

Bl. John Henry Cardinal Newman
At Sea. June 16, 1833

Lead Kindly Light

John B. Dykes
Lux Benigna

(D7) G C G D7

1. Lead, kind - ly light, a - mid th'en - cir - cling gloom, lead Thou me on;
2. I was not e - ver thus, nor prayed that Thou shouldst lead me on;
3. So long Thy power hath blest me, sure it still will lead me on,

(D7) G C G D7 G

1. The night is dark, and I am far from home; lead Thou me on.
2. I loved to choose and see my path; but now, lead Thou me on.
3. O'er moor and fen, o'er crag and tor - rent, till the night is gone,

D A D D7

1. Keep thou my feet; I do not ask to see.
2. I loved the gar - ish day, and spite of fears,
3. And with the morn those an - gel fa - ces smile,

G C G D7 G

1. The dis - tant scene; one step e - nough for me.
2. Pride ruled my will: re - mem - ber not past years.
3. Which I have loved long since, and lost a - while.

God has created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission. I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next. I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for naught. I shall do good; I shall do His work. I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place, while not intending it if I do but keep His commandments. Therefore, I will trust Him, whatever I am, I can never be thrown away. If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him, in perplexity, my perplexity may serve Him. If I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve Him. He does nothing in vain. He knows what He is about. He may take away my friends. He may throw me among strangers. He may make me feel desolate, make my spirits sink, hide my future from me. Still, He knows what He is about. —Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman

Literary Criticism of Blessed John Henry Newman's *Lead Kindly Light*

by Anthony Esolen, from *Real Music: A Guide to the Timeless Hymns of the Church* (2016)

Hymn audio sample, search YouTube, Andrew Remillard, *Lead Kindly Light Lux Benigna*

...[T]here are tremendously gentle poems of repentance, and rightly so, because though repentance is bitter, it is also sweet. It is the sweetness of restored love and gratitude, drowning all shame. The prodigal son tasted it when his father threw his arms about his neck and kissed him. We find this sweetness in [Blessed John Henry Cardinal] Newman's quiet and subtle poem, *Lead, Kindly Light* (1833): [See the hymn lyrics.]

Most impressive are Newman's pauses, placed with great tact, in the middle of the long pentameter lines. They give us the effect of lines-within-lines, echoing one another, tinting one another, so to speak, with a different color, a different feeling. In the first stanza, each of the long lines is suspended in the same position, after the fourth syllable:

...*Lead, kindly Light...*
...*The night is dark...*
...*Keep Thou my feet...*
...*The distant scene...*

That is fine indeed. Newman begs the Light to lead him, because the night is dark. What does it mean to be led by the Light? It means that we are led in every step we take: *Keep Thou my feet*. The destination is distant. Newman cannot see it, in the dark. Yet it is there. He does not even pray to see it, now: *One step enough for me*, he concludes the stanza, a terse, elliptical sentence omitting the verb *is*. What kind of terrain is he traversing? We don't know yet. All we know is that a foreboding gloom surrounds him, and-now turning to simple language that even a child can understand-he is *far from home*. That is all we need to know.

The second stanza turns from the present journey to the past. Newman now varies the position of his pauses, lending the verses a meditative effect, as he ponders the person he used to be. Again we may place beside one another the lines-within-lines:

...*I was not ever thus...*
...*I loved to see and choose my path...*
...*I loved the garish day...*
...*Pride ruled my will...*

How powerful and sad the progression is! Newman begins line after line with the personal pronoun *I*-and it was just because he once led his whole life according to the *I*, with pride ruling his will, that he went astray. That pronoun is set against the familiar *thou*. *I once led myself, but I do not wish to do so any- more; please, you lead me now, it's you I trust and not myself*. Notice the ironic power of the verbs: *I loved to see and choose; I loved; pride ruled*. It is as Augustine said: *Amor pondus meum*, "My love, my weight!" Our desire is like a weight on a pulley that throws us in one direction and not another. Newman loved, but loved badly; he loved his own way, his own path. He wanted to see. That doesn't mean he wanted to understand. He wanted his future to be laid plain before him. He wanted to be the decider of his fate. He wanted to bask in the glare of the day. But now he begs the Lord to forget that foolish past. If we thought that the darkness was merely that of sin, we are mistaken. It is also the darkness of trust in the Lord, giving ourselves utterly to His providence, declining to insist that we know all the specifics of our journey beforehand.

The third and final stanza [lyric] makes the journey more concrete for our imaginations. It is as if Newman were walking through a vast English wilderness, crossing the moors and the fens, fording the swift rivers; dangerous in the night. But the night will not last forever. The day will dawn, and when it does, the night will be gone, once and for all. The morning will shine with the faces of angels, those which the repentant Newman now tells us he once loved, a long time ago, but which he had *lost awhile*. The words are simple, and steeped in honest shame. How could he have lost such beauty? But the word *awhile* tempers the shame. Yes, he did lose them; but he did not lose them forever.

In 1865, the hymnodist John Dykes composed a most unusual and lovely melody for this poem. It is called *Lux Benigna*, a Latin translation of Newman's kindly light. Its complex interlacing structure helps to bring out the lines-within-lines and the power of the short lines, which Dykes stresses by slowing the melody down, lengthening the notes.

Father George William Rutler, *The Stories of Hymns*, "Lead Kindly Light"

After a lecture I had given in Tennessee, I met a woman whose father as a boy, along with his classmates at the Birmingham Oratory School in England, had called their founder, John Henry Cardinal Newman, "Jack" behind his back. Hilaire Belloc records somewhere that he did the same. Newman was very human, and, among his other human acts, he contracted fever while on a Mediterranean holiday in 1833. It happened after he had left the company of his friend Hurrell Froude and Froude's father and was alone in the Sicilian village of Castro Giovanni. The fever lasted three weeks. Then he boarded an orange boat for Marseilles and was becalmed in the Straits of Bonifacio. "When I was most qualmish I solaced myself with verse-making." Among the more than eighty verses that issued was "The Pillar of the Cloud," widely known as "Lead, kindly Light." Light to the feverish is garish. [Cf. Charles Dickens' description of harsh Marseilles light in *Little Dorrit*.] Newman's whole life seemed that way in such a moment, particularly so since he had been morally rattled by his introduction to Latin culture lived alive, and not as his neoclassical mind had met its mellow moons and mute thunder in the iambics of Virgil and Cicero. Florid Rome of his fervid tour was "corrupt and under a curse." Yet it stayed in his mind even when his mind came to rights. A dozen years before his conversion to the Catholicism of Rome, his words were burdened with prophecy: the garish day would yield to a kindlier light once one step yielded to another in trust of finding the way.

In a letter of 1874, Newman declines to explain what he had written long before, for no author should be held accountable for what he said "when home-sick, or seasick, or in any other way sensitive or excited." Coleridge never said that of his poetry written under the influence of opium, but then he attained only to Xanadu and not heaven. So Newman's "angel faces" still challenge interpretation. They are, I think, poetic diction, instead of theology, for the "angelic" human friends, whose pictures stayed on his mantels and even surrounded his altar.

Poetry was not Newman's chief claim to laurels. In the 1920s Professor Joseph Reilly sniffingly faulted the poem for contradictory images and found it distinguished for the uniquely popular success of its technical unsuccess. Newman humbly, if extravagantly, attributed his hymn's popularity to the tune written thirty-two years later by the Anglican clergyman of High Church sympathies John Bacchus Dykes (1823-1876). Dean Church and J. E. T. Street made a gift of a "fiddle" in 1865, which brought Newman's stiff fingers back to his beloved form of relaxation. Heaven performed in the Oratory School orchestra. The very probable thought of him playing Dykes' tune is one of the most palpably Victorian scenes imaginable. The hymn's appeal remains, and I recall talking about it in the longest conversation I ever had with Cardinal Cooke, two days before he ordained me.

In the crisis of his Sicilian fever, Newman kept muttering, "I have not sinned against the light." The line is freighted with common psychology, Platonism, and mystical religion, but most certain is his life itself as a hymn of grace, and all the accomplishments of his long life are variations on that theme. Back in Oxford, one month after he wrote "Lead, kindly Light," he heard John Keble (1792-1866), Professor of Poetry, preach the Assize Sermon on "National Apostasy" and called that the start of the Oxford movement.