

CRITICISM

VOLUME

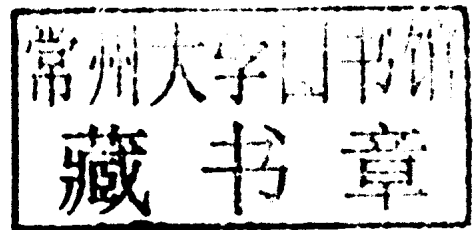
119

Poetry Criticism

*Excerpts from Criticism of the Works
of the Most Significant and Widely
Studied Poets of World Literature*

Volume 119

Michelle Lee
Project Editor



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Jean Ingelow

1820-1897

(Also wrote under the pseudonym Orris) English poet, novelist, and short story writer.

INTRODUCTION

Although she is now generally classified as a minor Victorian poet, Ingelow enjoyed enormous popularity in her lifetime. She was admired by many of her contemporaries in the literary world, including Lord Alfred Tennyson, and she maintained friendships with Christina Rossetti, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and John Ruskin. Her popularity waned after her death and her work is rarely studied in any depth today.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

The eldest of ten children, Ingelow was born in Boston, a seaport town in Lincolnshire, on March 17, 1820. Her father was William Ingelow, a banker, and her mother was Jean Kilgour, a member of a Scottish family originally from Aberdeenshire. Ingelow and her siblings received their education at home in Boston until 1834 when the family moved to Ipswich. She began writing poetry as a young girl, although her mother discouraged her, considering poetry a frivolous waste of time. Denied writing paper, Ingelow wrote verses on the back of her room's window shutters, eventually causing her mother to reconsider and thereafter to encourage her writing. Ingelow also received encouragement from a local curate, Edward Harston, who offered helpful suggestions on her work. She published her earliest poetry and stories in periodicals, using the pseudonym Orris. Her first volume of poetry did not appear until she was thirty years old, when the family moved to London. Ingelow never married and continued to live with her parents, helping to care for her younger siblings. She had many friends and admirers among the important writers of her day—both English and American. For the last thirty years of her life she maintained a close friendship with the art critic John Ruskin, who quoted her in his own writings. In 1892, when Tennyson died, Ingelow was reportedly nominated to succeed him as poet laureate, but was ultimately not chosen for the position. Ingelow died on July 20, 1897, in Kensington; she is buried in Brompton Cemetery in London.

MAJOR WORKS

The themes of Ingelow's poetry are love in its many manifestations, and nature, particularly birds, the river,

and the sea. Her focus on domestic and religious subject matter has been attributed to her sheltered lifestyle and the limited range of her personal experiences. She subscribed to contemporary Victorian views on morality and appropriate social behavior, and rarely challenged those standards in her writing. Ingelow's first volume of poetry appeared in 1850 and was titled *A Rhyming Chronicle of Incidents and Feelings*, which she published anonymously. She did not produce another book of poetry until 1863, when *Poems* was published. It was her most successful volume both critically and commercially, going through thirty printings. It contains the individual poems "Honors," "Divided," and "The High Tide on the Coast of Lincolnshire," usually considered her best single poem. It describes a tidal wave and flood in her village that occurred in 1571. In 1867, Ingelow again turned to the subject of floods and published *A Story of Doom, and Other Poems*, which was revised and reissued five years later as *Poems, Second Series*. The title piece of the original volume, "A Story of Doom," is a retelling in verse of the biblical story of Noah and the Great Flood, apparently influenced by Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Other notable poems in the volume include "The Dreams That Came True," "Laurence," and most especially the highly praised "Gladys and Her Island." *Poems, Third Series* appeared in 1885 and included the individual pieces "Rosamund," "Echo and the Ferry," and "Perdita." It was not as well received as her earlier work. Her final volume of poetry was *Poems of the Old Days and the New*, also published in 1885.

In addition to her poetry, Ingelow wrote a number of fictional works, including the short story collection *Tales of Orris* (1860), her highly praised children's story, *Mopsa the Fairy* (1869), and several novels, including *Allerton and Dreux* (1851), *Sarah de Berenger* (1879), and *Don John* (1881).

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Ingelow's first publication, *A Rhyming Chronicle of Incidents and Feelings*, received little critical attention, overshadowed by the appearance of volumes that same year by such well-known poets as Tennyson and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Tennyson read Ingelow's book and reportedly found it "charming," but her real critical success came much later with the publication of *Poems* in 1863. Beginning around that same time

Ruskin began corresponding with Ingelow and often praised her poetry in his letters, but the true nature of their relationship remains unclear. Ruskin was not quite a patron, nor did he seem to consider Ingelow his literary equal, but the two were friends for many years. U. C. Knoepfelmacher has studied their relationship and finds that Ingelow was a writer whom Ruskin "genuinely admired yet also steadily patronized." Although Ingelow became a very popular poet in the late nineteenth-century, her reputation faded rather quickly after her death. She has yet to regain her status alongside her peer and friend Christina Rossetti, with whom she is sometimes compared. Maura Ives notes that even the renewed interest in Victorian women writers that occurred near the end of the twentieth century resulted in little additional scholarly attention to Ingelow's career. She reports that most of Ingelow's correspondence is unpublished and there remains no adequate scholarly biography of this writer who once enjoyed "celebrity status."

Ingelow's reputation has always been that of a sheltered Victorian woman, whose experience was extremely limited and whose perspective on the world was narrow, which necessarily limited the subject matter of her poetry. Gladys Singers-Bigger, writing in 1940, confirms this view, claiming that after studying the author's life, "one's main impression is of gardens and clergymen," but the critic points out that "there were birds in her gardens, and some of the clergymen had children." Jennifer A. Wagner, however, in her analysis of the 1867 poem "Gladys and Her Island," contends that Ingelow's work is not quite as simple and conventional as it appears. She considers the poem transgressive in that it seems to imagine "an alternative vision" of a life for Gladys beyond the "repressive confines of the girls' boarding school where she lives and works." Heidi Johnson also finds that Ingelow's poetry—specifically the ten-book epic poem *The Story of Doom*—questions rather than validates certain Victorian norms, such as the connection between motherhood and spirituality. According to Johnson, "Ingelow exposes the precariousness of the authority that motherhood confers upon women and suggests that it can become an empty palliative rather than a source of spiritual and social strength." The critic notes that while the Biblical story of Noah provides little information about Noah's wife, Ingelow gives her a name, Niloiya, and a fairly strong characterization as "an Eve-like figure" who opposes her husband's preparations for the flood. "Niloiya's reinterpretation of the Fall and its sequel, centering on an empowered and exonerated Eve, allows Ingelow to proffer the possibility of an alternative form of female spirituality," claims Johnson, although she acknowledges that this position is later undercut and devalued. Ives reports that "Victorian-inspired representations of Ingelow as the sweet, fainting damsel, the respectable chronicler of propriety and domestic monotony, and the

second-rate literary servant remain commonplace," although Ives insists that the true story of Ingelow as a professional author has yet to be told.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

- A Rhyming Chronicle of Incidents and Feelings*
[anonymous] 1850
- Poems* 1863
- Stories Told to a Child* (sketches and prose poetry)
1865
- A Story of Doom, and Other Poems* 1867; revised as
Poems: Second Series 1872
- The Shepherd Lady, and Other Poems* (poems from
Mopsa the Fairy) 1876
- Poems of the Old Days and the New* 1885
- Poems, Third Series* 1885

Other Major Works

- Allerton and Dreux: or, the War of Opinion* (novel)
1851
- Tales of Orris* (short stories) 1860
- Studies for Stories* (children's stories) 1864
- Mopsa the Fairy* (novel for children) 1869
- Off the Skelligs* (novel) 1872
- Fated to Be Free* (novel) 1875
- Sarah de Berenger* (novel) 1879
- Don John: A Story* (novel) 1881
- John Jerome: His Thoughts and Ways* (novel) 1886
- A Motto Changed* (novel) 1894

CRITICISM

Gladys Singers-Bigger (essay date 1940)

SOURCE: Singers-Bigger, Gladys. "Jean Ingelow 1820-1897." *Journal of the English Association* 3, no. 14 (1940): 78-84.

[In the following essay, Singers-Bigger discusses the influences of Ingelow's early years.]

'While she lived, she shone.'

The Star's Monument.

When Jean Ingelow was fourteen her mother discovered the white shutters of her bedroom written over with verses in pencil. It was a double-windowed room looking on a garden in Ipswich, and her choice of tablets is significant. For in one sense she wrote with the shutters of life closed upon her and in the twilight, and in another they were thrown wide to beauty and the far expanse of the soul's country. As one finishes the simple record of Jean Ingelow's life, one's main impression is of gardens and clergymen—but there were birds in her gardens, and some of the clergymen had children.

She had an aunt who worked birds in wool, a quite celebrated artist in that medium; and she had a father who imitated the notes of birds, whistling them with his children raptly and rapturously listening at his knees. But Jean herself had the song of a bird at her heart, pure and nature-taught, and like the 'fair and fond dove' in her poem, she asked only to be 'left alone, for her dream was her own and her heart was full of rest'. Bird notes to her were like perfume in that they gave rise to reveries of environment appropriate to their song, whose language she had no difficulty in interpreting. She voyaged on their wings and had her own theory to account for the wonders of migration, a theory of angelic beings who have permission to take the form of birds, 'to fly and draw with them the sweet obedient flocking things'

How should they know their way, forsooth alone?
Men say they fly alone:
Yet some have set on record, and averred
That they, among the flocks had duly marked
A leader.

Thus were the fairy fancies of her childhood hallowed into religious mysteries, and the babyhood hours at her father's knee inspired the *Songs on the Voices of Birds* which were the work of her maturity.

Over her gardens also, in memory if not always in reality, after the first years, there blew salt breezes from the sea, and many of her birds were sea-gulls. Like her own *Margaret in the Xebec*, 'when to frame a forest scene she tried, the ever-present sea would yet intrude, and all her towns were by the water's side'. Through her mind there sailed the great ships as they had once sailed past her nursery window, up and down the Boston River in Lincolnshire, where she was born in 1820. Was it only coincidence, we may ask, that one who was destined to influence the American people in much the same way as their own poet Longfellow has influenced us should also have had for her earliest impressions

The beauty and mystery of the ships
And the magic of the sea?

Or that in her verse the chimes from Boston Stump should answer across the Fens the carillon from the

Belfry at Bruges, 'Till all the air bin full of floating bells', 'Changing like a poet's rhymes', interchanging and interweaving the thought of the old world with that of the new?

When Jean Ingelow's third collection of Poems was published the American civil war had just ceased, and a reviewer likened the voice of the new singer to that of one of the birds she loved, rising poignantly sweet after a great storm, comforting, consoling, and prophetic. Jean paid her own tribute to her brother poet in *Gladys and Her Island*, a delicate homage:

Soon there came by, arrayed in Norman cap
And kirtle, an Arcadian villager,
Who said, 'I pray you, have you chanced to meet
One Gabriel?' and she sighed; but Gladys took
And kissed her hand: she could not answer her,
Because she guessed the end.

Much as the Victorian gentlewoman shrank from any suggestion of masculinity, the fact remains that the finest women of the period were characterized by a delicate manliness, far enough removed in appearance from its modern development, but which, nevertheless, laid its foundations in moral courage and self-restraint. Those who like Jean Ingelow sat up straightly at their desk or their needlework; who with a peculiarly sensitive reserve abjured extravagant sympathy in sorrow, and endured the narrow confines of their existence with cheerfulness rather than trespass against what they conceived to be their feminine duty, were yet paradoxically being borne onward by the wings of events more imperatively than they knew—great wings which were to materialize in a way they dreamed not of, and to sweep across oceans and continents, driven by a woman's will, the resultant outcome of those controlled and balanced intelligences which had held even a rebellious imagination in check.

Jean Ingelow had the advantage of having brothers. It was this masculine companionship which perhaps enabled her to write with sympathy and understanding of the sailors and farmers about her home, to catch the rough idiom of their speech; or to enter into the more refined rivalry and scholarship of the young men, clergymen and others, whose ambitions and contemplations she transferred to her poems and novels. In these last the vacillating Valentine and more Teutonic Brandon witness to a trenchant observation in their creator. Sometimes her character-sketches take a semi-dramatic form; they are cameos of dialogue interspersed by songs, as in *Supper at the Mill* and *Afternoon at a Parsonage*. Singularly devoid of drama as her own life was, it was natural that she should dramatize her fancies, and just as natural that the call of some household

duty should interrupt and leave the little scene poised, as it were (or rather should we say hastily concluded), too slight and too homely to be deemed real drama, but also so unforced as to claim our admiration for its truth to life.

We are told that it was long before Jean realized her appeal to a wider audience than her home circle. The charity of her poetic gifts certainly began at home and overflowed almost imperceptibly into the world, but we should be wrong if we denied ambition to this modest and retiring writer.

Often as she paced the 'dry smooth-shaven green' we may think of her in solitude swept by an inward storm of enthusiasm and kindled by a secret flame of emulation for the work of one whose organ-voice inspired her with intellectual hero-worship and 'a humble sense of kinship'. This was Milton; as far removed from the milder poets with whom she has been compared as the 'wandering moon' is separate from a 'student's lamp'. Milton as a Puritan spoke to the Evangelical side of her nature; as one whose fancy teemed with archangels and resounded to the choirs of heaven he provided her with just that ritual of the mind which lack of outward beauty in life reacts to and demands in contemplation; as blind and afflicted he appealed to her womanly pity.

Her metaphor, applied to one who suffered blindness in her *Afternoon at a Parsonage*, is Miltonic in grandeur and too majestic to be adapted to the somewhat insignificant hero of that playlet, but explicable if a mightier shadow hovered in the background of her thoughts.

O misery and mourning! I have felt,
Yea, I have felt like some deserted world
That God had done with, and had cast aside
To rock and stagger through the gulfs of space,
He never looking on it any more.
Untilled, no use, no pleasure, not desired,
Nor lighted on by angels in their flight
From heaven to happier planets, and the race
That once had dwelt on it withdrawn or dead.
Could such a world have hope that some blest day
God would remember her and fashion her anew?

Her *Song for the Night of Christ's Resurrection* is avowedly written 'in humble imitation' of Milton's *Hymn on the Morning of Christ's Nativity*. She follows the Miltonic example of mingling mythology with Christianity, though only in so far as to confirm the defeat of the ancient gods and to provide us with a memorable picture of the three Fates alone surviving the years of Ministry. Atropos, in that timeless pause of dread suspense before Easter dawns, is withheld from cutting the thread of that sacred Life, which is metamor-

phosed as we read from the thread of a single existence to the thread on which depends the eternal life of all creation. Implicit in that inhibition is man's whole destiny of immortality.

But it was in *A Story of Doom*, first published in 1867, that Jean Ingelow's ambition reached its culmination. Milton's shadow still brooded above her genius, and in courageous obedience to that urge she cast about her for a subject which should be in a direct line of descent from the *Paradise Lost*. She found in it the Biblical Legend of the Flood. The poem, which is in nine books, is a noble effort of the imagination. One questions why a poem such as this should be so little known and how a jewel of language that is at once tender and sincere should be hidden under sligher and more commonly appreciated works.

Here is the prayer of Noah prior to his entrance into the Ark—could many have pleaded more passionately?

God, God! Thy billows and Thy waves
Have swallowed up my soul. Where is my God?
For I have somewhat yet to plead with Thee;
For I have walked the strands of Thy great deep,
Heard the dull thunder of its rage afar,
And its dread moaning. O the field is sweet,
Spare it. The delicate woods make white their trees
With blossom,—spare them. Life is sweet; behold
There is much cattle and the wild and tame,
Father, do feed in quiet,—spare them. God,
Where is my God? The long wave doth not rear
Her ghostly crest to lick the forest up,
And like a chief in battle fall,—not yet—
The lightnings pour not down, from ragged holes
In heaven, the torment of their forked tongues,
And like fell serpents, dart and sting—not yet.
The winds awake not, with their awful wings
To winnow, even as chaff, from out their track
All that withstandeth, and bring down the pride
Of all things strong and all things high—not yet,
O let it not be yet. Where is my God?

If we compare this agonized and repudiating prayer with the author's description of the Boston Flood of 1571, in her best-known poem, *High Tide on the Coast of Lincolnshire*, we shall discover a curious similarity of vision. The idea of an inundation seems to have been familiar to her and to have haunted her mind.

In *Mopsa the Fairy* we have the same idea rendered in prose, of the 'wonderful river' which flowed inland to the fairy countries rather than outward to the sea. Of rain there seems but little thought; it is the 'stolen tyde' in the first poem as in the last; and it may be because of the localization of the scene in her mind, as it were, that Jean Ingelow chose to leave the Covenant of the Rainbow unrecorded.

From her exposition of the age-long conflict between matter and spirit on the battleground of man's reason in one of the passages of *Doom* and from the opening lines of *Dominion* we may conclude that she was well read in philosophy.

But clearly hers was a philosophy of the negative—one which grew out of renunciation, the consistent crushing down in herself of the will to live.

Jean was happy in her home-life, none more so, but we have the whole witness of her dramatic poetry to confirm us in the belief that there were inward denials through which alone the even tenor of her surface way was preserved.

When I reflect how little I have done,
And add to that how little I have seen,
Then furthermore how little I have won
Of joy, or good, how little known, or been:
I long for other life more full, more keen,
And yearn to change with such as well have run,
Yet reason mocks me—nay, the soul, I ween,
Granted her choice, would dare to change with none.

From these denials there springs the courageous doubt-facing nobility of certain of her sonnets.

How long she wrestled with her angel before his blessing fell upon her in stark and arid counsel, leaving her exhausted but still spiritually strong, we may not guess, but it seems to me that her greatest sonnet, titled only by its first line, should accompany Emily Brontë's last utterance, for truly it may be said that 'no coward soul' was hers who wrote it. Light and darkness, the positive and the negative sides of Faith, find expression in these poems, and together they beat upon the eternal gates for admittance.

Though all great deeds were proved but fables fine,
Though earth's old story could be told anew,
Though the sweet fashions loved of them that sue
Were empty as the ruined Delphian Shrine;
Though God did never man, in words benign,
With sense of His great Fatherhood endue;
Though life immortal were a dream untrue
And He that promised it were not Divine;
Though soul, though spirit were not, and all hope
Reaching beyond the bourn, melted away;
Though virtue had no goal and good no scope,
But both were doomed to end with this our clay;
Though all these were not,—to the ungraced heir
Would this remain,—to live as though they were.

More tenderly in *Failure*, more devotionally in *Compensation*, we have the same trend of thought suggested; never abortive, never ending in the sterility of mere complaint, her discontents are glorified by a wide-ness of vision which justifies and envelops their being,

rendering them beneficent and fruitful. Instinctively, in the phrase of Lord Haldane, she knew that 'the negative must be the negative pregnant'. It is curious to come across the sonnet *Failure* in a book for children.

Indeed, the majority of the lyrics in *Mopsa the Fairy* are palpably above the heads of children. One wonders why they were included, almost wholly irrelevant to the story as most of them appear, until we look deeper into the writer's intention, until we remember the higher perception which, undeveloped, floated alongside our own childish appreciation of the beautiful. She would infuse the young minds of her readers with music and the strange unaccountable magic of words, and this, her spell, has its part not inappropriately in the inspired inconsequence of her tale.

Who could remain insensible to the spontaneous melody of her song with its haunting repetitions?

One morning, oh! so early, my beloved, my beloved,
All the birds were singing blithely, as if never they
would cease;
'Twas a thrush sang in my garden, 'Hear the story,
hear the story!'
And the lark sang, 'Give us glory!'
And the dove said, 'Give us peace!'

She herself was moved by it—we know she was because immediately it is finished she smiles through her tears, disavowing the stirred feelings of an adult and poking fun at herself to show that she is once more on a level with her childish audience.

"A very good song too," said the Dame, at the other end of the table, "only you made a mistake in the first verse. What the dove really said was, no doubt, 'Give us peas'. All kinds of doves and pigeons are very fond of peas."

Her predilection for 'doves, milking-pails, daisies and weather (with its few rhymes)' is noted by Mrs. Meynell in a brief introduction to the Red Letter Library edition of her poems, published in 1908, 'as the fashion of a day that is long over-past'.

I cannot recall any undue insistence on milking-pails or daisies, but if Jean Ingelow was preoccupied with doves and stars and children, it was because they were the colours wherewith she painted her own personal rainbow of hope. When the floods entered her soul, threatening to overbear her cheerful disposition with the loss of lover, of mother, and of brother, she had but to look up and there outspread were the tranquillizing wings of God's Paraclete.

Mrs. Meynell discovers in 'the picturesqueness of her lyrical stories' a kind of popularizing of the Pre-

Raphaelite movement; an observation justified by the medievalism that informs certain of the poems and by her fancy for archaic words such as 'wonned' and 'brede'.

The consolation offered to the bereaved mother in *The Mariner's Cave* is the traditional dream-consolation of the Middle Ages; but the correspondence between the central teaching of *The Monitions of the Unseen* and that of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's little prose work *Hand and Soul* is yet more arresting.

What governs such correspondences, involuntary as we needs must believe them? If we attribute them simply to the *Zeitgeist*, how is it that so often the moods they express are applicable also to the peculiar circumstances of the writer?

When Holman Hunt painted his picture 'The Light of the World', the figure with Christina's luminous eyes and Christina's brow knocked not only at the portals of the world but at the heart's door of each individual besides, and in poetry that insistent gentle sound was repeated. Jean Ingelow chose for the text of her seaman's sermon, finding fresh marvel in the words, 'Behold! Behold! saith He, I stand at the door and knock', and applied them with unerring perspicacity to the circumstances of her lowly fishermen, those to whom in her visits to Filey Brig her love had gone forth, finding perhaps in their environment the sea both spiritual and material towards which her life's river most unreservedly flowed.

So when, on that July morning in the Diamond Jubilee year of the great Queen whose reign her life and work had graced, the end came quietly, we have no difficulty in believing that

(She) only saw the stars—she could not see
The river—and they seemed to lie
As far below as the other stars were high.

If we accept the spiritualistic hypothesis of Arthur Findlay, who maintains that the next world is composed of matter at a higher rate of vibration than this one, interpenetrating and surrounding what is here visible, then indeed Jean was uttering a more comprehensive truth than she knew when she held that 'he who has his own world has many worlds more'.

Something of Christian Science teaching is reflected in this paragraph from a letter:

'The more we know that we are spirit, that the body is a mere nothing, and the spirit great, and might be wise and holy and happy in the life of God, the better the body will, so to speak, behave itself.'

It is maybe for the sake of such mental interweaving that Jeremiah exhorts us:

'Thus saith the Lord, Stand ye in the ways, and see and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls.'

So shall our pride of discovery be chastened and our knowledge widened. And so I suggest that we cannot do better than stroll awhile with Jean Ingelow through her gardens, forgetting in the quietness of her secluded life the clamours that surround us in our present world, listening only to the croon of her favourite bird,

An emblem meet for her, the tender dove,
Her heavenly peace, her duteous earthly love.

Jennifer A. Wagner (essay date autumn 1993)

SOURCE: Wagner, Jennifer A. "In Her 'Proper Place': Ingelow's Fable of the Female Poet and Her Community in *Gladys and Her Island*." *Victorian Poetry* 31, no. 3 (autumn 1993): 227-40.

[In the following essay, Wagner examines Ingelow's treatment of geographical and social boundaries in her poem "Gladys and Her Island."]

Eric S. Robertson's notoriously condescending "Critical biography" of Jean Ingelow in his 1883 *English Poetesses* locates the cause of her immense popularity in her "domesticity": "these [lyrics] deal with homely subjects described in good Saxon language. . . . Homeliness of subject and place are natural to Jean Ingelow."¹ These remarks, designed to put Ingelow "in her place" as a female poet, are nevertheless interesting, for they do point to the heart—hidden perhaps to Robertson—of "the English poetess"'s psychic landscape. Like so many female writers of her century, Ingelow revealed that landscape in a poem that has been recognized as one of her most imaginative, *Gladys and Her Island: On the Advantages of a Poetical Temperament* (published 1867).² This overlooked work is a parable of a young governess's "visionary nostalgia" for a home that has disappeared, but that is rediscovered—or perhaps discovered for the first time. The poem explores not only the subjective space of the female imagination, but also its relation to social "place" and to an ethical context. Gladys' journey is represented as a series of transgressions, not only of geographical boundaries, but also of social boundaries, of "decorum."

What is perhaps most interesting about the poem, however, is its recognition of its own ambivalence. While the narrated adventure leaves Gladys enlightened

but still isolated within the repressive confines of the girls' boarding school where she lives and works, the poem, extending beyond the narrative itself, ends with an alternative vision. This is a vision of a community of persons like Gladys, a community that may include the reader herself. The poem's own "transgression" beyond its narrative frame also effects first a conflation, and then a collusion of narrator, heroine, and reader that attempts to "interpret" the ending of Gladys' quest in a positive way.

1

Linda Dittmar has pointed out that narratives of artistic emergence, of which *Gladys* is clearly one, are characteristically narratives of transgression,³ and it is as such that this narrative is framed. The vision of *Gladys and Her Island* is in fact brought on by transgression, both literal and figurative, a crossing over not only of geographical, but also of behavioral boundaries. Significantly, for example, this vision takes place during "a holiday / A whole one, for herself!" (p. 226). Gladys had to leave the actual, physical premises of the school in order to leave also, if only temporarily, the parameters of its ideological premises. But this opportunity only comes about because the older teachers with whom Gladys works decide that "it were not well / That little Gladys should acquire a taste / For pleasure, going about, and needless change. / It would not suit her station: discontent / Might come of it; . . . we were best / To keep her humble" (p. 225). Although she is granted this day off, Gladys is said to "steal out" to the nearby beach; even with permission, she feels as a transgression her walk "beyond the groups" of bathers, and more notably, beyond a line of breakers that have marked the boundaries of her previous geographical knowledge of her environment:

"There is the boulder where we always turn.
O! I have longed to pass it; now I will.
What would THEY say? for one must slip and spring;
'Young ladies! Gladys! I am shocked My dears,
Decorum, if you please: turn back at once.
Gladys, we blame you most; you should have looked
Before you.' Then they sigh,—how kind they are!—
'What will become of you, if all your life
You look a long way off?—look anywhere,
And everywhere, instead of at your feet,
And where they carry you!' Ah well, I know
It is a pity," Gladys said; "but then
We cannot all be wise."

(p. 227)

Gladys' curiosity is tempered by the specter of disapproval from "THEM," according to their sense of what is appropriate for Gladys to experience. THEY would have Gladys looking at her feet, aware of the place

where she is, never at what is ahead or possible. She herself knows that her desire to look beyond is a transgression, a crossing over the line of decorum. But Ingelow's capitalization of the personal pronoun "THEY" has the effect of depersonalizing her superiors while it indicates their elevated status in her heroine's mind.⁴

Furthermore, Gladys is keenly aware that "wisdom" is associated with that sense of decorum, with convention, and in a passage just before the vision appears to her, she meditates on the conflict between living according to that wisdom (or according to "my duties") and living according to her desires:

—when I teach the sums
On rainy days, and when the practising
I count to, and the din goes on and on,
.

Then I am wise enough: sometimes I feel
Quite old. I think that it will last, and say,
'Now my reflections do me credit! now
I am a woman!' and I wish they knew
How serious all my duties look to me.
And how, my heart hushed down and shaded lies,
Just like the sea when low, convenient clouds,
Come over, and drink all its sparkles up
But does it last? Perhaps, that very day,
The front door opens: out we walk in pairs;
And I am so delighted with this world,
That suddenly has grown, being new washed,
To such a smiling, clean, and thankful world,
And with a tender face shining through tears,
Looks up into the sometime lowering sky,
That has been angry, but is reconciled,
And just forgiving her, that I,—that I,—
O, I forget myself, what matters how!

(p. 228)

In this obviously self-revealing passage Gladys' account of her duties lapses almost immediately, and inadvertently, into her imaginary glimpse of the emergence, evidently after a storm, of a paradisaical earth from a "lowering" and angry sky. Gladys' very "delight" with this "new-washed world" is checked by the echoes of THEIR sense of decorum. She stops her vision short in the last lines quoted above, not allowing herself to "forget herself"—which means, according to the following lines, also forgetting her place:

"And then I hear (but always kindly said)
Some words that pain me so,—but just, but true
'For if your place in this establishment
Be but subordinate, and if your birth
Be lowly, it the more behooves,—well, well,
No more. We see that you are sorry.' Yes!
I am always sorry THEN; but now,—O, now,
Here is a bight more beautiful than all."

(pp. 228-229)