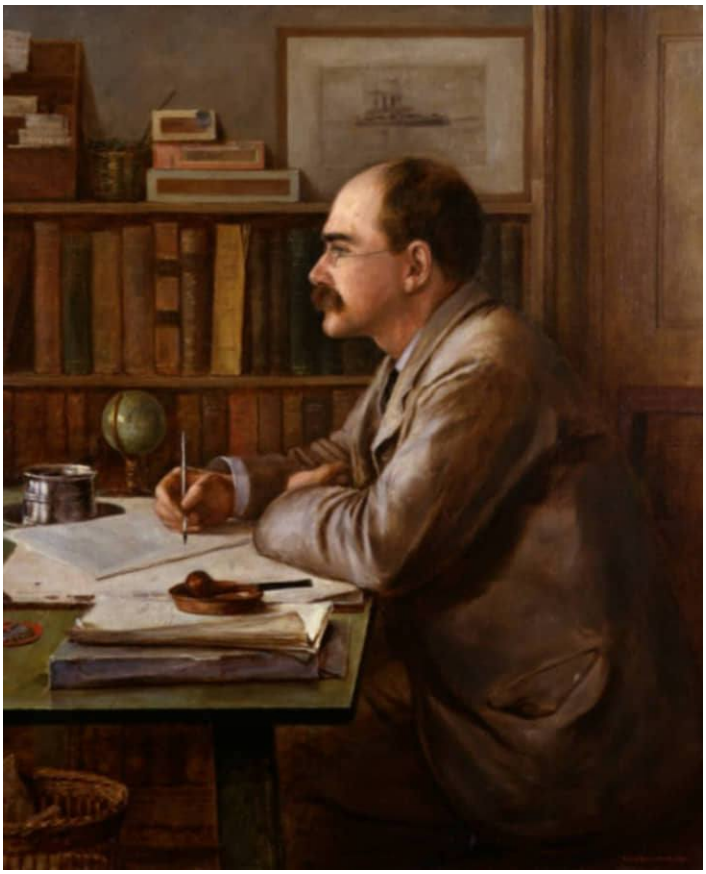

THE PRESCIENCE OF RUDYARD KIPLING

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In 1896, English writer and political observer Rudyard Kipling published a short poem titled, “The Deep-Sea Cables”:

The Deep-Sea Cables

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The wrecks dissolve above us; their dust drops down from afar --
Down to the dark, to the utter dark, where the blind white sea-snakes are.
There is no sound, no echo of sound, in the deserts of the deep,
Or the great grey level plains of ooze where the shell-burred cables creep.

Here in the womb of the world -- here on the tie-ribs of earth
Words, and the words of men, flicker and flutter and beat --
Warning, sorrow and gain, salutation and mirth --
For a Power troubles the Still that has neither voice nor feet.

They have wakened the timeless Things; they have killed their father Time;
Joining hands in the gloom, a league from the last of the sun.
Hush! Men talk to-day o'er the waste of the ultimate slime,
And a new Word runs between: whispering, "Let us be one!"
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The late nineteenth century was the halcyon age of the British Empire, an empire for which Kipling is often remembered (or, more accurately, detracted) as an “apologist.” It is rare to find a mention of Kipling in the popular press without a damning association, with his 1899 verse encouragement of the American takeover of the Philippines, “White Man’s Burden.”

On that reading, and given Kipling’s reputation as the “unofficial poet laureate of Empire,” it would be justified to explicate “The Deep-Sea Cables” as a typical pith-helmeted glorification of British rule over the planet—now, with the laying of the submarine cables, aided by the cutting edge of communications technology. With the “deep-sea cables” spiderwebbing the ocean floor, Kipling seems to be anticipating, the world will finally, as the British Empire aimed for all along, “be one.”

I take a very different view of "The Deep-Sea Cables," and a very different view of Kipling. The later British Empire subject Eric Blair, who very much wrote in Kipling's shadow, when he wrote about imperialism as George Orwell, adopted a cynical view of British rule which Kipling, the usual interpretation goes, was too tally-ho and forward-march to understand. However, if we take Kipling on his own terms, and read the poem for what it says, I believe we arrive at a much darker vision for the touted unity of humanity than one finds when "The Deep-Sea Cables" is read flat against the page and in the darkroom redlight of post-imperial autopsies. "The Deep-Sea Cables" was not encomium but Greek tragedy, a warning against the hubris of men who think they have become like the gods.

In the September, 2019, issue of *The Kipling Journal*, I find an intriguing note about "The Deep-Sea Cables," linking it to a couple of other Kipling poems "in which we are treated to a glimpse of a huge blind sea monster, which an underwater earthquake hurls up to the surface." Godzilla some sixty years in advance, perhaps. But I think the analogy is more than coincidental. The 1956 Japanese movie Godzilla, like "The Deep-Sea Cables," can also be read two ways. On the one hand, Godzilla is a campy horror flick—more for laughing at than for being frightened by—about a monster (so obviously a guy in a rubber suit) lurching out of the Pacific Ocean to stomp around Tokyo. On the other hand, Godzilla is a commentary on war, imperial politics, and the nightmare of nuclear holocaust. "The Deep-Sea Cables," too, can be read as a celebration of empire; or, as I read it, as a warning about human pride, about the false ecumenicism of what today I think we would call "globalization."

To get a sense of what Kipling was trying to say in "The Deep-Sea Cables," let us start with the last line of the poem. Here, we find the word "Word" curiously capitalized. This is the hinge of the work.

In a 2015 essay in *Modern Fiction Studies*, Heather Fielding interprets the capitalization this way: "As the capitalization of 'Word' indicates, Kipling ascribes a clear moral authority to the unifying power of the telegraph wires, which enable communication and in the process draw subjects of different nations toward a 'common good' that was certainly imperial, Christian, and British in nature." In the endnote following this sentence Fielding drives the point home further: "Of course, Kipling's vision of the common structure uniting mankind is an imperialist one. As Bernhard Siegert argues [in Relays: *Literature as an Epoch of the Postal System*, trans. Kevin Repp. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999], '[t]he command given… in the "deserts of the deep" was not to become one, but to become 'British.'" Again, the standard "Kipling as imperial apologist" interpretation.

But consider that Rudyard Kipling, although notoriously difficult to pin down theologically was a

product of a British education, and as such would no doubt have been more than passingly familiar with the Holy Bible. Even if Kipling was an atheist, as he himself seems to have said, he would have known the foundational text of Christianity much better than most in our contemporary secular culture do. The Bible would have been baseline for his literary development, storehouse for the imagery and phrasing which a poet deploys in his crafting of lines. In the Bible, in the Gospel of St. John, we read of the "Eternal Word," Who came into the world, which knew Him not.

The capitalization of "Word" in Kipling's poem has nothing at all to do with the glorification of empire, nor of being British, nor of being Christian. Kipling was no Pollyanna, no evangelical soapbox orator. Kipling's odd use of the capitalized "Word" is a warning, with unmistakable Biblical overtones, that man is arrogating to himself a power which he does not understand, and which has the potential to ruin him.

Working backwards from the last line, the rest of "The Deep-Sea Cables" follows from this single capitalized word. At the beginning of the poem, we find ourselves at the bottom of the pitch-black sea, with the wrecks of the vessels which men have built "dissolv[ing]" above us and "drop[ping] down from afar." The world of men is distant from this deep, dark place. The surface of things, the ships and commerce and battles of nations, is another world, one which, heretofore and while the old technology has prevailed, has left this abyssopelagic cosmos undisturbed. "Blind white sea-snakes" live here, slithering in "great grey level plains of ooze."

But now there is a new trick that men have learned, a new Promethean moment in their history. It is on this otherworldly muck-bottom that the cables which men have laid—and by Kipling's day submarine telegraph cables were already a highly-developed technology—repose, providing a home for mollusks. This unpeopled deep is not where men ought to go—this is the strong sense of Kipling's poem overall.

The Biblical motif of the poem continues. It is impossible for me to read the second stanza, about "the womb of the world" at the sea floor, "the tie-ribs of earth" where the planet is mortised and tenoned, without thinking of the first chapter of Genesis, of God's awful might in calling forth the bottomless waters out of nothingness. Or of the Book of Job, wherein God taunts a member of his puny human creation who dares inquire after the ways of the Almighty:

Then the Lord answered Job out of a whirlwind, and said:
Who is this that wrappeth up sentences in unskillful words? Gird up thy loins like a man; I will ask thee, and answer thou me.

Where wast thou when I laid up the foundations of the earth? tell me if thou hast understanding.
Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest? or who hath stretched the line upon it?
Upon what are its bases grounded? or who laid the corner stone thereof,
When the morning stars praised me together, and all the sons of God made a joyful melody?
Who shut up the sea with doors, when it broke forth as issuing out of a womb;
When I made a cloud the garment thereof, and wrapped it in a mist as in swaddling bands?
I set my bounds around it, and made it bars and doors:
And I said: Hitherto thou shalt come, and shalt go no further, and here thou shalt break thy swelling waves.
…
Hast thou entered the depths of the sea, and walked in the lowest parts of the deep? (Job 38: 1-11, 16)

Once we have this Biblical context in place, the poem knits together, and in a way very unlike the glib celebration of the British Empire that many scholars understand "The Deep-Sea Cables" to be. This is Godzilla, a shudder at what is going to come out of the "ooze," the "waste of the ultimate slime" if men keep "whispering" words in the blind, deaf, and dumb deep, "Joining hands in the gloom, a league from the last of the sun"—where men ought not go. In their hubris, Kipling is saying, men are making a new dispensation, a new "Word" for the world. This is not empire; this is something that men do not understand. And it will cost them dearly in the end.

Kipling senses that the old world of politics and dominion—the ships whose wrecks filter down as rotted powder from above (and Kipling would have been completely aware, of course, that the British Empire rested on naval prowess)—is meaningless in the new age of instantaneous information sharing. Some people have called this network of telegraph cables "the Victorian internet," which may sound outlandish at first, given the extraordinarily slow (by today's standards) rates of information transmission of which even the best telegraph cables were capable. But I think the internet metaphor is more apt than might at first appear. It seems that Kipling's poet's antennae were sensing, in "The Deep-Sea Cables," what a later inspired writer, Marshall McLuhan, tried working out in the 1960s—namely, that new modes of communication exert profound, transformative influence on human society. Whispers across cables thrill the pride of man—we are becoming one! But as the second stanza gives way to the third and last, we find this chilling turn: "For a Power troubles the Still that has neither voice nor feet./They have wakened the timeless Things; they have killed their father Time." This is no longer empire. This is now myth, the eternal retelling of the same story of man's rise and fall.

Who is "Father Time?" In the deep of the underworld, Tartarus, dwelt the old, wild gods, the Titans,

imprisoned there by the Olympians, the bright and shining deities ("Zeus" comes from an Indo-European root meaning "to shine") who banished the horrible Titans to their prison in the bowels of the earth. While there are many theories on the etymology of the name of one of the Titans, Cronus, in Kipling's day the most common would probably have been "Father Time," thought to derive from the Greek word *chronos*. Cronus was identified in Roman mythology with Saturn, the god of bounty. In ancient Rome, the Temple of Saturn was where the imperial treasury was housed.

Cronus as Saturn, Saturn as the god blessing the political dominion of Rome over the known world. But once a line is crossed, the god no longer blesses, but destroys. In the myth of the Titans, all was well until Saturn, Cronus, "Father Time," thought that his children were going to usurp him, just as he had usurped his father and mother, the heavens and the earth. Fearing this rebellion by his offspring, Cronus ate his children one by one. The god turned on his empire. The Titan devoured what he had brought forth.

Rudyard Kipling was no Boy Scout cheerleader for progress and the British Empire. He was, above all else, a poet, a man with a mystical connection to the incantatory power of words. "The Deep-Sea Cables" represents one of the most prescient and accurate foreshadowing of the dangers which men were stirring up—"the timeless Things" which men were "waken[ing]," the "Power troubl[ing] the Still" which men were disturbing with their globalist chatter in the primordial deep.

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Featured image: "Rudyard Kipling," by Sir Philip Burne-Jones, painted in 1899.