

“SHADOWS HOT FROM HELL”: SWINBURNE’S POETHICS

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Musings from the editor’s desk.

When Swinburne was helped from his deathbed in Bloomsbury to a cab bound for Putney in 1879 none of his friends would ever have guessed that he would outlive nearly all of them, not merely surviving but thriving for another thirty years. He lived the first half of his life as the Keith Richards of the Victorian era, risking his talent for the riotous affair of long nights of anarchic abandon, not to escape the boredom of endless hours but to extend the vigour of each fleeting day from dusk to dawn. The romantic attraction to this side of Swinburne’s life does not arise from the addiction to alcohol too often associated with the solitary artist agonizing over the search for *le mot juste*, but rather from the opposite direction: Swinburne was the late-night clubber who managed to embody the communal spirit of art envisioned by the Pre-Raphaelites as the ideal pursuit.

This art-club spirit motivated the Pre-Raphaelites to organize the Cyclo-graphic Society, the Literary Society, and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in the 1840s; *The Germ*, the Set Order of Galahad, *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, the jovial campaign at the Oxford Union, and the commune at Red House in the 1850s; Morris, Marshall, Faulkner, and Co. in the 1860s; and the fin-de-siècle Rhymers Club at the Cheshire Cheese in the ’90s. Sharing their devotion to art and poetry with a bohemian community of friends, the Pre-Raphaelites lived their lives for art. Stories were told of a naked Swinburne sliding down the bannister at Dante Rossetti’s Chelsea home while reciting *Sordello* forwards and backwards and of George Meredith grumbling that he could no longer work amidst such chaos. This distinction between the two friends is exactly the point of our romantic attraction: Swinburne could work

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despite the chaos, somehow managing to write prolifically. Faced with the *l'allegro* and *il penseroso* options that Milton once wrestled with, Swinburne managed to conflate the Apollonian scholar with the Dionysian reveller, able to embody the excessive extremes of both lives at once.

Dante's Inferno, an early Ken Russell film steeped in the adolescent spirit of the 1960s, conveys that romantic attraction to the bohemian commune of artists. In a typical scene, Morris, Rossetti, and Swinburne enter a church in pursuit of their unorthodox interests: Morris rushes straight to the windows, gazing in awe at the stained glass; Rossetti sidles along a pew to flirt with a stunner knelt in prayer; and, completing the trio's sacrilege, Swinburne attempts to ravish a statue of the Virgin Mary. For well over a century Swinburne exemplified the daring rebel, vilified by some as "the "libidinous laureate of a pack of satyrs," "avowedly fixed in an attitude of revolt against the current notions of decency and dignity and social duty" (Morley 147, 145). Thomas Hardy recalled the day he discovered "new words in classic guise" when he purchased *Poems and Ballads* in 1866. Too excited to wait until he reached home, Hardy stumbled along the cobblestones, his head bent low to the leaves of the book:

– It was as though a garland of red roses
Had fallen about the hood of some smug nun
When irresponsibly dropped as from the sun,
In fulth of numbers freaked with musical closes,
Upon Victoria's formal middle time
His leaves of rhythm and rhyme. ("A Singer Asleep" 6-11)

Students during Oscar Wilde's day would walk the lanes of Oxford chanting "Dolores, our Lady of Pain." Students during my day a century later would walk the orchards of Nova Scotia reciting stanzas from the queens and idols of excess:

What adders came to shed their coats?
What coiled obscene
Small serpents with their soft stretching throats
Caressed Faustine. ("Faustine" 133-36)

Their heads neared, and their hands were drawn in one,
And they saw dark, though still the unshaken sun
Far through fine rain shot fire into the south;
And their four lips became one burning mouth.
(*"Tristram of Lyonesse"* 1.1061-64)

Such recitations were motivated by our schoolboy delight that a serious poet could attract any degree of public attention, let alone an uproar of indignation.

Three preoccupations concerning Swinburne's legacy make his centenary a date to celebrate. The first is his establishment of a new reflexive paradigm for the function of art. The second concerns his mastery of prosody, earning him the crown of the laureate of the lyre, and the third concerns his love for the primordial geography that engulfs most of the earth, earning him the crown of the laureate of the sea.

The first preoccupation concerns Swinburne's role as the most literary of revolutionary artists, one as immersed in the library as he was in the sea. Staying clear of religion and politics as topics for conversation remains today a principle we ignore at our peril; Swinburne set them as his targets for a full-scale assault. But he was no adolescent rebel without a cause; the point of his assault was to launch an ambitious programme to revolutionize our lives through art. As Matthew Arnold had charged, "most men in a brazen prison live" ("A Summer Night" 37), and Swinburne sought to set us free from all the fetters of conventional norms. To change the brazen lives we live we must change the golden realms we envision. Swinburne thus led the campaign to overturn the paradigmatic roles of art that had shifted in cycles over the centuries from the mimetic focus on nature, the didactic focus on the audience, and the expressive focus on the self. To the names of Aristotle, Horace, and Longinus associated with each of those three paradigms, we add the Pre-Raphaelite poet as the vocal proponent of a fourth paradigm: the artist's reflexive focus on art itself. In his reviews, articles, and books of criticism, Swinburne lobbied for this new reflexive, art-for-art's-sake paradigm, the paradigm that would be taken up by Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde, and that remains embraced by artists today who explain their art with the shrug that they just know enough not to get in the way when something happens to work well. Thus Swinburne's assault on the traditional paradigms of art was a triumphant revolution for which he deserves more recognition. Théophile Gautier and Dante Rossetti were earlier proponents of the art for art's sake movement, but Swinburne was its steadfast crusader in criticism ranging from his reviews of Meredith's *Modern Love* (1862) – "the business of verse-writing is hardly to express convictions; and if some poetry ... has at times dealt in dogmatic morality, it is all the worse and all the weaker for that" (632); of Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal* (1862) – "a poet's business is presumably to write good verses, and by no means to redeem the age and remould society" (998); and of Hugo's *L'Année terrible* (1872) – "the only absolute duty of art is the duty she owes to herself"; to his groundbreaking book, *William Blake* (1868) – "art for art's sake first of all, and afterwards we may suppose all the rest be added to her" (*Major Poems* 387; 380).

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This same revolutionary spirit is the subtext of his poetry. Recalling in 1904 his shift from *Poems and Ballads* (1866) to *Songs before Sunrise* (1871), he identified their respective “Hymn to Proserpine” and “Hymn to Man” as “the death-song of spiritual decadence and the birthsong of spiritual renaissance” (“Dedicatory” xvi). As a death-song, “The Hymn to Proserpine” is a pagan’s lament for the decline of Roman paganism and the rise of Christianity, but moreover, it is Swinburne’s lament for our loss of faith in poetry. The suppression of our traditional pagan gods by the zealots of the new Christian God is a regressive effort to replace our literary readings of metaphors and mythology with literal transcriptions of fundamentalist illusions rendered as doctrinal documents. The speaker is suffering no crisis in faith, no confusion over what to believe – the old gods or the new god – because he is a poet who considered the old gods as metaphors and deplors the fashion for reading a new god as a literal phenomenon. To supplant the poetry of pagan myths with fundamentalist readings of a monotheistic world is to supplant vision with dogma, the beauty of song and story with the laws of scripture, the dialectical world of contraries with the authority of a central force repressing the margins.

“*Laus Veneris*” takes this repressive influence of Christianity to its next stage. As Swinburne clarifies, “the tragic touch of the story is this: that the knight who has renounced Christ believes in him; the lover who has embraced Venus disbelieves in her” (*Major Poems* 366). Typifying the Pre-Raphaelite grotesque, Swinburne exposes the horror of a marauding civilization that makes war, not love: Tannhäuser suffers guilt over his passion for a pagan goddess, but is buoyed with a pride derived from sadistic warfare as god’s Christian soldier. Hardened by slaughter, the crusading knight has lost sight of beauty and love, fearing the power of Venus as a stalking predator, feeling the deadly breath of a panther-like lust devouring him: “His head far down the hot sweet throat of her” (269).

Swinburne’s Pre-Raphaelite campaign for an art for art’s sake paradigm would restore biblical mythology to the golden realm of art, thus liberating us from the nightmares of Christian guilt to the visionary heaven of our imagination. His shift from a religious to a political discourse in *Songs before Sunrise* is a shift to a less sophisticated poetry, as the visions/illusions dichotomy descends from literary to literal fetters. His “birthsong of spiritual renaissance” launches his assault on the monarchy and imperialism and his campaign for revolution and liberty. Consistent with his assault on the tyranny of the Christian religion, his political hymns celebrate a renaissance of the secular spirit of humanity. Inconsistent, however, was his surprisingly conservative politics, an ideology which William Rossetti recognized as

embedded in the aristocratic origins of the family Swinburne failed to disinherit: “He upheld the Southern against the Northern states in the American Civil War; sided with the Turks against the Russians in the war of 1878; loathed Gladstone’s Home-rule policy; and believed England to be wholly right in the Transvaal conflict” (Rossetti, *Some Reminiscences* 1:219).

More problematic than his role as the rebel committed to revolutionizing the function of art is Swinburne’s second role: the laureate of the lyre. His obsession with prosody raises a question that has perplexed other poets who were masters of a modulated prosody, from Tennyson to Eliot. What is the function of Swinburne’s prosody, the insistent regularity of his rhythms and rhymes that subordinates the sense of his argument to its overwhelming sound, reducing the meanings of words to a metronomic tumble of syllabic beats? There are several answers.

What Swinburne wrote of Shelley’s poetry is more applicable to his own: “His aim is rather to render the effect of a thing than the thing itself; the soul and spirit of life rather than the living form, the growth rather than the thing grown” (“Notes” 15:380). The effect of Swinburne’s oceanic rhythms conveys the force and power of drives and dreams that are biological and psychological, natural and inarticulate, anticipating the semi-verbal efforts of later poets like Dylan Thomas. As Swinburne writes in “Hertha” – “In the buds of your lives is the sap of my leaves.... In me only the root is / That blooms in your boughs” (100; 163-64), so Thomas writes: “The force that through the green fuse drives the flower / Drives my green age.”

Even Swinburne’s most clearly articulated images can cause confusion by inviting us to misread their inverted connotations. Casual readers invariably confuse the first chorus of *Atalanta in Calydon* – “When the hounds of spring are on winter’s traces” – by reversing the startling imagery of spring as a pack of wolves hounding down the winter deer. His chorus is like those illusionary puzzles that expose our stubborn insistence to perceive a reversal of reality, reminding us of our habit to half perceive and half create in conformity with our expectations. Poetry must be reread like a song sung over again, and such re-readings deliver an essential gift of art: the surprise of epiphanies. In a perceptive note on the opening of the second chorus of *Atalanta* –

Before the beginning of years
 There came to the making of man
 Time, with a gift of tears;
 Grief with a glass that ran (314-17) –

W.O. Raymond explains how these epiphanies arise from Swinburne’s habitual

antitheses and inversions: “This bold and somewhat forced inversion of the usual attributes associated with Time and Grief is a striking example of Swinburne’s fondness for antithesis and paradox, his sense of the identity that may underlie formal distinction” (341). Throughout his poetry Swinburne demonstrates that identity is not a one-dimensional attribute but a complexity of contradictions.

In addition to contributing to these “maker-see” revelations, Swinburne’s prosody sustains the flight of poetic vision over the banality of ordinary experience. The secular state of a modern world is the domain of Proserpine, the dominion of destiny. Swinburne fortifies the trance of artifice as the primary defence against the transience of life: “We shall hear, as one in a trance that hears / The sound of time, the rhyme of the years” (“Triumph of Time” 309-10). Through rhapsodic incantation, the spellbinding trance of artifice, we enter “the kingdoms of speech and dream” (375). His rhymes and rhythms, his turns and returns, overpower the limitations of logic to sustain the visionary flight of art, offering the intensity of the dream as a worthy substitute for the drudgery of eternal life.

That Swinburne knew exactly what he was doing with his prosody is evident from one of his last major poems, *The Tale of Balen* (1896). Swinburne bravely adopts for this 132-page Arthurian tale the intricate nine-line stanza of “The Lady of Shalott.” However, here the master of mimicry ignores the insistent sing-song rhythm and rhyme of Tennyson’s poem. In doing so, he is also clearly abandoning his own style of prosody practised all his life. Instead, he demonstrates a virtuoso performance in manipulating the rigid rhyme scheme (*aaaabcccb*) of each stanza with caesura and enjambement to suppress the rhymes and create the narrative pace of romance with dramatically intense scenes:

Not many a day has lived and died
 Since at a tourney late I tried
 My strength to smite and turn and ride
 Against a knight of kinglike pride,
 King Pellam’s brother: twice I smote
 The splendour of his strength to dust:
 And he, fulfilled of hate’s fierce lust,
 Swore vengeance, pledged for hell to trust,
 And keen as hell’s wide throat. (84)

Critics who cite Theodore Watts-Dunton’s comments about Swinburne’s tone-deaf indifference to music as evidence that Swinburne’s prosody is a misguided exercise in monotony should read *The Tale of Balen* for another side of

Swinburne, as he departs from the intensity of song to practise the continuity of story, mastering the leisurely pace that balances anticipation with the unexpected.

The key to Swinburne's liminal "kingdoms of speech and dream" is the sea, the third preoccupation central to his poetry. Swinburne once confessed that he was dumbfounded by Shelley's interest in boating, explaining that he himself could not be *on* the water, but had to be *in* it: not wading in a pool or brook but embracing the challenge of the open sea or the cold depths of mountain lakes. Though, again, as a swimmer, Swinburne loves the liminal locale of the shoreline: "A sail to seaward, a sound from shoreward" ("Neap-Tide" 26).

A sustained passage from "Tristram of Lyonesse" (8.405-566) is among the best evocations of his love of the sea: from a delight in its waves to an awe of its primordial power. As Tristram awakens before dawn to the sound of the surf, the poem progresses from the beckoning call of the lunar tide in the dark to the sublime sight of the infinite sea at dawn, from the shoreline of the strand where Tristram stands to the horizon where the sea merges with the sky. Tristram breathes in the full beauty of the seascape before he splashes into the saltwater as a child rejoicing in the return to his mother's breast (8.478-81), as a sibling at play – "wrestl[ing] with the sea / For pure heart's gladness and large ecstasy" (8.426-27), and as a lover embracing his bride "with amorous arms made wide / To take the bright breast of the wave to his / And on his lips the sharp sweet minute's kiss / Given of the wave's lip" (8.492-95). A consummation follows the delight, rapture, and "joy full souled" of Tristram in the surf, first in play with the "white hurtling heads of waves" (8.436), and secondly after the sea stages an exemplary seduction: with each of its waves, all of its limbs, aflame with desire to embrace the young sun, the "bright rough shuddering sea" aspires to lap and wrap the sun within the depths of its heavenly foam (8.498-510).

As the whitecaps blossom in the sun, a rush of metaphors mounts and tumbles with descriptions of the sea as both a meadow in bloom and a starlit sky – the land, sea, and sky merging into a heavenly harmony where "all the rippling green grew royal gold" (8.511). This fusion of Edenic green and Arcadian gold as the colour scheme of paradise is repeated in Swinburne's personal recollection of a swim in the sea: "I was in Heaven. The whole sea was literally golden as well as green – it was liquid and living sunlight in which one lived and moved and had one's being ... far more glorious than even Dante ever dreamed of in his Paradise" (*Letters* 5:275). Tristram's swim – beginning with the invocational call from the sea and a vision of the sublime at dawn – moves from immersion to renewal; the renewal is not a spiritual resurrection

but a physical and mental revitalization after comprehending the infinite in the form of the intensity of momentary experience, recognizing the music of the spheres as “a note of rapture in the tune of life” (8.506). Immersed in the surf – whether nourished by the bonding relationship with a maternal sea, the joyful games with a playful sea, the self-transcendence with a beloved sea, or the visionary art of a heavenly sea – the swimmer feels both afloat and in flight, a physical sensation similar to the soaring flight of poetic vision.

If his political rhetoric could sometimes ring hollow because it arose from a brash spirit of rebellion, his visionary poetry generally has the conviction of inspiration springing from a deeper source, not from what he disliked, but from what he loved: this passion for the primordial power of the “interminable sea” (“Dedicatory” xxii). The passion ranged from glee – “Rejoice in the roll and clash of breakers” – to awe: “Brief as the breaking of a wave / That hurls on man its thunderous grave” (*Tale of Balen* 3.10-11). It is a passion equalled by no other poet. Hardy’s elegy briefly but accurately echoes Swinburne’s depictions of the sea, from the havoc on the shoreline – the “frothy manes” recalling Walter Crane’s portrait of the breakers as a stampede of cloud-white stallions – to its sublime dominion beyond the horizon – the “world-encircling deep..., the heaving hydrosphere” (“A Singer Asleep” 49; 31, 36).

The vast realm of our unexplored and unfathomable world, at once ancient and current: this is the realm of our lives on earth that interests Swinburne, analogous with the realm of our imaginations. Not the diversions of intellectual issues, but the primordial forces of biological drives and psychological retreats: these are the oceanic forces through which we align our physical lives with our visionary projections, the metaphors by which we read the artistic order of the imagination. As Swinburne articulated in his study of Blake, artists explore the imagination through two operative orders of imagery: a dialectical pattern and a cyclical pattern. These two orders correspond with the two basic elements of literature: conflict and metaphor. The dialectical pattern of imagery exemplifies the dramatic tension of such warring contraries as fire and frost, womb and tomb, hero and villain. The cyclical pattern of imagery follows such cosmological repetitions as springing into summer, falling into winter, and a potential renewal with the return of spring. For Blake, the two orders deliver us from such oppressive abstractions as good and evil by means of characterizing them as visionary narratives about gods and devils. Swinburne employs the two orders to clarify our vision of those primordial forces of the submarine and the subconscious, tidal impulses springing forth and falling back. His hymns to liberty and psalms for Sappho may be equally political as visionary songs of freedom, but the freedom is limited to overcoming the pressures of personal suppression and public decorum. There is no escaping the

primordial forces of the natural order of things, nothing beyond the respite provided by the heroic effort to sustain the flight of poetry, the power of art over life. Swinburne is all too well aware of the fine line between the two sides of language: one inspiring visions, the other exposing illusions.

The fourth chorus of *Atalanta in Calydon* typifies Swinburne's life-long views on the power of words, the transience of life, and the ultimate power of death. Words here hold only a demonic power: the premonition of death "that madness and the infatuate heart may breed / From the word's womb" (1042-43). Language enables us to articulate our predicament – that "A little fruit a little while is ours / And the worm finds it soon" (1100-01) and that we are but "transitory and hazardous, / Light things and slight" (1154-55). The chorus further warns that language breeds and exasperates the conflict of binaries: "Thou has sent us sleep and stricken sleep with dreams / Saying, Joy is not, but love of joy shall be" (1162-63). But Swinburne resists the cynicism of silence sung aloud by this fourth chorus which contends that "Loud words and longing are so little worth," that "sharp words and wits pluck no fruit" (1195, 1201). However true it may be that "words divide and rend," Swinburne does not agree that a stoic "silence is most noble till the end" (1203-04). The penultimate question at the conclusion of the play – "Who shall tame them with their song?" (2315) – suggests that no one can bind or tame or smite the gods who govern our lives, but reminds us that song may provide us with the means to live our lives within a vision of a better world.

Similarly, in "The Triumph of Time," there is little in life we can ever hope to save from the tides of change: a "weed from the water, grass from a grave, / A broken blossom, a ruined rhyme" (87-88). Even Shakespeare's "powerful rhyme" lasts little longer than the ruins of marble and gilded monuments (Sonnet 55), all lost for Swinburne beneath the worn grass and weed. In one poem after another he returns to our fruitless existence, to the failure in our lives to achieve fruition. To expect otherwise is to close our eyes to the reality of our "transitory..., slight" lives. But the intensity of poetry offers another reality: the revised rhyme, polished to perfection, sustains us in flight for as long as we read. Reading the new Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic practised by Morris and Swinburne, Walter Pater learned that "we have an interval and then we cease to be. Some spend this interval in listlessness, some in high passions, the wisest in art and song." The new fruit to pursue is understood to be the wisdom of "a quickened, multiplied consciousness..., the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake" (153). The principle of art for art's sake is not intended to excuse artists from considering their responsibility towards external referents. Rather it is a positive assertion that the mental world of art we envision is more important than the physical world of nature we experience.

In their romantic reverie, Tristram and Iseult can laugh “upon some dream too sweet for truth / Yet not so sweet as very love and youth / That there had charmed her eyes to sleep at last” (2.459-61). But when such “love and youth” are presented in heroic art we find a higher truth too sweet for life, whether it is experienced in the Wagnerian passion of an opera like *Tristan und Isolde* or in the elevating poetry of a play like *Antony and Cleopatra*, where Shakespeare contrasts art and life, as the majestic poetic imagery of Cleopatra conjured by Enobarbus dwarfs the petulant personality of the living queen we encounter on stage. Like Shakespeare, Swinburne reminds us that fictional characters do not serve as models for our own limited lives but rather they demonstrate the power of “shadows hot from hell” (“Ave atque Vale” 165), the passionate forces of a world too grand for individual lives. Reading “Tristram of Lyonesse,” we come to recognize the two lovers as personifications of the sun and the sea.

To sustain the flight of poetic vision amid the shadows of such forces, Swinburne writes an intense verse of antithetical words, alliterative lines, and an overwrought rhythm and rhyme. With the artifice of melodic language as the sole respite from the force of nature, his signature poetry inspires us to achieve that “multiplied consciousness” of poetic passion arising from “the love of art for its own sake,” what Samuel Beckett would call “word-storming in the name of beauty” (*Letters* 1). Imagining “a wave of the sea turned back in song” (“Triumph of Time” 356), Swinburne measures his own success in terms of “being now no more a singer, but a song” (“Thalassius” 474), and thereby, like Meredith in “The Lark Ascending,”¹ challenges us to soar within the song for as long as we can sing.

Note

1. And like Swinburne’s own expression in “Neap-Tide”:
 As bells on the reigns of the fairies ring
 The ripples that kissed them rang,
 The light from the sundawn sprang,
 And the sweetest of songs that the world may sing
 Was theirs when the full sea sang. (36-40)

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