptive writing (“carved sandalwood”, “a panel from a Japanese screen”, “the Japan of cabinets and joinery“, “a nation of artists”) absolutely bore out Wilde’s contention that the only Japan available to us is an artistic construct.

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This was, in fact, the Japan Kipling himself was primarily eager to see and record, a Japan untouched by modernity and progress: small, exquisite, static and safe. Naturally he observed and noted other possible Japans in the succeeding travel letters. He sent up the modern, Westernised model in the hybrid figure of a Japanese customs official, “partly French, partly German, and partly American” – “a tribute to civilisation”, as he laconically added. He got himself and his alter ego ‘the Professor’ into only half-comic tangles, trying to work out how come the Chinese in Japan behaved like English sahibs in India: “They stand high above the crowd and they swagger, unconsciously parting the crowd before them as an Englishman parts the crowd in a native city.” He also reflected overtly on Japan’s ““otherness””, perhaps the first recorded usage of this term in a modern and non-specialist sense. But it was the aesthetic Japan that he kept always in view. Consequently, the letters to the *Pioneer* made constant reference to the delicate refinement of the traditional architecture and lovingly detailed the dolls’ house neatness of the buildings. Kipling took a keen interest in the manufacture of porcelain, cloisonné, and lacquerware and paid enthusiastic attention to the work of painters like Hokusai, Kyosai, and “The great Kano”, who, as he put it, on the walls of the temple of Chion-in

drew numbed pheasants huddled together on the snow-covered bough of a pine; or a peacock in his pride spreading his tail to

delight his womenfolk; or a riot of chrysanthemums poured out of a vase; or the figures of toilworn countryfolk coming home from market; or a hunting scene at the foot of Fujiyama.

Kipling transformed the engine of the train which carried the Hills and himself from Kobe to Osaka into “A lapis-lazuli coloured locomotive”; even the tramway driver who conveyed the trio from Miyanoshita to Yokohama was called “artistic”, because “[b]etween the shoulders of his blue jerkin were done in white, three rail-heads in a circle, and on the skirts as many tram-wheels conventionalised. Only the Japanese know how to conventionalise a tram-wheel or make a key-pattern of rail-heads.” Kipling’s coda to his month in Japan once more playfully endorsed a Wildean aestheticised view:

A tea-girl in fawn-coloured crêpe under a cherry tree all blossom.
Behind her, green pines, two babies, and a hog-backed bridge
spanning a bottle-green river running over blue boulders. In the
foreground a little policeman in badly-fitting Europe clothes
drinking tea from blue and white china on a black lacquered stand.
Fleecy white clouds above and a cold wind up the street ...

A rather elaborate game with ‘The Decay of Lying’ and Wilde aesthetics: that seems to have been the plan. In effect, Kipling was at least partially endorsing Wilde’s central point that “It is style that makes us believe in a thing – nothing but style”, and that included ideas of what constitutes a nation: “In fact, the whole of Japan is a pure invention.” Kipling, for all his intense patriotism, always subscribed to the truth of Defoe’s ironic couplet: “A true-born Englishman’s a contradiction:/In speech an irony, in fact a fiction.”

The real irony, however, is that all Kipling’s tongue-in-cheek cleverness entirely failed to impress them back at the *Pioneer*, which quietly excised his entire Wildean preamble and, after the Emersonian epigraph, plunged straight into the arrival: “This morning, after the sorrows of the rolling night, my cabin port-hole showed me two great grey rocks studded and streaked with green and crowned by two stunted blue-black pines.” The original opening paragraph survives in Kipling’s handwritten draft, preserved in the Huntingdon Library in San Marino, California. He did not replace the paragraph when he republished these travel letters in *From Sea to Sea* in 1900, presumably because by then everything had changed. Wilde, imprisoned for two years for ‘homosexual offences’ in 1895, had recently died, and Kipling, at the height of his fame, would have seen little point in reminding his readers that a decade earlier he had considered Wilde an important literary lion.

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There is a further irony. This story of Kipling’s short walk on the Wilde side made up about a thousand words of *The Unforgiving Minute*, my 1999 biography of Kipling. However, those thousand words – part of the eighty

thousand or so by which I had exceeded my commissioned limit – had in their turn to be excised from my own manuscript. Such are the accidents of literary history, always at the mercy of the gods of the sub-editing headings. But any reader may, as I did, find Kipling's original Wildean opening restored to its proper place in *Kipling's Japan* (1988), edited by Hugh Cortazzi and George Webb and published in 1988, almost exactly a hundred years after Kipling's visit.