Border, nor Breed, nor Birth.

Kipling and Multiculturalism

Richard Harris

Then there arose ... a masterless man, one who had taken no part in the action of his fellow, who had no special virtues, but who was afflicted — that is the phrase — with the necessary word. He saw; he told; he described the merits of the notable deed in such a fashion, we are assured, that the words “became alive and walked up and down in the hearts of the hearers”. Thereupon, the Tribe seeing that the words were certainly alive, and fearing lest the man with the words would hand down untrue tales about them to their children, took and killed him. But, later, they saw that the magic was in the words, not in the man.¹

As Marxism, in both its theoretical and practical manifestations, ceases to exist as an intellectual attraction,² university campuses in the west, at least, perhaps not unconnectedly, are currently being ravaged by a new phenomenon which would be risible were it not so potentially threatening to the future liberty of thought and expression. The epidemic is usually known as Political Correctness (PC), although I think the British writer Paul Johnson’s coining is to be preferred in that it conveys more succinctly the virulence and infectiousness of this ideological cancer; he calls it Academic Aids.³ Like a biological virus, PC is constantly mutating in response to fresh stimuli, and some of its intellectual speculations have attained a truly

²As a political creed, anyway. Tony Judt has stressed the importance, however, of “the distinction between Marxism as a methodological tool and Communism as a political practice.” Tony Judt, “Chronicles of a Death Foretold”, History Today, October 1991, p. 48.
ultramontane sophistication, absurd though they might appear to the man on the Clapham omnibus. At base, however, the movement can be seen as merely a new and surprisingly effective move in an old contest: the philosophical incompatibility of liberty and equality. Where Marxists, however, fought on the battleground of socio-economic class, the new ideologues have chosen the less well defined arenas of language and attitude in which to accomplish a radical restructuring of society. The modern champions of PC are extremist egalitarians, linguistic revolutionaries dedicated to the overthrow of an impressive range of 'isms', from the traditional social evils of racism and sexism to the newly-identified and supposedly more insidious ones of ageism, lookism, and Eurocentrism.

One of the key terms of PC is multiculturalism, unquestioningly held to be a desirable attitude, yet curiously undefined. In its benign form it seems to be a reasonable and belated demand that more academic attention be paid to voices outside the Western cultural mainstream, such as non-Western cultures, ethnic minorities, sexual minorities, and women. In its more extremist manifestations, however, multiculturalism implies the necessity of jettisoning the Western cultural tradition wholesale, as the creation of DWMs (Dead White Males), who are by definition phallocentric, racist, gynophobic, elitist, sexist, etc. The traditional Western canon of thought and expression — Homer, Plato, Shakespeare, Mozart, Wittgenstein — would be displaced by a new perspective on cultural history emphasising the contributions of hitherto neglected minorities or 'honorary minorities' such as immigrants, homosexuals, and women. The potentially useful term multiculturalism has thus been forced to represent a kind of extreme relativist chaos, where no academic or moral value judgements are possible other than an undifferentiated attitude of uncritical acceptance. It is hard to believe that this kind of nonsense is taken seriously, but it is, and in important and influential circles. One example will suffice, cited by John Taylor in a
recent article. Stephan Thernstrom and Bernard Bailyn are tenured professors at Harvard University, where they are regarded as being in the academic mainstream, with solid liberal-democratic credentials. Thernstrom is considered one of the leading scholars of race relations in America and Bailyn has twice been awarded the Pulitzer prize. Until recently, these two respected academics taught an undergraduate course on race relations in the United States called 'Peopling of America'. To cut a long and nasty story short, the two professors and their course were accused by the students of racism, and the course was forced off the curriculum. The details of the professors' offenses against PC were as follows: Bailyn had apparently quoted from the diary of a southern planter without giving equivalent time to the memoirs of a slave, while Thernstrom, among other crimes, had used the word 'Indian' instead of the PC-preferred term 'native American'. The facts that Bailyn had explained that no material written by slaves has ever been found, and that Thernstrom had told his class that 'Indian' was the term used by most native Americans to refer to themselves were considered inadequate defences against the charges of racism. That is, Bailyn should, in the absence of slave writings, have dispensed with the planter's diary altogether, and Thernstrom ought to have conformed to PC terminology even at the expense of academic accuracy.

Now, my worry is that if so clear a travesty of academic justice and abrogation of intellectual responsibility can occur in Harvard, then the PC movement has achieved a frightening degree of power. The reasons for its emergence are manifold, but they are clearly connected to what John Searle has called "the migration of radical politics from the social sciences to the humanities", the course of which has been charted by Roger Kimball in his 1990 book, *Tenured Radicals*:

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If the undergraduate population has moved quietly to the right in recent years, the men and women who are paid to introduce students to the great works and ideas of our civilisation have by and large remained true to the emancipationist ideology of the sixties.\(^6\)

The irony, of course, is that the radicalism of the sixties was in large part a response to the repressive atmosphere of the postwar period, when influential figures like Hoover and McCarthy were imposing their own conceptions of Political Correctness on the American public.

In university English departments there have always been fierce debates on the political and moral implications of this or that text, but until very recently there existed a general liberal-humanist consensus that no text was so far beyond the pale, for whatever reason, that it could not even be discussed. This is clearly changing however, and to such an extent that traditional curricula are not being responsibly questioned so much as rejected in their entirety as a rich white male heterosexual conspiracy. A man called Stanley Fish has claimed that “The canon of great literature was created by high-Anglican ass...s to underwrite their social class”\(^7\), which would be laughable for its breathtaking silliness except for the sobering fact that Professor Fish is head of English at Duke University, and his opinions are far from atypical among similarly-placed academics. As Orwell warned: “It is at the point where literature and politics cross that totalitarianism exerts its greatest pressure on the intellectual.”\(^8\)

This is not an essay on the Political Correctness phenomenon, much though I should like to write one, but I feel that this long introduction has been necessary to indicate the intolerant, witch-hunting academic climate of the contemporary United States which, in my view, threatens to produce a generation of graduates indoctrinated into damagingly one-dimensional literary views. In this atmosphere of hysteria (almost certainly a

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\(^6\)Quoted in Taylor, op. cit., p. 6.
\(^7\)Ibid., p. 6.
sexist/gynophobic term, on the analogy of 'denigrate', which has been stated to be racist), the easiest targets and first victims will be those writers who have always aroused controversy for their perceived political or sexual orientations and whose ambiguous reputations have proved inseparable from these perceptions. A case in point, and the one I wish to focus on in this essay, is that of Rudyard Kipling, a writer whose combination of immense talent and unpleasant politics has made him inconveniently difficult (up to now) to classify, yet impossible to ignore.

Critical (rather than popular; his works have never been out of print) reaction to Kipling has always contained a strong element of embarrassed reservation, even when it has not been openly hostile. When the young Kipling made his sensational appearance on the English literary scene in the 1880s the aesthetically inclined Max Beerbohm, while openly deploring what he called Kipling's vulgarity, nevertheless admitted that he was a genius. "Even I," he stated, "can't help knowing him to be that." In similarly apologetic vein, William James, writing to his brother Henry, speaks thus of his admiration for Kipling:

Last Sunday I dined with Howells at the Childs', and was delighted to hear him say that you were both a friend and an admirer of Rudyard Kipling. I am ashamed to say that I have been ashamed to write of that infant phenomenon, not knowing, with your exquisitely refined taste, how you might be affected by him and fearing to jar. ... He's more of a Shakespeare than anyone yet in this generation of ours, as it strikes me. ... He has such human entrails, and he takes less time to get under the heartstrings of his personages than anyone I know. ... All intellectual work is the same, — the artist feeds the public on his own bleeding insides.

What is it about Kipling that makes a man like William James compare him to Shakespeare yet be simultaneously ashamed to admit his admiration to his own brother for fear of offending his sensibility? Many of Kipling's best

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critics have confessed to similarly confused reactions; Orwell, writing in 1936 on the occasion of Kipling's death, is a good example: "I worshipped Kipling at thirteen, loathed him at seventeen, enjoyed him at twenty, despised him at twenty-five, and now again rather admire him."11 That qualifying 'rather' is important; six years later, Orwell was to write again on Kipling, at greater length, reacting to Eliot's long, defensive introduction to A Choice of Kipling's Verse. In this essay, Orwell deliberately and harshly sets out the case against Kipling before attempting a partial rehabilitation:

... there is a definite strain of sadism in him, over and above the brutality which a writer of that type has to have. Kipling is a jingo imperialist, he is morally insensitive and aesthetically disgusting. It is better to start by admitting that, and then try to find out why it is that he survives while the refined people who have sniggered at him seem to wear so badly.

And yet the "Fascist" charge has to be answered, because the first clue to any understanding of Kipling, morally or politically, is the fact that he was not a Fascist.12

No, he was not a Fascist, whatever that may mean nowadays (I think I know what Orwell meant by the word; I have less idea what is implied when it is used by PC missionaries), although he was, at least consciously, a reactionary. In fact, in the remainder of this paper I shall attempt to show that Kipling was a supremely gifted multiculturalist in what I believe to be the most important sense of that abused and ambiguous term, and that his reputation still suffers from the fact that, as Bonamy Dobrée remarked in 1967, he has been "more grotesquely misunderstood, misrepresented, and in consequence denigrated, than any other known writer."13

It must be first admitted that Kipling consciously held and expressed a number of views on race and culture that most of us today, brought up in a broadly liberal-humanist tradition, find deeply offensive. Somerset

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13Quoted in Page, op.cit., p. 190.
Maugham, paying due homage to Kipling for pioneering a genre which he (Maugham) himself was to develop so successfully, the exotic story, which "deals with the reactions upon the white man of his sojourn in an alien land and the effect which contact with peoples of another race and colour has upon him"\textsuperscript{14}, nevertheless had to concede that "cultivated opinion was always somewhat condescending in its appraisal of [Kipling]. ... He was identified with an Imperialism which was obnoxious to many sensible persons and which is now a source of mortification."\textsuperscript{15} Kipling believed firmly that the English had a God-given talent for ruling and civilising,\textsuperscript{16} just as other races had gifts in other directions, usually lesser skills such as ornamentation or trade, and he could never countenance the idea that India would ever be capable of ruling itself. He categorises entire races and cultures with derogatory generalisations and takes an obvious delight in demonstrating the innate superiority of the white man — specifically an Englishman. (Having said this, it is remarkable how many critics have failed to see the irony undercutting many of Kipling's apparently prejudiced attitudes, and even an element of self-parody; Maugham again notes of the early stories that it is "amazing that no one at the time saw what a damning indictment of the Paramount Power these stories were"\textsuperscript{17} and one of Kipling's earliest critics, Richard Le Gallienne noted perceptively that:

Like a true Englishman, Mr Kipling loves to pretend that he has no feelings ... we must be a little careful sometimes in taking his cynicism and hard-heartedness at their surface values.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., p. 88.
\textsuperscript{16}In a letter to an unidentified recipient, Kipling wrote typically: "Naturally I believe there has been no civilizing experiment in the world's history, at all comparable to British rule in India." \textit{The Letters of Rudyard Kipling: Volume 2}, edited by Thomas Pinney (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 235.
\textsuperscript{17}Maugham, op.cit., p. 103.
Kipling's reputation has suffered much from people who have never read him properly — and not a little from people who have never read him at all.) As Orwell noted, he does have a strong authoritarian streak which sometimes manifests itself as sadistic bullying, and his most recent biographer (albeit rather unconvincingly, I feel) even maintains that this trait is the main key to interpreting Kipling's personality and work.\(^\text{19}\)

Yet there is another Kipling, the Kipling in particular of *Kim* and the best of the stories, a writer with an imaginative sympathy so fertile and so powerful that he could cross barriers of sex, race, and even species to enter with total conviction into the soul of another being and convey the experience with absolute truth. It is the gift alluded to by William James above, where he talks of Kipling's ability to get “under the heartstrings of his personages”\(^\text{20}\) and Randall Jarrell has summed it up beautifully:

If I had to pick one writer to invent a conversation between an animal, a god, and a machine, it would be Kipling. To discover what, if they ever said, the dumb would say — this takes real imagination; and this imagination of what isn't is the extension of a real knowledge of what is, the knowledge of a consummate observer ... Knowing what the peoples, animals, plants, weathers of the world look like, sound like, smell like, was Kipling's métier, and so was knowing the words that could make someone else know.\(^\text{21}\)

This combination of curiosity, knowledge and imagination seems to me to be the absolute *sine qua non* of multiculturalism, as opposed to the uncritical and uninformed PC preference for other cultural phenomena simply because they are not the dominant Western one. To a certain extent, then, the problem with appreciating Kipling is that in much of his work there are two distinct, almost antithetical personae speaking; the saloon bar bigot and propagandist of Empire, as opposed to the sympathetic and sensitive multiculturalist with his


\(^{20}\) See Note 10.

\(^{21}\) Jarrell, op. cit., p. 12.
almost unique ability to project himself into the consciousness of another, totally different being.

This is certainly not just a question of Kipling’s holding conflicting beliefs. Le Gallienne, in the study mentioned above, makes the rather obvious point that

It is quite possible for a man to believe two or more different things at once, or to think he believes them — which is about as deep as the roots of belief really go. He may, perhaps, give expression to the two or more beliefs side by side, without any insincerity.  

This is true, but is not really relevant in the case of Kipling, who was perfectly consistent in his consciously expressed beliefs; the interest in Le Gallienne’s comment to me lies in the point he makes almost parenthetically about how a man may only think he believes something. Throughout this essay so far I have been careful to preface any reference to Kipling’s thought or belief with the term ‘conscious’, as I hold this to be the key to resolving the dichotomy apparent in his work. In the most simplistic terms, in his best work Kipling literally did not know what he was doing. This is far from being an outlandish notion; Christopher Ricks, for instance, in an essay on the famous problem of Milton’s God in Paradise Lost, makes a remark somewhat exceeding Le Gallienne’s in subtlety and usefulness:

... matters of intention are not as simple as all that. There is no reason why the critic should not invoke the idea of an unconscious intention — which is after all no more than we continually do in everyday life ...  

Although he consistently viewed his writing as a craft, Kipling himself was very aware of the idea of something working ‘through’ him, yet he refrained from exploring it too deeply, usually referring in an offhand way to his ‘Daemon’. These extracts from his generally reticent autobiographical work

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*Something of Myself* convey the odd mixture of jocularity and serious respect with which he spoke of it:

At last I reported Kim finished. ‘Did it stop, or did you?’ the Father asked. And when I told him that it was *It*, he said: ‘Then it oughtn’t to be too bad.’ ... Let us now consider the Personal Daemon of Aristotle and others, of whom it has been truthfully written, though not published:

This is the doom of the Makers — their Daemon lives in their pen. If he be absent or sleeping, they are even as other men. But if he be utterly present, and they swerve not from his behest, The word that he gives shall continue, whether in earnest or jest.

Most men, and some most unlikely, keep him under an alias which varies with their literary or scientific attainments. ... My Daemon was with me in the *Jungle Books, Kim*, and both Puck books, and good care I took to walk delicately, lest he should withdraw. I know that he did not, because when these books were finished they said so themselves with, almost, the water-hammer click of a tap turned off. ... When your Daemon is in charge, do not try to think consciously. Drift, wait, and obey.²⁴

That this was no mere family joke or mock-humble convention, still less an evasion of authorial responsibility, but a matter of serious belief for Kipling is further shown by a fascinating report by Rider Haggard of a conversation they had together in 1918 when Haggard congratulated Kipling on his wide fame:

‘What is it worth? — What is it all worth?’ he answered. Moreover he went on to show that anything any of us did well was no credit to us; that it came from somewhere else, that we were, in fact, only telephone wires. As for an example he instanced some of our individual successes — ‘You did not write *She*, you know,’ he said, ‘something wrote it through you ...²⁵

Kipling was to explore this idea of the artist as conduit many times in his fiction, most interestingly in a short story of 1902 called 'Wireless', an odd, disturbing tale in which the narrator is present at a chemist's shop where the chemist's nephew is attempting to receive messages on a wireless set. The setting and atmosphere are reminiscent of those of Keats' 'The Eve of St Agnes' and, at the same time, the chemist's assistant, an unread, consumptive youth in love with a girl with initials FB, is in a drug-induced slumber when he seemingly begins to compose imperfect fragments of Keats' poetry. Just as the wireless receiver is imperfectly tuned, and cannot receive a clear message, so the young man, a coarsened Keats, can only receive similarly incomplete and tantalising fragments. As J.M.S. Tomkins has written of this story:

... we can assert with some confidence that this one was generated by the excitement of finding in the new development of wireless telegraphy parallels to his [Kipling's] conception of the mysterious nature of inspiration.26

More explicitly, in The Light that Failed Kipling has the artist Dick Heldar assert that "Good work has nothing to do with — doesn't belong to — the person who does it. It's put into him or her from outside."27 There are many other instances in Kipling's fictional work relating to this external theory of artistic creation, all of which more or less echo the statement of Blake's that: "I dare not pretend to be other than a secretary; the authors are in Eternity."28

So although we can assume that Kipling did not believe in any literal "Daemon' or, come to that, some kind of supernatural telegraph office, he was certainly convinced that inspiration (as opposed to craftsmanship, in which he took justifiable pride) came somehow from outside him, or at least, I would say, from outside his conscious self. Probably wisely, Kipling chose not to

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28 Quoted in Tomkins, op.cit., p. 219.
probe too deeply into the nature of his gift; he accepted his ‘Daemon’, learned the conditions that encouraged it, and otherwise left it alone, except for the forays into the nature of inspiration in his imaginative fiction mentioned above, which are themes for stories rather than serious investigations. Nor does it serve the purposes of this essay to make a detailed survey of theories of artistic inspiration, although the unqualified acceptance of the idea of creativity’s having an external source would clearly be an abrogation of critical responsibility. I shall therefore take it for granted that, along with his individual intelligence and sensibility, a writer’s early environment is bound, to a greater or lesser degree, to influence the development of his artistic personality. In Kipling’s case these circumstances were such that the effects, I believe, were to become the dominant factor in his character and work, and an understanding of these circumstances and their importance may go a long way towards resolving the difficulty alluded to earlier of the incompatibility of the dogmatic, ‘public’ Kipling with the essentially and sympathetically cosmopolitan spirit informing his best writing.

Kipling was born in Bombay and for his first six years, as he tells us in his autobiography, lived the pampered life of an Anglo-Indian baby, cared for principally by an ayah.

In the afternoon heats before we took our sleep, she or Meeta would tell us stories and Indian nursery songs all unforgotten, and we were sent into the dining-room after we had been dressed, with the caution ‘Speak English now to Papa and Mamma.’ So one spoke ‘English,’ haltingly translated out of the vernacular idiom that one thought and dreamed in.29

At the age of six, Kipling was sent back to England for schooling, returning to India at the age of sixteen to take up a post on a newspaper in Lahore. This is how he describes the return:

... I found myself at Bombay where I was born, moving among sights and smells that made me deliver in the vernacular

29Kipling, *Something of Myself*, p. 4.
sentences whose meaning I knew not. Other Indian-born boys have told me how the same thing happened to them.

There were yet three or four days' rail to Lahore, where my people lived. After these, my English years fell away, nor ever, I think, came back in full strength.30

Some critics have doubted whether Kipling's bilingualism was as complete as this suggests, or at least whether it lasted much beyond his Indian years, but that literally his first functional language was Maharathi (or possibly, according to Shamsul Islam and others, "kitchen Hindi")31 is not in doubt, and neither is the fact that Kipling remained demonstrably fascinated with language, accent, and dialect throughout his career. (Some of his experiments in representing these features were arguably less successful than others; Orwell maintained that the dialect poetry would have been far more moving without the relentlessly dropped aitches of what he called "a sort of stylized cockney"32 and Salman Rushdie, in an adroit phrase, writes of Hindi words and phrases in the early stories being "simply sprinkled over the text, like curry powder."33) To my mind, this early bilingualism is the most important element in Kipling's development as a writer; not only was it a communication system to him, but it was an entry into the minds of people of other races and cultures. (Not that the young Kipling would have been aware of the extraordinariness of this facility; switching from one mode of thought and language to another would have become perfectly natural to him.) His powerful intellectual curiosity gave him an interest in the facts regarding other races and societies, and the subsequent detailed knowledge gives his fiction its unmistakable authority, but Kipling's invaluable linguistic and cultural adaptability enabled him to approach the truth beyond the facts, and this is the essential element of his multicultural genius. Salman Rushdie, in an essay unfortunately confining itself to some of the early stories, is one of

30Ibid., p. 25.
32Orwell, op.cit., p. 185.
the impressively large number of Indian writers to appreciate Kipling with sensitiveness and generosity, although he admits at the start of his essay that reading him is not always easy:

... Kipling is a writer with a storm inside him, and he creates a mirror-storm of contradictory responses within the reader, particularly, I think, if the reader is Indian. I have never been able to read Kipling calmly.34

Rushdie's particular insight in his discussion, however, although he does not develop it, is to identify the nature of the storm inside Kipling and give it a memorable formulation, one that I shall make use of to give a structure to the remainder of this essay.

The influence of India on Kipling — on his picture of the world as well as his language — resulted in what has always struck me as a personality in conflict with itself, part bazaar-boy, part sahib. In the early Indian stories ... that conflict is to be found everywhere, and Kipling does not always seem fully conscious of it. ... Ruddy Baba as well as Kipling Sahib.35

This is a brilliantly perceptive summary, and I would only take issue with it by arguing that Kipling was never fully conscious of the conflict within him, which is why he resorted to glib references to his 'Daemon'. Although his essentially multiculturalist sensitivity enabled him to respond immediately and accurately to the spirit of a place, the internal conflict responsible for this gift also prevented his ever feeling properly at home anywhere, thus fuelling his wanderlust, a rootlessness only partially conquered by his determined effort to settle permanently at Bateman's after 1902. Kipling, for the same reason that he was able to empathise so remarkably with other cultures, was unable to feel comfortable as a totally committed member of any one, much though he wanted to, and, indeed, was never fully accepted into any one. To a certain extent, he was a perpetual outsider who nevertheless wished to belong, and his reactionary public attitudes stem from an unconscious desire to be

34Ibid., p. 74.
35Ibid., pp. 74-75.
more English than he genuinely was, or could be; Kipling Sahib was made to suppress Ruddy Baba, and the results were predictably unbalanced.

In the best of Kipling's work, however, the conflict between these two elements is magically transformed into a creative tension which gives the prose its distinctive vitality. I have said 'the prose' by design, for it is only rarely in the verse that Ruddy Baba plays anything but a supporting role, adding background colour to expressions which are usually very much Kipling Sahib. This rather unusual circumstance, that Kipling generally used poetry as a definitive, rather than an exploratory medium, has caused great trouble to commentators. Eliot, for instance, after trying out terms such as verse, ballad, and hymn, finally wriggles around the problem by defining it as a question of motive — "Kipling does write poetry, but that is not what he is setting out to do."36 — but the neatest expression of the situation is that of James Harrison:

... whereas his prose often works indirectly, through allegory or symbol, his poetry relies in large measure on direct statement. It is not too much to say that his prose is often the more poetic and his poetry the more prosaic of the two media.37

I shall therefore concentrate on Kipling's prose as the more illuminating expression of his genius, as opposed to his superb craftsmanship, which can be seen in the verse, and of his huge prose output the most suitable text to illustrate true multiculturalism is surely Kim. Some of the short stories, particularly the later ones, are great and mystifying works of art, and could not have been written but by someone of immense multicultural vision, but in Kim this quality is closer to the surface and more accessible to analysis. Kim is also of peculiar interest in that the eponymous hero is, like his creator, a divided soul,38 and one of the major strands in the book is the story of how

38The Mowgli stories are other explorations of this theme, though space prohibits a discussion of them here.
Kim becomes aware of the conflicting loyalties within him and, in my reading at least, successfully resolves them. And at any level it is a very wonderful book.

We may, for the purposes of this discussion, think of the novel in rather artificial terms as having a foreground, a middle ground, and a background, although the distinction between the three elements is often deliberately blurred to the the point of inseparability (and therefore will necessarily be similarly blurred in this essay). Kim himself, with his travels both external and internal, comprises the foreground; the middle ground is filled by the supporting characters like Mahbub Ali, the lama, Colonel Creighton, and the rest; while the background, which contributes so vitally to the rich texture of the novel, is Kipling’s superb portrait of the multicultural marvel that is India and its peoples. The characters stand out in natural relief against this background just as they do in Kipling’s father’s beautifully-executed illustrations for the first edition. In no other work in English are the sights, sounds, smells, of that glorious, ancient chaos rendered in such evocative, loving detail as they are in Kim, where they inform every page with their truth, a truth attested to by almost every reader and critic who has experienced the reality. Any number of examples could be chosen to demonstrate this aspect of the book, but this passage in particular surely shows Kipling himself (or at least Ruddy Baba) experiencing an Indian dawn on the Grand Trunk Road through Kim’s senses and using Kim’s mouth to express his own love for the land of India:

The diamond-bright dawn woke men and crows and bullocks together. Kim sat up and yawned, shook himself, and thrilled with delight. This was seeing the world in real truth; this was life as he would have it — bustling and shouting, the buckling of belts, and beating of bullocks and creaking of wheels, lighting of fires and cooking of food, and new sights at every turn of the approving eye. The morning mist swept off in a whorl of silver, the parrots shot away to some distant river in shrieking green hosts: all the well-wheels within earshot went to work. India was awake, and Kim was in the middle of it, more awake and more excited than anyone, chewing on a twig that he would presently use as a tooth-brush; for he borrowed
right- and left-handedly from all the customs of the country he knew and loved.\textsuperscript{39}

Geographically, the tale covers only a small area of North India, although the locations are sharply differentiated, from the hot, dusty bazaars of Lahore City in the first chapter to the hill villages and snowbound passes of the Himalaya, when Kim and the Lama make their journey into the mountains at the book’s climax. These are all locations known to Kipling from his time as a journalist, yet \textit{Kim} is not a travel book, and the scenery is never really described for its own sake, but is always a backdrop to human activity. The different landscapes are painted with undoubted skill and authenticity, but the writing is at its most alive when there are new people and customs to be described, especially on the move, along the Grand Trunk Road, Kim’s river of life:

This broad, smiling river of life, he considered, was a vast improvement on the cramped and crowded Lahore streets. There were new people and new sights at every stride — castes he knew and castes that were altogether out of his experience. ... It was equally beautiful to watch the people, little clumps of red and blue and pink and white and saffron, turning aside to go to their own villages, dispersing and growing small by twos and threes across the level plain. Kim felt these things, though he could not give tongue to his feelings, ...\textsuperscript{40}

In \textit{Kim}, Ruddy Baba is surely giving tongue to his feelings, feelings that would be often unacceptable to Kipling Sahib, restricted as he is by barriers of race and caste. Kim enjoys a freedom that his creator could never have, though it is doubtful whether Kipling realized how much of an idealized version of himself he was putting into his loving portrait of the ‘Little Friend of All the World’. Meeting and communicating with other people, especially if they are new and different, is the true joy of life for Kim; his original interest in the lama is because he is new, and the book is studded with instances of Kim’s spontaneous delight in and respect for any new

\textsuperscript{39}Rudyard Kipling, \textit{Kim} (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd, 1901), pp. 103-104.
\textsuperscript{40}Ibid., pp. 86-89.
manifestation of the life around him — a faithful reflection of his creator's true nature. Of Kipling's own interest in the ethnology of India, his Lahore editor E. Kay Robinson has left a vivid memoir:

While possessing a marvellous faculty for assimilating local colour without apparent effort, Kipling neglected no chance and spared no labour in acquiring experience that might serve a literary purpose. Of the various races of India, whom the ordinary Englishman lumps together as 'natives', Kipling knew the quaintest details respecting habits, language, and distinctive ways of thought.41

This surely attributes to Kipling too utilitarian a motive; he of course used this knowledge for literary purposes, and he certainly shared the opinion of the old lady in Kim that colonial administrators without any real knowledge of the country, "all new from Europe, suckled by white women and learning our tongue from books, are worse than the pestilence."42 However, there is much to suggest that he was genuinely, sympathetically interested in such anthropological detail for its own sake, partly because it interested him but partly because he was able to respond to it at a deeper level than that of purely intellectual curiosity. His instinctive empathy is shown by the fact that his interest was reciprocated; his great friend of the India days, Mrs Edmonia 'Ted' Hill (in language revealing a more common Anglo-Indian attitude), recalled in a memoir of 1938 that:

Kipling does love those wild men of the North! He calls them his own folk. They are savage, boastful, arrogant, and hot-headed, and these vagrant loafers, snaky-lipped and vulture-eyed, come to pay their respects to him....43

To a certain extent, Kipling's India in Kim is a vision of an earthly Paradise, an Eden before the fall, without true evil: Kim has to beg, but food is always there; the lama is in danger of being cheated, but not of being

42Kipling, Kim, p. 107.
murdered; people, whatever their race, creed, or social standing treat each other with rough-hewn courtesy and tolerance. (Kim's early playmate is Chota Lal, whose father was "worth perhaps half a million sterling, but India is the only democratic land in the world."

Of course this is a romanticised view, and Kim is, after all (at one level), a children's book, but the most important point is that we are shown this lively yet benign India through the eyes of Kim, a true innocent without sin or guilt. This is a point I shall return to briefly in the discussion of Kim's character below, although Kipling's essentially multiculturalist vision of Eden, involving as it does the Mowgli stories and certain others, demands separate and much lengthier treatment.

If we move on to examine the characters comprising what I have called the 'middle ground' of the book's landscape, one of the most striking features is the range of faiths they represent. Kay Robinson's comment above testifies to the fascination that belief and custom held for Kipling, and when he visited Japan in 1889 he was simultaneously puzzled by and attracted to the temples:

It is an exasperating thing to stand at the altars of a faith that you know nothing about. There be rites and ceremonies of the Hindu creed that all have read of and must have witnessed, but in what manner do they pray here who look to Buddha, and what worship is paid at the Shinto shrines? The books say one thing; the eyes another.

But not only was Kipling interested in and knowledgeable about other faiths, he was also, for all his supposed identification with the uncompromising attitudes of British Imperialism, enormously tolerant. Although brought up (albeit none too strictly) in the Church of England, Kipling deliberately makes the Anglican chaplain, Bennett, one of the least pleasant characters in Kim. Bennett's complacent indifference to other creeds and their representatives inspires withering scorn in Kipling, not only for the man but

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44Kipling, Kim, p. 5.
for his church, as when he writes of the chaplain meeting the dignified and courteous lama for the first time and looking at him "with the triple-ringed indifference of the creed that lumps nine-tenths of the world under the title of 'heathen.'" Bennett’s counterpart, the Catholic Father Victor is treated much more gently by Kipling, not out of any superiority residing in his faith, but because he is a more understanding human being. When Kim tells the lama they must part, he speaks Hindi, which Father Victor cannot understand; yet on hearing the lama reply, the priest being "wise in the confessional, heard the pain in every sentence." Even the devout Moslem Mahbub Ali is made to represent Kipling's instinctive multiculturalism without compromising his own faith when he speaks to Kim of his race and creed:

"Therefore, in one situate as thou art, it particularly behaves thee to remember this with both kinds of faces. Among Sahibs, never forgetting thou art a Sahib; among the folk of Hind, always remembering thou art -' he paused, with a puzzled smile.

'What am I? Mussalman, Hindu, Jain, or Buddhist? That is a hard nut.'

'Thou art beyond question an unbeliever, and therefore thou wilt be damned. So says my Law — or I think it does. But thou art also my Little Friend of all the World, and I love thee. So says my heart. This matter of creeds is like horseflesh ... the Faiths are like the horses. Each has merit in its own country.'

This willingness to judge by his own experience, accept the claims of other faiths, and value love above doctrine are a world of sensitivity and perception away from the sterile elitism of Bennett. Mahbub Ali is one of the most appealing characters in the book, despite his allegiance to the Great Game players, and it is fascinating to find that, according to Robinson, writing before Kim was written, he was based on a real person, surely one of the "wild men of the north." recalled by Mrs Hill:

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46 Kipling, Kim, p. 124.
47 Ibid., p. 131.
48 Ibid., pp. 203-204.
49 See Note 43.
I remember well one long-limbed Pathan, indescribably filthy, but with magnificent mien and features — Mahbub Ali, I think, was his name — who regarded Kipling as a man apart from all other ‘sahibs’. After each of his wanderings across the unexplored fringes of Afghanistan, where his restless spirit of adventure led him, Mahbub Ali always used to turn up travel-stained, dirtier and more majestic than ever, for confidential colloquy with ‘Kuppeleen Sahib’, his ‘friend’.50

(What a shame, incidentally, that Robinson felt impelled to place those patronising inverted commas around the term ‘friend’; I feel sure Kipling would have considered them egregious.)

At the opposite end of the spectrum, as it were, from Mahbub Ali is the figure of the lama. Where the Moslem Mahbub Ali is an active man of the world, the Tibetan Buddhist lama is a gentle, contemplative seeker after truth and escape from the ‘wheel’ of the world’s illusion, a holy innocent whom Kim feels initially attracted to for his newness, becomes his disciple out of a sense of responsibility, and finally comes to love for his simplicity. Although the lama is generally a passive character, he does proselytize his faith even, in his innocent way, daring to attempt to convert the Moslem Mahbub Ali: “Why not follow the Way thyself, and so accompany the boy?”51 It is significant that the lama assumes that Kim, as his disciple, is committed to follow him on what he calls the ‘Middle Way’, which yet entails a total renunciation of the world (‘the wheel’) as illusion.

‘Then all Doing is evil?’ Kim replied, ... ‘To abstain from action is well — except to acquire merit.’ ‘At the Gates of Learning we were taught that to abstain from action was unbefitting a Sahib. And I am a Sahib.’ ... “To those who follow the Way there is neither black nor white, Hind nor Bhotiyal. We be all souls seeking escape. No matter what thy wisdom learned among Sahibs, when we come to the River thou wilt be freed from all illusion — at my side.”52

Kim is therefore pulled in entirely contrary directions by the two people he perhaps loves most, his two father-figures; and Mahbub Ali’s dignified and

50 Robinson, op. cit., p. 72.
51 Kipling, Kim, p. 408.
52 Ibid., p. 303.
moving jealousy ("My heart is a little angry," ... [to the lama:] "I have no
wish to hear him call thee master."53) of Kim's attachment to the lama is one
of the understated beauties of Kipling's characterization.54 Kim's dilemma is
further complicated by his being a Sahib. The Sahibs wish to claim Kim for
their own purposes, and although Kim does not love them in the way he loves
the lama and Mahbub Ali, neither does he deny his birthright (at least after
his initial capture at the Mavericks' camp), and he admires the Colonel and
his 'honorary Sahib' associates like the Babu and the enigmatic Lurgan
Sahib. Lurgan is a dark figure, even his name suggesting overtones of
'lurk', and possibly the terrifying Hindu goddess of destruction, Durga. He is
always presented by Kipling in a kind of chiaroscuro; he is a 'healer of sick
pearls', yet clearly a potentially dangerous man with strange powers who
lives in a house explicitly said to have a more wondrous collection of Asian
curios than the Lahore museum. Unlike the benign Sahib curator of that
museum, however, an affectionate sketch of Kipling's father, Lurgan is a
fascinating mystery to Kim:

He was a Sahib in that he wore Sahib's clothes; the accent of his
Urdu, the intonation of his English, showed that he was
anything but a Sahib. He seemed to understand what moved in
Kim's mind ere the boy opened his mouth, ... Sweetest of all —
he treated Kim as an equal on the Asiatic side.55

If India is an Eden for Kim, then Lurgan is the tempter who introduces him to
the lure and excitement of dangerous knowledge; the sin, to press the analogy,
lies in Lurgan's using his multicultural abilities for unicultural ends — the
ends of Creighton and the Imperial power. Kim is to become a pawn in the
Great Game — as, indeed, is Mahbub Ali, but there is a crucial difference of
which Mahbub Ali is well aware when Kim asks him if Lurgan Sahib is 'one
of us':

53Ibid., pp. 204, 408.
54Although one biographer at least sees Kim's attractiveness as an element of
55Kipling, Kim, p. 215.
"What talk is this of us, Sahib?" Mahbub Ali returned in the tone he used towards Europeans. 'I am a Pathan; thou art a Sahib and the son of a Sahib.'

Once Kim joins the Great Game in earnest, he will have lost his multicultural freedom, in fact his essential innocence; the gates of Eden will be closed to him forever. He still possesses free will, however, a point subtly misunderstood by Jorge Luis Borges, a great admirer of Kipling, who yet chides him for what he sees as a betrayal of his hero:

Kipling invents Kim, the little friend of the whole world, who is completely free: a few chapters later, impelled by some patriotic perversion, he gives him the horrible occupation of a spy.

Borges has seen the hand of Kipling Sahib, and assumes that Kim's 'corruption' is complete and irreversible; in fact Kim is given the choice of becoming a spy, just as he is given the choice (by the lama) of renouncing the world altogether. In very large measure, the principal theme of the book is how Kim becomes aware of the implications of that choice and its alternatives, and how he resolves the conflict.

The focus of this discussion has now moved gradually from a consideration first of the multicultural Indian mosaic of the background, and then the principal characters who stand out from this background, to the foreground story of Kim himself. It is sad how many critics have been misled by the structure of Kim into classifying it as a simple picaresque novel, when its psychological theme is so important. Of course it is about a boy growing up and facing new responsibilities, but the transition is not the straightforward, unambiguous one of bazaar boy into Imperial agent, Ruddy Baba into Kipling Sahib, that many readers (even Borges) have taken it for. Kim, like his creator, was born into a pluralist world where he was able to

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56 Ibid., p. 209.
develop multicultural talents (that go far beyond mere linguistic ability) allowing him to do the things he liked best: meeting new people, seeing new places, experiencing new sensations. For Kim, even after being schooled in the ways of the sahibs, his first allegiance is always to the land and its people; when Mahbub Ali asks him "And who are thy people, Friend of all the World? 'This great and beautiful land,' said Kim,"58 and he only agrees to return to school if he can roam at will during the holidays. Deprived of this multicultural input, he is unhappy; when he is sent by train to Lucknow to go to school he is placed, as the son of a white man, alone in a second-class carriage. On the journey he thinks of the last time he travelled by train in the cramped but exhilarating company of a Sikh artisan, a Jat couple, a Dogra soldier, a rich Hindu moneylender, and a courtesan from Amritzar; a compartment made deliberately by Kipling to be almost an affectionate but accurate microcosm of north Indian society. "This solitary passage was very different from that joyful down-journey in the third-class with the lama. "Sahibs get little pleasure of travel," he reflected."59 To me, one of the most important themes of Kim is the story of how this wonderfully all-embracing multiculturalist perspective is threatened, on the one hand by the lama, who sees the world as mere illusion, a wheel to be escaped from (it is surprising how many critics accept without question that the lama's influence on Kim is unmitigatedly benign), and on the other hand by the hard-eyed, single-minded players of the Great Game, like Colonel Creighton, Lurgan Sahib, the Babu, and even Mahbub Ali. Kipling makes all these men attractive characters (albeit ambiguously so, in some cases), and they all have impressive multiculturalist skills, but they lack Kim's uncritical love of the land and its people, his innocent, multicultural soul, and they come very close to destroying his precariously divided personality with their conflicting

58 Kipling, Kim, p. 193.
59 Ibid., p. 167.
The development of this conflict of identity in Kim's soul has, up to its resolution, strong parallels with his creator's and is worth examining closely. In reading Kim, it is well to remember William James' remark about how "the artist feeds the public on his own bleeding insides."  

In his early appearances, Kim moves easily between worlds. He appears first to the lama dressed in European clothes, and when he changes into Hindu garb, not only does the lama fail to recognize him, but even Mahbub Ali is fooled. When Kim is taken in the Mavericks' camp, the lama, who is still half-convinced that Kim is of supernatural origin, remembers: "As a boy in the dress of white men ... And a second time thou wast a Hindu. What shall the third incarnation be?"  

(Kipling, *Kim*, p. 129.) Kim is of course aware of his ancestry as the son of a Sahib, but it is of no real interest to him. When he offers to accompany the lama in the latter's search for the River of the Arrow, Kim says he has a quest of his own, to find the red bull on a green field that was his father's legacy, but his motivation is shallow:

Boylke, if an acquaintance had a scheme, Kim was quite ready with one of his own; and, boylke, he had really thought for as much as twenty minutes at a time of his father's prophesy.  

Kim's experience with the regiment is new, and therefore interesting, but something about it is disquieting to him: "Life as a Sahib was amusing so far; but he touched it with a very cautious hand."  

On the journey to St Xavier's he begins to analyse his situation:

"No man can escape his Kismet. But I must pray to Bibi Miriam, and I am a Sahib. ... No; I am Kim. This is the great
world, and I am only Kim. Who is Kim?" He considered his own identity, a thing he had never done before, till his head swam.65

When he goes to school the pressure to conform to the behaviour and attitude of the Sahibs intensifies, even though Kim has little respect for most of them, and his disquiet (according to my reading) increases:

St Xavier’s looks down on boys who ‘go native altogether.’ One must never forget that one is a Sahib, and that some day, when examinations are passed, one will command natives. Kim made a note of this, for he began to understand where examinations led.66

That this is intended ironically is surely confirmed by the fact that this passage is immediately followed by Kim’s escape for the holidays in order to go roaming along ‘the Road’. Yet Kim is influenced by the school and Sahibdom in general, to the extent that, at Lurgan Sahib’s, he threatens to beat Lurgan’s boy because “I do not love Hindus.”67 This attitude is so far from that of the innocent ‘Friend of All the World’ that there is obviously a real danger of Ruddy Baba’s turning smoothly into Kipling Sahib; yet the disquiet is still there, occasionally reaching the intensity of a near-breakdown. After ‘graduating’ from Lurgan’s tutelage, Kim is equipped with codewords and a special amulet, along with what Kipling refers to in a telling phrase as a “revolver he could feel in the folds of his sad-coloured robe,”68 and is sent out alone. Once the euphoria and excitement of Lurgan’s training have worn off, Kim suffers a more serious identity crisis:

“Who is Kim — Kim — Kim?”

He squatted in a corner of the clanging waiting-room, rapt from all other thoughts; hands folded in lap, and pupils contracted to pin-points. In a minute — in another half-second — he felt he would arrive at the solution of the tremendous puzzle; but here, as always happens, his mind dropped away.

65Ibid., p. 167.
66Ibid., p. 177.
67Ibid., p. 213.
68Ibid., p. 262.
from those heights with the rush of a wounded bird, and passing his hand before his eyes, he shook his head.69

(Incidentally, it is worth pointing out the marvellous appropriateness of the metaphor here; Kipling’s language in Kim is in the main concrete, but the image of the wounded bird for the state of Kim’s mind at this time is perfect.) Once Kim meets the lama again, the Sahib influence drops away and he “slipped back to thinking and dreaming in the vernacular,”70 but the Sahib is only dormant, coming back with a vengeance when the Babu speaks disrespectfully of ‘old Creighton’, “‘The Colonel Sahib,” the boy from St Xavier’s corrected.”71

Kim manages to balance the conflicting demands of Ruddy Baba and Kipling Sahib throughout the difficult and stressful trip with the lama into the hills, whither the latter has been half-encouraged, half-tricked by the Babu. The encounter with the two spies, the Russian and the Frenchman, ends very satisfyingly for the Sahib aspect of Kim, but as the lama notes, “Ignorance and Lust met Ignorance and Lust upon the road, and they begat Anger.”72 In Shamlegh, Kim learns that the lama is dying, and is driven by sorrow, strain and anger to confess to the Woman of Shamlegh73 that “I have wrestled with my soul till I am strengthless.”74 Defying despair and illness, Kim manages to get the lama down to refuge in the plains, but the effort exhausts him; the excitement of being a Sahib playing the Great Game has worn off:

“Thou hast said there is neither black nor white. ... I am not a Sahib. I am thy chela, and my head is heavy on my shoulders.” ... the Great Game might play itself for aught he then cared. He was tired and hot in his head, and a cough that came from the stomach worried him.75

69Ibid., p. 265.
70Ibid., p. 304.
71Ibid., p. 314.
72Ibid., p. 373.
73Interestingly, Kipling makes it explicit that this is Lisbet, the hill girl betrayed by a Sahib in the first story of Plain Tales from the Hills.
74Kipling, Kim, p. 377.
75Ibid., pp. 386-387.
At this, the nadir of his strength, Kim comes close to becoming the lama’s disciple indeed; he may have sickened of the world of the Sahibs, but he is in a very fragile condition, highly susceptible to influence, and the lama accepts this with disturbing equanimity as he preaches to Kim:

"In a little — in a very little — we shall sit beyond all needs. ... there are no liars like our bodies, except it be the sensations of our bodies." ... "Thou leanest on me in the body, Holy One, but I lean on thee for some other things."}

76

The lama’s motives are selfless and he shares Kim’s (and Ruddy Baba’s) indifference to the distinctions of caste and race, but his insistence on rejecting as illusion the world Kim loves so much adds another dimension to the confusion in Kim’s mind. Kim is restored to physical health by the old lady at her house in Kulu, where he is able to lock away the pistol and the papers he stole from the spies “with a groan of relief. For some absurd reason their weight on his shoulders was nothing to their weight on his poor mind.”

77 He also receives essential and significant sustenance from sleeping out on “Mother Earth ... [who] breathed on him to restore the poise he had lost”

78 but his real recovery, and the true climax of this particular, internal aspect of the book’s story, comes in a glorious passage when Kim, after his most serious identity crisis brings him to the verge of mental collapse (“I am Kim. I am Kim. And what is Kim?” His soul repeated it again and again.”

79), somehow finds the strength to reassert to himself his essential character:

... with an almost audible click he felt the wheels of his being lock up anew on the world without. Things that rode meaningless on the eyeball an instant before slid into proper proportion. Roads were meant to be walked upon, houses to be lived in, cattle to be driven, fields to be tilled, and men and women to be talked to. They were all real and true — solidly

76 Ibid., pp. 388-389.
77 Ibid., p. 392.
78 Ibid., p. 404.
79 Ibid., p. 403.
planted upon the feet — perfectly comprehensible — clay of his
clay, neither more nor less.  

This seems to me a triumphant rejection of both the sterile, materialist
politicking of the Sahibs and the unworldly idealism of the lama, and
although Mahbub Ali and the lama both seem to think that he is still
committed to the factions they represent, my reading of the above passage is
that Kim has been made to triumph where his creator failed; he has, for the
moment at least, achieved a balance between Ruddy Baba and Kipling Sahib.
Norman Page has stated that “Kim opts for a synthesis or golden mean,
avoiding both fanaticism and a crass rejection of the spiritual life”, 81 but
Kim’s choice is also a reaffirmation of his commitment to the land and its
multicultural plurality.

Kipling knew he had achieved something out of the ordinary with Kim;
in a letter to Charles Eliot Norton in 1900 he said of it, “I’ve done a long
leisured asiatic yarn in which there are hardly any Englishmen. It has been
a labour of great love and I think it is a bit more temperate and wiser than
much of my stuff.” 82 The last sentence in the novel refers to the lama, but I
do not think it fanciful to read it as Kipling’s satisfied farewell to a creation
of tremendous cathartic value to him: “He crossed his hands on his lap and
smiled, as a man may who has won Salvation for himself and his beloved.” 83

Throughout this essay I have argued that any overidentification of
Kipling with Imperialist propaganda is a narrow misrepresentation, ignoring
the wonderful multicultural perspective of his best work. Based as it is on
real experience and detailed knowledge, and informed by an imaginative
sensibility of true genius, Kipling’s writing shows a multiculturalist

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80 Ibid., pp. 403-404.
81 Page, op. cit., p. 154.
82 Quoted in Lewis D. Wurgraft, The Imperial Imagination: Magic and Myth in
104.
83 Kipling, Kim, p. 413.
sympathy of infinitely more value than the posturings of the PC advocates with whose shallow contributions I introduced this discussion. In his conscious, public life, sadly, Kipling himself never fully resolved Kim’s dilemma of belonging to two worlds, and I have tried to show that although the resulting confusion was the cause of much unpleasantness in his work, it is also one of the sources of his genius — his ‘Daemon’. It is, after all, better to have two minds than either too narrow a one or none at all, and it is the all-too-rarely undividedly aware Kipling speaking again, I feel, in the epigraphic verses to the centrally important Chapter Eight of *Kim*:

Something I owe to the soil that grew —  
More to the life that fed —  
But most to Allah Who gave me two  
Separate sides to my head.

I would go without shirt or shoes,  
Friends, tobacco or bread  
Sooner than for an instant lose  
Either side of my head.\textsuperscript{84}

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\textsuperscript{84}Ibid., p. 186.