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Kingsley’s Muscular Poetics

Some Real and Objective Analogy

A glance at the index of this bicentenary book will reveal the falsity, and highlight the oddity, of Kingsley’s claim in a friendly letter of 1858 that “my poetry is all of me which will last. Except, perhaps, Hypatia” (*LML* 1877, ii.55). That fetching allowance for *Hypatia* must by now be enlarged to cover at least *Alton Locke*, *The Water Babies*, and the public controversy over Newman’s *Apologia*, all of which steadily find more readers than Kingsley’s poetry does, and easily by an order of magnitude. Our author’s sanguine prediction might be dismissed as the collateral byproduct of his having just published to favor a volume of poems in that same year, were it not so firmly illustrative of Victorian received ideas about the relative status of literary genres, and thus so squarely suggestive for the purposes that, as Norman Vance has proposed, impel Kingsley scholarship of many kinds: “His ideas, often derivative, sometimes confused, repay examination not least for their representative quality” (Vance 1975, 31). Kingsley’s bet on poetry’s chances with posterity was one that most of his contemporaries would have backed on generic grounds alone.[[1]](#endnote-1) That so few of us would back it today throws its Victorian representativeness into a relief that can clarify this chapter’s leading topics: what was at stake in this admittedly minor poet’s work, what was at play there in selected local instances of versification, and finally what the special case of such poetry may disclose about Victorian literature more generally.

On a closer look, Kingsley’s claim to poetic longevity arrives only after a passage of critical self-analysis, within the same letter, that is at once disarming and acute:

I feel in myself a deficiency of discursive fancy, which will prevent my ever being a great poet. I know I can put into singing words the plain things I see and feel; but. . . the power of metaphor and analogue – the instructive vision of connections between all things in heaven and earth, which poets *must* have, is very weak in me; and therefore I shall never be a great poet. (*LML* 1877, ii.54)

Inquirers since Aristotle have acknowledged the “power of metaphor” Kingsley addresses here, and have correlated it with the analogical heuristic that has long distinguished poetry’s way of knowing the world, through a more or less concentrated intuition of likeness among the world’s diverse components. While most of us nowadays would scale back Kingsley’s appetite for connecting “all things in heaven and earth,” we know well enough what he is talking about, and so would any reader from the last two hundred years who has turned to poetry for an interpretation of life. Yet it is the heartiness of the cosmic ambition that marks Kingsley, in this and other respects, as a representative Victorian.

The terms that flowed from Kingsley’s epistolary pen in 1858 had been incubating in his mind for some time. By that date he had been publishing poetry for a decade, and had also been reflecting on poetry in published essays and reviews that rehearse the challenge of articulating disparate phenomena into an integrity that attests the universal and witnesses the divine. “Outward things,” he declared when inaugurating a course of lectures “On English Literature” in 1848, “beauty, action, nature, are the great problems for the young. God has put them in a visible world, that by what they *see* they may learn to know the *unseen”* (*LGLE* 253). The connection between seen and unseen realities could not, by Kingsley’s lights as either a clergyman or a poet, hinge on anything so arbitrary as allegory. Hence his quarrel the next year with the “poetry” of Anna Jameson’s *Sacred and Legendary Art*, where he countered her postulate of “the allegorical origin of certain legendary stories” (*LGLE* 220) with an appeal to Coleridgean and Carlylean ideas about the organically grounded symbol, which Kingsley deemed essential to approaching his beloved *Faerie Queene* and also such legends as that of Perseus, which would furnish the main exhibit in his 1858 *Andromeda and Other Poems.* “In the old legends the moral did not create the story, but the story the moral” (*LGLE* 222): like the young person studying a ballad, the ideal reader of Kingsley’s age must read upward from the historically or empirically given realities enumerated in the text and toward that other reality – be it moral, metaphysical, immaterially imaginative – to which the meaning of texts, nay the meaning of things, was due (Hawley 1991, 169).

Nor was allegory the only impediment to such imaginative induction. The same violence that allegory did at large to authentic fable was done to the sentence, at phrasal scale, by what Kingsley called conceits. Reviewing Alexander Smith’s *A Life-Drama* (1853), he denounced that spasmodist sensation for a counterfeit poetics that, substituting mere fancy for imaginative truth, cheapened true metaphors into conceits. The “factitious life” of this rhetorical inflation reflected the modern ascendancy of subjective mood over traditional myth, which in turn was symptomatic of “the poetry of doubt” that each of Kingsley’s vocations – rector and poet – summoned him to resist (*LGLE* 85-89). Significantly, his clearest exposition of the workings of true metaphor occurs in an 1856 review of a book, not on literature or art at all, but on mysticism. There metaphor properly speaking inheres in “some real and objective analogy – homology we should call it – between the physical phenomenon from which the symbol is taken, and the spiritual truth which it is meant to illustrate.” And this mystical definition arises in a religious context because it is, for Kingsley, radically an article of faith: “The physical and spiritual worlds cannot be separated by an impassable gulf. They must, in some way or other, reflect each other, even in their minutest phenomena, for only so can they both reflect that absolute primeval unity, in whom they both live and move and have their being” (*LGLE* 304-5).

By now my reader may be ready to take this last claim as what, just behind the veil, it is: a thesis in poetics. Its tonal insistence tells poignantly against our first quotation above from 1858, which makes it known that the gulf between worlds, while not impassable theoretically or doctrinally, was practically so in Kingsley’s experience as a poet. Nor did Kingsley hold (with, say, the Matthew Arnold who was striking similar notes in poetry and criticism from this same decade) that his self-diagnosis described a general condition which no Victorian could escape. For he made a large and generous exception of Tennyson, who more even than Wordsworth or Keats combined “honest sensuous observation” of imagistic detail in his matter, and “stately and accurate melody” in his manner, with the one thing needful for greatness: a “mysticism” that proves to be the secret of this “greatest naturalistic poet which England has seen for several centuries” (*LGLE* 61, 108). And it is the mysticism that overarches, and underwrites, the naturalism: Tennyson’s visionary access to the unseen is what infuses his “sensuous observation” with the validation of reality, in poems from the early “Mariana” to the just-released *In Memoriam.* During the poet’s protracted composition of that 1850 testament, Kingsley avers, “Within the unseen and alone truly Real world which underlies and explains this mere time-shadow, which men miscall the Real, he had been going down into the depths, and ascending into the heights” (*LGLE* 124).

Compensatory Strains

We shall return to the implications of this arresting, yet typically representative, approach to Victorian Realism as a defining aesthetic program of the era. Our business meanwhile is with the poetry that Kingsley wrote, under the handicap of that “weak” visionary “deficiency” in himself of which the counter example of Tennyson made him candidly aware. Convinced, as he told his mentor and friend F. D. Maurice, that “there is a quite miraculous and divine element underlying all physical nature” (cited in Kendall 1947, 117-18), Kingsley found himself only partially and intermittently capable of bearing witness – in accordance with what he acknowledged as poetry’s special charter of articulate “embodiment” (*LML* 1877, i.186) – to the heavenly meaning of earthly things. It was a keen awareness of this impediment that elicited in a variety of compensatory coping devices what might be called “muscular poetics,” with a firm nod to the “Muscular Christian” label that has stuck to Kingsley because, his repudiation of it notwithstanding, it remains so apt an epithet (Vance 1975, Harrington 1977). We shall encounter it repeatedly in the following examples.

Frank affirmation of the holy wonder of nature occurs in Kingsley’s poems only seldom, and then only under conditions that qualify it:

See in every hedgerow

Marks of angels’ feet,

Epics in each pebble

Underneath our feet.

(“The Invitation: To Tom Hughes” 101-4; *P* 316)

Like the bumptious occasional poem from which it comes, this apparently Blakean quatrain is on holiday, licensed as a winsome, hyperbolical exception to the ordinary Kingsleyan rule that such celebratory gestures must be distanced or chastened. The poet may be saying here what he would like his poetry to mean, but he may do so only tongue-in-cheek, on the understanding that Hughes and others will know he doesn’t altogether mean what he says about the hedgerows and the pebbles. More characteristically frank of Kingsley is the disclaimer of any such unmediated vision in “Dartside. 1849”:

I cannot tell what you say, green leaves,

I cannot tell what you say:

But I know that there is a spirit in you,

And a word in you this day.

(1-4; *P* 218)

This stanza and the nearly identical two that follow on “rosy rocks” and “brown streams” all affirm the inherence in nature of “a word” that the poet nevertheless “cannot tell.” For his aphasic bafflement a nonconforming stanza then provides a consolation, sort of, in quotation marks that indicate a second voice is talking back to the lyric speaker:

“Oh green is the colour of faith and truth,

And rose the colour of love and youth,

And brown of the fruitful clay.

Sweet Earth is faithful, and fruitful, and young,

And her bridal day shall come ere long,

And you shall know what the rocks and the streams

And the whispering woodlands say.”

(13-19)

The first, variant version of this last stanza subtitles it “The Word’s Answer” (*LML* 1877 i.213). Whether this subtitle misprints “Word” for “World” is more than I can tell. But in either case the word that answers for Earth in these lines is in equal measure joyous and coy; one suspects that the joy of anticipation depends on the coyness of nondisclosure, which vouchsafes the promise of meaning rather than expounding it. Kingsley dallies with that poor tool allegory in lines 13-14, only to supersede it in line 15 with the materiality of living matter itself (“the fruitful clay”), and then to treat ideas and things impartially in what follows, as if abstractions and realities possess equivalent (because merely provisional) value as placeholders securing the promise of what has not been spoken because it can’t be – at least not by this poet, who nevertheless succeeds in communicating the excitement of awaiting its eventual utterance.

Such procrastinated reward is one of Kingsley’s principal ways of making good on poetry despite a visionary deficit that should, in theory, have disabled it. It is a way that consistently opens in the small but estimable body of rallies and marches he devoted in “Poems Connected with 1848-9” to Christian Socialist recovery in the aftermath of failed Chartism:

Who would sit down and sigh for a lost age of gold,

While the Lord of all ages is here?

True hearts will leap up at the trumpet of God,

And those who can suffer, can dare.

Each old age of gold was an iron age too,

And the meekest of saints may find stern work to do,

In the Day of the Lord at hand.

(“The Day of the Lord” 22-28; *P* 260)

A rousing stanza, kept up to the mark by the prophetic expediency of its verb tenses. The omnipresence of the eternal Lord is an article of faith for the preacher, and perhaps a matter of present experience for the mystic. For Kingsley the poet, though, what matters is its deferred representation among those who *will* leap up, *can* suffer and dare, *may* set to work for the cause, as they remember that the good fight ahead *was* ever so in days past. The Lord *is here*, all right, but from a temporal standpoint his Day is imminently *at hand*, around each corner of that refrain’s four verbatim iterations, which replenish with virtually muscular protention the gap between now and then. The tensed readiness is all.

Readiness is all there is, by way of comfort, for the eponymous speaker of “Saint Maura: A.D. 304,” a dramatic monologue spoken from the edge, or the grotesquely extended threshold, of connubial pathology by one crucified martyr to another during their final, protracted hours of torture at imperial hands. Thankfully, Kingsley does little to incite readers to imagine bodily throes that exceed literary imagination; he rivets attention instead on the station of stripped Maura and her blinded husband between earth and sky, this world and the next, and thereby on the gap between what she “could not speak for shame and misery,” what she still “dread[s] to tell,” and the perfect fluency of the “new limbs” she and he will earn after death, which “will not mar the love they try to speak” (75, 82, 175-78; *P* 239, 242). It is fair to remember that this often rebarbative work was to Kingsley what “Childe Roland,” *Maud*, and “The Wreck of the Deutschland” were to their authors: the poem that had to be written, Kingsley’s being thrown off, he told Maurice, at one stroke in a fit of “poetic fervour such as I never felt before or since” (*LML* 1877, ii.52; also i.345). One explanation for this urgency is that “Saint Maura” exposed, through the racked frame of its enamored martyrs’ passion, the anguish of doubt and the failure of articulation to which Kingsley – a lifelong stammerer, be it likewise remembered – was exposed by the poetic calling, and which every poem he wrote that matters wrestled to a draw. Maura’s lyric abjection is essentially one with Elizabeth’s misery on the bedchamber floor in act 2 of the 1848 drama *The Saint’s Tragedy* (*P* 37), and at the same time with the plight of Andromeden, chained to the rocks in an agony of despair before her ecstatic rescue. The helpless yet impassioned passivity of the naked bride in crisis figures Kingsley’s own status among souls who, because they can suffer much, can dare much, though daring’s purest shape be sheer endurance (Maynard 1993, Adams 1995, Barker 2002).

If Andromeden’s release into heroic hierogamy with Persea looks past such endurance into a newly comedic world suffused with divine sponsorship, the poem centers nevertheless on the anguish of her protracted exposure to a reality as harsh as it is dark. What trips the plot into action is her mother Cassiopeia’s hubristic comparison between Andromeden’s beauty and that of the chthonic sea goddess Atergati (43-46, *P* 183) – a recklessly fond solution, we might say, to the riddle Kingsley’s muscular poetics also seeks to solve: how to correlate the human seen with the unseen divine. This plot premise haunts with menace the regular traffic Kingsley’s hexameter epyllion conducts in the generic staple of epic similes.[[2]](#endnote-2) This starts from the breathtaking dare that has compared handsome Cassiopeia herself not ten lines earlier to the matron goddess “Here, / Queen before whom the Immortals arise” (37-38; *P* misprints as “Hebe”), and persisting into a conclusion where Pallas Athené bestows on Andromeden, bride to a demigod, pretty much what the early simile was angling for: “the heart of a queen, and the mind of Immortals; / Godlike to talk with the gods” (468-69; *P* 206). The abundant wish-fulfillment of sacred comedy in this unique production of Kingsley’s fulfills not least his own wish to transact with a deity, one that will be, as Athené condescendingly says she is, “Pleased at our image in man, as a father at his in his children” (434; *P* 204). Judaeo-Christian myths of Creation and Incarnation are but an easy analogical jump from this Hellenizing vantage, which limns by proxy a version of the mystical intercourse between realms that Kingsley held a “great poet” must practice. Still, even under the sunlit Olympian skies of “Andromeda” the poet’s imagination dwells long and hard on the sublimity he vests in the sea-monster and its atavistic mistress in the deep: “Shapeless, a terror to see” (18; *P* 182), “twy-formed, many-handed, terrible, shapeless” (58; *P* 184), “Awful. . . and formless” (166; *P* 190), “a monster, / Child of the earth and of night, unreasoning, shapeless” (314-15; *P* 198). Without form and void: such is the nightmare that muscular poetics labored to keep at bay because the earthbound Kingsley, unlike his winged hero, could never vanquish it once for all.

Labor in its own right proved to be one of the palliations of which the poet availed himself when, as often occurs, he broke into what is not so much song as melodic *snatch* or *strain*. There is less physique, to my mind, in the dragon-slaying and celebration of “Andromeda” – “warm and voluptuously idealized enjoyment,” in an early reviewer’s happy phrase (Skelton745) – than infuses a passage like this from the heroine’s ordeal beforehand on the cliff:

Crashing and lapping of waters, and sighing and tossing of weed-beds,

Gurgle and whisper and hiss of the foam, while thundering surges

Boomed in the wave-worn halls, as they champed at the roots of the mountain.

(176-78; *P* 190)

This is more fun than monsters and, for Kingsley’s purposes, more resonant. The passage toys with personifying the sea and the rock but doesn’t quite go there (although in “impersonation,” as he called it, Kingsley did not mind the ascription of “animal passions or animal enjoyment. . . to inanimate objects”: *LGLE* 86). The real life of the passage, as of “the foam-laced teeth of the ledges” a few lines later (186; *P* 191), transpires in the clash of sea against rock, an energetic spectacle not for the eye but for the kinaesthetic empathy that a muscular poetics can tender to a reading body. The comparability of elemental with literary media was not lost on Kingsley, who confided in 1852 to his confidant in poetics, John Ludlow, “Ido feel a different being when I get into metre – I feel like an otter in the water, instead of an otter ashore. He can run fast enough ashore. . . but when he takes water, then indeed he becomes beautiful, full of divine grace and freedom, and exuberance of power” *(LML* 1877, i.338). The very prose splashes into rhyme (*metre-otter-water*), and indeed into hexameter in the first clauses quoted, exuberantly remediated by contact with its topic.

Kingsley started as a poet in boyhood with such effects of strenuous kinaesthesia. “When the dark forest glides along, / When midnight’s gloom makes everybody still” (“Night” 1-2; *LML* 1877,i.10): every body’s compulsory stillness seems to precipitate something stranger than puerile animism, as an entire forest somehow “glides” while rooted in place, with the free exuberance of power. And Kingsley ended in much the same place, when one of his latest lyrics teetered on the brink of athletic self-parody:

The climb homeward by park and by moorland,

And through the fir forests again,

While the south-west wind roars in the gloaming,

Like an ocean of seething champagne.

(“The Delectable Day” 13-16; *P* 321)

The interplay of motion with stasis in each of these extracts performs a clenched standoff that on one hand renders Kingsley’s strandedness under mystical disability, on the other hand constitutes, as it were, physical therapy for that condition. Manly exertion in the poetic figures and syntax works out, for the time being, solutions to a looming vacancy between what the “Mystics” review designated as the “physical phenomenon” and the “spiritual truth.” Where the truth of the spirit eluded imagination, the aspirant reality of the wind in trees or on seas might provisionally stand in.

John Ruskin was responding to this rehabilitative poetic kinesiology when, in the best-known passage of criticism that Kingsley’s verse has ever attracted, he chose as his proof-text for the “pathetic fallacy” in *Modern Painters* what would prove to be our poet’s best-known piece, “The Sands of Dee” from *Alton Locke*:

They rowed her in across the rolling foam,

The cruel, crawling foam.

(19-20; *P* 211)

In curtly establishing that “The foam is not cruel, neither does it crawl,” Ruskin says no more about Kingsley than Kingsley had said years earlier about Alexander Smith’s conceits (*LGLE* 89). But then Ruskin enlarges the function of criticism by attributing the perceptual error to “a more or less noble state, according to the force of the emotion which has induced it” and then coming around to praise these lines, which Kingsley devoted to a maiden’s pathetic drowning “not because they fallaciously describe foam, but because they faithfully describe sorrow” (3.4.12.5-11: Ruskin 1885, 155-60). To Ruskin’s exemplary reception in 1856 of this still recent ballad we may add a note on the waves of sheer sound that converge in the key trope for morbidly sluggish surf, “crawling.” The alliteration with “cruel” speaks for itself, but the accumulated effect is partly due to a subtle anticipation of the shared double consonant in “across” from the first line; likewise the vocalic impact in the middle of “crawling” has come into earshot gradually with “rowed,” then the buried full rhyme of “rolling.”

Such are the sinews and ligatures that in practice activate and bind Kingsley’s muscular poetics. If a prosodically curious reader may find their like in each passage this chapter has quoted, that is because the poet strove to put them there. He did so in the exercise of his “strong faculty” for “that sense of *form*” which like others of his generation he approached in embodied, “organic” terms (*LML* i.338, 345; *LGLE* 81), and which found its calling in the pursuit of evanescent meaning:

If you are a poet, and have an idea and one key-note running through the whole, which you can’t for the life define to yourself, but which is there out of the abysses, defining you; then every polishing is a bringing the thing nearer to that idea.

(letter of 1852, recipient unknown: *LML* 1877, i.341)

Noting again Kingsley’s perplexity when confronting the shapeless without benefit of mystical certitude, we note as well his candor in disclaiming to have captured it (the artifactual “thing” and the inciting “idea” remain quite mutually distinct). More interesting still is his suggestion that the undefinable idea pursued by poetry-writing in effect *defines him*; it is as if the pursuit of “key-noted” coherence, the serial formal commitment of which workmanlike “polishing” consists, identifies the poet to himself as an intermediary presence, not yet spanning the gap between earth and heaven, but working on it.

Both the best and the worst of that reach for significance emerge in an early lyric whose title, “The Poetry of a Root Crop,” gives reason to think Kingsley regarded it as in some sort an *ars poetica*. The whole poem forms a single sentence:

Underneath their eider-robe

Russet swede and golden globe,

Feathered carrot, burrowing deep,

Steadfast wait in charmèd sleep;

Treasure-houses wherein lie,

Locked by angels’ alchemy,

Milk and hair, and blood, and bone,

Children of the barren stone;

Children of the flaming Air,

With his blue eyes keen and bare,

Spirit-peopled smiling down

On frozen field and boiling town –

(1-12; *P* 310)

The first two couplets execute the sentence’s basic subject-predicate syntax, stating the facts with a couple of unprepossessing figures for vegetable slumber. Everything after that independent clause is an appositive or modifying or relative extension: one explanatory grasp at significance after another, none of them satisfactory. The next quatrain (5-8) proposes the most biochemically materialistic explanation, and for its 1845 date the most daring: as Lafcadio Hearn observed long ago, “Milk and hair, and blood, and bone” name at once what will come of these matured roots once they have fed human bodies, and also what has nourished the roots themselves in the long composting of many a foregone generation of farmers (Hearn 1916, 293).[[3]](#endnote-3)

When his early poem names this elemental recycling the work of “angels,” it cracks open a skylight that will widen as the poem continues, first balancing geology with meteorology (8-9), and in the process ascending from mundane fact via pagan personification to celestial societies of spirit – but then jump-cutting from spiritual to moral criteria at the jagged tear where my quotation breaks off. The poem goes on with four couplets more, each one bidding for the privilege to declare the meaning of the initiating phenomena:

Boiling town that will not heed

God His voice for rage or greed;

Frozen fields that surpliced lie,

Gazing patient at the sky;

Like some marble carven nun,

With folded hands when work is done,

Who mute upon her tomb doth pray,

Till the resurrection day.

(13-20)

The root crop is all very well in itself, versified from the first with an impressively kinaesthetic, burrowing verve; and for many of us today the first-quoted, this-worldly portion of the lyric will be enough. But for Kingsley the *poetry* of a root crop entails its linkage to a realm beyond, a role for which soil science, solar power, nonce mythography, and social unrest are auditioned by turns, until at last, by a kind of parochial tithe, eschatological fancy confiscates as orthodox “resurrection” the premissed insurgency of organic growth.

In the end it is this poet’s dissatisfaction that most bespeaks him, his restiveness at any one way of captioning the natural facts. And dissatisfaction embraced as a poetic premise serves him in other poems better, as an incentive to get a grip and retain it. “Elegiacs” lays out a drifting anomie to whose existential queries Kingsley’s chest-thumping assertions of purpose – across the oeuvre in prose, by the way, as well as verse – may often be understood as compensatory answers. The unusual explicitness of the lamentation in this case evokes an unusually naturalistic consolation:

Just is the wave which uptore us; ’tis Nature’s own law which condemns us;

Woe to the weak who, in pride, build on the faith of the sand!

Joy to the oak of the mountain: he trusts to the might of the rock-clefts;

Deeply he mines, and in peace feeds on the wealth of the stone.

(“Elegiacs,” 17-18; *P* 217)

Familiar scriptural backing from the parable of the wise and foolish builders (Matt. 7:24-27) licenses the poet to reverse the priorities of his “Root Crop,” subscribe to the poetic justice of “Nature’s own law,” and rejoice in the sheer physical descriptivity of the last two lines’ radical musculature (Kendall 1947, 99).

That cleft-rooted oak’s flexed bulk gives local habitation to the ideal of plenitude towards which Kingsley’s poetic strains. An imagination of abundance inspires the cornucopia he longs for in “Ode to the North-East Wind.” This season-changing ode answers Shelley’s greater one with a double restriction: the revolutionary internationalism of the Romantic yields, sad but true, to a jingoism of “hard English men” bred to fish, hunt, and fight world-round for the homeland; yet in the depiction of that homeland a corresponding formal shrinkage, from Shelleyan extravaganza to trimeter terseness, yields results of admirable pith and heft:

Sweep the golden reed-beds;

Crisp the lazy dyke;

Hunger into madness

Every plunging pike.

Fill the lake with wild-fowl;

Fill the marsh with snipe;

While on dreary moorlands

Lonely curlew pipe.

(17-24; *P* 233-34)

Kingsley is at home, for a time, with his hankering after a day that remains stubbornly at hand. The remarkable syntactic command of details packed into the first four lines does not forget that the lake and the marsh are empty now, or even that, once autumn migrations have restocked the wetlands with game, up on the moors things will be as remote and solitary as ever. A characteristic dialectic of plenty and want toils on beneath the imagery, and within the hungry plunge of the verse.

Down beyond reference and even syntax, muscular poetics approaches degree zero in nonsense verse, where sound resounds for its own sake. Kingsley didn’t write nonsense like Edward Lear’s or Lewis Carroll’s, albeit here and there the simile of a wind like seething champagne does tend that way. Still, for the author who wrote to John Stuart Blackie that “poetry always comes to me first as music without words” (Martin 216), sense in verse came as an afterthought. In Kingsley’s phonemically pumped-up signifiers (“cruel, crawling”; “Hunger. . . plunging”) we hail the outcrop of an ancient poetic function, call it atavistic or infantile, to which he was strongly attuned. His 1867 essay “‘A Charm of Birds’” prizes in early ballads “Hey lillelu,” “Fal-la-la,” and other “meaningless refrains, sung for the mere pleasure of singing” (*PI* 10). We share with the birds this elemental pleasure in a mode of “speech” that is avowedly “inarticulate, expressing not thought but hereditary feeling” (14) – feeling whose somatic quality as kinaesthetic motion invests, even preempts, whatever psychic content comes with it as emotion.

In a slight poem written for “Valentine’s Day. 1873” Kingsley distills this pleasure into its avian essence, the wish to sing himself senseless: “I would put my tiny tail down, and put up my tiny mouth, / And sing my tiny life away in one melodious dream” (3-4, *P* 304). What that late lyric fantasizes, the poet’s designated farewell lyric actually starts to do. The energetically thoughtless language of nonsense plays a major part, and gets the last word, in “Last Poem,” which was written in Colorado during an illness and narrates a calamitous frontier horse race. The second and sixth lines of each stanza run “Barum, Barum, Barum, Barum, Barum, Barum, Baree,” so infallibly that the typesetter soon resorts to telegraphy (“Barum, Barum, &c.”: *P* 345) and by the halfway point has left the refrain entirely up to the reader to supply. This seven-iamb line mimes so lamely the fatal gallop toward which the entire vignette builds – and which if anything ought to fall into anapests – that it’s hard to endorse Guy Kendall’s reading of the refrain as “just action transformed into sound” (Kendall 1947, 99). Unless, of course, by a deep tautology of nonsense the “action” in question is the poem-animating deed of recitation itself. This option finds reinforcement in the poem’s second, more affecting refrain, which ends each stanza’s first line and is made from a fading echo of the doomed jockey’s name: “Lorraine, Lorraine, Lorrèe.” Declare, repeat, then diminish: isn’t that just what ballads always do? They immortalize heroism, by a process that takes possession of the hero (another suffering young woman in this case, as my reader will have guessed), whose destiny is to dissolve into the song itself, become a name in reverberant time, all for what Kingsley identified as “the mere pleasure of singing.”

Wanting the great poet’s gift of world-gathering symbolism, Kingsley may have found his best palliative in the prosthetic physio-therapy of such “mere pleasure” in form. Within the ludic flexion of a jingling refrain, form is all; form is more impressive, however, when it embraces more than itself, circumscribes a moving tale and imparts to it the consolation, not of meaning, but of shape.

The merry merry lark was up and singing,

And the hare was out and feeding on the lea;

And the merry merry bells below were ringing,

When my child’s laugh rang through me.

Now the hare is snared and dead beside the snowyard,

And the lark beside the dreary winter sea;

And the baby in his cradle in the churchyard

Sleeps sound till the bell brings me.

(*P* 219)

Even unwarned by the title (“A Lament”), at the end of stanza one a reader with metrical radar will be bracing for what is to come. Three pentameter lines, bedecked for jolly good measure with feminine endings, anapestic beginnings, or both, set the snare for the overloaded trimeter line 4 (anapest-spondee-spondee), which with just seven syllables boasts five stresses, all in a row at the close. Time doesn’t stop passing, but suddenly it slows way down, passing right “through” the speaker, with an emotion whose affective valence counts for less than its physical impact, and which includes merriment but also – as will come clear in retrospect – apprehensiveness. When the happy-go-lucky meter cranks up again in stanza two, each line hits a consonantal twist that gives the oral muscles more of a challenge in utterance, until in line 8 a variation on the five-stressed heptasyllable from line 4 rings its final change (spondee-anapest-spondee). The lark and the hare trade places from stanza one, rehearsing the formal chiasmus with which lines 7-8 go on to repeal lines 3-4. Now in penultimate position the baby lies in the churchyard where the bells rang once, and in lieu of its piercing laughter the speaker will await in silence the toll that must end all. Doubters of Kingsley’s credentials as a prosodist should consult his correspondence on the subject with “an Oxford friend” and John Ludlow (*LML* 1877 i.186, 337-49), and then return attentively to “Andromeda” or “Elegiacs” – or the “Lament” before us here. Tightly focused and superbly evocative, the tenderness of the whole depends on a dance of structural correlations within syllable, line, and stanza that, providing the comfort of a formal rightness, justifies nothing whatsoever that takes place in the spare bleak story the words convey.

More circumstantial stories required of Kingsley a larger and looser envelopment. In two cases where the end of a stanzaic narrative cycles back to its beginning, the story has a way of wrapping up without adding up. “A Bad Squire” earns its rank in the “1848-9” cluster of political verses by incorporating, on the part of a convicted poacher’s widow, a long-winded denunciation of hard-hearted landowners’ greed. Yet it begins and ends somewhere else, in the following brace of stanzas:

The merry brown hares came leaping

Over the crest of the hill,

Where the clover and corn lay sleeping

Under the moonlight still.

(1-4)

But the merry brown hares came leaping

Over the uplands still,

Where the clover and corn lay sleeping

On the side of the white chalk hill.

(81-84; *P* 254-56)

Here, in contrast to “A Lament,” the point of the microvariation between framing stanzas is that nothing in between has made any difference. The widow’s words and tears having sent her “passion,” and then herself, off “wandering into the night” (78-79), the scene resets itself. “Still” in line 82 now denotes persistence as well as quietude, as it couldn’t back in line 4, but this is an addition that only leaves the sum of things where it stood, and says so.

A comparable loop cinches the narrative of “The Mango-Tree,” this time with a poignancy that is eloquent of the condition that I have been imputing to Kingsley all along. The British speaker has followed her soldier husband off to the tropics, borne him three children there, then watched all four die of fever. That story, with its aftermath of barren survival on alien soil, constitutes the poem these stanzas bracket:

He wiled me through the furzy croft;

He wiled me down the sandy lane.

He told his boy’s love, soft and oft,

Until I told him mine again.

(1-4)

Thus am I dead: yet cannot die:

But still within my foolish brain

There hangs a pale blue evening sky;

A furzy croft; a sandy lane.

(45-48; *P* 301-3)

The persistence of memory sketched here succeeds through the poet’s lightness of touch in reprising the first two lines in the last one. The imperishable fondness of the speaker’s heart hardly consoles her: that verb “hangs” makes it seem an annoyance – not unlike the “wiling” courtship itself, when her suitor wouldn’t quit hanging around. Yet, for all that, the random details of nondescript croft and lane obtrude anyhow on the veritable paradise in which she survives, whose exotic fauna and flora have crowded the intermediate stanzas with a fecundity of details the speaker regards but cannot bring herself to care about. She tries to get interested in a properly sublimated vision of surrounding realities, deeming that the “spirits” of her dead family “light the golden shade / Beneath the giant mango-tree” (27-28). But that symbolic frame of reference fails her, just as it ordinarily failed her poet. The vital frame of reference is the one with which the overall structure of “The Mango-Tree” holds fast: psychological, this-worldly, demystified. And the bemused disappointment in which the speaker concludes is more largely recognizable as a version of Kingsley’s accommodated ambition in poetry. Deficiency of vision is at first resisted; next it is conceded; finally it is incorporated as the guiding principle of a worthy if minor body of work.

Realism in Spite of Itself

I have tried to show how a theoretical handicap that constrained Kingley’s poetic production also furnished him, by default, with a practical rationale for continuing to write poems. Although his ideal agenda remained out of reach, he reached for it anyhow, and with a sinewy honesty that in effect produced a second, derivative agenda. This second agenda privileged imaginative circumstances and forms that were expressive of discrepancy, because a reciprocity between failure and aspiration typified the condition that brought it forth. Poetical topics engendering either manically keen anticipation, or else disappointment whetted to the point of abjection; ruggedness in the articulation of figures and tropes; effortful exertion within the formal body of the verse: these were qualities that, in the first instance, suited the robustness of Kingsley’s taste. Beyond this aesthetic compatibility, he also valued these qualities for the witness they bore, encoded in literary muscle memory, to ideals of grace and fulfillment that he could strenuously indicate if seldom achieve. The lexical, syntactic, and prosodic patterning of Kingsley’s poems stood proxy for an embodiment of metaphysical reality, integrating earth with heaven, in which he believed despite his inability to imagine it.

Kingsley’s is a signal case of a predicament, or opportunity, that defined a major program for the poetry of his age more largely considered. During the Victorian era scientific and industrial advances, and with them the retrenchment of traditional religious certitudes, called the received meaning of things into question, brought new things to notice, and proposed fresh contexts within which things old and new were to be understood. Under these changing conditions, poets stepped forth as ad-hoc ministers of the real. Presenting readers with texts that were about reading the text of the world, sometimes they drew communicable lessons from that text and sometimes they gave voice to the disoriented perplexities that arose when it proved illegible. If realism in the novel was principally mimetic, with its broad-canvas depiction of a densely woven social fabric, realism in poetry was principally heuristic. Poets of strongly varied outlook and style shared a Victorian program of putting the things of this world – most often natural objects or beings – into question, and looking for answers that arranged those things in a meaningful order. Whether or not they discovered an answer, they were committed to the same search, which as we have seen was Kingsley’s search too.

The agnostic ritualist D. G. Rossetti handled things as if they were sacramental elements that had gotten lost: beautifully enchased in themselves, yet dissevered from any larger design than the aesthetic one a poem might construct for them in harmony and color. Rossetti the Pre-Raphaelite meets his opposite number in Hopkins the Neo-Tractarian, whose most characteristic poems find every thing, no matter how humbly plain on any hieratic scale, meaningful because divinely created and sustained. Could Kingsley have read Hopkins – and accommodated the formal experimentation, and accorded any acolyte of Newman’s a fair hearing to begin with – he would have hailed there a shining success in the endeavor that had engrossed his own poetry too; Rossetti’s crafted repose, in contrast, would have struck him as too easy a surrender to the sensuous allure of art alone. In Browning, whom Kingsley with a regrettable snobbishness found repellent (Thorp 1969, 95; Colloms 1975, 158), he might have found a brother in the art. Fra Lippo Lippi’s credo “This world’s no blot for us, / Nor blank; it means intensely, and means good: / To find its meaning is my meat and drink” (313-15; Browning, 548) bespeaks an agenda close to Kingsley’s, in ideal conviction and compromised physical attainment alike. For both poets the struggle to correlate the real with the ideal gave rise to a poetics of strife and of resolution deferred, under the banner of a progressivism that concurrently recruited overseas a third figure (unknown, it seems, to Kingsley): that tireless scribe of realities swept by the zeitgeist, Walt Whitman.

The poetic realism of Tennyson makes for more revealing comparison. Kingsley like the rest of his generation was captivated, we saw above, by Tennyson’s descriptive fluency and precision, the felicity of which proceeded from mystic correspondence between the seen and unseen realms of experience. Passages from *In Memoriam* evinced moreover the Laureate’s awareness that within the modern dispensation this correspondence was at risk: “I found Him not in world or sun, / Or eagle’s wing, or insect’s eye” (124:5-6; Tennyson 1969, 974). For King Arthur decades later the vantage was reversed, but it disclosed the same breakdown in correspondence: “I found Him in the shining of the stars, / I marked Him in the flowering of His fields, / But in his ways with men I find Him not” (“The Passing of Arthur” 9-11; Tennyson 1969, 1742). Meanwhile the seashell at a fugitive expatriate’s foot, the flower in a crannied wall, aroused “a sharper sense / For a shell, or a flower, little things” (*Maud* 2.2.111-12; Tennyson 1969, 1081): an acuity of phenomenal perception that sprang, for the lyrical time being, out of those little things’ divorce from any holistic, explanatory big picture.

Throughout Kingsley’s career, then, the contemporary he most admired was unapologetically making memorable poems from the very crisis in meaning for which Kingsley’s muscular poetics strove, as in denial, to compensate. For as a matter of principle he talked himself out of directly engaging the irony and ambivalence that were leading features of the age: “What our poets want is faith. . . . firm coherent belief. And a poetry of doubt, even a sceptical poetry, in its true sense, can never possess clear and sound form, even organic form at all”; *“*It is impossible to give outward form to that which is in its very nature formless, like doubt and discontent” (*LGLE* 81, 94). The lucidity of Tennysonian doubt and the brilliance of Browningesque skepticism, to look no further, reveal the strangely limiting fallacy in Kingsley’s thinking about the resourcefulness and versatility that form itself might exhibit under pressure – a fallacy that is stranger still in light of his understanding that “the metrical-prose didactic,” although something like it might do for polemical novels, was a non-starter when it came to poetry (*LML* 1877, i.186; Hawley 1991, 174). The good news this chapter has meant to bring is how well Kingsley the poet kept faith with the bad conscience that his outward profession of faith entailed, and how often the poems managed in practice to work free of the principles and to get, in spite of him, real.

1. Although the 1875 obituaries evince little consensus on which of Kingsley’s works would last, *The Spectator* thought that he was a “poet by genius and a novelist by habit”, and the *Penn Monthly* maintained that his “best work was his poetry. He was made for a lyric poet and might have been the Burns of the nineteenth century.” *[THUS MUCH LIFTED NEARLY VERBATIM FROM IVO’S EMAIL 1 JULY 2019. I LEAVE IT TO HIM TO SUPPLY CITATIONS FOR THESE INSTRUCTIVE QUOTATIONS.]* Nowadays in contrast, while a sizable Wikipedia entry represents Kingsley in its first line as “historian and novelist,” there is no mention of his poetry beyond a single title (*Andromeda and Other Poems,* 1858) among three dozen listed publications. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Kingsley> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For briefing on Kingsley’s place of honor in the hexameter sweepstakes of Victorian epic prosody, see my *Epic: Britain’s Heroic Muse 1790-1910* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2008), pp. 351-52; also 333-38. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Young Charles, a believer in the vivification of rubbish, had given to a surviving notebook of juvenilia the title *Original Composts* (Thorp 1969, 9). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)