CONTENTS / ÍNDICE

RUDYARD KIPLING

ARE YOU AS ANGLO AS I AM INDIAN?
Cristina Baptista .......................................................... 9

IMPERIALISMO E REPRESENTAÇÕES DO IMPÉRIO EM KIM, DE RUDYARD KIPLING
Pedro Estádio ................................................................. 29

TRAVELLING BETWEEN JOURNALISM AND LITERATURE: KIPLING'S ART IN CROSSING FIXED
TEXTUAL BORDERS
Izabel Simões-Terreira .................................................... 45

ORWELL ON KIPLING: AN IMPERIALIST, A GENTLEMAN AND A GREAT ARTIST
J. Carlos Vinha Ferreira .................................................. 60

A MAN OF HIS TIME: THE SCIENTIFIC AND POLITICAL GROUNDS FOR KIPLING'S IMPERIALISM
Carla Lencouço Gomes .................................................... 73

COULD THEY HAVE BEEN “MASONIC FRIENDS”? RUDYARD KIPLING AND ANNIE BESANT
Teresa de Abade Malafaia .................................................. 87

BOARDING SCHOOLS: RUDYARD KIPLING’S YOUNG HEROES
Patrícia Rodrigues and Teresa-Claudia Tavares ....................... 99

ESSAYS / ESTUDOS

EMERSON AMONG THE PATHS OF THE MODERN SELF: CHARLES TAYLOR AND THE CONCORD THINKER
Marie Amiel ................................................................. 120

BETWEEN HARD COVERS AND THE “CLOUD”: IS A CANON TO BE FOUND?
cristina Baptista .......................................................... 139

NARRATIVE MEDICINE: WHAT DISCOURSE ADDS TO LISTENING
María de Jesus Cabrál, Marie-France Marzel, Christian Hervé, Cécile Beecher Martins
and Rita Chãen .......................................................... 159

REVIEWS / RELEITURAS

Alexandra Cheeta .......................................................... 181

CREATIVE DIALOGUES: NARRATIVE AND MEDICINE – A “ZIBALDONE” ON MEDICAL HUMANITIES AND NARRATIVE MEDICINE
María Giulia Martin .......................................................... 197

Notes on Contributors / Notas sobre os Colaboradores .................. 201
Travelling between Journalism and Literature: Kipling’s Art in Crossing Fixed Textual Borders

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Travelling between Journalism and Literature: Kipling’s Art in Crossing Fixed Textual Borders

When Kipling died, in 1936, although the urn containing his ashes was buried in Poet’s Corner in Westminster Abbey, few "men of letters" attended the service. High-imperialism days were over. The world was rapidly heading towards a new ideological and geopolitical order. After having taken the English literary scene by storm at the end of the 1890s and being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature (1907), many voices would turn against him, because his reputation as a writer was considered to be inevitably linked to a repulsive ideology — an ideology that was jingoistic, ethnocentric and racist.

His main on "The wisdom of India" (1917) would probably have put it, if he had written on Kipling’s career — which he didn’t, — was very much related to his inability to wake up outside the dominant order of discourse that helped maintain the British empire.

Even though the time-scale enslavement of the self produced by mainstream discursive formations is a decisive force in steering people to interpret the world in which they live in a specific direction, to categorize Kipling’s prose as the epitome of imperialistic orthodoxy would be a grotesque oversimplification. Kipling’s legacy as a writer is far more complex than we may think of at first sight. So what drives me, eighty years after his death, to evoke Kipling’s legacy as a man of letters is his undeniable craftmanship in journalistic reportage and literary storytelling.

Born in Bombay (30 December 1865), he returned to India at the age of 16. in 1882, to join his parents and started to work for the "Ceylon & Military Gazette" in Lahore as Assistant Editor. Later, in 1887, he was transferred to The Pioneer at Allahabad — "India’s greatest and most important paper" (Kipling, Something of Myself 77).

Judging by his own words, his job as a journalist was extremely hard:

I never worked less than ten hours and seldom more than fifteen per diem; and as our paper came out in the evening did not see the midday sun except on Sundays. I had fever too, regular and persistent (...). Yet I discovered that a man can work with a temperature of 104, even though next day he has to ask the office who wrote the article. (57)

Covering "visits of Viceroys to neighbourhood Princes on the edge of the great Indian Desert (...) reviews of Armies expecting to move against Russia", food supply to the European community of Lahore, outbreaks of cholera and small-pox, floods on railways, village festivals, race-meetings, murder and divorce trials, amongst various other events or occurrences, was part of his daily routine as a young journalist (59).

Despite his work hardships, being a journalist gave him the opportunity of broadening his views on Anglo-Indian life and the subcontinent as a whole. His night wanderings at the back streets of Lahore, namely his visits to "all manner of odd places — liquor-shops, gambling and opium dens" (64) — and his travels to the Native states near the Afghanistan border in the North-western frontier made him spend a lot of time outside the newwriting office and develop a keen interest towards India. He was not therefore unfamiliar with the bustling and the intrigues of the Great Game on the Grand Trunk Road, masterfully described in Kim (1901).

The writer’s inspiration, or his Duexon as he likes to call it, draws therefore a great deal of force and creativity from his experience as a journalist. In other words, "from the possibilities of common things seen" (71), after all the very stuff of journalism.

Henry Boyton, a contemporary of Kipling, in an essay entitled Journalism and Literature, published in 1904, in the United States, raises the question of the specific characteristics of literature as opposed to those of journalism:

Is ‘literature’ broadly ‘the printed word’, the whole body of recorded speech? Or is it the product of a conscious and regulated, but not inspired, art? Or is it, with other products of art, due to that expression of personality through craftsman ship we call genius? To the final question I should say yes; (...) The real business of journalism is to record or to comment, not to create or to interpret. In its exercise of the...
ABSTRACT

The paper explores Kipling’s art and craftsmanship as a storyteller, whether one is talking about real/factual news reporting or imaginary stories. The main focus falls on Kipling’s experience both as a journalist and a writer in order to problematize the blurring line that sometimes divides these two genres of narrative regarding their commitment to telling the truth. Three texts were chosen for this purpose: “The Sutlej Bridge”, a news article published by the Civil and Military Gazette (1887); and two tales “The Man Who Would Be King” (Wee Willie Winkie, 1888) and “The Bridge Builders” (The Day’s Work, 1898). From a thematic perspective, these narratives are linked, on the one hand, by the act of construction — the construction of bridges or empire-building — and, on the other hand, by the role of the journalist in reporting what he sees and/or listens to. The analysis demonstrates that fiction/literature can often supersede in scope and depthness factual accounts of reality, thus aiming to reach higher levels of truthfulness.

Keywords

Journalism; literature; constructivism; truth; British Empire

RESUMO

O artigo explora a arte e mestria de Kipling como contador de “histórias”, seja elas reais/factuals ou imaginárias. A sua experiência como jornalista e escritor é o nosso objeto de análise no sentido de problematizar a tênue linha divisória que, por vezes, separa os dois gêneros de narrativa no que respeita o seu compromisso com o contar a verdade. Escolhemos para o efeito três textos: “The Sutlej Bridge”, um artigo publicado pelo jornal Civil and Military Gazette (1887); e os contos “The Man Who Would Be King” (Wee Willie Winkie, 1888) e “The Bridge Builders” (The Day’s Work, 1898). A unir estas narrativas, do ponto de vista temático, temos, por um lado, o ato da construção — a construção de pontes ou a construção de impérios — e, por outro, o papel do jornalista em relatar o que
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