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SWINBURNE'S CONCEPTION OF SHELLEY

Although Swinburne wrote only three essays exclusively devoted to Shelley,¹ his comments on Shelley in his poetry, in his letters, and in the rest of his essays are all but innumerable. In the present study, I intend to examine those comments that are germane to understanding how Swinburne conceived of Shelley as an advocate of political and religious freedom. Such a focus must leave out many aspects of Shelley that Swinburne commented on but which are not central to understanding the importance of Shelley to Swinburne.²

In Swinburne's estimating the value of Shelley's political radicalism, we find a certain amount of complexity. On the one hand he thought little of Shelley's political and philosophical essays. On the other, he greatly admired Shelley's fervor for liberty as he revealed it in his poetry. To further complicate matters, he also felt that Shelley's political optimism was too sanguine. He respected Shelley's sympathy for the oppressed, but was skeptical of Shelley's actual effects in alleviating tyranny and oppression. As an examination of Songs before Sunrise would show, Swinburne's adopting a Shelleyan voice there was manifested by his incorporating Shelley's views as only one of several ways of achieving freedom.

Of Shelley's essays, Swinburne thought well only of "A Refutation of Deism," probably because he sympathized with its indictment of Christianity.³ Of the rest, Swinburne took a dim view. He would never, he says, "set up his [Shelley's] early philosophical or political essays as models of original or profound reflection, of untimely maturity in reasoning or subtle conclusiveness of combination in the recast and rearrangement of other men's positions."⁴ Shelley's idol, Godwin, Swinburne dismissed as "a teacher and preacher of political and religious philosophies long since forgotten and never much more than derivative from France" (Bonchurch, XV, 332).

The reason for Swinburne's disdain is one that explains his refusal in Songs before Sunrise, for instance, to make Shelley's voice more than one voice in a chorus. Swinburne described Shelley's "Address to the Irish People" as "characteristic," and noted that it "had no recorded effect or result beyond the comical effect of alarming the Government into notice of his not very dangerous or politically important existence" (Bonchurch, XV, 331-332). It was this lack of pragmatic effect in alleviating misery that stopped Swinburne from giving Shelley's doctrines his full endorsement. In William Blake, we can find this same skepticism about Shelley's ameliorative views. Swinburne wrote that

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Blake, as evidently as Shelley, did in all innocence believe that ameliorated humanity would be soon qualified to start afresh on these new terms after the saving advent of French and American revolutions.⁵

A similar tone of disparagement underlies Swinburne's view that Blake's and Shelley's "republican passion was . . . a matter of fierce dogmatic faith and rapid assumption" (Bonchurch, XVI, 68).

Swinburne's doubts about the practicability of Shelley's politically and philosophically perfectibilian ideas did not, however, stop him from worshipping Shelley for the impulse that lay behind them. In speaking of Shelley's various pamphlets, Swinburne emphasized that they were "distinguished rather by good sense and right feeling than by eloquence or genius" and that "as a thinker, he [Shelley] was just and generous rather than original or profound" (Bonchurch, XV, 333, 339). This love of Shelley's humanitarianism, his "right feeling" and his generosity, combined with Swinburne's sense of Shelley's impracticality, reveals itself in a remarkable letter written in 1873.

Having read of two sisters imprisoned with their infants at Oxford and not allowed enough food to feed their children, Swinburne burst out:

I could wish I had more in me of Burns and less of Shelley, that I might write something that should do good and might endure on the evidence published in yesterday's Times of those two poor women in prison with their babies. I thirst with impotent desire to do something -- but the mere contemplation of the tyranny and attempt for a moment to realize the suffering is literally intolerable pain to me. I could no more write under its influence than under the influence of neuralgia. It makes me feel exactly

'as a nerve o'er which do creep

The else-unfelt oppressions of the earth.'

But if I could, I would write something 'that should make wise men mad.' These things are incredible and they are next door to us. How is it that the whole countryside has not been driven mad between rage and pity?

(Letters, II, 251-252)

Swinburne's very quotation from Shelley's "Julian and Maddalo" reveals the sensitivity he recognized in Shelley even as, having too much of Shelley in him, he despaired of being able to effect a change in the situation.

The point here is a subtle one and one that in at least one place

may be misunderstood. In defending Shelley from Arnold's attacks, Swinburne wrote that, unlike Wordsworth,

in politics, Shelley looked steadfastly forward to the peaceful and irreversible advance of republican principle, the gradual and general prevalence of democratic spirit throughout Europe, till the then omnipotent and omnipresent forces of universal reaction should be gently but thoroughly superseded and absorbed.

Defending Shelley from being seen as a "befogged, befooled, self-deluded, unpractical dreamer" he suggested that Shelley was actually, more than Wordsworth, "the man of insight and foresight, the more practical and the more rational student of contemporary history, alike in its actual pageant of passing phenomena and in its moral substance of enduring principles and lessons" (Bonchurch, XIV, 195, 196).

If we do not read carefully, we may see in these words an endorsement of Shelley's position. Several circumstances should be noted. Swinburne's sketch of Shelley's politics is a neutral explanation, not an acquiescence. Indeed, the very tone of "gently but thoroughly superseded and absorbed" subtly implies Swinburne's skepticism. Swinburne is describing a Shelleyan view that, as his other comments suggest, and as a study of his poetic reworking of Shelley shows, he does not accept. We must also note the particular implications here of "unpractical" and "practical." Shelley is described not as a practical politician, but as a practical student, and his practicality is in contrast to Wordsworth's whose lapse to conservatism and to the support of "such divine institutions as rotten boroughs and capital punishment" (Bonchurch, XIV, 195) was disappointing. Furthermore, if Shelley is not an "unpractical dreamer," he must be a "practical dreamer." And, in essence, that is what he was for Swinburne, a dreamer who indeed had little direct effect on the political institutions of his day, but whose dreams and visions, though perhaps politically naive, nevertheless were "inspiring" (Bonchurch, XIV, 196) in their effect on his readers. Shelley, as Swinburne subtly points out in a parallel he draws with himself, may have been wrong in his actual ideas, as the "crushing refutation" of "the practical and unanswerable evidence of historic facts" (Bonchurch, XIV, 196, 197) had made Swinburne wrong. Nevertheless, Shelley's dreams were, more than Wordsworth's, in contact with the "moral substance of enduring principles and lessons" (Bonchurch, XIV, 196). It was Shelley's general love of humanity and fervor for liberty and particularly his powers of melody which could open his readers to a similar sensitivity that Swinburne admired, not his particular political tenets.

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Swinburne's praise for Shelley is almost always based on Shelley's philanthropy and the general republican direction of his political ideas. If Byron, as Arnold claimed, was praiseworthy for his republican aspirations, Shelley was even more so since "his whole nature was pervaded and harmonized by the inspiration of this faith (Bonchurch, XIV, 197). Shelley was "the poet of freedom, a champion of the sacred right and holy duty of resistance" to monarchies (Bonchurch, XIII, 22). Like Hugo, he had a "heroic love of man" (Bonchurch, XIII, 210) and exhibited a "passionate compassion for those who lie open 'to all the oppression that is done under the sun'" and a "sleepless mercy and love incurable" (Bonchurch, XVI, 171 n). Shelley was joined with Landor and Lamb, in Swinburne's mind, by their "community in goodness, of simple-hearted and pure-minded loving-kindness" (Bonchurch, XIV, 246). In a phrase Swinburne mockingly adapted from Carlyle, Shelley belonged with Aurelio Saffi, Hugo, and Jesus -- all were "'beautiful, republican creatures, of universal rosepink philanthropy'" (Letters, v, 69).

Although Swinburne had little sympathy for Shelley as a practical political thinker, he was an enthusiastic sharer of Shelley's anti-pathy for Christianity and love for Christ. Swinburne's admiration of

Shelley's "A Refutation of Deism" and Laon and Cythna, his insistence that Shelley was attacking Christianity in the "Ode to Liberty,"⁶ and his frequent allusions to several of Shelley's anti-Christian images and lines⁷ all point to the identity he felt between his own and Shelley's views. He thought Shelley was one of "the fiercest anti-Christian and anti-Jehovist [poets] on all the list of poetic rebels" (Bonchurch, XIV, 322), though perhaps less brave than Marlowe, "the first free thinker of us all" -- Shelley "after all did not run any risk of being roasted alive Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam" (Letters, VI, 216).

In an important letter in 1875, Swinburne made clear his sympathies with Shelley's religious position:

But we who worship no material incarnation of any qualities, no person, may worship the divine <man> humanity, the ideal of human perfection and aspiration, without worshipping any God, any person, any fetish at all. Therefore I might call myself if I wished a kind of Christian* (of the Church of Blake and Shelley), but assuredly in no sense a Theist.
*That is, taking the semi-legendary Christ as type of human aspiration and perfection, and supposing (if you like) that Jesus may have been the highest and purest sample of man on record.⁸

Looking at some of Swinburne's sketches of Shelley in his poetry

lets us further appreciate Swinburne's deep reverence for Shelley as a proponent of the general political freedom and brotherly compassion that Swinburne himself was vitally interested in. Throughout the poems where Shelley appears as a figure, he is presented with imagery of the heart, of love, of light and fire, and of song. The intimate connection of these images makes clear Shelley's status as a type and figure of man and poet whose powers of music stand as a sign in the heavens to move men to emulate his love. Behind the imagery lies Shelley's myth in "Adonais" that the "transmitted effluence cannot die / So long as fire outlives the parent stock" and that "The Soul of Adonais, like a star, / Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are" (ll. 408-409, 494-495).

Swinburne's earliest portrait of Shelley is in "Shelley," written at Oxford in 1856 or 1857.⁹ "Shelley" sets definitively the characteristics of Shelley that Swinburne was to return to time and time again. The poem merges Shelley with Swinburne's human Christ and stresses his Christ-like mission and benevolence, his martyrdom, his meekness, and his apotheosis. Shelley, "clothed in song," is presented as "the sweetest heart of love," almost a Catholic ejaculation here suggesting Shelley's compassion and generosity. He came among "unloving men," himself "gentle, brave [,] wise" and "clothed with power and love." His "power," the power lent by "the kiss of lips divine and calm," is the same humanitarian love that Swinburne attributed to Christ.

The inspiriting mission and effect of Shelley are clear in several of the cancelled lines: "<Thou camest to give comfort> <we feel thy>/ <The work is done>." Shelley having returned to Paradise, his example nevertheless lives on: "<We look to thee above the> / <Thy thoughts are rays, thy memory>." Shelley is here, as in later poems, a light which illumines life, "<The lampless waste>," and which can give us the strength to go on.

It is Shelley's general philanthropy and inspiring example which is most stressed in the poem, not Shelley as a political figure. Swinburne even recalls and repudiates in "Doubt, pain, love, hope, endurance" the concluding speech of Demogorgon in *Prometheus Unbound* to emphasize the ethereal, extraterrestrial nature of Shelley. Presented as "A strong and fair Archangel, calm and crowned," this Shelley of Swinburne's youth is a forerunner of Shelley as "a son and soldier of light, an archangel winged and weaponed for angel's work" (Bonchurch, XV, 377).

Later too, as characterized in Swinburne's poetry, Shelley figures as admirable for his lyrical excellence, but even more so for his ded-

Swinburne's portrait of Shelley as an opponent of Christianity is clearest in "For the Feast of Giordano Bruno," where Swinburne imagines Bruno joining in an afterlife with Lucretius. He would "walk with him apart till Shelley came / To make the heaven of heavens more heavenly sweet / And mix with yours a third incorporate name." The conjunction of the names clearly suggests that the characterization of Bruno as "a rod / To scourge off priests, a sword to pierce their god," as "A staff for man's free thought," and as "A lamp to lead him [man] far from shrine and throne" is a characterization that applies to Shelley as well.¹³

Swinburne's appreciation of Shelley's philanthropy is manifest in the imagery of love and the heart he associated with Shelley from "Shelley" onwards. The alliance of the images with liberty is clear early in Songs before Sunrise in "The Eve of Revolution." There Swinburne appeals to England to aid the cause of liberty and cites as "sons . . . of thy [England's] womb" Milton, Landor, and Shelley. Milton, who receives the longest attention of the three, is associated with the soul, for it is soul that England lacks in the crisis; Landor is associated briefly with the mind, and Shelley with the heart:

And Shelley's heart and Landor's mind
Lit thee with latter watch-fires; why wilt thou be blind?
(Poems, II, 19)

The allusion here is brief, but the heart forms the central image of a sonnet to Shelley, "Cor Cordium," where it is closely associated with love. Swinburne addresses his prayer to the "heart of hearts, the chalice of love's fire," to the "wonderful and perfect heart," to the "heavenly heart" and to the "heart whose beating blood was running song." At the heart's desire "Dead love, living and singing, cleft his tomb" and began to sing again. The stress on the heart, of course, comes most directly from Byron's epigraph for Shelley's tomb. Nevertheless, Swinburne has in mind here humanitarian love, the kind of love that he could say died with the last previous republican lyricist, Milton. Hence it is that Shelley's is the heart "for whom / The lyricist liberty made life a lyre."¹⁴

That the love is humanitarian is confirmed by a line in "The Centenary of Shelley." When Swinburne writes that Shelley is "Clothed about with love of all men as with light"¹⁵ the syntax has Shelley being both loved and loving. This loving is the same that Swinburne emphasized in prose much earlier in speaking of

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the passion for humanity, . . . the suffering
with all unknown who suffer in the world, which
binds together all great men whose genius is
akin to loving-kindness and twinborn with mercy,
from Jesus even onwards to Mazzini, and from
Shelley even backwards to St. John.

(Bonchurch, XV, 420)

The conclusion seems obvious. Swinburne was largely suspicious of the perfectibilian conclusions of Shelley's political thought and was skeptical of Shelley's work having had any effect on the oppressive structure of society. Nevertheless he recognized in Shelley a generous feeling of humanitarian love and an extraordinary sensitivity to suffering that kindled his own worship. Furthermore, though Shelley had no measurable political effect and was in a sense impractical, the rich melody of his song and his burning love for humanity made him an appropriate beacon for Swinburne and his benighted contemporaries. Though impractical, Shelley was nevertheless useful, inspiring through his song, in Swinburne and others, a thirst for freedom and an impulse for love.

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FOOTNOTES

¹"Notes on the Text of Shelley" (1870) republished in 1875 with a note added (The Complete Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne, eds. Edmund Gosse and Thomas James Wise, 20 vols. [London: Heinemann, 1925-1927], XV, 348-397; subsequent references to "Bonchurch" will be to this edition); "Les Cenci" (1883) (Bonchurch, XV, 319-329); "Percy Bysshe Shelley" (1903) (Bonchurch, XV, 330-347). The first deals primarily with problems of emending Shelley's text. The second is a preface to a French translation of Shelley's play. The third is a concise article for an encyclopaedia. Because the form and subject of each is restricted and because Swinburne was consistent in his view of Shelley, I have not dealt with each individually. The points Swinburne made in each I introduce as appropriate.

²Swinburne's low estimations of Shelley's novels, letters and critical writing may be found, respectively, in: a) Bonchurch, XIV, 193; XV, 330, 358; b) Bonchurch, XIV, 199, 200; XVI, 83; c) The Swinburne Letters, ed. Cecil Y. Lang, 6 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959-1962) (cited hereafter as Letters), V, 72, 138; Bonchurch,

XII, 9; XIV, 93, 94; XV, 339. Swinburne generally thought Shelley's prose writings interesting only as they cast "light on the character which helped to shape and to colour, to modify and to quicken, the genius of a poet" (Bonchurch, XV, 338-339). To Arnold's admiration of Shelley's prose works, Swinburne replied, "No critical reputation can possibly survive much more of this sort of thing" (Bonchurch, XIV, 201). Despite his poor opinion of Shelley's critical ability, Swinburne did from time to time cite Shelley's judgments approvingly. See Bonchurch XIV, 181, 296; XV, 23, 83-84, 148, 341.

Since the present study is limited, I shall not discuss Swinburne's admiration of *The Cenci*. Similarly to the side of my major concern is the considerable attention Swinburne devoted to the beauties of Shelley's translations -- and their inaccuracies (Letters, II, 9, 61-62, 63, 69, 84, 111; III, 38; V, 122; Bonchurch, XIII, 437; XV, 366, 373). Another area I do not explore is Swinburne's frank willingness to specify the faults he occasionally found in Shelley: Shelley's lax grammar, spelling, and meter; his obscurity in some poems; his sometimes writing mere fantasy or awkwardly combining fantasy and profundity; and his infrequent bombast and rhetoric (Letters, I, 115; II, 7, 10, 63, 94, 218; V, 225; Bonchurch, XII, 71, 72; XIV, 209, 224; XV, 331-356 and 393-396, *passim*).

I discuss a central aspect of Swinburne's admiration for Shelley in "Shelley and Swinburne's Aesthetic of Melody," Papers on Language and Literature, 14 (Summer, 1978), 284-295.

³See Swinburne's praise of the "intellectual power as well as . . . literary capacity," the "dialectic skill and . . . ironic ability," and the "remarkable precocity and promise" displayed in the work (Bonchurch, XV, 331; XIV, 195). Even in speaking of this essay, however, Swinburne emphasized that it was a youthful work.

⁴Bonchurch, XIV, 194-195. Swinburne's comments on Shelley's other essays show him consistently unimpressed. "The Necessity of Atheism" he thought, for instance, a "neat and compact summary of a very simple argument," but "not a work of any particular promise" (Bonchurch, XIV, 195; XV, 330). "The Address to the People on the Death of the Princess Charlotte" struck him as "a very unimpressive sample of Shelley" of which he "thought nothing" (Letters, II, 85).

⁵Bonchurch, XVI, 278. For a discussion of Swinburne's "determined opposition to perfectibilian notions of all kinds" see Jerome J. McGann, Swinburne: An Experiment in Criticism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), pp. 35-39.

⁶For a history of how Swinburne was violating his own conservative editorial standards in urging his views of Laon and Cythna and "Ode to Liberty" on William Michael Rossetti, see my unpublished doctoral dissertation "Swinburne and Shelley" (Chicago, 1973), pp. 22-27.

See also Letters, II, 7-8, 9, 13-14; Bonchurch, XV, 353-355; William Michael Rossetti, Rossetti Papers, 1862-1870 (1903; rpt. New York: AMS, 1970), pp. 379, 394-395; Bonchurch, XV, 357-359.

⁷Swinburne was particularly fond of quoting or alluding to Shelley's image in the "Ode to Liberty" of Christianity as "The Galilean serpent" and of quoting or alluding to the line in Laon and Cythna, "He was a Christian Priest from whom it came." For examples of Swinburne's fondness for the former, see Letters, I, 193; IV, 138, 183; VI, 176, 203; for the latter, see Letters, II, 10, 160; III, 204; IV, 81.

⁸Letters, III, 14. See also Swinburne's comment on Shelley's "adoration of the personal Jesus, -- combined as it was with an equal abhorrence of Christian Theology" (Bonchurch, XV, 353 note).

⁹A. C. Swinburne, Shelley (Worcester, Mass.: Achille J. St. Onge, 1973). In his preface, John S. Mayfield suggests the date of composition as "1856 or early 1857" (p. 6). He included the possibility of 1856 at my urging -- several of the lines in "Shelley" in stanza II seem to be in the process of revision and the revised lines show up in "The Temple of Janus" (B.M. Add. MS. 40888). Since "The Temple of Janus" had to be completed for the Newdigate Prize by March 31, 1857 (Georges Lafourcade, La Jeunesse de Swinburne, 2 vols. [London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1928], II, 21) and since the rules for the contest were announced as early as June 13, 1856 (The Times, p. 11, col. 1), 1856 seems a possibility for the date of "Shelley."

My quotations from "Shelley" are taken from the manuscript of the poem in the private collection of Mr. Mayfield. I am indebted to him and to William Heinemann, Ltd. for permission to quote this and other unpublished material.

"Shelley" has also been printed in the Keats-Shelley Journal, 24 (1975), 171-172.

¹⁰One unpublished work by Swinburne also concerns Shelley. I have been unable to locate the manuscript which was Lot 283 at an auction held by City Book Auction, New York City, September 22, 1951:

Autograph Manuscript Signed, entitled: 'The Shelley Flower.'