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## **Swinburne: Notorious, Eccentric, Prolific-but Obscure: Swinburne Re-Emerges as a Major Victorian Literary Figure**

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By the ravenous teeth that have smitten  
 Through the kisses that blossom and bud,  
 By the lips intertwined and bitten  
 Till the foam has a savor of blood,  
 By the pulse as it rises and falters,  
 By the hands as they slacken and strain,  
 I adjure thee, respond from thine altars,  
 Our Lady of Pain.

Wilt thou smile as a woman disdain  
 The light fire in the veins of a boy?  
 But he comes to thee sad, without feigning,  
 Who has wearied of sorrow and joy;  
 Less careful of labor and glory  
 Than the elders whose hair has uncurled;  
 And young, but with fancies as hoary  
 And grey as the world.

I have passed from the outermost portal  
 To the shrine where a sin is a prayer;  
 What care though the service be mortal?  
 O our Lady of Torture, what care?  
 All thine the last wine that I pour is,  
 The last in the chalice we drain,  
 O fierce and luxurious Dolores,  
 Our Lady of Pain.

- from "Dolores,  
 (Notre Dame des Sept Dolors)"  
 by Algernon Charles Swinburne

All heaven in every baby born,  
 All absolute of earthly leaven,  
 Reveals itself, though man may scorn  
 All heaven.

Yet man might feel all sin forgiven,  
 All grief appeased, all pain outworn,  
 By this one revelation given.

Soul, now forget thy burdens borne:  
 Heart, be thy joys now seven times seven:  
 Love shows in light more bright than morn  
 All heaven.

- from "Babyhood," by  
 Algernon Charles Swinburne

The two excerpts show Swinburne's intriguing shift, from the blasphemy and masochism of "Dolores" to the innocence and worship of "Babyhood."

# SWINBURNE

Notorious, Eccentric, Prolific - But Obscure,  
 Swinburne Re-Emerges As A Major Victorian  
 Literary Figure

By Terry L. Meyers

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In 1882 James McNeill Whistler, smarting from an attack on him by his erstwhile friend Algernon Charles Swinburne, wrote Swinburne a public letter addressed to "one Algernon Swinburne--outsider--Putney." Those stinging words, "outsider--Putney," are an apt precis of the critical reputation of Swinburne's work written after his move in 1879 from London to the Pines, the suburban villa in Putney, near Wimbledon, that Swinburne was to share until his death in 1909 with a solicitor and man of letters, Theodore Watts (later Watts-Dunton).



Algernon Charles Swinburne,  
 drawing executed in 1874 by Carlo Pellegrini.

Indeed, to modern readers not professionally engaged in literary studies, Swinburne (1837-1909) is probably even more an outsider. Though he was notorious in his lifetime, and prolific as a poet, a dramatist, an essayist, and even a novelist, our century's early turn against all things Victorian has led to a double oblivion for Swinburne, a poet seemingly of the second rank in an age little regarded. But just as the distance of time is allowing a dispassionate reappraisal of the Victorian age and its accomplishments, so it is leading to a new look at Swinburne who, in recent years, has been the subject of increasing interest, understanding, and appreciation. The most recent anthology for college courses in Victorian poetry, for example, treats him, with Tennyson and Browning, as one of the triumvirate of major poets in the age.

Until Swinburne moved in 1879 to Putney, his poetry and plays had sung defiantly to the ears of the Victorians songs they did not want to hear, songs of catatonic despair and destruction, songs of fiery revolutionary fervour, and songs of lurid sin and depraved passion. In an age when poetry was much looked to for responsible moral, social, and religious sustenance, when Tennyson was struggling to mute his two voices and to resolve his internal debate between pleasure and duty, Swinburne was insisting on the independence of art from all but aesthetic concerns. He was, moreover, writing poetry that purposely assaulted Victorian propriety in matters political, religious, and sexual.

And in a kind of moral drama that hostile audiences must have much appreciated, Swinburne's determined violation of the restraints of convention was apparent in the 1860's and the 1870's in his increasingly ravaged health. Literary London was frequently abuzz with rumors of Swinburne's dissipations, of his drinking, of his patronizing richly appointed brothels pandering to *le vice anglais*, of his consorting with sordid denizens in the murky depths of the Victorian underworld.

Swinburne's life, with his poetry, insured a lingering distrust -- his political, religious, and sexual offensiveness and then his apparently baffling turn to writing such poetry as that in worship of babies were

enough to bring him critical opprobrium. Certainly as an undergraduate confident and foolish enough to dismiss all of Victorian literature out of hand, I had never heard of Swinburne. My fascination with his poetry came only at the University of Chicago when I studied with Jerry McGann, one of those teachers and scholars whose vitality, insight, and force of personality essentially carve out whole careers for their students. But even by itself, Swinburne's life had quirks enough to attract the most jaded graduate student.

Swinburne was born, in London, in 1837, to parents of aristocratic lineage on both sides. His father, an admiral in the Royal Navy, and his mother raised him as a child in two homes, moving seasonally from Capheaton Hall, the ancestral home in Northumberland, to the softer climate of East Dene, near the tiny seaside village of Bonchurch, the Isle of Wight. Swinburne's youth was one of happy play, of climbing cliffs, of galloping ponies, of games shared with his cousins, including Mary Gordon, with whom he fell hopelessly in love, and whose marriage in 1865 shattered, perhaps, whatever composure Swinburne still

retained. As a boy of nine, Swinburne was sent to Eton, where he studied under the tutelage of James Joynes, whose pedagogic use of the birch helped guide Swinburne's developing sensibilities into curious channels. From Eton, Swinburne went to Balliol College, Oxford, where, like Shelley, he was rusticated, for offenses still not known (one can suspect alcohol was involved). In any case, his landlady took the opportunity to close her lodgings to "them troublesome Balliol gentlemen."

At Oxford, Swinburne had met William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, all brought there to paint murals on the new building of the Oxford Union Society. Swinburne's delight in their camaraderie, their high jinks, their appreciation of local girls -- "stunners," they called the beauties -- carried on into London in the 1860's and 1870's. His acquaintances there ranged from the high to the low, from Browning and Tennyson, infrequently and formally, to the likes of Simeon Solomon and Charles Augustus Howell, frequently and informally. Solomon, a painter of some repute, had little in com-



Swinburne and his sisters - by George Richmond (1843).

mon with Howell, a blagueur whose wits kept him alive as he diddled friend and foe alike -- except that both came to sad and sordid deaths, Solomon as an alcoholic reduced to painting on sidewalks and Howell, found in the gutter, his throat cut, a coin wedged in his mouth, apparently signifying his execution as a squealer.

The poet-painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti was one of Swinburne's closest friends until Rossetti's addiction to laudanum so beclouded his mind with paranoia that the friendship had to be ended (Rossetti came to believe quite literally that the very birds in their twittering were talking about him!). Rossetti's regard for Swinburne in their happier days included his concern for Swinburne's sexual development. To initiate Swinburne, Rossetti is supposed to have hired, for ten pounds, an American actress, Adah Isaacs Menken, several times married, and much celebrated for her dazzling performance wearing a flesh colored body stocking while strapped to the back of a galloping stallion. Erotic stuff indeed! The story goes that Menken returned Rossetti's money -- "It's no good," she complained, "I can't get him to understand that biting's no good!" Another version, though, suggests that the temptress ignored the bard's nibbling in favor of long recitations of her own lush verse!

We can laugh now at the chaos in the Chelsea house Swinburne shared with Rossetti and George Meredith, a house where Rossetti kept a private zoo: a raccoon, a wombat, peacocks, a kangaroo, an armadillo, a zebu and other oddities. He wanted to add a lion and an elephant, but was dissuaded, though neighbors could have been no happier at the goings-on of the human menagerie. One story recounts a riotous soiree ending (one hopes) with Swinburne and Simeon Solomon racing, sliding down the stair banisters -- naked. But these follies had to cease, of course, and they did, when Rossetti's solicitor Watts-Dunton virtually kidnapped Swinburne and carried him away from dangerous temptation.

Then, under the mesmeric influence and gentle care of Watts-Dunton, Swinburne was able to make a recovery that vindicated commonsensical notions of modera-

tion and regularity and healthful suburban living. Swinburne's mother was happy, Watts-Dunton was happy, and Swinburne was happy.



But literary critics have not been so happy. Swinburne tamed seemed to lose most of his vitality; his poetic scope seemed to narrow, and the magnificent energy of his revolt against God, of his intense obsession with the pain and pleasure of being under the rod of Dolores, Our Lady of Pain, was replaced with vapid verse jingoistically praising the Queen and the England he had assailed in *Songs before Sunrise* (1871) for being dormant; with elegies insistently and repetitiously recalling dead friends and heroes from his youth; with increasingly intricate poetic forms entwined around increasingly trivial themes; with finely wrought descriptions of flowering hawthorns and May mornings, and sea-scapes and the sea; and with apparently unblushing, sentimental poems about babies, babies whom he knew as well as babies whom he met only briefly in his daily perambulation across Wimbledon Common.

Though critics are willing to recognize some flashes of Swinburne's old power in a few late poems such as "A Nympholept" (1894), the consensus is that Watts-Dunton's rescue of Swinburne preserved the person but lost the poet. Certainly Swinburne himself seems to recognize a falling off in his 1889 poem "To a Sea Mew" where, like so many other nineteenth century poets from Wordsworth to Hardy, he chooses a symbolic bird with which to contrast his own life:

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;  
When I had wings, my brother,  
Such wings were mine as thine.

A renaissance, or, more properly, a naissance, of critical interest in the minor poetry of Swinburne's later period will surely, we can all hope, be a long time coming. Certainly I

do not want to give these poems undue attention, or to suggest that we ought to value them more highly than they are presently valued. But I would like to try my hand at an extreme case, Swinburne's poetry dedicated to infants and infancy, poetry that in most cases only a verse writer for Hallmark cards might decently praise. Seen, however, from one perspective, Swinburne's turn from the themes of his more famous, and more lurid, earlier works is a part of the evolution that in larger ways marks his poetry. The baby poems in this light are not necessarily the literary equivalent of Watts-Dunton's weaning Swinburne from brandy to beer (one glass daily) so much as they are a continuation, albeit in a quieter tone, of Swinburne's revolt against Christianity, against "the supreme evil, God," and an affirmation of Swinburne's moderated vision of the way the world is constituted.

Swinburne's poetic conception of human life, of the way the world is put together, is not a hard one to discover, though often the careful precision of his subtly convoluted and precisely intertwined syntax and imagery impedes forward progress in its exploration. Both in his early and in his late poetry, Swinburne discovers man in the clash of opposing extremes, the strife of contraries that tear and rend each other. He notes, for example, in *Atalanta in Calydon* (1865) the cruelty of the creating gods in their molding of man, the gods who "very subtly fashioned/Madness with sadness upon earth" and "circled pain about with pleasure,/And girdled pleasure about with pain." The chorus gives this account of the complex genesis and constitution of Man:

Before the beginning of years  
There came to the making of man  
Time, with a gift of tears;  
Grief, with a glass that ran;  
Pleasure, with pain for leaven;  
Summer, with flowers that fell;  
Remembrance fallen from heaven,  
And madness risen from hell;  
Strength without hands to smite;  
Love that endures for a breath;  
Night, the shadow of light,  
And life, the shadow of death.

And the high gods took in hand  
Fire, and the falling of tears,  
And a measure of sliding sand  
From under the feet of the years;  
And froth and drift of the sea;  
And dust of the labouring earth:  
And bodies of things to be  
In the houses of death and of birth;

And wrought with weeping and laughter,  
 And fashioned with loathing and love,  
 With life before and after  
 And death beneath and above,  
 For a day and a night and a morrow,  
 That his strength might endure for a span  
 With travail and heavy sorrow,  
 The holy spirit of man.

These constant antitheses that slip into mutual identity inform the entire corpus of Swinburne's work. John D. Rosenberg stresses that Swinburne charges his poetry "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." Swinburne's greatest poems, and many of his lesser ones, hover in musically nuanced ambiguity around those actual and symbolic points where both the profound kinship of all things and their terrible and essential division are revealed.

But that Swinburne's works evolve in their treatment of the vast contraries and oppositions he dramatizes and explores has not been much noted. Looking at this evolution suggests a way of relating poems as different as, on the one hand, "Félise," from *Poems and Ballads* (1866), with its soul - and consciousness-dissolving desire for a woman who "must be swift and white, / And subtly warm, and half perverse, / And sweet like a snake's love lithe and fierce" and, on the other hand, such a later poem (1883) as that entitled, without irony, "Etude Réaliste":

I

A baby's feet, like sea-shells pink,  
 Might tempt, should heaven see meet,  
 An angel's lips to kiss, we think,  
 A baby's feet.

Like rose-hued sea-flowers toward the heat  
 They stretch and spread and wink  
 Their ten soft buds that part and meet.

No flower-bells that expand and shrink  
 Gleam half so heavenly sweet  
 As shine on life's untrodden brink  
 A baby's feet.

II.

A baby's hands, like rosebuds furled,  
 Whence yet no leaf expands,  
 Ope if you touch, though close upcurled,  
 A baby's hands.

Then, even as warriors grip their brands  
 When battle's bolt is hurled,  
 They close, clenched like tightening bands.

No rosebuds yet by dawn impearled  
 Match, even in loveliest lands,  
 The sweetest flowers in all the world --  
 A baby's hands.

III.

A baby's eyes, ere speech begin  
 Ere lips learn words or sighs,  
 Bless all things bright enough to win  
 A baby's eyes.

Love, while the sweet thing laughs and lies,  
 And sleep flows out and in,  
 Lies perfect in them Paradise.

Their glance might cast out pain and sin,  
 Their speech make dumb the wise,  
 By mute glad godhead felt within  
 A baby's eyes.

In his early poems like "Félise," those works dating from the 1860's, Swinburne is so stunned, so dismayed, so undone by the painful violence of existence, especially by the desolation of unrequited love, that he desires only oblivion and death, whether literally and immediately or more figuratively and indirectly through the dissolution promised by sin. This sense of the painfulness of life and the balm of death is illustrated in one tone by the subdued verse of "The Garden of Proserpine" (1866):

I am tired of tears and laughter,  
 And men that laugh and weep;  
 Of what may come hereafter  
 For men that sow to reap:  
 I am weary of days and hours,  
 Blown buds of barren flowers,  
 Desires and dreams and powers  
 And everything but sleep.

.....  
 From too much love of living,  
 From hope and fear set free,  
 We thank with brief thanksgiving  
 Whatever gods may be  
 That no life lives for ever;  
 That dead men rise up never;  
 That even the weariest river  
 Winds somewhere safe to sea.

Then star nor sun shall waken,  
 Nor any change of light:  
 Nor sound of waters shaken,  
 Nor wintry leaves nor vernal,  
 Nor days nor things diurnal;  
 Only the sleep eternal  
 In an eternal night.

A similar, though a more passionate, a more erotic, and a more complex desire for self-immolation burns forth from the jealous denunciation in "Anactoria" (1866) by Sappho of her lover Anactoria's taking a male lover:

O that I

Durst crush thee out of life with love, and die,  
 Die of thy pain and my delight, and be  
 Mixed with thy blood and molten into thee!  
 Would I not plague thee dying overmuch?  
 Would I not hurt thee perfectly? not touch  
 Thy pores of sense with torture, and make bright  
 Thine eyes with blood like tears and grievous light?  
 Strike pang from pang as note is struck from note,  
 Catch the sob's middle music in thy throat,  
 Take thy limbs living, and new-mould with these  
 A lyre of many faultless agonies?  
 Feed thee with fever and famine and fine drouth,  
 With perfect pangs convulse thy perfect mouth,  
 Make thy life shudder in thee and burn afresh,  
 And wring thy very spirit through the flesh?  
 Cruel? but love makes all that love him well  
 As wise as heaven and crueller than hell.  
 Me hath love made more bitter toward thee  
 Than death toward man; but were I made as he  
 Who hath made all things to break them one by one,  
 If my feet trod upon the stars and sun  
 And souls of men as his have always trod,  
 God knows I might be crueller than God.

During these decades of the 60's and 70's, Swinburne's life nearly matched in despair the painful cries of his poetry. The speaker in the profoundly autobiographical poem "The Triumph of Time" (1866) virtually is Swinburne when he declares that "I shall go my ways, tread out my measure, / Fill the days of my daily breath / With fugitive things not good to treasure." About this time, it is reported in a private and confidential essay long kept locked in the private cases of the British Library, Swinburne was visiting "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." And these were the years too of alcoholic dissipation, with Swinburne so often the first in a company to be drunk that once, when he came across a friend inebriated, he called a doctor, not recognizing the symptoms, and thinking his friend must be in his death agony.

But in the late 1860's, though the irregularities of his life did not lessen, Swinburne's vision of the world began to expand to a more comprehending view that set oppositions and duality in a broader perspective. He began to celebrate the very contraries he had earlier sought to escape. In *Songs before Sunrise* (1871), his poems celebrate, as in "Genesis," "The immortal war of mortal things": "Labour and life and growth and good and ill, / The mild antiphonies that melt and kiss, / The violent symphonies that meet and kill." As the oxymorons suggest, Swinburne understands

both the parts and the relations that constitute the whole, both the division and the harmony. Swinburne depicts in "Hertha" (1871), an all encompassing being, an earth spirit who joins all apparent disharmony and division into harmony and unity; Hertha speaks to man to reveal the connected wholeness of all that exists, including humanity itself:

Beside or above me  
Nought is there to go:  
Love or unlove me,  
Unknow me or know,  
I am that which unloves me and loves;  
I am tricken, and I am the blow.

I the mark that is missed  
And the arrows that miss,  
I the mouth that is kissed  
And the breath in the kiss,  
The search, and the sought, and the seeker,  
The soul and the body that is.

One birth of my bosom;  
One beam of mine eye;  
One topmost blossom  
That scales the sky;  
Man, equal and one with me,  
man that is made of me, man that is I.

The humanism in *Songs before Sunrise* and the movement away from the devastating madness of *Poems and Ballads* are announced in the "Prelude" (1871): there Swinburne repudiates "that subtle shade" and "the fierce flute whose notes acclaim/ Dim goddesses of fiery fame" and girds himself to confront and cope with the actual conditions and limitations of human life:

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.

For what has he whose will sees clear  
To do with doubt and faith and fear,  
Swift hopes and slow despondencies?  
His heart is equal with the sea's  
And with the sea-wind's, and his ear  
Is level to the speech of these,  
And his soul communes and takes cheer  
With the actual earth's equalities,  
Air, light, and night, hills, winds, and streams,  
And seeks not strength from strengthless dreams.

This acceptance of human life and its complexity finds one of its most vital expressions in Swinburne's much later poem "The Lake of Gaube" (1904), where, in the image of a swimmer plunging into the

dark, plumbless cold of a mountain lake, Swinburne hymns the intensity of life, intensity increased by the power of death:

Death-dark and delicious as death in the dream of a lover and dreamer may be,  
It [the lake] clasps and encompasses body and soul with delight to be living and free:  
Free utterly now, though the freedom endure but the space of a perilous breath,  
And living, though girdled about with the darkness and coldness and strangeness of death.



Swinburne in 1883 - by G. K. Halkett (from the Mayfield Collection).

Swinburne's wondering sense of the harmony of life and death concludes the poem: "Whose vision has yet beholden/ The splendour of death and of life?/ Though sunset as dawn be golden,/ Is the word of them peace, not strife?"

Swinburne's sense of being wholly alive to the vital forces that pulse through experience, his sense of divinity in man, his sense of apparent oppositions in life actually enriching the experience of life all help to explain, if not perhaps wholly to justify, the energy Swinburne put in his later years into writing baby poetry. To celebrate babyhood is to celebrate birth, to celebrate growth, to celebrate life. And it is also to affirm humanism.

At first glance there seems little hope of redeeming from virtue such a saccharine piece as this one of Swinburne's "Cradle Songs" (1884):

Baby, baby dear,  
Earth and heaven are near  
Now, for heaven is here.

Heaven is every place  
Where your flower-sweet face  
Fills our eyes with grace.

Till your own eyes deign  
Earth a glance again,  
Earth and heaven are twain.

Now your sleep is done,  
Shine, and show the sun  
Earth and heaven are one.

But even this poem has, as it were, a saving grace. Here and throughout his poetry on children, Swinburne obsessively reiterates, as in a poem mourning the death of a baby, "Benediction" (1883), how "Blest in death and life beyond man's guessing/ Little children live and die, possess/ Still of grace that keeps them past expressing/ Blest." Why Swinburne insists so often on the innocence of children, and does so in terms larded with religious overtones reveals how Swinburne's baby poetry connects with his grander, more lurid, and seemingly more corrosive early poems. These later and minor works, even as they help delineate Swinburne's movement towards a vaster and more benign comprehension of human life, also continue Swinburne's early revolt against the conventions of Victorian society, especially the repressiveness of Christianity. Swinburne repudiates a myth central to Christianity, the fall of Adam and Eve, and the consequent burdening of all men at birth with original sin, and replaces that myth with one he prefers, man as divine being, pure and innocent, humanly responsible for his own salvation (to deny the Fall is to deny the Redemption, and to make man responsible for himself).

There is, then, an abiding irony in Swinburne's baby poems, for if he has given up his thundering and direct assault on the citadel of Victorian propriety, in these minor poems he offers to the defenders of the citadel the sweets of sentimentality they enjoy, but sentimentality whose sweetness masks poison. Swinburne expressed his admiration for *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* in *William Blake: A Critical Essay* (1866). That study of Blake was not without fruit.

Swinburne in Putney, at the Pines, under the tutelage of Watts-Dunton, was a reformed man and a reformed poet. No one can deny the loss of power and of magnificence in most of his later work. But even that part of the later work which is seemingly the least significant, the least connected with the earlier poems, has connections that must mitigate any judgment of the late Swinburne as absolutely an outsider.