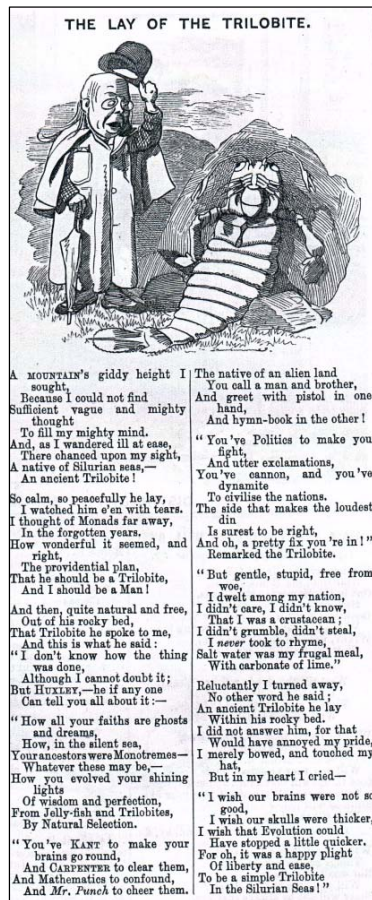


# 'The Lay of the Trilobite': Rereading May Kendall

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## I

### Introduction



May Kendall's 'The Lay of the Trilobite' (1885) has become one of the most familiar of the many Victorian poems engaging with evolutionary theory. Routinely anthologised and immediately accessible, it is a delight to read and to teach. Yet there remain very few extensive critical discussions of Kendall and fewer still of her best-known poem.<sup>1</sup> There are a number of plausible reasons why this may be so. Looking at the poem on its own, it seems to speak for itself better than a critic could. On the other hand, what it says appears on the face of it straightforward. 'The Lay of the Trilobite' is an effective satire on providential readings of evolution and a comic warning against taking our place in evolution too seriously. It is effective partly because it is uncomplicated. The characterisation is deft but nevertheless broad, while the comedy works too

easily and too well to need much glossing. There seems to be little in the poem to tempt scholars of literature and science to write about it either. It responds to evolutionary debate, but only on a general level. There are no indicators that Kendall has any specific tenet of evolutionary theory in her sights, as Constance Naden does in her equally funny but much more widely discussed skits on sexual selection grouped together as 'Evolutional Erotics' (1887). Nor is Kendall responding to any particular controversy here, such as the spat between Huxley and Gladstone over whether or not the geological record could be reconciled with the book of Genesis to which she alludes in her poem 'Nirvana'. Nor is she obviously working through her own ideas on evolution, as many late-Victorian poets including Tennyson, Meredith,

Swinburne, Hardy and Mathilde Blind do in their poems.<sup>2</sup> Finally, Kendall is herself an awkward subject. Her life has come down to us more as a series of detached fragments than as a single whole, while her diverse corpus includes poetry, novels, prose satires, socio-political studies and religious journalism. The task of making sense of Kendall's long and diffuse career is therefore much more daunting and arguably less inviting than the equivalent task of understanding Naden's short, well documented and intellectually focussed one.

In this essay I want to try and push beyond this apparent critical impasse towards a deeper understanding of Kendall's poem and of Kendall's own place in Victorian debates over the interpretation of evolution. To do so, I am going to reread 'The Lay of the Trilobite' in a series of distinct contexts. The first two contexts are those of the poem's original publication, in *Punch* magazine on 24 January 1885, and its subsequent inclusion in the collection *Dreams to Sell* (1887) as the first poem in a series headed 'Science'. In both cases I will be looking for clues that might steer a reader towards an interpretation of Kendall's particular engagement with evolutionary theory. I will then move on to consider the poem in the light of Kendall's writings as a Christian thinker and activist from the end of the 1880s to the late 1890s, to see how a fuller reading of her work might inflect and flesh out our understanding of this engagement. In conclusion, I will take Kendall's review of Hardy's *Wessex Poems* as a starting point for briefly placing her perspective on evolution within the wider context of the evolutionary poetry of her contemporaries Tennyson, Meredith and Hardy.

## II

### 'The Lay of the Trilobite' in *Punch*

Before readers encountered 'The Lay of the Trilobite' in its first published form they would have already passed through a series of experiences framing their responses to the poem itself. Firstly, they would have bought or borrowed a copy of *Punch*. Depending on their reading habits, they may or may not have read other pieces in this particular issue of the magazine, but they would undoubtedly have had certain expectations about the material they were to find within it. *Punch's* attitude to science in the 1880s was irreverent but not hostile nor obviously partisan. It was most often inspired to play with science which had practical applications, such as

medicine or technology, or highly visible manifestations, such as comets or mammoths. When it did engage with science for its own sake, it was generally through similarly visible public figures, including T. H. Huxley and William Carpenter, both of whom are named in the original text of ‘The Lay of the Trilobite’ (ll. 23, 34; Carpenter, who died in 1885, is replaced by Hegel in the later text), or Darwin and Richard Owen, who are mentioned alongside each other in Kendall’s next contribution to the magazine, ‘Ballad of the Ichthyosaurus’ (l. 57).<sup>3</sup>

‘The Lay of the Trilobite’ conforms to and confirms the expectations established by its publication in *Punch*. The title, which may seem idiosyncratic in an anthology or a collection of poems, is merely conventional, a jocular trademark, in the pages of a magazine that routinely called poems ‘lays’. Over the two years before Kendall’s poem, *Punch* had offered its readers, ‘The Lay of the Armed Burglar’ (20 January 1883), ‘The Lay of the Ichthyophagist’ (27 January 1883), “‘Look at the Clock!’: A Lay of the National Liberal Club’ (12 May 1883), ‘A Lay of Modern Russia’ (2 June 1883), ‘The Lay of the Lord Chief Justice’ (1 September 1883), ‘The Baffled Iceberg: A Lay for the Horse-Marines’ (4 December 1883), ‘The Woman of the Future: A Lay of the Oxford Victory’ (10 May 1884), ‘A Lay at Lord’s’ (2 August 1884) and ‘A Love Lay à la Mode’ (*Punch’s Almanack for 1885*, 9 December 1884), among others. While Kendall’s poem gains rather than loses from being a variation on this theme – *Punch*’s stream of ‘lays’ is funnier than the whimsy of any one comic poem claiming that same inappropriate title – the title remains *Punch*’s, not Kendall’s. Like these other ‘lays’, ‘The Lay of the Trilobite’ is unsigned. This affirms the impression that the poem is a house-production rather than a work by a particular poet. In effect, the implied ‘author’ is Mr Punch himself, who, like Huxley and Carpenter, gets a reference in the poem (l. 36).

As well as the magazine and the title, the original readers of ‘The Lay of the Trilobite’ encountered the poem accompanied by an illustration, positioned between the title and the text, and so directly mediating the response to the poem itself. This illustration shows the encounter between the poem’s two speakers on a rocky mountain top. The narrator is looking somewhat aghast and raising his hat, while the trilobite looks as though he is smiling up at him. The narrator’s initial response to chancing upon the trilobite in the poem is to watch him while tearfully contemplating the beauty of ‘The providential plan, / That he should be a Trilobite, / And I should be a Man’ (ll. 14-16). The picture does not illustrate this first

impression, however, but rather the poem's close, when the narrator takes his leave of the trilobite, touching his hat (in fact he raises it in the picture, as he does in the revised version of the poem) but not speaking, as he wishes to himself 'that Evolution could / Have stopped a little quicker' (ll. 67-68). The expression on the faces of the two characters in the illustration leads the reader to anticipate that the trilobite will in some way get the better of the man, piquing our interest to see how this might happen.

By the standards of cartoons in *Punch*, the illustration to 'The Lay of the Trilobite' is clumsy, even crude, and yet its characters remain notable. The narrator is not clearly delineated as a caricature of anyone in particular, but he bears at least a passing resemblance to Richard Owen, with his bald pate and straggly white hair. Owen was a leading advocate of providential interpretations of evolution, while Huxley, who is cited by the trilobite as an authority both on evolution and on 'How all your faiths are ghosts and dreams' (l. 25), was his most vocal critic. The clash between the two men over human evolution was most publicly played out in the early 1860s, but they remained public figures and known opponents. The poem does not explicitly target Owen, and nor does the illustration, but the illustration might well lead a reader to identify the self-satisfied narrator with, if not as, Owen. Read in the light of the illustration, the poem can seem to be a comic restaging of the antagonism between Huxley and Owen which broadly sides with Huxley, as the trilobite, who disillusiones the providential evolutionist, defers to Huxley's authority.

The trilobite in the picture bears no resemblance to Huxley, but he is anthropomorphised, with his antennae resembling eyebrows and his legs positioned in such a way as to suggest a thick moustache growing on either side of a thin nose. Aside from this anthropomorphic re-jigging of his bodily structure, the most remarkable thing about the trilobite in the illustration is that it is not a trilobite at all but a eurypterid or sea-scorpion, an entirely different form of extinct marine arthropod. Eurypterids were well known among palaeontologists in the late nineteenth century, and the distinction between them and trilobites was well established. They lacked the public profile of trilobites, however. The fact that *Punch* illustrates a poem about a trilobite with a picture of a eurypterid strongly suggests that the trilobite was for this particular illustrator and the magazine's editor, and perhaps for Kendall too, a vague concept – some form of ancient fossil from the 'Silurian seas' (l. 7), as the poem puts it – rather than a clear palaeontological type.

This corroborates the view that *Punch* was negligent about details in its engagement with science. It seems reasonable to suppose that most original readers would have shared that same level of engagement and expected no more. They would have read ‘The Lay of the Trilobite’ as a light-hearted lampoon of providential evolutionism in keeping with the magazine as a whole. Those readers who were sufficiently scientifically well-informed to recognise that the trilobite in the picture was not a trilobite but a eurypterid would presumably have had if anything even lower expectations of the level of scientific engagement in Kendall’s poem. These expectations would have been confirmed by the poem’s suggestions (in the voice of the trilobite) that the ancestral ‘Monotremes’ swam ‘in the silent sea’ (ll. 26-27), conflating two very different stages of human ancestry, and that humans evolved from jellyfish and trilobites (ll. 29-32), neither of which were identified as human ancestors in the Darwinian model of evolution promoted by Huxley. These casual scientific conflations and inaccuracies contrast with the comical but precise reconstruction of the human lineage in Naden’s ‘Solomon Redivivus, 1886’. They contribute to the alternative comedy of Kendall’s poem, but in so doing they precisely do not mark it out as any more informed or consequential than the rest of *Punch*’s interventions in scientific debate.

### III

#### Science in *Dreams to Sell*

Readers of *Punch* would not have known that ‘The Lay of the Trilobite’ was by May Kendall, nor would they have read it as a particularly acute or well-informed comment on evolutionary theory. Two years later, however, Kendall’s poem appeared in a new context with different implications for how it was to be read. *Dreams to Sell*, published by Longmans in 1887, was May Kendall’s first collection of poems and her first book to appear under her own name. Here again, the presentation of the text will have tended to foster various expectations. The title page identifies Kendall as one of the authors of ‘*That Very Mab*’, a playful satirical fantasy by Kendall and Andrew Lang, published anonymously by Longmans two years before. The title of Kendall’s new book suggests that her poems too are ‘dreams’ or fantasies. This impression is reinforced by the fact that the epigraph from which the title is taken is quoted from the playfully macabre Gothic poet

Thomas Lovell Beddoes. The first poem in the collection, after a tribute by Lang to Kendall herself, is entitled 'The Jester', corroborating once again the impression suggested that *Dreams to Sell* is a collection of primarily if not exclusively fantastical, comic and satirical poems.

'Lay of the Trilobite' (without the initial 'The') is the second poem by Kendall in the collection, and the first of a series of twelve poems grouped together under the heading 'Science'.<sup>4</sup> The fact that this series exists at all suggests that this new poet has a level of scientific expertise not evident from 'The Lay of the Trilobite' alone as it appears in *Punch*, while the other poems in the series come to inflect the opening poem after the fact. 'A Pure Hypothesis' and 'The Conscientious Ghost', for example, both show Kendall's eye for the ludicrous potential of scientific ideas. In the former, the idea of a fourth dimension is a starting point for imagining a four-dimensional perspective on life in three dimensions as humans had conventionally conceived it. In the latter, the persistence of psychological researchers in scrutinising the activity of supposed spirits is seen as putting an unreasonable burden on the ghosts themselves. The series 'Science' appears, then, to fall within the wider remit implied by the title *Dreams to Sell* and the rest of the book's front matter. Science is one topic for fantastical comedy and satire within the collection as a whole.

In other poems in the group, the comedy derives less from particular scientific ideas or practices than from the speakers' attitudes to science itself. In 'The Lower Life', the speaker, recalling the providential evolutionist at the end of 'Lay of the Trilobite, laments the fact that humanity's mental evolution has come at the cost of peace, pleasure and opportunities lost. In "'Taking Long Views'", the narrator tries to persuade his interlocutor of the evolutionary advance of humanity only to be repeatedly brought up short by the man's despair at not knowing whether, in the distant future, centrifugal force will carry the Earth away from the sun or centripetal force will cause it to fall into the sun. In this poem the two voices undercut one another. The message of evolutionary progress is undermined by the reminder of the Earth's ultimate extinction, while the second speaker's paralysis is both crippling and ridiculous as he frets over what astronomy might reveal about what may happen long after he himself is dead.

The most direct expression of Kendall's satire on those who take science too seriously and who try to base a larger worldview upon it comes at the end of

'Education's Martyr'. The subject of this poem is a man who has been spoilt by an education geared towards tests or 'scoring marks' (l. 30), including in science. He can no longer enjoy everyday flowers, as botany has made them specimens. He cannot enjoy landscapes for their own sake, but only the rocks and fossils they contain. He cannot appreciate the power of classical poetry, because he has become an instinctive pedant. The poem concludes:

Ah! happier he who does not know  
The power that makes the Planets go,  
The slaves of Kepler's Laws;  
Who finds not glands in joy or grief,  
Nor, in the blossom and the leaf,  
Seeks for the secret Cause! (ll. 31-36)

The implication of this poem, as of 'Lay of the Trilobite', 'The Lower Life' and "'Taking Long Views'", is that too great an obsession with science, or too much investment in it, can be debilitating.

As Kendall recognises, science can be disillusioning, even disenchanting. In 'Education's Martyr', emotions such as joy and grief are reduced to the workings of 'glands'. In 'A Pious Opinion', the story of Cinderella is debunked as a nature myth. In 'The Philanthropist and the Jelly-Fish', the narrator's plan to rescue the stranded jelly-fish is undermined by the jelly-fish herself, who explains that it will make no difference as 'I'm dead to woe or bliss: / *I haven't a Sensorium* / And that is how it is' (ll. 50-52). Science can even disillusion us of illusions that are supposedly predicated on science itself, like those of the providential evolutionist in 'Lay of the Trilobite', or of the optimistic narrator of "'Taking Long Views'", or, as Kendall suggests in the last poem in the series, 'Woman's Future', of male evolutionists who take women's apparent intellectual inferiority to be a fact of nature. In this context, the last line of 'Evolution's Martyr' is particularly revealing. There is only one gesture earlier in this poem to suggest that the man it describes sought for a higher 'Cause' in nature, when he falls on the ground before a centipede to 'worship and rejoice' (l. 18). But the warning certainly is applicable to the narrator of 'Lay of the Trilobite'. Kendall's satire there is targeted most directly at theistic evolutionism, and more generally at all readings of evolution that see it as progressive, for all that she appears happy to invoke progressive evolution for her own feminist purposes in 'Woman's Future' (a point I will return to towards the end of this essay).

Yet Kendall is equally sceptical of a materialist insistence on science as the only basis for values. The trilobite, paraphrasing Huxley, may claim that ‘all your faiths are ghosts and dreams’, but Kendall is, according to the title of her book, a purveyor of dreams herself, making the encounter with the trilobite itself one such dream. Furthermore, the fact that the providential evolutionist is mocked for his vanity at the outset and later disillusioned of his beliefs does not of itself amount to an endorsement of materialism. As we have seen, the trilobite’s own materialism is grounded in a garbled reading of Huxley and Darwin. Reading the poem again in the context of *Dreams to Sell*, this garbling looks less like the casual ignorance of *Punch* and more like a deliberate mistake, undermining the authority of materialism within the poem even as the trilobite undermines the providential evolutionist. Kendall adds a footnote to the lines ‘I didn’t care—I didn’t know / That I was a Crustacean’ (ll. 51-52), observing ‘He was not a Crustacean. He has since discovered that he was an Arachnid, or something similar. But he says it does not matter. He says they told him wrong once, and they may again’.<sup>5</sup> This note at once displays the poet’s detailed biological knowledge by correcting an error in the original poem and repudiates that same knowledge as impermanent and so ultimately trivial. The overall effect of the series of poems on ‘Science’ in *Dreams to Sell* is to suggest a poet who is at once knowledgeable and sceptical, a poet for whom science can be fascinating but for whom it cannot lead us to more profound truths that might merit more serious poetry.

#### IV

##### May Kendall’s Christian Ethics

From the series ‘Science’, it would appear that Kendall has in her satiric sights those who presume to have found in science a final understanding of nature, whether teleological or material, and who let that understanding determine or inhibit their actions, either through fatalism or a crippling preoccupation with science itself. By putting these poems in the wider context of Kendall’s writings from the 1880s and 1890s, we can see more fully the preoccupations that motivate her satires on science. The result is surprising. Kendall is remembered primarily as a comic poet. As Marion Thain has noted, she was the only woman included by Alfred H. Miles in the volume of his comprehensive Edwardian anthology *The Poets and the Poetry of the*



*Nineteenth Century* set aside for humorous poetry.<sup>6</sup> Kendall is also remembered as a feminist and as a Fabian socialist who championed the working poor in poetry and prose. She is rarely if ever thought of as a religious writer. Yet several articles she published in the periodical press in the late 1880s and the 1890s reveal a preoccupation with Christian ethics which underlies her satire on science and scientists.

Kendall explores the relationship between faith and science in an essay on 'Fear and Hate', published in *Longman's Magazine* in November 1889. Here she is careful to distinguish faith from proof, identifying it rather as honest 'trust'. Indeed, faith is 'in its nature incapable of proof', she argues. On this basis, she insists that faith 'should be too proud to press scientific evidence a hair's breadth beyond its proper limits'.<sup>7</sup> This is precisely what the narrator of 'The Lay of the Trilobite' does in presuming to know the 'providential plan' through his understanding of evolution. It would seem again that Kendall is mocking his theistic interpretation of science specifically. For Kendall, faith is necessarily distinct and separate from science. This is not a weakness, however, but a strength. 'When men cast away the last shred of false certainty', as she writes in this essay, 'their trust only grows stronger in life, and death, and in themselves'.<sup>8</sup> The complacency of the providential evolutionist in 'The Lay of the Trilobite' is dependent on false certainties, which is why he is so vulnerable to their exposure by Huxley and the trilobite, for all that their own certainties as represented in the poem may be false in turn.

In 'Fear and Hate', Kendall writes that to affirm trust in life, death and oneself is 'equivalent to saying: In God'.<sup>9</sup> The religious position she puts forward in this essay is developed over a series of three short essays written for the *Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine* in 1894 and 1895, entitled respectively 'The Social Ideal', 'Relative Selfishness' and 'The Fear of Death'. The object of these essays is to define a Christian moral and political ideal. In them, Kendall argues against the position, put most eloquently and provocatively by Wilde in 'The Soul of Man under Socialism', that the aim of socialism should be the abolition of material want in order to enable the emergence of a more elevated spiritual or cultural life for all. She rejects this utopian model of socialism, remarking that 'In whatever utopia, the weakest must go to the wall – a respectable wall it may be, and well cushioned, but a wall nevertheless'.<sup>10</sup> Kendall is not arguing against the alleviation of poverty by the state per se. But she is arguing that such alleviation can never be a social panacea, as

it is premised on the assumption that material needs come first. Her own position, by contrast, is that people's spiritual and moral well-being must come first, and that social reform, including material betterment, must follow and will follow from proper religious commitment.

Kendall is careful to outline what she means by such a commitment. In her eyes the prime moral danger is selfishness, which she does not hesitate to label 'sin'. This is not merely a material matter, a case of the actions one performs and their practical consequences. Remorse, the vanity and self-satisfaction of philanthropy, 'the glamour of moral obligation' cast over society's 'more repulsive vices, such as avarice or greed', are all selfish motives for actions or bequests that are ostensibly benevolent.<sup>11</sup> So too is the desire for one's own immortality. For Kendall, the main failing of the otherwise noble enterprise of the Salvation Army is that it encourages people to put their hope in an essentially material concept of eternity: an everlasting Heaven. 'Multiply time indefinitely', Kendall writes, 'and it is still time'.<sup>12</sup> What is needed is not the promise of immortality but the realisation that love and the deeds motivated by love transcend both self and time. By contrast, 'the wages of sin is death', not literally in hellfire, but because the sinful soul 'is merged in desires of the most perishable things'.<sup>13</sup>

The relevance of these arguments to 'The Lay of the Trilobite' lies in the characterization of its narrator. He is the very type of self-satisfaction. In 'The Social Ideal', Kendall notes that 'Somewhere Mr. Spencer seems to think that one day the biddings of egoism and altruism will coincide', commenting sardonically that 'that day, at all events, is too far remote to need consideration', and noting that 'in the meantime no amount of appeal to egoistic motives will ever produce a democracy' or 'a utopia'.<sup>14</sup> Like Herbert Spencer, the narrator of 'The Lay of the Trilobite' is too complacent that evolution will, indeed has, brought about the 'providential plan'. He makes this mistake in part because he perceives God's will as operating through time rather than as transcending it. The 'basis of all religions', Kendall argues, is the recognition of 'the difference between things temporal and things eternal'.<sup>15</sup> Whether one calls oneself a Christian or an atheist, if one recognises this, one is religious, while to fail to see this is 'the true atheism'.<sup>16</sup> The narrator's theism is on these terms no more than an empty piety.

Kendall explains the dangers of complacency in a fourth essay for the *Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine*, 'The Brotherhood of Sin', published in 1898. 'As

our self-satisfaction waxes,' she observes, 'our sympathy wanes', because 'we institute mental comparisons between ourselves and those whom we desire to serve' which 'are always to our own advantage'.<sup>17</sup> The providential evolutionist's vanity has literally detached him from his fellow men, as he is off on a mountain top alone seeking 'vague and mighty thought' (l. 3). He implicitly contrasts himself with his fellow men, not so blest with a 'mighty mind' (l. 4), even as he explicitly contrasts himself with the trilobite. 'Idleness and vanity', Kendall remarks in this later essay, 'are delightful enemies to converse with – perfect gentlemen, just like virtues. They can quote Scripture by the mile, and they never shock our feelings or wound our self-respect'.<sup>18</sup> The providential evolutionist is shown to be precious about his self respect and about keeping up the appearance of superiority. He does not answer the trilobite's remarks, commenting that 'that / Would have annoyed my pride' (ll. 61-62). Instead, with perfect comic judgement Kendall has him touch his hat and bow with the immaculate decorum of one who has been deeply stung but won't admit it.

We may find the conclusions that Kendall's evolutionist leaps to on the basis of his encounter with the trilobite as comically false as his opening assumptions. But his disillusionment at least marks the start necessary to any moral progress away from vanity and self-satisfaction towards what Kendall calls 'the only possible atonement – work'. As she explains in 'Relative Selfishness', there is always a danger of passing from the Charybdis of brooding remorse to the Scylla of 'thinking that it matters little whether we do right or wrong'.<sup>19</sup> There is a clear danger that the narrator of 'The Lay of the Trilobite' may have passed straight from complacency to such indifference. Yet he needs to move away from his starting point to have any hope of moral redemption, while in revealing to us the inadvertent comedy of both his starting and his closing positions Kendall surreptitiously warns us from assuming either ourselves.

The moral premium Kendall puts on work helps to account for the apparent contradiction between 'The Lay of the Trilobite', where she derides teleological evolutionism, and 'Woman's Future', where she appears to affirm it, claiming that through 'Evolution' the 'laws of the universe' will make women amends for the slurs on their abilities as their 'talents shall rise in a mighty crescendo' (ll. 6-8). Although Kendall holds Herbert Spencer up as an intellectual ideal for women to aspire to in this poem, seemingly endorsing his view of evolution as a progressive

law of nature, she makes it clear over the course of the poem that women need to apply themselves if they are to realise this destiny:

But ah, when I ask you for food that is mental,  
 My sisters, you offer me ices and tea!  
 You cherish the fleeting, the mere accidental,  
 At cost of the True, the Intrinsic, the Free. [...]

On Fashion's vagaries your energies strewing,  
 Devoting your days to a rug or a screen,  
 Oh, rouse to a lifework – do something worth doing!  
 Invent a new planet, a flying-machine. (ll. 9-12, 25-28)

Where the providentialist trusts to evolution to do its own work, Kendall herself has no such illusions. Political and spiritual progress must be achieved through the 'lifework' of individuals, itself driven by the realisation that there is a distinction between the 'fleeting' and 'accidental' and the 'True' and 'Intrinsic'. In keeping with the logic of Kendall's Christian socialism, freedom in the temporal sphere, for women as against poverty, can only be achieved through the realisation of these eternal qualities.

## V

### Conclusion:

#### Christianity and the Darwinian Condition

A reading of Kendall's essays helps to account for the positions she adopts on science and evolution throughout her writings, from 'The Lay of the Trilobite' in 1885, through the fuller series 'Science' in 1887, to her review of Hardy's *Wessex Poems* in 1899. Kendall condemns Hardy's poetry for its 'apparent conviction that love and faith are worthless, whether offered to man or God'. By contrast, she vindicates 'lives like Huxley's, Darwin's, John Stuart Mill's' as 'no caprice of doubt, but a triumph of faith', for all that these men did not see themselves as Christians.<sup>20</sup> Here again the fault lies in discouragement, inaction, solipsism – in a defeatist and pessimistic response to science, not in science itself. Kendall's own attitude and response to science reflect her attitude and response to the human condition that it reveals. For all that she differs from them over faith, she respects Darwin, Huxley and Mill, broadly accepting their view of material nature as purposeless and amoral, in place of the teleological alternatives proposed by Owen

on the one hand or Spencer on the other. This respect is justified because, in her own view, they share her religious outlook without realising it, affirming value and purpose through ethics and aesthetics, and through their very work as scientists and philosophers investigating nature.

Kendall's claim that these famous agnostics are in fact religious is premised on a concept of religion that is itself predicated on ethics, not dogma. Kendall uses the language of Christianity in her essays, but she recasts the key concepts of God, sin and the soul in terms that are deliberately ecumenical and can even remain applicable within an otherwise secular worldview. In 'The Fear of Death', she redefines the 'soul' as 'so much of the thought and will of the universe as somehow both *is* the man and is in his keeping'. Kendall insists that 'we must save our souls, not because they are ours, but because they are nothing of the kind'. Instead of appealing to the familiar notion that a person's soul is merely on loan from God, however, she characterises it rather as 'a converging and diverging point of influences, where these are altered for better or worse'. It is this capacity to influence others that imposes 'responsibility' on us. Our souls, Kendall writes, 'are streams we may poison or purify; but if we think we are the only ones who will drink of them, we are mistaken'.<sup>21</sup> Kendall's ethical position here is grounded in her own Christianity, but it does not require any specific theology, or even any theology at all, to sustain it.

For Kendall, to have faith in God is to live by an ethical imperative which admits this responsibility, recognising that real value – like God himself – transcends time. If we can realise that that which lasts of us is not our physical or even our mental existences but rather, *contra* Mark Antony, the good that we do, providing it is done sincerely and so not intrinsically enfeebled and corrupt, then we can learn better to accept the limits of our temporal existence. 'Death is the complete readjustment of the molecules of the brain, which comes alike to saint and sinner', Kendall observes with wry detachment, but 'Men of science are not afraid of molecules'.<sup>22</sup> Kendall's insistence that the sphere of religion should be kept strictly separate from the sphere of material science recalls the position Tennyson held with increasing tenacity in his later poetry, for all that he flirted with Owen's providential evolutionism.<sup>23</sup> But Tennyson was profoundly afraid of molecules, and could not live without immortality. So for all that Kendall is clear in her own mind, in her rhetoric and indeed in her decision to formulate her arguments in the pages of the

*Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine*, that she is herself a Christian, in the end the ideal of religion that she spells out in her essays and that underwrites her poems is closer to that of the non-Christian George Meredith. Kendall repudiates the yearning for immortality as a ‘lust after life’ alien to the true ‘lover of life’, as Meredith put it in his sequence ‘In the Woods’ (1870), while both poets aim to reconcile their readers to mortality by encouraging them, in Kendall’s words, to transcend ‘self after self, till at last his being is so identified with the universal that for him there is no death possible’.<sup>24</sup> For Hardy, Darwinian evolutionary theory and materialist science lead (among other things) to disenchantment, as they do for Kendall’s providential evolutionist in ‘The Lay of the Trilobite’. For Kendall herself, as for Meredith, it is possible to retain a sense of spiritual purpose through what she calls the ‘sense of the solidarity of the universe’ which ‘softens joy and tempers grief, and even forbids despair, just because no one can despair to himself alone’.<sup>25</sup> Where Meredith both articulates and exemplifies his philosophy in his poetry, Kendall’s poetry foreshadows through comedy and satire the arguments she goes on to make in her essays.

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<sup>1</sup> The fullest discussions of Kendall’s poetry to date are Marion Thain, ‘May Kendall’, in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, 240; *Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Women Poets*, ed. by W. B. Thesing (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2001), 118-23; and Diana Maltz, ‘Sympathy, Humor, and the Abject Poor in the Work of May Kendall’, *English Literature in Transition*, 50 (2007), 313-32.

<sup>2</sup> For a full discussion of evolutionary ideas in the work of these and other nineteenth- and twentieth-century poets, see John Holmes, *Darwin’s Bards: British and American Poetry in the Age of Evolution* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> [May Kendall,] ‘The Lay of the Trilobite’, *Punch*, 24 January 1885, p. 41; [Kendall,] ‘Ballad of the Ichthyosaurus’, *Punch*, 14 February 1885, p. 82; Kendall, *Dreams to Sell* (London: Longmans, 1887), p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Kendall, *Dreams to Sell*, pp. 7-39.

<sup>5</sup> Kendall, *Dreams to Sell*, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Marion Thain, ‘What Kind of a Critical Category is “Women’s Poetry”?’ *Victorian Poetry*, 41 (2003), 575-84, pp. 577-78.

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- <sup>7</sup> Kendall, 'Fear and Hate', *Longman's Magazine*, 15 (1889), 78-81, p. 80.
- <sup>8</sup> Kendall (1889), p. 80.
- <sup>9</sup> Kendall (1889), p. 80.
- <sup>10</sup> Kendall, 'The Social Ideal', *Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine*, 117 (1894), 425-27, p. 427.
- <sup>11</sup> Kendall, 'Relative Selfishness', *Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine*, 118 (1895), 115-18, p. 115.
- <sup>12</sup> Kendall, 'The Social Ideal', pp. 425-26.
- <sup>13</sup> Kendall, 'The Social Ideal', p. 426.
- <sup>14</sup> Kendall, 'The Social Ideal', p. 427.
- <sup>15</sup> Kendall, 'The Social Ideal', p. 425.
- <sup>16</sup> Kendall, 'The Fear of Death', *Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine*, 118 (1895), 767-68, p. 768.
- <sup>17</sup> Kendall, 'The Brotherhood of Sin', *Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine*, 121 (1898), 29-31, p. 30.
- <sup>18</sup> Kendall, 'The Brotherhood of Sin', p. 30.
- <sup>19</sup> Kendall, 'Relative Selfishness', p. 116.
- <sup>20</sup> Kendall, 'Pessimism and Thomas Hardy's Poems', *London Quarterly Review*, 1 (1899), 223-34, p. 227.
- <sup>21</sup> Kendall, 'The Fear of Death', p. 767.
- <sup>22</sup> Kendall, 'The Fear of Death', p. 767.
- <sup>23</sup> See Holmes, pp. 62-74.
- <sup>24</sup> George Meredith, 'In the Woods', *Fortnightly Review*, O.S. 14/N.S. 8 (1870), 179-83; Kendall, 'Relative Selfishness', p. 116. For a fuller discussion of Meredith's poem and his views on death and immortality, see Holmes, pp. 107-116.
- <sup>25</sup> Kendall, 'Pessimism and Thomas Hardy's Poems', p. 229.