

THE ORIGINS OF *THE WATER-BABIES*

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In *The Water-Babies* the covert equivalence which Charles Kingsley draws between the states of childhood, race and species conflates, in a colonising fashion, the otherness perceived as so threatening in a climbing boy. Tom, who is black with soot, is regarded as a member of a different race; Tom, who is young and small, is vulnerable as a powerless child and a victim of the class system; Tom, who is represented as ape-like, is loaded also with the moral connotations of bestiality. All of these characteristics are regarded as irreducibly other in the terms of his life as it is lived, but each is capable, after a kind of dying, of radical change towards the condition of the imperial known. Tom's blackness is less than skin-deep and can be washed off; his soul requires a more thorough spot treatment and soak. Tom's littleness is altered in two ways in the text: he is erased as a child, made to make himself grow up and become adult, and his class inferiority is elided by his educational development—no more the sweep's boy, he becomes a man of railways and engineering. Tom's simian characteristics are more troubling: having perceived himself as less than human in the evolutionary chain, he has to revert to a mythical beginning place and trace his way from the diminutive amphibian to the human again. The "little black ape" of the first chapter becomes a big white English male.

How does the one become the other, or, more pertinently, how does the other become the one, the chosen? I will argue that the origins of Tom's transformation narrative lie within a welter of anxieties about discourses of origins—Darwinian, political, colonial—that are heavily inflected with concerns about race, class and gender; and that the first chapter of *The Water-Babies* has its origins in a variously told urban sweeps' legend, Kingsley's reversioning of which implies a reactionary rather than a radically Romantic teleology. I will also examine the way Kingsley's strategic reconstructions of the child figure and childhood enable him to slip insidiously towards the fantastic desiderata of middle-class imperial masculinity.

The origins of Kingsley's representation of evolution and devolution are clearly with Darwin's *Origin of Species* and its precursors; versions of the theory had been current for some three decades and Kingsley, as has often been noted, includes an odd variant in his early "social problem" novel, *Alton Locke* (1850). The hero, after seeing appalling social squalor, degradation and disease, finds himself in a surreal evolutionary dreamland in which he has gone back to "the lowest point of created life"; in a series of metamorphoses he must climb the "golden ladder" of evolution, an image yoking the biblical and the scientific. He is a madrepore, a crab, a remora, an ostrich, a mylodon and, penultimately, an ape. Clearly, however, Kingsley wants to open up any simple opposition between the ape-like and the human and insert intermediary possibilities; for Locke, seeing his ape's face reflected in a pool, "thought it might have been a Negro child's" (345). The likeness perceived between animal and black child bespeaks Kingsley's blurring of these parameters and an implicit fear of a further blurred parameter with the white adult. The contingencies are too close for comfort.

The process of selection narrows to the next stage, that of a child in its mother's arms, the woman herself "some ideal of the great Arian tribe, containing in herself all future types of Arian women" (346). The discourse is moving towards the eugenic notion of a master-race delivered out of a perfect matrix. There follows an image close to those associated with Mrs Doasyouwouldbedoneby and Mother Carey in *The Water-Babies*, of milling babies multiplying and going forth: "Titan Babies, dumb angels of God, bearing with them in their unconscious pregnancy the law, the freedom, the science, the poetry, the Christianity of Europe and the world. Westward ever, who could stand against us?" (347). Such beings are to go forward taming, enslaving, slaying, hewing, chopping and smiting, so that all may be equal, free and brothers. Or so that all who are not smitten may be made subject, colonised and disempowered. Metaphoric representations of implacable colonising forces and of remorseless self and national righteousness are legion in Kingsley's writings. Their very grotesqueness and massiveness demonstrate a pathological fear of otherness, whether perceived in animals, in children, in women, in the under classes, or in other races. If all can progress towards the theoretical pinnacle of evolutionary perfection, then the possibility of regress also threatens. Kingsley makes use of this possibility as part of a ceaseless cycle of purification in *The Water-Babies*, but he seems much more frightened of the downward slide than the upward climb. What is more he cannot cope with the company he might keep.

Kingsley's claim to social reformist fame lies partly with his involvement with Christian Socialism and its efforts to defuse the political claims of the Chartists. Under the banner of Parson Lot Kingsley made an aristocratic call for a conditional democracy of the spirit, not of the body politic: "Workers of England, be wise, and then you must be free, for you will be fit to be free" (qtd Frances Kingsley 1: 157). It is not the survival of the fittest according to Kingsley's scales of fitness, but the freeing of the fittest in an elective freemasonry of the spirit. For a time Kingsley hoped that universal education might fit men for universal suffrage, but by the 1860s he had concluded that many were ineducable, largely for reasons of class or race. In all of this he regarded himself as the type, or, as we would put it, the norm against which such fitness could be measured. He despised the American democracy "where little boys are not expected to be respectful, because all of them are as good as the President" (*Water-Babies* 131). He always favoured a feudal model of the state with a benevolently paternalistic squirearchy.

Throughout his life Kingsley supported English wars, no matter the moral or military principle. The process of colonisation was seen as synonymous with pacification and civilisation. During the Crimean War he wrote exhortatory tracts urging the government to spend more money sending troops to this "holy war"; one of these tracts which questioned the Prince Consort's judgment and actions was suppressed as treasonous. He even underscored his calls for sanitary reform with the justification that it would ensure the provision of sufficient and healthier cannon fodder: "It is a sad thing that 'food for powder' requires to be of the best quality; but so it is, and unless the physical deterioration of the lower classes is stopt by bold sanatory [sic] reform . . . we shall have rifles, but no men to shoulder them" (qtd Frances Kingsley 1: 423). Outrageously Kingsley supported the case of Rajah Brooke who in the name of British settlement had been responsible for the slaughter of the Dyaks in Borneo. "Prove that it

is human life," he wrote to J.M. Ludlow. "It is beast-life. The Dyaks have put on the image of the beast, and they must take the consequences" (qtd Frances Kingsley 1: 222). In the name of imperialist colonisation and war human beings may be sacrificed readily, but only if they are part of the other—the working classes, the "savage" races.

Kingsley was capable of seemingly monstrous rationalisations. During a trip to Ireland at the time of the potato famine he was distraught at the ghastly state of the peasantry and wrote to his wife Fanny:

But I am haunted by the human chimpanzees I saw along that hundred miles of horrible country. I don't believe they are our fault. I believe there are not many more of them than of old, but that they are happier, better, more comfortably fed and lodged, under our rule than they were. But to see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black, one would not feel it so much, but their skins, except where they are tanned by exposure, are as white as ours. (qtd Frances Kingsley 2: 107)

It was as if he had to displace the Irish to the level of beasts to separate himself from a sense of common humanity, let alone of liberty, equality or fraternity with them. Had their skins been black, he could have dismissed them entirely as a form of beast life. As it was they disturbed his secure divisions between the human and the animal, set up a marginal realm which troubled his psychological and religious beliefs, and prevented him from displacing guilt totally. Until the end of his life he was disturbed by the assurances of his religion that all would be made into the likeness of his God.

In her article "Soiled Fairy" Valentine Cunningham examines "Human Soot," one of Kingsley's most famous sermons preached at the Kirkdale Ragged School in 1870 in which he likens the calculated by-products of industry to the human by-products. Each of these, Kingsley argues, can be put to profitable use; unused, each pollutes and contaminates. Cunningham comments that the human by-products are perceived as dangerous because they might revolt and because they are revolting and noxious to the senses. In "Origin of the Water-Babies" I argue a similar point, contending that while Kingsley goes on to preach the preciousness, salvageability and profitability of all human life be it ever so humble, his fear of the human pollutants was as great as his anger at the wastage of humanity. The implication that it was in the general good to correct the social evil, not out of compassion for the human victims but out of wisdom and expediency for the safety of the body politic lays bare Kingsley's fear of the mob and the masses, a fear which had become the rationale for much of his social commentary—the pity of it had become the terror. While the text of *The Water-Babies* transforms the sooty child waste-product into a useful adult engineer in the Epimethean mould, Kingsley the preacher and social reformer advocated the profitable conversion of the waste human beings into those value-added commodities, emigrants who would colonise the earth's blank spaces.

Cunningham further reads *The Water-Babies* as a variant of the ashbrother/Cinderella tale. Tom the little sweep's boy suffers a testing time in the soot, dirt and ashes, cast out and disowned by all the social brothers of Victorian England. He

is exiled to the margins, and Cunningham, referring to Kristevan notions of the abject, argues convincingly that the text is pervaded with the rhetoric of marginality (from soot all the way through slops, trash, poison, disease, backstairs and sewage). Redeemed by his trials Tom is rewarded by the recognition of “the beautiful little white girl,” Ellie. They are not married—“Don’t you know that no one ever marries in a fairy tale, under the rank of a prince or princess?”—but he does get to go home with her on Sundays! (*Water-Babies* 281).

I would argue that there are important differences between archetypal Cinderella/ashbrother tales and the story of Tom, the sweep’s boy transformed into a water-baby. A fascinating intertext, or pre-text, enables a subtler reading of the reversioning that Kingsley undertakes. A nameless tale of a little lost and found sweep is, I suggest, a likely source and inspiration for the first chapter of *The Water-Babies* and is crucial to the understanding of the ensuing narrative. The tale appears to have been popularised around the beginning of the nineteenth century and there are several versions extant. As far as can be ascertained this connection has not previously been made by historians, biographers or literary critics.

The tale tells the story of a young boy named Montagu who is of high social standing, and who is one day lost by his widowed mother. All searches for the child are fruitless. Years later the bereft mother has cause to call a chimney sweep to her house. One of the sweep’s climbing boys becomes lost in his ascent, and the frantic efforts to find him are to no avail. He is presumed dead. Miraculously he is found some time later in one of the household beds, fast asleep. Surprise is expressed at his noble appearance and demeanour. He is washed and presented to the lady of the house who recognises in him her long lost son.

In his *Essays of Elia* Charles Lamb refers to the Montagu tale and relates another version associated with Arundel House in Sussex (130-31). In his description of the London chimney sweeps in *London Labour and the London Poor* Henry Mayhew gives his own version and recounts others including that of Lamb. Both writers tell the stories as if the events have historical credence, although Mayhew does qualify this by referring to the “strong strain of romance” in the “stories of the lost and found Montagu” (3: 371-72). Almost certainly what is being dealt with here is the kind of local story which Stith Thomson calls a sage: that is, a legend which has “attached itself” to a particular place “but which will probably also be told with equal conviction of many other places” (8-9). We know such tales now as local or urban legends, always related as if they belong to historical truth. In this tale of the lost and found sweep the child serves out a lowly time unrecognised among the soot and ashes, and once fortuitously recognised is then restored to the nobility. The local legend truly does have all the signs of a Cinderella/ashbrother tale.

There can be no doubt that Kingsley has offered a rewriting of this tale. What is much more significant is the reversioning that has taken place. These are the active alterations. First Tom is not of a noble family. He is an orphan: “for one is dead, and the other is in Botany Bay” (*Water-Babies* 66). He has always been a sweep’s boy and known only hearths, ashes, soot and chimneys. Second when Tom gets lost in the chimneys he does not come out in a room in whose great white empty bed he falls asleep but in a room whose bed is occupied by a shockingly clean little girl and

surrounded by a large number of implements of cleansing—baths, ewers, soaps, towels. Third, far from being recognised by and reunited with the loving mother, he is rejected noisily by this virginal Madonna. Furthermore he becomes lost and alien to his familiar self when he looks in Ellie's mirror and sees "a little ugly, black, ragged figure, with bleared eyes and grinning teeth. He turned on it angrily. What did such a little black ape want in that sweet young lady's room? And behold, it was himself reflected in a great mirror. . . . And Tom, for the first time in his life, found out that he was dirty" (22).

At this point it is well to attend to Anne McClintock who argues that in late-Victorian England "four fetishes recur ritualistically in soap advertising: soap itself, white clothing (especially aprons), mirrors and monkeys" (214). *The Water-Babies*, whilst predating the Pears phenomenon, nonetheless sets up the iconographic and ideological spectacle. Far from being restored to the nobility Tom is hunted like "strange game" across Vendale Scar, drowned in the river and made over into an amphibious water-baby. His trials are endured in the cleansing, educating and reforming water-world rather than amongst the soot and ashes. He has to recognise the mother-of-all in her many faces, and be recognised as fit by Ellie after he has done the thing he does not like, forgiven and rescued his master and surrogate father figure, Grimes. The final alteration is in absolute opposition to what such diverse critics as Pattison, Coveney and Stone (on Dickens's novels) recognise as the controlling motif of the fairy tale: the child figure as victim crying out loudly: "It's not fair!" Kingsley instead insists: "Yes it is, it is so fair" he insists. While Tom has some superficial aspects of the victim—it is conceded that he works overly hard and that he is beaten by his master—he is very swiftly accused of being responsible for his own "savage" state. Only he can pull himself up by the bootstraps and redeem himself socially and spiritually.

It is extraordinary that some six generations of critics have read Tom as an orphan figure bathed in Kingsley's romantic compassion and pity and who is by the grace of God and author allowed a second chance, a pastoral beginning again. To the contrary, I read Tom as the ignorant fool of a kind of divine comedy: in Calvinist fashion he is rendered as "full" rather than "empty"—full of ignorance, full of irreligion, full of bestiality and savagery. This fullness of negativities requires extirpation so that the freshly "emptied" child can be filled full with the desiderata of a British middle-class boy. What is even more striking is that a middle-class boy's narrative, part picaresque, part quest, part *Bildungsroman*, is overlaid upon the putative working-class boy's narrative, and threatens, in a narrative sea change, to subsume it. When Tom's sooty skin is washed clean in the river when he drowns an ideological slippage and erasure take place. Not only is Tom "emptied" in order to be refilled but he becomes, as a child figure, "a universalised social referent" used "to conceal/erase historical and cultural divisions and differences" (Rose 11). It is this strategy which enables Kingsley to lose interest in Tom as sweep's boy and proceed to his real interest, the training and education of a middle-class boy.

Attention to the forms of social regulation anatomised, satirised and valorised in *The Water-Babies* reveals Kingsley's anxieties about the middle-class institutions of family and school. Specifically he parodies both middle-class boys' schools and their educational practices, and middle-class children's literature and foolish middle-class parents. He decries over-regulation at home and at school as epitomised in the practices

of the Isle of Tomtoddies where the children, subject to incessant and pointless cramming and examination, have all turned into turnips and mangold wurzels and suffer water on the brain (not all water evidently is good). Throughout the fantasy the institutional practices berated for damaging the child are most specifically not those which might concern a working-class boy. What would such as Tom know, for example, of Wastepaperland full of stupid books trading on children? Or of the territory of tuck? Or the land of Hearsay? When Kingsley suddenly pays attention to all those adults who by dint of negligence or malice cause harm to children, many of them in this instance working-class, the exception proves the rule.

What Kingsley gestures towards is a deregulation of school and family, the better to produce the ideal boy child. Parents are to love gently and discipline fairly, while schools are to concentrate on “reading and riting sure, with rithmetick” which “will help a lad of sense through thin and thick” (263). The narrow walls of the schoolroom are to be broken down: Kingsley favours the notion of the whole world as a vast schoolroom, with most learning to be by hard experience. (Bunyan is never far away.) The necessary social regulation is provided by the panoptical surveillance of Mother Nature—here in her two faces, those of the gentle and loving Mrs Doasyouwouldbedoneby and of the reactively punitive Mrs Bedonebyasyouid. Nature is fertile and nurturing (all those milling babies) as well as consuming and destructive (the monstrous feminine with a divine and natural right to beat, torture and murder, in the guise of a phallicised governess cum dame school teacher complete with chastening birch rod). Big mother is indeed watching you.

Given Kingsley’s segue towards his real concern with the upbringing of a middle-class boy, it is not surprising that the masculinities stressed accord with those characteristic of the imperial man and boy. Not only is Tom praised for his manfulness—his bravery (when the going gets tough, the tough get going; no pain, no gain); his willingness to exhaust himself in physical effort; his determination and pluck; his preparedness to wait and work for what he wants; his eagerness to see and know the world—but his representation also aligns him with what James Eli Adams sees as crucial aspects of late Victorian manhood: Tom is “forward looking” (albeit walking backwards) and eventually demonstrates a “capacity for deferred gratification” (111). Kingsley stresses the control, deferral, even denial of desire. Most of the punishments in the novel involve regression, devolution and inside-out corporeality—the species of salmon that regress into dirty spotted trout living out their lives in the muddy pond; the Doasyoulikes who devolve into gibbering apes; Tom himself whose body bristles with guilty spines and prickles—and arise out of desires too readily filled.

Further, as Adams also argues, “the periphery of Victorian empire is an especially appropriate space in which to imagine the strength of Victorian discipline, precisely because it is so attractive as an imagined realm of self-indulgence. Hence the remarkable persistence with which Victorian celebrations of progress incorporate fantasies of escape to a tropical paradise” (111). While Adams sees this trope only in Kingsley’s boys’ own and heroic narratives and overlooks *The Water-Babies*, it is undoubtedly present also in the children’s story. The stern imperatives of hard work, duty and cold water take up three quarters of the narrative; the harsh imperative of hard work alone takes up nearly one quarter. But just for an instant there is an interlude allowed, a time

of play, holiday and enjoyment whose temporary and ceded nature reinforces the overriding Calvinist ideology. Granted Tom's early holiday of play in the water-world, "where the sun is never too hot, and the frost is never too cold" (73), is not precisely a "tropical Saturnalia," but its exotic elements make it function in just the way Adams argues.

The child figure in *The Water-Babies* is the site of many of Kingsley's anxieties and of the contradictions of his religious and political discourse. The notion of childhood, as Ariès and Postman have shown, is constituted and supported by the institutions of family and school, both of which grew alongside the bourgeoisie in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Ivan Illich argues that most of the world's children in our own age know no childhood because they are too poor. Childhood is a function of wealth, class and race. Tom has no childhood because he is poor and unprotected; he has no family, is given no education and he works for his survival. To speak of Tom as an orphan victim who has been robbed of his childhood, as Prickett, Cockshut and many other critics do, is to speak oxymoronically. Tom is a small adult who represents the working classes. Because he is not quite a *tabula rasa*, Kingsley supplants his working-class ignorance with that painful recognition of self as a "little black ape." He then has him erased entirely, made invisible by death and a new birth into a different kind of life. The child is thus a convenient symbol of New Testament rebirth, of becoming as a little child to enter the kingdom of heaven.

But it is the connection between childhood and death that is the more interesting. As Peter Coveney argues in *The Image of Childhood* (first published as *Poor Monkey*), for a society which privileged and sentimentalised the child figure so excessively the Victorians were certainly obsessed with dead ones. He attributes such a fascination to an unhealthy desire to escape from present realities back to a nostalgically idealised childhood past and, because the child was seen to exist in an atemporal realm and to have sprung romantically straight from heaven, from thence to death itself. The child became associated ambivalently with growth, development and change *and* with stasis, immutability and nescience. The child is thus the site of confusion between progress and regress, the locus of blurred notions about origins in religious and scientific constructions. Explorations of origins in terms of family, class, species and human history tend to be located in a child figure sent to wander or search the world. Binary oppositions between flux and stasis, between the known and the other, between the civilised and the primitive often collide within the construct of the child.

One of western culture's most abiding oppositions is that linking childhood with play and adulthood with work. In addition the child is linked strongly with the body and the adult with repression of the body and establishment of the mind as sovereign. Tom begins as that blurring of categories, a child who works. He becomes a child who plays; the text is a parable of the play-way to heaven. But adult-constructed play, otherwise known as education, is always predicated on making the child other to itself; the adult values the child in so far as it can be made over into an adult. Tom begins with work and no water; he proceeds through play and cold water to grow up into an educated and cleansed adult; the final injunction to Tom is to stick to "hard work and cold water." The real changes are thus in that transmogrifying water and in the acquisition of knowledge which, cognisant of consequences, controls the childish body, and

disciplines it. Yet even this progress is represented as being invested with both longing and dread. In the words of the backwards giant cum specimen collector: "Turn into a baby, eh? If I could do that, and know what was happening to me for but one hour, I should know everything then, and be at rest. But I can't; I can't be a little child again; and I suppose if I could, it would be no use, because then I should know nothing about what was happening to me" (253-54). If any character in the text resembles Kingsley himself it is this bumbling natural scientist with the yearning to go back and to know all—mutually exclusive desires, as he painfully understands. Childhood, it is implied, is wasted on children. The text has thus a central ambivalence about the value of the return to origins. The only perceived value lies in the obliteration of whatever is now, whatever guilt has been stored up. Beginning again has that attraction. The impulse though for Kingsley has to be towards knowledge, towards science, and away from ignorance and nescience.

Jan Gordon suggests that when real child readers confront literature whose oppressiveness is overwhelming they will often, in order to avoid further violence, identify with the oppressor annihilating their own identity as children and adopting the identity of the other, the colonising adult. Such a psychic manoeuvre is well known in women's reading of male texts whose object of gaze is woman. As a real child reader my own idiosyncratic way of dealing with this text was to stop reading it at the point when Tom slips mindlessly into the river. I could see that Tom was a victim of adult cruelty, and his death seemed a piece of aggravated authorial assault. Not only does Kingsley insist on the death of the child before he can become worthy of esteem, he frequently makes invisible both the child in the narration and the implied child reader. The former is as often "little man" as "dear little boy," the latter is as often adult as child. Despite the colonising format of the narrative with its quest/adventure structure, the putative child protagonist, who is given no real voice and who is both totally protected by and totally subjected in the otherworld, is thoroughly colonised by an imperialist adult voice.

The Water-Babies is thus problematic as a text about a working-class child, as a text about childhood, as a text about a return to a mythical beginning, and as a text addressed to a child reader. The washed-out child figure is used as a universalising emblem, effectively erasing or concealing those elements of class, gender and race which constitute and determine the existence of childhood. Jacqueline Rose contends that children's literature is based on just those liberal humanist assumptions which make invisible "historical and cultural divisions and differences" (11). The origins of the child figure in *The Water-Babies* are thus coterminous with the origins of a special children's literature; not insignificantly Kingsley's text heralded the beginnings of what has been judged as the Golden Age of English children's literature. Further, as Rose, Jo-Ann Wallace and others have noted, this Golden Age coincided with the climactic period of British imperialism. As Wallace puts it, "the West had to invent for itself 'the child' before it could think a specifically colonial imperialism" (176).

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