

Summer 1993

Two Poems by Swinburne: 'Milton' and On Wagner's Music

Terry L. Meyers

College of William and Mary, tlmeyer@wm.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/aspubs>

Recommended Citation

Meyers, Terry L., Two Poems by Swinburne: 'Milton' and On Wagner's Music (1993). *Victorian Poetry*, 37(4), 203-209.

<https://scholarworks.wm.edu/aspubs/443>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Arts and Sciences at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Arts & Sciences Articles by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.

Two Poems by Swinburne: “Milton” and On the Effect of Wagner’s Music

TERRY L. MEYERS

IN WORKING ON AN EDITION OF SWINBURNE’S CORRESPONDENCE, I have in the last several years discovered two previously unknown poems by Algernon Charles Swinburne. One has existed for decades in the British Library’s Ashley Collection, unrecognized probably because it survives in the form of a copy not in Swinburne’s hand. The other, a signed holograph which I bought from a bookseller in Texas, has a provenance that is unknown. Swinburne appears to have wanted to publish both, though circumstances in each case made that infeasible.

Swinburne created “Milton” at a time, as the Third French Republic was about to be declared, when he was eager to make a public statement about England and its responsibilities to respond to developments on the Continent. The poem is written on the four pages formed from a sheet of white letter paper folded in half (the sheet has also been folded a second time, as for an envelope). The watermark is “Towgood / Fine.” The manuscript shows no revisions; indeed, the poem appears to have been created by excision, for it comprises stanzas 14, 15, and 16 of “The Eve of Revolution” (first published in *Songs before Sunrise* [1871]) and differs from them only in the capitalization of “Him” in the penultimate line of the first stanza and the omission of the comma at the end of the second line of the second stanza:¹

Milton

Thy soul was like a star, & dwelt apart;
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was as the sea,
Pure as the naked heavens—majestic, free.
Wordsworth.

He died
Who was the sire of an immortal strain,
Blind, old, & lonely when his country’s pride
The priest, the slave, & the liberticide
Trampled & mocked with many a loathèd rite
Of lust & blood; he went, unterrified,
Into the gulf of death; but his clear sprite
Yet reigns o’er earth; the third among the sons of light.
Shelley.

O thou, clothed round with raiment of white waves,
 Thy brave brows lightening through the grey wet air,
 Thou, lulled with sea-sounds of a thousand caves,
 And lit with sea-shine to thine inland lair,
 Whose freedom clothed the naked souls of slaves
 And stripped the muffled souls of tyrants bare,
 O, by the centuries of thy glorious graves,
 By the live light of the earth that was thy care,
 Live, thou must not be dead,
 Live; let thine armed head
 Lift itself up to sunward & the fair
 Daylight of time & man,
 Thine head republican,
 With the same splendour on thine helmless hair
 That in His eyes kept up a light
 Who on thy glory gazed away their sacred sight;

Who loved & looked their sense to death on thee;
 Who taught thy lips imperishable things
 And in thine ears outsang thy singing sea;
 Who made thy foot firm on the necks of kings
 And thy soul somehow steadfast—woe are we
 It was but for a while, & all the strings
 Were broken of thy spirit; yet had he
 Set to such tunes & clothed it with such wings
 It seemed for his sole sake
 Impossible to break,
 And woundless of the worm that waits & stings,
 The golden-headed worm
 Made headless for a term,
 The king-snake whose life kindles with the spring's,
 To breathe his soul upon her bloom,
 And while she marks not turn her temple to her tomb.

By those eyes blinded & that heavenly head
 And the secluded soul adorable,
 O Milton's land, what ails thee to be dead?
 Thine ears are yet sonorous with his shell
 That all the song of all thy sea-line fed
 With motive sound of spring-tides at mid swell,
 And through thine heart his thought as blood is shed,
 Requickening thee with wisdom to do well;
 Such sons were of thy womb,
 England, for love of whom
 Thy name is not yet writ with theirs that fell,
 But, till thou quite forget
 What were thy children, yet
 On the pale lips of hope is as a spell;
 And Shelley's heart & Landor's mind
 Lit thee with latter watch-fires; why wilt thou be blind?

A. C. Swinburne.

In studying the holograph, one might think of several explanations for the poem. One is that "Milton," being so short, was somehow the germ of "The Eve of Revolution." But everything Swinburne says of "The Eve of Revolution" suggests that he conceived of it, *ab ovo*, as an ode. On February 14, 1870, he wrote to William Michael Rossetti, "I have all but finished the centre poem and mainspring of my volume—'The Eve of

Revolution.' I never worked so hard at perfecting a poem into which I had put so much heart—I only hope the result will be answerable to the work I have spent on it. If so it must be one of the most important poems I have achieved."² By April 19, 1870 (and probably well before then), the ode was finished, and had been sent to William Michael Rossetti for his admiration along with other poems intended for *Songs before Sunrise*.³

Another explanation might be that "Milton" is not a work in its own right at all, that Swinburne simply copied out several stanzas from "The Eve of Revolution" for a friend, an admirer, or an autograph collector. That the piece is so formally signed might support this. And yet Swinburne created such snippets only rarely. Moreover, in such a case, to title the excerpt would be unusual, and to create a title different from that of the source seems even more unusual.

It is to me more likely that Swinburne considered the verses a separate work with an integrity of its own, not only titling it distinctively but fitting it with appropriate epigraphs from Wordsworth ("London, 1802," slightly misquoted) and Shelley ("Adonais," stanza 4). These epigraphs place Swinburne in the same position as Wordsworth and Shelley, turning to Milton as a bardic, national voice of Liberty. To Swinburne, indeed, the several causes of British patriotism, of democracy, and of Italian freedom were easily intertwined, as he makes clear in a paragraph from "Wordsworth and Byron" (1884) that spells out the connections among Wordsworth, Mazzini, and Italian unity. And as the paragraph goes on, it seems to evoke the period when "Milton" must have been forming in Swinburne's mind: "The time has been, since the close of Wordsworth's day, when the appeal of his own memorable sonnet to Milton might perhaps with no less propriety have been addressed to him who wrote it: in any case, the spirit and the body of such poems must be alike imperishable, the lesson of their heroic example a possession beyond price for ever."⁴

The precise circumstances that led to Swinburne's creating "Milton" are not certain, but I believe I know when and why it came into being. The one reference that I have been able to find in Swinburne's correspondence that might have to do with "Milton" is in a letter from Emilie Ashurst Venturi, September 4, 1870.⁵ Venturi writes to Swinburne with an outburst of renewed republican hope after the surrender of Napoleon III, defeated at the Battle of Sedan, September 2, 1870, but also with concern about Mazzini's health. Then she comments on an unspecified poem which Swinburne has sent her in (or accompanying) a letter that is yet to be traced:

One thing not Italian I can think about, and that is the verses you sent. My dear boy they are simply magnificent; voilà tout. Strong, as well as lovely; and possessing what

sometimes your verses lack, the extra dignity given by the sense of noble self-restraint; that the Poet gives us less than is in him, instead of wearing his heart upon his sleeve. This quality which is the essence of Dante's immense grandeur, and elevation, over all other Poets of whom I know anything—so that one always feels how much greater the man himself is than the part of him he condescends to show to us inferior mortals—I find in these last verses of yours and rejoice greatly over it.⁶

Even if "Milton" is the poem Venturi praises, however, its origin and Swinburne's intention for it are not absolutely revealed. Perhaps when his letter to Venturi appears, the mystery will be cleared up; in the meantime, I would guess that Swinburne intended publishing "Milton," but found the moment for it had passed, superseded both by the proclamation of the Third French Republic and by his ode celebrating that event.

Certainly by the late summer of 1870, Swinburne was frustrated at delays that seemed to postpone publication of *Songs before Sunrise* until October (in fact, the volume was not to appear until early in January 1871). The political scene on the Continent was, to say the least, fluid. In July, the Franco-Prussian War broke out (with Britain officially neutral). Events in Italy were moving toward the unification of Rome and the Papal States with Italy in October. We can see these factors combining in a pressure to publish something, anything, in Swinburne's enquiring of John Morley, on August 9, 1870, whether the *Fortnightly Review* might be interested in publishing "The Eve of Revolution":

I was going to write to you, as it happened, before your note reached me, to know whether you would like to have in the *Fortnightly Review* the firstling of my forthcoming book—now for the *immediate* present postponed—a lyric poem of some length on the European prospect as seen from the democratic point of view. Rossetti wants me to bring out something of the kind at this moment when it might tell; but as I hope certainly to publish my volume of national or political lyrics in the next autumn season, I cannot of course guess whether you would think it worth while to have it as it were on so short a lease; and it must make part of the series, though of course standing separate by itself. If you let me know that you would like to have it—supposing, of course, you find it otherwise available [*sic*—it shall be sent at once. It is called *The Eve of Revolution*—an Ode in some twenty or thirty regular strophes or stanzas.⁷

Since Morley, for whatever reason, offered no outlet for "The Eve of Revolution" (perhaps because of its length), Swinburne might well have created "Milton" under the pressures of the moment. Then as the best and politically most appropriate time for publication passed, he most likely simply retired the effort, especially if he had second thoughts about the wisdom of publishing a part as a whole. "Milton" was probably viable only some time between Morley's apparent rejection of "The Eve of Revolution" and September 5, 1870, when Swinburne exuberantly saluted the Third Republic with his "Ode on the Proclamation of the French Republic, *September 4th, 1870*," published on September 12 as a pamphlet.

The second unknown poem by Swinburne was also an occasional poem, in a sense, but failed to appear not because circumstances changed

but, I believe, because those who solicited it received it harshly enough that Swinburne withdrew it or allowed it to be withdrawn.

The occasion of the poem is clear in an invitation Swinburne received from Sidney Colvin (1845-1927), the art and literary critic, elected in 1873 Slade Professor of Fine Art at Cambridge, and later director of the Fitzwilliam Museum and Keeper of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum. Writing from the Saville Club on July 17, 1872, Colvin passed along to Swinburne an invitation from several of his French admirers:

I have been asked pressingly by the promoters of a new journal of literature in Paris called the *Renaissance*, to convey to you their petition for a poem in French from your hand. They are young enthusiasts of talent known as "Les Parnassiens," by name Aicard, Blémont, d'Hervilly, Camille Pelletan, & some others; and the paper consists of reviews & original pieces including verse.— Should you be at all disposed to comply with the request, I shall be [only] too glad to forward anything,—and they, I know, flattered to receive it—which you may send through me.—

La Renaissance littéraire et artistique was published from April 1872 through May 1874. The first issue (April 27, 1872) included an admiring essay on Swinburne by Émile Blémont (pp. 6-7).⁸ But none of the issues includes any poem by Swinburne. What happened is apparent from the materials accompanying Colvin's letter in the British Library.

We know that Swinburne prepared a contribution, for he wrote to his mother (July 24, 1872) about how pleased he was to receive the invitation:

I have nothing more to tell you, except of a very flattering petition conveyed to me in pressing terms from the conductors of a French journal for a poem (French of course), from my hand. As I like being recognized as a French poet as well as an English, I am writing them one on some music of Wagner's—I hope they won't mind the musician being a German. I hate them otherwise, but I must say the one good thing the Germans can do—music—they do so much better than any other people that no one even comes second. (Letters, 2:182)

And to his friend George Powell, Swinburne noted the "pressing request for a French poem from my hand" and specified that he was "writing one on the effect of Wagner's overture to *Tristan*" (Letters, 2:183).

S. J. Sillars has written that "one of the more notable lacunae with which the Swinburne scholar is faced is the poet's relationship with music, in particular the degree to which his composition of *Tristram of Lyonesse* was influenced by Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*"⁹ and both Cecil Y. Lang and Francis J. Sypher, Jr., have noted the absence of the poem Swinburne mentions. Lang annotates Swinburne's reference to the poem as "unidentified" and writes that he knows of "no French poem by Swinburne on Wagner" (Letters, 2:183n, 182n). And in his careful and detailed study of "Swinburne and Wagner," Sypher comments that "the French poem has not been traced."¹⁰

It seems, however, that the poem does survive among several related sheets in the British Library. Swinburne appears to have sent a sonnet to Colvin, who appears to have sent it to the French editors, who appear to have returned it to Colvin. At least, so I deduce from a poem in French grouped with Colvin's letter, a poem headed with simple authority "Texte de M. Swinburne":

Comme un fleuve qui donne à l'océan son âme,
Je verse entre vos mains d'où le vers tourne et luit,
Tout ce que mon livre a de musique et de flamme,
Tout ce qu'il peut tenir de lumière et de nuit;

Tout un siècle qui hurle au doux pied d'une femme
Ses révolutions pleines d'ombre et de bruit,
Son jour âpre et guerrier qui luit comme une lame,
Sa mer qui rugit va, vient, ronge, brise, et fuit;
Et sur tout ce temps mort comme une âme apparue
Qui rayonne et respire en s'épanissant,
Soleil mortel, éclair éteint, flamme abbatue,
Rayon d'amour qui frappe et de haine qui tue,
Fleur éclore au sommet du siècle éblouissant,
Une rose épineuse et vermeille de sang.

Swinburne had been apprehensive about praising a German composer to a French audience so shortly after the Franco-Prussian War, yet it appears that the quality of his French doomed the poem more than any political sensitivities: the copy is marked with superscriptions keyed to an accompanying, detailed critique of Swinburne's French and to an amended copy of the poem headed (still in the copyist's hand) "Corrections proposées." Though I have yet to discover any further exchange of relevant letters between Colvin and Swinburne, I suspect that either Colvin equivocated until the project died or Swinburne simply ceased work on the project.¹¹ But despite its apparently not having met the desired standard, Swinburne's poem is an important and revealing document of Wagner's powerful impress on the poet's imagination.

Notes

- 1 I am grateful to the British Library for permission to publish the second poem and the letters by Sidney Colvin (Ashley MSS B1069, ff.74-84). The only previous appearance of "Milton" has been in a limited edition (no more than 250 copies) which I had printed in Williamsburg, Virginia in 1987 for private circulation.
- 2 *The Swinburne Letters*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang, 6 vols. (New Haven, 1959-62), 2:95.
- 3 See *Selected Letters of William Michael Rossetti*, ed. Roger W. Peattie (University Park, Pennsylvania, 1990), p. 253.
- 4 "Wordsworth and Byron," *The Complete Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, ed. Edmund Gosse and Thomas James Wise, 20 vols. (London, 1925-26), 14:236-237.
- 5 Venturi's letter is in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin, and is quoted with permission. Cecil Lang notes that Venturi (d. 1893) was a close friend of Mazzini, and "acted as his literary editor and secretary in England." She had been raised, he says, in accord with her father's liberal ideas. Venturi married twice, the second marriage ending in 1866 with the death of her husband Carlo Venturi (see *Letters*, 1:314n, 2:29n). Venturi's extensive correspondence with Swinburne is fascinating, but one-sided, since few of his letters to her have turned up. If and when they do, they will be among his most interesting.
- 6 The "verses" cannot be the "Ode on the Proclamation of the French Republic, September 4, 1870," for Swinburne began that poem only on the next day, Monday, September 5 (*Letters*, 2:125). They could be "The Eve of Revolution," except that those twenty-seven stanzas seem not wholly to merit Venturi's praise for restraint and reserve.
- 7 *Letters*, 2:118. In a letter to Swinburne of August 5, 1870, William Michael Rossetti echoed Dante Gabriel Rossetti's remarking the aggravation of the delay in publishing *Songs before Sunrise* "just now—when anything of an excited political tone from you on foreign politics would ring through England and Europe" (Peattie, p. 259).
- 8 In the issue of November 16, 1872, pp. [233]-234, Blémont also contributed an essay on Swinburne's review of Hugo's *L'Année Terrible* in the *Fortnightly Review*, September 1872.
- 9 S. J. Sillars, "Tristan and Tristram: Resemblance or Influence?" *VP* 19 (1981): 81.
- 10 Francis Jacques Sypher, Jr., "Swinburne and Wagner," *VP* 9 (1971): 176n.
- 11 A letter (May 26, 1922) from Colvin to T. J. Wise included in Ashley B1069 leaves it unclear whether Wise found the French materials among Swinburne's papers acquired from The Pines (which presumably included Colvin's 1872 letter) or whether Colvin had kept them and now passed them along to Wise: "You are entirely welcome to these if you at all care to possess them. I am no collector of my own old letters." Indeed, the phrasing may apply only to letters and not to the French transcription at all. In any case, Wise appears never to have realized what the French materials concerned.