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Algernon Charles Swinburne

Terry L. Meyers
College of William and Mary, tlmeye@wm.edu

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War, the Boer War, and the suffrage movement, evidence that Stoker was thinking about contemporary events and weaving these thoughts into his fiction. A definitive study of his romances remains to be written.

Stoker was a complex writer who saw evil in his world but who also hoped to alleviate that evil either through science and technology or through human relationships. He often wove romance into his darkest works and gothic horror into his romances, as well as references to politics and medicine into both.

SEE ALSO: Gothic; Medicine; New Woman fiction; Novel, historical; Vampires and vampirism

REFERENCES

FURTHER READING

Swinburne, Algernon Charles

TERRY L. MEYERS
College of William and Mary, United States

Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837–1909) is perhaps the last major Victorian writer yet to take his due place in the canon, kept from the pantheon even today by attitudes engendered by his earliest appearances in print. Recent scholarly and critical work is raising Swinburne's standing as poet, critic, and even novelist, but the bleakness of his early vision, the explicitness of his challenges to Victorian political, literary, and sexual propriety, and the antipathy of such modernists as T. S. Eliot have hampered his becoming a popular writer or one taught broadly in secondary schools and universities.

Swinburne's eclipse from his standing during his age is such that in a 2014 New York Times review of Gilbert and Sullivan's Patience (which satirizes the aesthetic movement developed in part from Swinburne's dedication to art for art's sake), a critic commented on "an increasing unfamiliarity with the targets of its satire," including Swinburne. Nevertheless, Oscar Wilde's evaluation in 1896, when a successor to Tennyson as Poet Laureate was being sought, that Swinburne was already, beloved of all poets, "the Poet Laureate of England," guides a recent collection of compelling essays on such topics as
Swinburne’s immersion in French literature, aestheticism, and Hellenism; their thesis is that Swinburne ought to be more broadly “acknowledged to be one of the most important Victorian poets, a founding figure for British aestheticism and the dominant influence for many fin-de-siécle and modernist poets” (Maxwell and Evangelista 2013).

Swinburne burst forth as the bad boy of Victorian poetry in *Poems and Ballads* (1866), though his unconventionality was apparent earlier. Born April 5, 1837, in London to Captain (later Admiral) Charles Henry Swinburne and Lady Jane Swinburne, Swinburne was the eldest of five siblings (a twin to one of his sisters died early and his favorite sister, Edith, died in 1863, darkening his worldview). Difficulties in birthing may have occasioned a characteristic excitability in Swinburne’s behavior throughout his life.

Swinburne’s grandfather, Sir John Swinburne, had a grand home in Northumberland, Capheaton Hall, where as a child Swinburne frequently visited and which imprinted on him a deep consciousness of Scottish connections. He collected and wrote Border Ballads in his youth, and identified with Mary Queen of Scots, the subject of several of his historical dramas, including *Chastelard* (1865) and *Bothwell* (1874), the longest play in English literature.

At Capheaton, too, he came under the mentorship of Pauline, Lady Trevelyan, whose nearby home, Wallington, was decorated with murals commissioned from William Bell Scott, the earliest of Swinburne’s acquaintances among the Pre-Raphaelites. Lady Trevelyan was among those who tried to counsel Swinburne into less confrontational modes, both in his personal life when she warned him about rumors and insinuations concerning his sexual orientation (a question still open to investigation) and in his literary life as he was working on *Poems and Ballads*.

Swinburne’s family lived on the Isle of Wight, at East Dene, Bonchurch, overlooking the Channel, and a short distance from the new church his parents helped to fund; the home was also not far from Northcourt, where lived a first cousin, Mary Gordon, with whom, most scholars believe, Swinburne was in love, and whose inaccessibility helped to shape Swinburne’s early pessimism and nihilism as well as his plunging in the 1860s and 1870s into a dissolute life of alcoholism and flagellation brothels. This descent he anticipated in a poem articulating in archetypal terms the devastation of unrequited love, “The Triumph of Time,” when his cousin married Colonel Disney Leith. Unraveling the relationship between the two cousins has taken scholars decades—a curious psychological harmony between the two shaped a number of works written by each, not least Swinburne’s novels.

Swinburne’s early life was typical of his class: private tutoring, Eton, Oxford. At Eton, his small stature and red hair led to his being bullied, and the school’s traditional punishment, birching, helped to shape his lifelong obsession with sadism and masochism, a taste encouraged by a friend in the 1860s, Lord Houghton, who introduced him to the works of the Marquis de Sade, which he took up obsessively.

The psychology behind such an attraction, as John D. Rosenberg has suggested, opens an insight into not just Swinburne’s being but also his poetry, which is charged with the tension of delicately poised opposites: shadows thinned by light, lights broken by shade, sunset passing into moonrise, sea merging with sky. He is obsessed by the moment when one thing shades off into its opposite, or when contraries fuse, as in “Hermaphroditus” ... Yet apart from his profound esthetic affinity with [the painter] Turner, there is the unique idiosyncrasy of Swinburne himself, who was equipped with
superb senses, each of which must have transmitted a peculiar counterpoint. In a sense, Swinburne perceived in paradoxes, and his recurrent synesthetic images express perfectly that passing of pain into pleasure, bitter into sweet, loathing into desire, which lay at the root of his profoundest experiences. (Rosenberg 1967, 149–50)

Even at school, Swinburne was immersed in such unconventional literary enthusiasms as the Jacobean and Caroline dramatists, whose works he was in his later life to champion. One memoir of him at Eton pictures him in a window “with some huge old-world tome, almost as big as himself, upon his lap, the afternoon sun setting on fire the great mop of red hair. There it was that he emancipated himself, making acquaintance with Shakespeare minus Bowdler, Marlowe, Spenser, Ben Jonson, Ford, Massinger, Beaumont and Fletcher.” One result was a juvenile play, “The Unhappy Revenge,” into which, characteristically, he reported, he’d “contrived to pack twice as many rapes and about three times as many murders as are contained in the model.”

Swinburne matriculated at Balliol College, Oxford in January 1856. Benjamin Jowett, soon to become the Master of Balliol, remained a mentor and friend even after Swinburne’s rustication, a rustication he affected to think echoed that of Shelley, another of his extracanonical heroes. Another influence at Oxford was John Nichol, a Scotsman and lifelong friend, who went on to a career as a professor of English literature at Glasgow University. Though Swinburne abandoned his early and intense High Anglican, virtually Catholic, faith at Oxford, the standard claims that Nichol was responsible for Swinburne’s apostasy and alcoholism are false. Swinburne and Nichol were members of Old Mortality, a literary society that produced a short-lived magazine, Undergraduate Papers, where Swinburne was able to publish several early essays, including what purported to be a review of an English writer he made up (in 1862, he tried but failed to place reviews of two purported and shocking French poets in the Spectator).

A third influential figure from Oxford days was the painter and poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti, brought to Oxford to paint murals at the Student Union, and whose magnetic personality drew in Swinburne as well as William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones, close friends for the rest of his life. Though Swinburne was to back away from the influence, the rebelliousness of Pre-Raphaelitism permeated his early work, and he, along with other Pre-Raphaelite writers, was attacked by an unsympathetic critic, Robert Buchanan, as being a practitioner of the “fleshy school of poetry,” indifferent to the higher callings Victorians largely expected from their writers.

Swinburne’s first book publication, Queen Mother and Rosamond, appeared in 1860, underwritten by his father, who also gave him an allowance to move to London to pursue a literary career. Until his virtual collapse and rescue in 1879, the years in London were heady ones of intense intellectual, literary, and artistic excitement, mixed with drunken episodes from which Swinburne had to be rescued, removed by his father to the family home, Holmwood, at Shiplake. An early biographer, Edmund Gosse, recorded, in an account he sealed for decades, that Swinburne was a frequent client at “a mysterious house in St. John’s Wood where two golden-haired and rouge-cheeked ladies received, in luxuriously furnished rooms, gentlemen whom they consented to chastise for large sums.”

Swinburne published in 1862 the first critical notice in England of Baudelaire and, later, an elegy, “Ave atque Vale,” a tribute to the French poet within the pastoral tradition but also a riposte to the optimistic asseverations of faith promulgated by Tennyson in In
Memoriam. In 1868 he published William Blake, the first critical study of a poet little regarded at the time, an ambitious exploration, but also an essay self-serv ing in its reading art for art’s sake into Blake.

Swinburne’s notoriety, however, came not so much from his critical interests, but from his own works. In 1865 he published a Greek tragedy at twice the usual length, Atalanta in Calydon, pulsating with an antitheism that went largely unnoted (though Christina Rossetti, a friend and admirer, could not bear to read the climactic denunciation in one chorus of “the Supreme Evil, God”). Critical outrage was reserved for Poems and Ballads (1866). The volume’s sexual explorations as in “Anactoria” (lesbian love), “The Leper” (necrophilia), and “Dolores” (domination and flagellation), as well as in other sexually explicit poems, outraged critics, even such an enlightened one as John Morley:

no language is too strong to condemn the mixed vileness and childishness of depicting the spurious passion of a putrescent imagination, the unnamed lusts of sated wanton, as if they were the crown of character and their enjoyment the great glory of human life. The only comfort about the present volume is that such a piece as “Anactoria” will be unintelligible to a great many people, and so will the fevered folly of “Hermaphroditus,” as well as much else that is nameless and abominable. (Morley 1866, 24)

Though some students at Oxford delighted in chanting the more outrageous lines from the volume, students at Cambridge debated whether Poems and Ballads should be added to the university library.

Swinburne had delighted in increasing the shock value of Poems and Ballads, as when he revealed in having “added yet four more jets of boiling and gushing infamy to the perennial and poisonous fountain of ‘Dolores,’” but he was taken aback by the critical fuss; just the threat of a review from The Times had made his publisher refuse to proceed, and the volume appeared from John Camden Hotten, whose reputation was not wholly salubrious. Though in places disingenuous, Swinburne defended himself in terms that made clear his dedication to free thinking and free speaking in a pamphlet, Notes on Poems and Reviews (1866), which has some claim to stand with Milton’s Areopagitica and John Stuart Mill’s On Liberty (both admired by Swinburne) as a document expanding especially artistic license in England, encouraging the currents toward aestheticism and modernism swirling not far beneath the surface of the dominant values of the age. Another defense came in a book, Swinburne’s Poems and Ballads (1866), from William Michael Rossetti, brother of the poets, and a lifelong friend.

Political intimations in Poems and Ballads were present, if somewhat muted, but friends concerned about the moral irregularity of both Swinburne’s poetry and his lifestyle determined to channel his poetic virtuosity into support of the Italian Risorgimento, and introduced him to Giuseppe Mazzini, who wrote asking him “to give us a series of ‘Lyrics for the crusade.” Swinburne did, in Songs before Sunrise (1871), a volume of political poetry which includes “Hertha,” Swinburne’s working out of a higher force supportive of humanism and freedom. The shift from Poems and Ballads was marked, and emphasized by Swinburne in his “Prelude” to the volume, a palinode:

Then he stood up, and trod to dust
Fear and desire, mistrust and trust,
And dreams of bitter sleep and sweet,
And bound for sandals on his feet
Knowledge and patience of what must
And what things may be, in the heat
And cold of years that rot and rust
And alter; and his spirit’s meat
Was freedom, and his staff was wrought
Of strength, and his cloak woven of thought.
The shift toward an optimism and spiritualism (both at times attenuated) colored Swinburne's writings for the rest of his career. Still, even decades later one reader of “Before a Crucifix” was outraged at what he regarded as Swinburne's blasphemy and wrote him, “you do credit to your name, for your language is of Swine.”

The excesses of Swinburne's lifestyle threatened to become debilitating until, in 1879, a friend, a solicitor and developing literary critic, Theodore Watts-Dunton, virtually kidnapped Swinburne, moving him to Putney, then a quiet suburb of London, and into No. 2, The Pines, where for the next thirty years Swinburne lived a chastened life. His susceptibility to suggestion bore fruit as Watts-Dunton weaned him from alcoholism, allowing him one bottle of Bass Ale a day, drunk by Swinburne at the Rose and Crown pub in Wimbledon, where he made his way in a daily perambulation. The routines at The Pines have held little interest for biographers – they were a far cry from Swinburne's Dionysian years in London; a memoir, *The Home Life of Swinburne* (1922), by one of the later denizens of The Pines, Clara Watts-Dunton, enforces the idea of domesticity. But as his letters and publications reveal, the years were rich in intellectual and poetic activity, and Swinburne remained engaged with a number of friends and acquaintances.

Much of Swinburne's literary energy during his last decades was expended not just in writing poetry but in writing historical dramas, which have received little critical attention, and especially volumes of criticism which, though little regarded today, ensured his stature at the time as a major critic. Though characterized by thoughtful reading and scholarship, Swinburne's critical prose will often seem to the modern reader impressionistic, idiosyncratic, and labored. His ebullience can nevertheless be taking, as can his pleasure in the nineteenth-century sport of spirited disputes among men of letters. One of the most enduring, though perhaps little edifying, was with Frederick James Furnivall, where each addressed the other insultingly, for example Swinburne as Pigsbrook and Furnivall as Brothelsdyke. The dispute was over disparate approaches to such matters as determining authorship, Swinburne resisting newer, supposedly more objective and scientific, approaches.


In addition Swinburne wrote two novels. *A Year's Letters*, which appeared serially and under a pseudonym, Mrs. Horace Manners, in 1877 (published in 1905 as *Love's Cross Currents*), sardonically depicts Swinburne's own class, and, like the unfinished *Lesbia Brandon* (published posthumously, 1952), is redolent of sadomasochism.

Though one recent critic, Yisrael Levin, has encouraged a reconsideration of Swinburne's later poetry, the consensus that the poet was
largely defanged, drained of fervor and fire, is unlikely to change. Swinburne himself acknowledged his waning in a contribution to the canon of nineteenth-century bird poetry—"To a Seamew":

When I had wings, my brother,
Such wings were mine as thine:
Such life my heart remembers
In all as wild Septembers
As this when life seems other,
Though sweet, than once was mine.

Nevertheless, scattered among an abundance of elegies, occasional poems, baby poetry, and poems about Bertie Mason, a nephew to Watts-Dunton growing up at The Pines, are works of significance and interest—especially "Tristram of Lyonesse" (with its resonances reflecting Wagner and resisting Tennyson), "Thalassius," "The Lake of Gaube," and "A Nympholept." Largely for his private delectation, Swinburne during these decades also wrote verses obsessively recounting episodes of birchings and corporeal punishments at Eton.

In personal terms, perhaps the most intriguing development of Swinburne's later years was a reopened correspondence with Mary Gordon Leith after her husband died in 1892. Relations over the years between the two cousins had been conducted through family members rather than through letters, but widowhood brought new freedoms. The letters cast a light on the elective affinities between the two. In their youth they had ridden together, and Swinburne had composed parts of Atalanta in Calydon as Leith played the organ at Northcourt. They had even collaborated on one of Leith's early books for children, The Children of the Chapel (1864), where Swinburne provided scenes reflecting his fascination with flagellation. The letters exchanged by the two in receding middle age are infused with a mutual interest in schoolboy punishments and the innuendos, sometimes flagellatory, arising from transposing the initial letters of words. In her memoir on Swinburne's boyhood, Leith denied a published report of a romantic attachment, but most scholars today see her as Swinburne's inamorata.

Although Swinburne, become more conservative, even jingoist at times as he aged, had been considered to succeed Tennyson as Poet Laureate (Queen Victoria is supposed to have asked after him as "the best poet in my dominions"), his youthful péchés de jeunesse (as he himself styled them), his early republicanism, and his more recent antipathy to the Russian tsar, Victoria's relation, blocked that possibility. Nominations for the Nobel Prize in literature went nowhere (a false report of his winning the prize in 1908 pleased Swinburne before it evaporated).

Swinburne's death came on April 10, 1909, of influenza. He is said to have died murmuring Greek, perhaps Aeschylus. Even in death, he generated controversy, denounced by a vice dean of Canterbury Cathedral for the "pollution" he had introduced into English poetry. His wish that the Anglican burial service, with its theme of resurrection and life everlasting, be omitted from his funeral caused further consternation. Watts-Dunton assured the family that "up to his last moment [Swinburne] cherished the deepest animosity against the Creed which he felt had severed him from his most beloved ties ... If he had made a slight matter of his antagonism against Christianity ... it would have been different but with him it increased with his years and at the last ... it was bitterer than ever." In the end, Swinburne's wishes were disregarded, to the dismay of sympathizers present.

Swinburne's standing at his death was significant—Yeats commented that when Swinburne died he, Yeats, became "King of the Cats"—and there were some who thought of interring his remains at Westminster Abbey. But as part of the modernist agenda,
Swinburne and other Victorians had to be repudiated, and they were. Although T. S. Eliot's "Swinburne as Poet" defined narrowly the limits of critical and popular interest for many decades, the modernist insistence on a break between generations obscured a continuity that recent critics are unveiling. Swinburne's star is likely on the ascendant, propelled by essays and monographs by such critics as Antony Harrison, Catherine Maxwell, Margot Louis, David Reide, and Kerry McSweeney.

SEE ALSO: Aestheticism; Italy; Modernism; Poetry; Pre-Raphaelitism; Religion; Sexuality

REFERENCES


FURTHER READING


Symonds, John Addington

SARAH J. HEIDT
Kenyon College, United States

Born in Bristol on October 5, 1840, John Addington Symonds was an essayist, poet, historian, translator, life-writer, and student of sexuality. His extensive literary output was concentrated in the last twenty-one years of his life, when he published nearly forty books, including the seven-volume Renaissance in Italy (1875–86). Though recent works (and international conferences in 1998 and 2010) have considered a wider range of Symonds's voluminous writings and cultural importance, particularly as a historian and student of classical and Italian culture, he is still best known for the Memoirs he penned chiefly in 1889–91. At his death from pneumonia in Rome on April 19, 1893, Symonds bequeathed the Memoirs to Horatio F. Brown, his literary executor, who used parts of them in an 1895 biography and then willed them to the London Library in 1926, under a fifty-year embargo. The Memoirs have never been published in full: a 1964 biography paraphrased them; a 1984 edition published only two-thirds of their contents; and an unexpurgated critical edition was not finally in progress until 2013.