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## Introduction to "Victorian Poetry" Vol. 14, Iss. 4

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# Introduction

Part I, by Rikky Rooksby

This special issue of *Victorian Poetry* is the first to be dedicated to Swinburne since the spring-summer 1971 number, edited by Cecil Y. Lang, which commemorated the centenary of the publication of *Songs before Sunrise*. To borrow from Swinburne, that issue is certainly not yet a fugitive thing, and it is certainly worth an hour (or two) of anyone's time who is interested in Swinburne to read some of its essays.

In his introduction, Lang declared resoundingly that for Swinburne studies "a new era has begun." He looked back to 1951, when he had started editing and collecting the texts of Swinburne's letters, and recalled how in the mid-century Swinburne's reputation had lain under a negative judgement from two influential groups of critics: the formalists and those Lang described as the New-Humanists-turned-Christians. He also felt that Swinburne had suffered from the decline in classical learning. That, if anything, has probably worsened, but the two groups of critics have long since yielded ground to the aggressive ideologues of critical theory, a change Lang acknowledged was already in the air in 1971. He cautiously welcomed the change for the new approaches it might open in Swinburne studies, though "whether it will give us basic historical research, as opposed to explication, is another matter." As it turned out, his complaint that critics "who . . . professed objectivity were as guilty as any of using critical techniques to propagate their pre-critical biases" applied to many who published on Swinburne after 1971.

Lang was also doubtful of the value of some notable Swinburne-related publications which his monumental edition of Swinburne's letters had helped to inspire. He commented, "Swinburne dead needs rescuing from his friends as much as Swinburne alive needed it." He was strongly critical of Edith Sitwell's 1960 volume of selected Swinburne poems, attacked scholarly mistakes in Morse Peckham's 1970 edition of *Poems and Ballads* and *Atalanta in Calydon*, and described Jean Overton Fuller's 1968 biography (the first new Swinburne biography since 1949) as "best read as comic pornography or black humor."

Lang pointed out some silly mistakes which Fuller had made in her over-zealous pursuit of clues about the (then) newly hypothesized relationship between Swinburne and his cousin Mary Gordon. Along with John S. Mayfield, Lang himself had performed an inestimable service to Swinburne by undermining the absurd story (enshrined by Gosse in 1917) of Swinburne's romantic rejection by Jane "Boo" Faulkner. One might wish that literary critics and readers generally could form a balanced opinion of a writer's work

independent of any damaging biographical legend, but this is not usually the case, and so it had been with Swinburne. The replacement of the “Boo” story with the Mary Gordon hypothesis did not entirely make Swinburne free from the caricature and ridicule which often substitutes for critical engagement with the poetry, but it was a significant step forward. Fuller was the first Swinburne biographer to incorporate this new hypothesis into a life of Swinburne, and it clearly carried her away. It was telling, therefore, that one of the most interesting contributions to the double Swinburne VP issue of 1971 was by F.A.C. Wilson, who provided invaluable information about Mary’s writings, both poetry and fiction, as well as discussing autobiographical elements in Swinburne’s late play *The Sisters* (1892). Wilson was convinced that Mary’s novels were repeated attempts to work through her own troubled feelings about her cousin and the events in their lives in 1863-64 which had brought them initially close together but had culminated in what appears to be an arranged marriage with a much older man. Mary’s writings remain unaccountably rare and it has been difficult for anyone else to follow-up Wilson’s work. In April 2009 I tried looking for her books on one of the largest online book-search engines. Her poems *A Martyr Bishop* (1878) are available as a download, and several novels—*Auld Fernie’s Son* (1881) and *Like His Own Daughter* (1883) are available as print-on-demand, along with a single (and expensive) first edition of *Auld Fernie’s Son*. This is the only novel of Mary’s I have seen for sale in thirty years of collecting Swinburne books, despite the fact that some of her novels went into more than one edition.

The VP special issue came at the end of a decade that had seen Swinburne publishing increase, against a background of a revival of interest in the Pre-Raphaelites. Some of the interest in Swinburne must have been sparked by Lang’s *The Swinburne Letters* (1959-62), which he followed with the miscellany *New Writings By Swinburne* (1964). General studies included those by John A. Cassidy in the Twayne’s English Authors Series (1964); Rupert Croft-Cooke, *Feasting With Panthers* (1967); Jean Overton Fuller’s biography (1968); and Mollie Panter-Downes *At The Pines* (1971). There were poetry selections edited by Edith Sitwell (1960), Bonamy Dobree (1961), and John D. Rosenberg (1968). Edmund Wilson edited the novels in 1963; there was a Signet paperback of *Love’s Cross-Currents* edited by Marya Zaturenska in 1964, two reprints of *William Blake* (Benjamin Blom, 1967 and University of Nebraska Press, 1970), and Howard B. Norland’s edition of *A Study of Ben Jonson* (University of Nebraska Press, 1969). Veteran Swinburneian C. K. Hyder, who had first published on Swinburne in the 1930s, edited *Swinburne Replies* (1966) and a *Critical Heritage* volume on Swinburne (1970). Scholarly studies included Thomas Connolly, *Swinburne’s Theory of Poetry* (1964) and Robert L. Peters, *The Crowns of Apollo: Swinburne’s Principles of Literature and Art* (1965).

Several of the contributors to the VP special issue later published books on Swinburne. Jerome McGann's discussion of "Ave Atque Vale" was reprinted in his brilliant *Swinburne: An Experiment in Criticism* (1972); Francis J. Sypher edited a critical edition of Swinburne's novel *A Year's Letters* and a reprint of *Undergraduate Papers* (both in 1974); Len M. Findlay edited a selected Swinburne poems in 1981; Kerry McSweeney published *Swinburne and Tennyson as Romantic Naturalists* (1981); Robert E. Lougy edited *The Children of the Chapel* by Mary Gordon and Swinburne; and Meredith B. Raymond published a study of Swinburne's poetry in 1971.

This special issue of VP necessarily reflects Swinburne studies in the light of the critical work produced since 1971. Our knowledge of Swinburne's life has been primarily increased by three biographies, by Philip Henderson (1974), Donald Thomas (1979), and myself (1997). In addition, more raw material for Swinburne biography was made available in Terry L. Meyers, *The Uncollected Letters of Algernon Charles Swinburne*. This included letters published in journals by other scholars since the 1960s, others from printed sources that Lang missed, and a choice from some 1200 letters to Swinburne known to survive. Scholars should also consult the biographical articles anthologized in my Swinburne volume in Pickering and Chatto's *Lives of Victorian Figures* series (2008).

In addition to texts previously mentioned, the years since 1971 have seen a small number of critical studies of Swinburne, including John S. Mayfield, *Swinburneiana* (1974); David G. Riede, *Swinburne: A Study of Romantic Mythmaking* (1978); R. C. Murfin, *Swinburne, Hardy, Lawrence and the Burden of Belief* (1978); Anthony Harrison, *Swinburne's Medievalism* (1988); Margot K. Louis, *Swinburne and His Gods* (1990); *The Whole Music of Passion: New Writings on Swinburne* (1993) which I co-edited with Nicholas Shrimpton; and Catherine Maxwell's *Swinburne* (2006).

There have been some editions of Swinburne's poetry in the past two decades: L. M. Findlay, *A. C. Swinburne: Selected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet / Fyfield, 1982, 1987, 2002); Catherine Maxwell, *A. C. Swinburne* (J. M. Dent, Everyman's poetry, 1997); Kenneth Haynes, *Poems and Ballads & Atalanta in Calydon* (Penguin Classics, 2000); and Jerome McGann and Charles L. Sligh, *Algernon Charles Swinburne: Major Poems and Selected Prose* (2004).

It is interesting to compare the focus of interest between the essays presented by Lang in 1971 and those we present today in 2009. Three of the 1971 collection focused on *Atalanta in Calydon*, four on *Poems and Ballads* (1866), while one was a daring reading of "Anactoria," and two touched on "The Triumph of Time" as an autobiographical document. There were readings of "Hertha," "Ave Atque Vale," "Thalassius," and several of "A Nympholept" and "The Lake of Gaube," signs that Swinburne's later poetry was now on the map. The reading of "The Lake of Gaube" was important in a way which

has not been recognized. Meredith B. Raymond pointed readers to the prose source of the poem in "Sketches of Travel" which quite clearly made the autobiographical link and proved that Swinburne's poetry was sometimes incontrovertibly grounded in actual experience, experience recollected after almost thirty years, experience which had powerfully affected him. Francis J. Sypher pursued the interesting topic of Swinburne, music, and Wagner.

By contrast, the current essays reflect many of the changes which have occurred. No-one now apologizes for writing about the later poetry, even to the point where critics are prepared to make a case for sequences such as "A Dark Month." Lang closed his preface by talking about Swinburne as a writer deeply interested in the visual arts and this in turn has come to pass—there are now many key essays recognizing Swinburne's role in the history of aestheticism.

## Part II, by Terry L. Meyers

The twelve essays in this special issue are characterized by a diversity that speaks well for the liveliness of critical and scholarly interest in Swinburne in the centenary year of his death. He remains, however, as I like to tell my students, the last major poet in English to receive his due, banished still from the sanctuary of such canonical compilations as the Major Authors Edition of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*. To my mind, this exile has been for moral and ideological reasons, even in this age when the canon has been expanded in so many ways. Whether it has room for someone as consistently subversive as Swinburne is still to be seen.

The essays Rikky Rooksby and I present here will, we hope, make Swinburne's due recognition more likely. Some are written by critics and scholars well along in their careers, others by those just starting. And they range from textual scholarship seeking to resolve or point towards the resolution of a number of textual issues to compelling interpretations from a number of perspectives of works by Swinburne both less known and well known. The essays necessarily have little in common in their approaches, but they do all take Swinburne seriously and continue to combat the turn against him that was so common for so long—really from the 1860s on, for well over a century. As Rooksby notes above, the rebirth of interest in Swinburne stimulated by Cecil Lang's *The Swinburne Letters* and by his 1971 special issue of *Victorian Poetry* is itself ready for a renaissance. We hope and we think that these essays as well as other compilations soon to appear will constitute a provocative body of scholarly and critical work that will challenge and convert those who may still feel but somehow escape Swinburne's magic tone.

We are delighted that one of the foremost scholars and critics of our age, Jerome McGann, leads off our collection. McGann was close to the start of his extraordinary career when Cecil Lang, his mentor, included in the

1971 special issue his seminal essay on “Ave atque Vale.” Now almost four decades later, with a mountain of intervening work completed in so many areas of scholarship and criticism, McGann rounds back to Swinburne, as he has done in recent years (see especially the rich selections in Swinburne’s *Major Poems and Selected Poems* that he and Charles Sligh edited in 2004 for Yale University Press). His essay here on “Wagner, Baudelaire, Swinburne: Poetry in the Condition of Music” was delivered in his absence by his friend and colleague Herbert Tucker at the Swinburne Centennial Conference in London in July 2009. The essay advances our understanding of Swinburne’s aesthetic of harmony, a term of high praise, what McGann calls “the meaning of all poems, whatever moral ideas they may carry along or profess,” a harmony which McGann richly traces through its corresponding “musical ideas and analogies.”

As an aside, McGann’s citation of Gosse’s comment that Swinburne was somehow unable to appreciate musical compositions simply in the hearing of them rings slightly false not just for the reasons McGann expounds. In the same month as the London Swinburne conference a more minor Swinburne event took place, this one at Mary Gordon’s family home, Northcourt, on the Isle of Wight. There, after a sojourn of a century or more at a nearby church, the organ Mary played while Swinburne wrote parts of “Atalanta in Calydon” was dedicated, restored and in its home setting, in a lovely evening of music.

Tony Garland, in “Brothers in Paradox: Swinburne, Baudelaire, and the Paradox of Sin,” takes up a seminal relationship, recalling Swinburne’s responsibility for first introducing Baudelaire to English readers. Garland follows the history of that relationship in critical reaction, suggesting its complexity, traces out Swinburne’s paradoxical response to his French brother, and highlights in different ways and different works the pervasive conflicts and irreconcilables that attracted Swinburne’s poetic attention. It is this very achievement of “paradoxical complexity,” Garland suggests, that has befuddled readers and critics and led to opprobrium and condemnation, the suggestion that the link is derogatory to Swinburne. But, Garland suggests, the connection between the two writers, “if approached as inherently paradoxical . . . can enrich an understanding of Swinburne’s work.”

Margot Louis is represented in this collection with one of her last essays, “Erotic Figuration in Swinburne’s *Tristram of Lyonesse*, Canto 2: The Vanishing Knight and the Drift of Butterflies.” Louis’ extraordinary accomplishments especially in scholarship and criticism began with her undergraduate honors essay at Smith College in 1974—the promise of that, published in 1976, was fulfilled with a richly developed series of works tragically cut off by her death in 2007, a serious blow to Swinburne studies. Her determination, energy, and exuberance had moved Swinburne’s standing along significantly. And her essay here is a provocative one in the matter still unresolved of the parameters

of Swinburne's sexuality. Her thesis explores Swinburne's subversiveness in sexual relations themselves, "undercutting the phallic model and substituting for it a model of sex based on the assumption of multitudinous centers of pleasure, in ways that highlight female subjectivity and female desire." The essay takes on a special resonance in the context of Swinburne's sometimes notorious fascination with lesbian love, but explores that love in the context of heterosexual lovers, a daring extrapolation on the part of both author and critic.

Louis is represented indirectly in this collection too by the presence of one of her students, Yisrael Levin, who, like his mentor, pushes existing bounds. In this case, Levin takes up a poem that is usually regarded with little beyond bemusement or worry, "A Dark Month." Levin treats the poem with an unusual respect and regard, and uses it to examine the referential relationships between the language of poetry and extra-poetic objects. Levin sees the poem as only one, possibly, among other overlooked poems from Swinburne's life after 1879 and as a form of poetic experimentation that gave rise to those of his later poems that are recognized as great.

In another case of a largely neglected poem, Andrew Fippinger takes up one of Swinburne's poems from the Putney days and pairs it with one of his self-parodies. "Intimations and Imitations of Immortality: Swinburne's 'By the North Sea' and 'Poeta Loquitur'" sets out, in the first poem, to trace Swinburne's complex interweaving of mortality and immortality, a theme traced to a larger matrix which includes Wordsworth as well as earlier authors. Fippinger then sees the poem as being in dialogue with "Poeta Loquitur," a connection that allows Fippinger space to explore the central themes of Swinburne's deep introspection on death, the sea, and poetic lineage—and then to counterbalance that with his parody, adding a new layer of contemplation and another side of serious epiphany, the ridiculous.

Julia Saville uses contemporary and earlier ideas and exemplars of cosmopolitanism to locate Swinburne as a serious political thinker, something beyond being simply the bad boy of Victorian poetry. She places Swinburne among a group of thinkers between 1850 and 1870, seeing him as standing out in articulating, in effect, not just civic duty and self-restraint but "the civic duty of the poet to voice the equal value of diverse passion to a healthy, intellectually vibrant body politic." In a commanding review of republican theories and theorists in England stretching from the Victorians to their predecessors, Saville puts Swinburne in the context of such of his heroes as Kossuth, Mazzini, and Blanc and his contemporaries at Oxford, clarifying the connections as well as the distinctions. She then tests her approach by examining two poems little considered, "Les Noyades" and "Before a Crucifix," showing that poetry's very sensuality can bring something to the political table that mere reason cannot.

Katie Paterson explores the nature of Swinburneian love and traces it to Schopenhauer in “‘Much Regrafted Pain’: Schopenhaurian Love and The Fecundity of Pain in *Atalanta in Calydon*.” Paterson embeds the conception of love, a force in *Atalanta in Calydon* that is painful, divisive, and destructive, in Schopenhauer’s intense pessimism where human life is defined by the suffering and torment incorporated in the blind will to live and to continue the species. Exploring as well the Darwinian context, Paterson brings this force into focus as it pulses through Swinburne’s first Greek tragedy, exploring the power of death, as death and the illusion of love are confronted each with the other.

In “Swinburne and Thackeray’s *The Newcomes*,” Catherine Maxwell takes up Swinburne’s *femmes fatales* to explore an influence removed from the usual suspects in French literature. She finds in Thackeray’s novel a romantic relationship between cousins that will make beat a little faster the heart of many a Swinburne scholar. Swinburne’s particular interest in the novel, Maxwell suggests, would have been driven by his own situation vis à vis Mary Gordon, and Maxwell teases out the connections between the lives in the novel and the lives of the real cousins, and develops the biographical implications in the points of contact.

Jason Boulet explores the classical connections in Swinburne in “‘Will he rise and recover [?]: Catullus, Castration, and Censorship in ‘Dolores.’” Boulet surveys Swinburne’s admiration of Catullus, and the condemnation brought down on him by its manifestation in *Poems and Ballads*. The essay teases out the complex allusions Swinburne mounts as part of his assault on the moral criticism of the Victorians, their censorship of literature, and even the primness of public school education. Boulet’s essay engages the influence of Catullus in a close analysis of “Dolores,” elucidating the full implications of the allusions, and developing the figurative self-castration of Victorian criticism and education.

In an essay that explores the question of Swinburne’s impact and influence, T. D. Olverson examines the response of Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper. “Libidinous Laureates and Lyrical Maenads: Michael Field, Swinburne, and Erotic Hellenism” examines how the two were drawn to Swinburne’s poetics and aesthetic creed as well as to his subjects and were moved to take up and refashion those in a number of their works. Olverson traces the influence through the intensity of pain and pleasure in Field’s classical works, drawing attention to the influence of Swinburne’s Hellenistic poetics. Field, she suggests, moves Hellenism forward to allow its fulfillment physically and spiritually, but also socially in terms of gender and sexual politics.

T.A.J. Burnett takes up a challenging conundrum in his “Some Reflections on the Text of Swinburne’s Unfinished Novel, the so-called ‘Lesbia Brandon.’” Burnett works with the fragments of the novel first printed by



Randolph Hughes in 1952, but in a form that has satisfied few. Burnett posits a date of composition for the work, describes the various manuscript fragments in detail, and works out the complexities of their relationship both in Hughes and as revealed by paper, watermarks, and text—and works through the special questions posed by sheets discovered after Hughes' edition. He ends with a call for a new edition (which I understand is likely soon to be undertaken by Burnett and Rooksby working together).

In another analysis of manuscripts, Benjamin F. Fisher considers "Swinburne's 'A Nympholept' in the Making," setting it in the context of the 1890s and its critical reception into the twentieth century. Fisher subjects the manuscripts of the poem, one in the Berg Collection and the other in the Ashley Collection, to close analysis. The revisions, Fisher demonstrates, reveal the "fundamental brainwork," in Rossetti's phrase, behind the poem and Fisher recounts the choices Swinburne makes and their implications as the revisions are presented and analyzed. In each case, says Fisher, the better choice is the one Swinburne makes as he works through the difficult and complex thoughts and emotions of this late mystical poem.