

English

---

4-2009

# Review of Politics and Awe in Rudyard Kipling's Fiction

John S. McBratney

*John Carroll University*, [jmcbiratney@jcu.edu](mailto:jmcbiratney@jcu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://collected.jcu.edu/engl-facpub>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

McBratney, John S., "Review of Politics and Awe in Rudyard Kipling's Fiction" (2009). *English*. 4.  
<http://collected.jcu.edu/engl-facpub/4>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Carroll Collected. It has been accepted for inclusion in English by an authorized administrator of Carroll Collected. For more information, please contact [connell@jcu.edu](mailto:connell@jcu.edu).

meatless regimens in the home. Although Gregory's research reveals a wealth of vegetarian and health reform periodicals and books that have gone relatively unexamined by scholars, I regretted that he was not able to make better use of personal diaries and testimonies to illuminate more about how vegetarianism was "lived"—such as its effects on holidays and celebrations and whether or not it created tensions within the home between spouses or parents and children.

The last two chapters of the book take a step back and examine the vegetarian movement through the lenses of class, gender, and Victorian culture. Chapter 6 explores how ideas of class and gender influenced the emerging vegetarian movement, primarily in terms of its (failed) efforts to attract working-class families and the expanding role of women through groups such as the Women's Vegetarian Union.

In these chapters, the author also expands on his notion of Victorian vegetarianism as a distinctly urban phenomenon and its close development to Britons' hopes and fears of industrialization. In chapter 7, the book takes a more interdisciplinary bent and addresses representations of vegetarians in Victorian fiction and scholarly works by philosophers and social scientists. This final chapter explores how notions of "modernity" contributed to the emergence of a distinct social movement to promote abstention from meat. Gregory also hints at the vegetarian movement's role in turn-of-the-century attempts to construct a cohesive national identity and culture for Great Britain. This theme, however, is not sufficiently explored. Nonetheless, there is still significant work to be done on vegetarianism as a means of "cultural nationalism" as well as both a pro- and antimodernity movements.

Gregory's work serves as an important step beyond recent scholars' mere acceptance of vegetarianism and other "unorthodox" health reforms as legitimate subjects for historical analysis. The author successfully demonstrates the social, cultural, and political significance of the nineteenth-century vegetarian movement in Great Britain and raises new questions about the meanings of food and diet in the past.

*Margaret Puskar-Pasewicz, Pittsburgh*

PETER HAVHOLM. *Politics and Awe in Rudyard Kipling's Fiction*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2008. Pp. 188. \$99.95 (cloth).

One of the perennial questions that swirl about Rudyard Kipling is how readers who vehemently object to his conservative and imperialist politics can nonetheless take deep pleasure in his art, even when that art is underwritten by the very politics they despise. It is a measure of the bold ambition of Peter Havholm's *Politics and Awe in Rudyard Kipling's Fiction* that this is the precise question he seeks to answer.

Havholm believes that to read Kipling correctly, we must first understand the hard lessons in politics he learned shortly after arriving in India in 1882 to assume his position as subeditor of the official Anglo-Indian newspaper *The Civil and Military Gazette*. Those political lessons—delivered as much by the young journalist's father, Lockwood Kipling, as by the members of the Anglo-Indian club to which Rudyard belonged—rested upon the firm cultural view that Indians were so far below Britons in the scale of civilization that they were wholly different in kind. For Havholm, this perception of difference is key, since out of it grows for Kipling, in Indian tale after Indian tale, a sense of wonder (the "awe" in Havholm's title) at human beings who are distinctly "other" than Britons. This awareness of wonder at the strange persists throughout Kipling's career as the hallmark of his art, even after he as a writer had left India and Indians behind and taken up treating other subjects, some of which (animals, ships, and locomotives) were alterior in a nonhuman sense and

others of which (Britons, Americans, Frenchmen, and South Africans) were alien in a sense that exploded entirely the difference between the strange and the familiar.

Havholm's argument about otherness draws upon reader-response theorists, particularly Wayne Booth and Martha Nussbaum, who focus upon the connection between the emotional and the ethical in our reading experiences. Nussbaum distinguishes between the majority of art, which arouses emotions (chiefly fear and pity) that are "eudaimonistic," or conducive to life's flourishing, and a minority that "elicit[s] only wonder and delight, without tapping our more eudaimonistic emotions" (90). She locates this minority within art works "that please primarily by sophistication of form and do not purport to explore human concerns with time, death, love, and other eudaimonistic issues" (90). Havholm expands this minority to include works whose appeal to "wonder and delight" depends not on "the story's form" but on "its content" (91). Within this subset, Havholm places all of Kipling's fiction. As we read about his characters, so removed from our realm of experience, we can only wonder at them, our fear and pity attenuated by their irrelevance to our lives. Given this irrelevance, Kipling's politics—at least the implication of those politics for our own present and future—is rendered moot, and readers, such as Edward Said, who find Kipling's political positions embarrassing in the abstract can obtain guilt-free pleasure from tales about wondrously "exotic" characters and settings. With this cutting of the Gordian knot, this uncovering of "hidden simplicities" (xi), Havholm reveals a Kipling startlingly at odds with the Kipling of modern consensus, the complex, ambivalent author whose best fictions both confirm and contest the imperialist politics they invoke. Against this self-conflicted writer, Havholm holds up an author whose politics never wavered, whose self was completely unified, and whose art pursued the single aim of inspiring awe.

Simplicity has its attractions; however, simplicity in this case comes at a cost, one that involves, first, Havholm's assessment of Kipling's politics and, second, his analysis of Kipling's art. On both levels, the sacrifice of complexity brings a narrowness of focus and evaluation that weakens an otherwise fine, detailed, wide-ranging, and provocative monograph. In his study of Kipling's political apprenticeship, Havholm looks primarily at the outrage provoked among Anglo-Indians by the 1883 Ilbert Bill, which would have permitted Indian judges to try Europeans outside of major cities in India. In focusing upon the effect of this controversy on Kipling's political sensibility, Havholm is rigorous. He is likewise precise in his treatment (a treatment that includes some excellent archival work) of Lockwood Kipling's views on Indians, a powerful influence upon his son's political and cultural attitudes at this time. However, a comprehensive approach to the formation of Kipling's politics needs to include much more than the furor over the Ilbert Bill and the shaping pressures of Lockwood's views. What about Kipling's infancy in India or the hell he endured at Southsea or his schoolboy experience at Westward Ho! or his insomniac, nighttime rambles through the streets of Lahore and Allahabad? Surely, these had some influence on his politics, too. Consideration of these influences might have enriched Havholm's analysis of Kipling's relationship with his early Anglo-Indian readers. *Pace* Havholm, Kipling did not always echo perfectly the political opinions of his club and his father, nor was his slyly satirical art always popular with an often hidebound Anglo-Indian readership.

Havholm's analysis of Kipling's fiction is also oddly truncated. He is wrong, I think, to extend Nussbaum's category of noneudaimonistic fiction to include considerations not only of form but also of content. It is untrue that when we read a Kipling story, we only wonder. "Lispeth," for example, is not simply "a grim party trick," whose wronged hill-woman protagonist we regard with distant awe (106); it is a moving tale that evokes pity as well. By a kind of indirection, the cynical narrator in this tale stimulates rather than inhibits our compassion. The eudaimonistic payoff in Kipling's fiction is often crude, but it is nevertheless present. In "Lispeth" that payoff also includes disappointment at the conventional racial atavism of the ending. After reading, we feel wonder, pity, *and* a subtle disquiet at the very

racial politics that Halvolm thinks impertinent to our response. This is a Kipling not of "hidden simplicities," as Havholm contends, but of evident and baffling complexities.

*John McBratney*, John Carroll University

STEVE EDWARDS. *The Making of English Photography: Allegories*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006. Pp. 358. \$94.00 (cloth).

The past decade has seen a growing interest in photography, and numerous studies of photographic practices and histories have tackled the subject from inventive angles. By now, Foucauldian and psychoanalytic accounts of the photographic image have become de rigueur, and as wonderful as these accounts are, they often lack a sustained engagement with photography's materialist history. Steve Edwards presents a compelling materialist account, since it situates photography not only as an institutional and discursive technology, but also as the site in the nineteenth century around which questions of aesthetics and truth were articulated through the language of labor and class politics. Edwards demonstrates through copious historical research that such figurations are not reducible to a simple battle over words, but point to the deepest philosophical and material investments of the contradictory discourse of nineteenth-century British photography.

In Edwards's account, photography is born within a paradox: its autogenic capacity, its power to produce—through apparatus alone—a more truthful document of the scene than painting, is initially praised by the likes of William Henry Fox Talbot even as this automatic production of the scene threatened to usurp the contested position of the photographer as an artist. Edwards shows how this paradox at the heart of photography's inception arises out of material history itself: the concern with "raising" photography to the level of fine art was born out of the aspirant class desires of the nineteenth-century photographers, who were generally petit bourgeois and anxious to set themselves apart from the "motley" proletariat. In other words, "Art is not separate from trade; rather, it presented individual photographers with an imaginary resolution to economic uncertainty and fear" (124). Edwards documents the comparisons made within photographic discourse, between the operators of photographic apparatus and operators of carding machines. These comparisons depended on the autogenic features of photographic apparatus in order to link photographers to the proletarian rabble, relegating the role of photography to "handmaiden to the arts" at best, and machine documentation at worst. At stake, then, in shifting the focus from the autogenesis of the machine to the autotelic nature of the photographer subject is not only the alignment of photography with the established discourse on aesthetics (essentially the precepts of Joshua Reynolds) but, simultaneously, an attempt to repress the allegory of labor that underwrites the operation of the photographic machine.

Among the results of this constant shifting back and forth between the autogenic nature of the machine and the autotelic nature of the subject is an opposition between "documents" (associated with machine labor) and "pictures" (associated with lofty aesthetic output), an opposition whose checkered history forms the connective tissue among the book's chapters. Edwards is primarily concerned not with individual readings of photographs (we receive no more than three or four readings of specific photographs) but with the assumptions and investments that underscore photographic discourse, as represented by British photographic journals such as *The Photographic News* and *The British Journal of Photography*. Among his most insightful interventions is his analysis of the classification of photography at the International Exhibition of 1861, a year that marks a turning point for photographers as they actively seek to be classified in the exhibition's fine arts section. While their petitions do not succeed (it would take another decade before photography would be admitted to the