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Talk at the Swinburne Centenary Conference, London

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[The text of my plenary talk at the Swinburne Centenary Conference, London, June 11, 2009, Senate House, University of London]

Terry L. Meyers | June 11, 2009

First of all, let me thank Stefano for his generous introduction, and express the sense of honor and humility I feel as I stand here in the presence of so many accomplished students of literature and especially so many students of Algernon Charles Swinburne. I like to tell my own students that Swinburne is the last of the great poets in English Literature yet to receive his due--I hope very much that this conference and the talks and papers coming out of it will be one more step on what has been an unduly long journey towards Swinburne's being adequately recognized. I am not fully sure how we will know when that honor has been accorded Swinburne, but in America a strong sign will be when the dominant anthology used in university survey courses, the two volume Major Authors Edition of the Norton Anthology of English Literature, does actually include Swinburne.

My own contribution today to the development of Swinburne's reputation will be slight, in large part because I'll be talking about Swinburne's life and letters—his recognition will have to be based on the just appreciation of his work, which is a job for the critics among you. But when Catherine Maxwell invited me to speak, she more or less gave me my marching orders in saying that the audience today would like to hear from me about “some aspect of your Correspondence project – maybe significant new perspectives/material on ACS that emerged during your researches.” That seemed to me to be a good topic, so what I'd like to do today is look back briefly at the history and the editors of Swinburne's letters, and their contributions towards the biography of Swinburne that has developed in the last 90 years. As a step towards that and then towards an indication of what I think my own edition of Swinburne's correspondence might bring to Swinburne's next biography, I'd like to start with an account of my own project, how it developed, and what drove it.

Starting with this bit of editorial autobiography lets me pay tribute, as Swinburne would approve, of those who came before me and who shaped my own apprenticeship in Swinburne studies. I would start, of course, with Jerry McGann, with whom I studied at the University of Chicago in the late 1960's. Jerry was a white-hot spark then, as he still is now, and I knew from the first moments of the first class I took with him that I wanted to do a dissertation under his direction, even though I was distressed to discover that he was interested in, and soon to teach a course that was to include, Victorian poetry. I knew from a secondary school exposure to several of Tennyson's poems that Victorian poetry was worth no one's time. But following the old dictum to take the teacher and not the course, I signed up anyway, and soon encountered for the first time a bad boy of Victorian Poetry, a poet not allowed then or still into high school anthologies, Algernon Charles Swinburne. Under Jerry's tuition, I read Swinburne's “Garden of Proserpine” among other poems and was, to use a highly technical, critical term from contemporary theory, “blown away.”

And in writing a paper on Swinburne, I was encouraged by Jerry to look into Swinburne's letters, as edited by Jerry's mentor, Cecil Lang. I'm sorry to admit to my graduate student naiveté by saying that it was a revelation to me that poets wrote letters and that those letters could be collected and edited. Lang's edition was the first I'd ever encountered, and I can still remember the place and the time when in the bowels of the old Harper Library at the University of Chicago I began to feel the fascination of reading other peoples' mail, and began to see a connection between a poem and a life and indeed an era. The rigorous teachers of my undergraduate youth had shown me the high, white star of truth and its name was New Criticism, where lives and letters found thin air indeed. So I was hooked-- by Swinburne, by Jerry, and by Cecil Lang's spare and often wry footnotes.

And then I met another Swinburne enthusiast, again through Swinburne's letters. Seeing the misery of the job market, I had sought a job even before I had started my doctoral dissertation and found myself as a visiting instructor at the College of William and Mary, in Virginia, not too far from the Library of Congress, where in those days long before Google books, I hid myself regularly to do research. There, I was able to see and hold the limited edition publications of John S. Mayfield, whose name I'd seen in Lang's volumes and whose privately printed rarities had intrigued me. And, appropriately, it was a letter by Swinburne that led to my friendship with John Mayfield for John had acquired a letter by Swinburne that mentioned Shelley, and I was writing on Swinburne's connections to Shelley. That letter and the correspondence it occasioned led to a wonderful friendship with John and his wife Edith and many visits back and forth between Williamsburg and Bethesda, Maryland.

In contemplating Catherine's invitation and assignment for this talk, I looked back at the history of Swinburne's correspondence and the biographical and critical presentations and representations that followed from that. One of my colleagues for a time at William and Mary, Michael Reynolds, said in a departmental talk, when he was working on his biography of the Young Hemingway, that biography itself is a form of fiction. That's a provocative statement, and of course it contains some falsehood and some truth. To construct a biography requires information, data points, a scientist might say, the more the better. And where direct and verifiable data are lacking the biographer depends on inference, deduction, and guess work—hence, in part, the fiction Michael referred to. In Swinburne's case, there have been several waves of letters, several accumulations of data points, followed by increasingly complete biographies.

The first wave of letters was the series of pamphlets among the privately printed rarities produced by Thomas James Wise and Edmund Gosse in the decade or so immediately following Swinburne's death. These were intended for wealthy collectors largely, and no doubt had an appeal in their physical rarity and therefore monetary value—but the attraction too must have been a promise to the collector that he owned in some sense biographical information not widely shared.

Other more public collections followed, those edited by Thomas Gordon Hake and Arthur Compton-Rickett, and by Gosse and Wise themselves, in several editions from 1918, including the penultimate volume of the Bonchurch Edition. In their 1919 preface, Gosse and Wise wrote cautionary words both true and humbling: “the Correspondence of an eminent author is bound to be given to the

public in successive stages and in the last resource is condemned to imperfection. No collection of the Complete Letters of a writer is likely ever to be published.” And they cautioned that Swinburne wrote relatively few letters and that many of them had already been destroyed. All of this was true, of course, but it’s also clear in looking at Gosse’s own correspondence that the volume he and Wise edited was limited not just by what was available to the editors and but also by the sensibilities of the times and of the editors themselves, as they followed in large part the hagiographic tradition of literary biography.

It was not until the late 1940’s and 1950’s that Swinburne’s letters found a worthy editor, in the person of Cecil Lang. Lang undertook a full and unexpurgated edition of all of Swinburne’s letters then discoverable and undertook even to publish in an appendix the deposition of Edmund Gosse, sealed in the British Museum, concerning the alcoholism and sexual peccadilloes of Swinburne. That in itself was not easy—the British Museum had stopped even Randolph Hughes, perhaps the most fearsome of Swinburne’s editors, from access to those sealed materials. As an aside, let me just say that I have felt fortunate to be a Swinburne scholar in an age and during a time when an editor and scholar like Hughes is the exception—my experience has been almost universally one of meeting everywhere exuberant generosity and willingness to share knowledge. I have my doubts as to whether Hughes was much of a mentor to younger scholars and I look back with awe at the titanic exchanges between Lang and Hughes over Hughes’ edition of Lesbia Brandon. Cecil and John Mayfield, John told me, worked together on that, and enjoyed it.

Lang persevered in his editorial work, and the magnificent six volumes of the Swinburne Letters, published by Yale University Press, appeared—the first two volumes in 1959, fifty years ago this year and fifty years after Swinburne’s death. The immediate result was an explosion of interest in Swinburne, exemplified by new biographies, new anthologies, and new critical studies offering a fuller and more provocative portrait of Swinburne the man as well as Swinburne the poet. If you plot a graph of critical and scholarly books and articles on Swinburne, you’ll find a rapid rise in the 1960’s. Part of that, I think, was the era itself and its immersion in rebellion and resistance to the status quo. It is no coincidence that the American rock band “The Fugs,” moving in Andy Warhol’s circle, recorded several versions of “The Swineburne Stomp” in the 1960’s. But Cecil Lang’s editorial work was certainly the immediate stimulus.

Lang was the most assiduous possible scholar and researcher—he missed little either in the form of documents or information. I found only one letter in the Gosse and Wise Bonchurch compilation that Lang overlooked—and as the gods would have it, that letter, an interesting one from 1869 on Swinburne’s sense of “being mastered—dominated—by Browning,” got misplaced in the course of my own work and came to hand again at the last moment only through chance. The only larger oversight I could find Lang guilty of was that he somehow overlooked a 1934 article by Herbert G. Wright bringing to print some unpublished letters from Theodore Watts-Dunton to Swinburne. I mention these lapses with charity—until you have yourself undertaken a chase after uncollected and unpublished letters scattered through hundreds of repositories and journals, I don’t think you can appreciate Cecil’s extraordinary success in tracking down Swinburne letters and material.

But as the decades passed after Cecil’s volumes appeared, more letters by Swinburne began to turn

up. I came across these from time to time, both in collections where curators and donors saw to it that letters found their enduring home, and in booksellers' catalogues. I had little money in those days, but prices were less than they are now and I began to buy the odd letter, or at least the few I could afford. One effect of my recent edition, by the way, is that I'm now priced out of the market. A notation in a bookseller's catalogue of "Not in Lang" had marked a decreasing rarity as time passed; but for the moment at least "Not in Lang" accompanied by "Not in Meyers" seems to have led to a premium in prices--on two Swinburne letters currently on offer the price seems to be some 50% higher than it might have been a few years ago.

As I had come across Swinburne letters in the 70's, I published them in a few dribs and drabs. But then I realized there were more uncollected letters than I had thought. Many of you know John's Mayfield's quest to own 100 copies of the first edition of Atalanta in Calydon. He had long been a virtual vacuum cleaner for Swinburneiana, and in visiting his home, just outside Washington DC, I was overwhelmed by the extent of his collection, now split for peculiar reasons between Syracuse and Georgetown Universities. And I was startled to discover the way he stored the manuscript materials--in filing cabinets next to the furnace in his home. John, it turned out, had collected a fair number of letters since Cecil's edition had appeared.

With all my mentions of John Mayfield and Cecil Lang I want to acknowledge here the deep debt I owe to each of them. They have both died, but their scholarship lives on. And certainly their scholarship is present in my edition, for John's collection, as is obvious, yielded up many, many letters—and in almost every case he'd done some of the scholarly sleuthing that lies directly or indirectly behind my footnotes to those letters. John was an indefatigable scholar, obsessed, relentless, unceasing. He would go to any lengths to track down Swinburneiana. He commissioned me once to go to Swinburne's pub, The Rose and Crown, and, in an effort to discover a date, to ask the barman to remove from its frame a Johnnie Walker advertisement that featured the ghost of Swinburne. The barman refused and John went to his grave disappointed with me I am sure. He told me once that in trying to find out more about a pornographic novel ascribed to Swinburne, Flossie, A Venus of Fifteen, he'd met with a publisher of a modern edition, only to retreat in haste as he began to suspect his lunch companion was an active member of a criminal gang active in Baltimore. Such are the dangers of scholarship.

And Cecil too had a hand in my work, for in 1995 he took the opportunity to read through my manuscript which at that time was probably 90% or more done; he offered guidance and information in a number of ways including passing along further information that he had discovered or that had come to him over the years. In one of the visits I made to his and Violette's home in Charlottesville, he introduced me too to a neat way to solve a problem all editors quickly discover—that handwriting can be remarkably ambiguous and hard to read. I had long since discovered the usefulness of a magnifying glass and even the magnification feature on photocopying machines, but Cecil taught me the utility of other people's eyes — he kept troublesome texts on a table in his front hall with a magnifying glass and everyone who came through the door was asked to read or attempt to read the resistant word or words.

I was also motivated to look for further letters by a project still to find daylight, an edition of several note books by Swinburne used at Oxford and filled with drafts of poems and a play that he never published. I realized that I could never write the introduction to those notebooks until I was sure I'd read all of Swinburne's letters, just to make sure I knew anything he might have said about them. And there seemed to be more and more letters the more I looked. John Mayfield had said to me at one point that more and more family material was appearing on the market, that is, letters and manuscripts that seemed likely to have been in the hands of Swinburne's family, understanding by "family" the family of Mary Gordon Leith and her relations and descendants. That, by the way, seems still to be true, and I would guess that the next editor of Swinburne's letters, who may very well be today in this audience, might well be working with a trove of material still to turn up.

Although other matters began to distract me from editing Swinburne's early notebooks, I began to think that enough uncollected letters might become available to fill another volume or two of published letters. And I began to work towards that—it was a congenial project to me and one that was possible even with a heavy teaching load. But I found that I could track down letters, oversee their transcription, and research and write footnotes in odd gaps of time. I persevered in the project, despite discouraging responses to my enquires at several university presses—Yale University Press was unable to express interest, not seeing a market, and the same was true at Oxford and at other presses I approached.

Even as I worked with no expectation of finding a publisher, a publisher found me. I had listed my ongoing project on my cv, posted at my William and Mary website, and it was there that Mark Pollard at Pickering and Chatto found mention of it, and wrote to ask if I had a publisher, and if not, whether I would consider Pickering and Chatto. I hesitated about a nano-second and several years later, late in 2004, the three volumes appeared containing some 600 letters by Swinburne that had not been collected before, most of them not having been published before, even in academic journals. I had some years previously also begun to transcribe and annotate letters to Swinburne, not realizing how many existed but finding them of interest in a number of instances, either reflecting letters by Swinburne yet to appear or letters perhaps totally lost, or associations, events, and undertakings by him otherwise not documented. Mark Pollard agreed with me that this part of a poet's correspondence, not always present in scholarly editions, deserved a generous representation.

I want to praise Pickering and Chatto for their willingness to publish hardcopy editions of documentaries such as collected letters. I think hardcopy is a dying medium. I don't celebrate that, I regret it in many ways. But the costs of printing, binding, and distributing are impediments and as enduring and convenient as such editions are to work with, I suspect that within a decade or less they will be superseded. Already extraordinary scholarly editions are appearing on line—think of the editions in 19th Century letters alone, collections by Whistler, Leigh Hunt, Darwin, and Carlyle. And minor writers whose correspondence might never find a market in hard copy can now be edited by willing scholars and distributed at little cost—think, for example, of the letters of William Sharp, being undertaken by Bill Halloran and hosted by the School for Advanced Study here at the University of London. There are surely

costs in producing these editions, but they pale in comparison to the costs of hard copy.

And in our own immediate field we are all grateful for the work of John Walsh, who is advancing rapidly in putting Swinburne's works online at the Swinburne Project at the University of Indiana. John has been generous enough too to allow me space at the Swinburne Project to keep my Uncollected Letters current and up to date. There I have been able not only to correct typographical and other errors, but also to update annotations as new information has developed and to add some new letters to the edition, letters both by and to Swinburne.

My years of collecting the correspondence and of editing it involved some wonderful experiences, traveling to some of the great libraries of the United States and England. Even where my contacts were limited to correspondence with curators, librarians, and scholars, my experiences were overwhelmingly ones of cordial encouragement and generous cooperation. Only once did I find myself rebuffed by someone who seemed to have, and who still seems to have, at least one Swinburne letter he was willing to tease me with but not to give up—his right, of course. But I have wonderful memories of working with people and collections at the British Library, the Bodleian, the University of Cambridge Library, Eton College, Reading University, Leeds University, and many others. And I value the memories associated with the research, the number of times, for example, that I stayed in one of the extraordinary hotels of London, the Driscoll House Hotel, where the Virgin Mary herself made an apparition in the early 1950's, a hotel whose quirky inhabitants and customs endeared themselves to thousands of visiting students and impoverished scholars as well as the old age pensioners who made it their home. The Driscoll House Hotel is now closed, alas. Someone should write its history.

As I commented, editions inevitably give rise to biographies, since letters are among the more reliable guides to events and undertakings in a writer's life. In the case of my edition, some of my work and discoveries have already had an impact. In the 1990's when I was convinced I might never find a publisher, Rikky Rooksby wrote me to ask if he could look through my work as he was starting his brilliant biography. I happily sent him my work on perhaps a dozen 3.5-inch computer disks, the best media storage devices of that age now eons ago. But Rikky, constrained as he was by space limitations, was sparing in the material he used, and there remains a great deal of interest in my edition to the critic, the scholar, and the biographer.

Catherine's invitation in effect was an offer to allow me to review my own work. Who could resist that? So for the remainder of my talk, I'd like to mention some things I think my edition of Swinburne's correspondence brings to the table that is worth a biographer's attention. Had I world enough and time, there are other subjects I would expand on--for example, the evidence that the years at the Pines were not quite the intellectual mummification that Gosse portrayed it as; Swinburne at The Pines had a reasonably busy social and intellectual life worth a second look by a biographer. And that biographer might be impelled too to look at the community of skeptics and freethinkers that Swinburne moved among in the London of his youth, a subject still to be fully developed. In this regard, by the way, I might mention one mystery I never did solve because I never could get a response from the South Place Ethical Society as

to whether they were able to include in their revised Hymn Book the lines from Songs before Sunrise that they asked permission to. And I would wish I had the time to explore the impact on Swinburne of Emilie Venturi—if Swinburne’s letters to her have not been destroyed by enemy action during World War II, they will be a wonderful complement to the fascinating letters we have from her to him.

I suspect few users of my edition will spend much time reading the appendix, though I hope it will be useful to the next step towards the impossible, a complete Swinburne Letters. In my appendix, I sought to update Cecil Lang’s work in the light of further discoveries about the letters that he’d edited. Where the holographs of letters he’d had to print from earlier editions had turned up, I was able to correct or expand earlier transcriptions. And in some instances, and frequently drawing on the work of a whole new generation of Swinburne scholarship, I was able to re-date letters, make new identifications of people and incidents. and so on. With some regularity I was able to date some of Swinburne’s letters more precisely and also identify recipients—something allowed by the mind-numbing transcriptions of a thousand or more of the letters to Swinburne that ultimately turned up.

Reading the appendix is not always totally fascinating, but there are moments of interest. Drawing on work by Dick Fredeman and Raleigh Trevelyan, for example, I was able to add some documents that clarify and contextualize a moment of some trauma in Swinburne’s young life when in late 1865 he seems to have been accused of being homosexual. Swinburne’s behavior around this time seems to have attracted suspicion, both from his friends such as Lady Trevelyan and William Bell Scott and from more remote acquaintances, such as Josephine Butler and, a bit later, A. J. Munby. This question of Swinburne’s sexual experiences and orientation is one that continues to attract attention. I’ve been able to explore in several articles the old question of Swinburne’s largely homophobic attitude towards Walt Whitman, and Arnold Schwab has recently done somewhat the same with Swinburne’s attitude towards Oscar Wilde, both indirect ways of fleshing this question out. My edition contains evidence of various sorts that deserve examination, I believe, including a series of letters to John Addington Symonds, and homophobic squibs aimed at him.

In this context, one of Swinburne’s friendships that takes on a certain life in the letters I publish is the one with George Powell, whose relationship with Swinburne needs more consideration than I can give it here. But I might mention an anecdote I came across about Powell, a brief aperçu that seems to me to capture a great deal of his personality. The story is that Powell’s father was irritated at Powell’s apparently effeminate ways in his teens, and, hoping to make a man of him, handed him a gun, telling him not to return to the house until he had shot something. Powell left and promptly returned--having shot one of his father’s prize bullocks.

Let me approach this relationship with Powell too through a letter that seems utterly insignificant, and is, in some ways. It is a letter to Theodore Watts-Dunton from a businessman in Redcar, Yorkshire, writing in September 1900 to Watts-Dunton in reply to an apparent query about the possibilities of bathing there in the nude. The writer, a C. W. Sheppard, was honest in his evaluation of swimming in the sea there—he calls it “a poorish place for a swimmer”—though his comments make it clear that public

swimming by naked men was far more acceptable than I for one might have thought in the Victorian era.

He writes that,

our local authorities are not very strict about bathing in the open—if there are any restrictions I have heard of them—It would probably not be allowed in front of the houses on the Promenade but clear of the houses you could do what you liked—Scores of people bathe in the open daily & when the Militia are in Camp here they have regular battalion bathing parades when the men undress stark naked, enter the water, leave it and dress by word of Command or bugle call in hundreds at a time.

I mention this practice of nude bathing on public beaches because it recalls in the collection comments by George Powell that are intriguing in terms of Swinburne's sexuality. In an August 1877 letter, Powell describes the pleasures of bathing in Pembroke as “delightfully simple & primitive”:

You choose [he says] your hour & place on the sands, (never mind any twenty or so ladies who may be promenading within a yard of you), undress calmly on your towel; stalk into the water stark naked; turn round and look at the landscape and ladies whenever you please—say when you are knee deep—plunge & disport yourself awhile and return in leisurely wise, remembering that any chaste or prudish poses would be utterly wasted—and dress where you stripped.

Powell also wrote a curious letter to Swinburne from the notorious house in Normandy, where Swinburne almost lost his life by drowning in the sea and the place Guy de Maupassant described in such suggestive terms. Powell's letter is dated December 12, 1868, from the cottage with a name from de Sade, Chaumière Dolmancé. Philip Henderson and Rikky Rooksby have already described this episode in detail, and in a later letter (29 November 1882) Swinburne underlined his wish to deny absolutely a published version in a French newspaper, what he described as “the absurdly impertinent invention of the Figaro.” But Powell's letter is suggestive. Although nominally he is describing different arrangements of fires and draughts to combat the damp of the house, his phrasing seems intimate more, for, he writes, “Edwin, I and Nip lead our usual quiet life here, struggling, as best we may, against the damp of the house, by means of artful combinations.” Nip, of course, was a monkey; the phrase “artful combinations” seems weirdly suggestive.

Indeed, looking back from this letter at the nude bathing letter Powell wrote from Pembroke, we may notice something curious in that letter's next paragraph. After describing the delights of nude bathing I've already quoted, Powell makes an comment that suggests that he for one was not actually naked, for, he says, his bathing costume had “nearly raised a revolution; it is looked upon as indecent.” What to conclude from this? I don't know, but it appears that Powell has gone out of his way to create a scene that would evoke in Swinburne's mind a portrait of Powell naked.

Let me return to the appendix one more time to draw attention to the pearls sometimes to be found there. One is what I think is perhaps the funniest document in the collection, brought to my attention very late in my work by a colleague at William and Mary, Jenny Putzi. This is a letter by an American poet,

George Boker, writing to a fellow poet, Richard Henry Stoddard, October 21, 1868 about the likelihood of an American publisher, Lippincott, publishing Love's Cross Currents or A Year's Letters. The letter is a comic delight that reflects the cultural context Swinburne was writing in, both its sexual constraint and its sexual license. I should caution you that although this excerpt does not contain flash photography, it is startlingly explicit, explicit enough that before I could type it on my office computer I needed permission from the State of Virginia to do so.

Boker writes to his friend Stoddard that Lippincott, who apparently had yet to see the manuscript of Swinburne's novel, seems open to publishing the work. He comically anticipates Lippincott's reaction and pretends to write Swinburne with some words of advice on how perhaps to revise the manuscript to make the novel more acceptable to American readers, "keeping in mind," he says, "that our public is not so advanced as his own, and therefore more liable to shocks of the nerve." So Boker presents himself as a friendly advisor to Swinburne offering ways to tone down the manuscript:

Let him [Boker says] not make the mutual love of the hero and heroine the product of the 'birch' entirely.... There should not be too much 'froth of kisses that taste of blood;' at all events such kisses should not pass between near relations, e.g., between father and daughter. The hero should not copulate with the heroine in an unnatural manner. The con, the rectum and the mouth may be permitted—and surely here are holes enough to serve the purpose of a great imagination—into any one of these he may introduce his nine inches stiff, limber or even double; but I would not have him burst open her delicate shell-like ear with his penis, and beget in her dreamy head another Pallas. The villain of the story should not bugger his mother in the first chapter; at least I should not open with this domestic incident, usual as it may be, and therefore perfectly defensible on natural grounds. I should not form too many 'groups' after the manner of de Sade; for that great master has almost exhausted those situations. I do not say that in the last scene or climax, all the characters may not shag and bugger together in a ring, say in the form of a Round Robin; but a little of that kind of thing goes a long way in our present fiction.

Reading the appendix is largely dry as dust. But it has its moments.

Let me also mention something that no reviewer has commented on yet. Each of my three volumes has as a frontispiece a picture of Swinburne that is relatively unknown. The 1875 photograph, at the start of Volume II, of Swinburne at Holmwood was discovered and printed first by Rikky Rooksby and has its charms depicting Swinburne at the family home peacefully reading. The frontispiece to Volume I is a previously unknown picture of Swinburne and his so-called mistress, the Victorian equivalent of Madonna, Ida Isaacs Menken. It has its interest, I think, in showing Swinburne manifesting an implied confidence in his sexual prowess, whatever the truth of the story that Menken could not make him understand that "biting's no use." But the photograph is finally only a variant, taken at the same sitting as one long known.

Of the three portraits, the ink drawing of Swinburne at the start of Volume III is worth a second glance. It is published for the first time in my edition. Sir William Rothenstein drew it after a visit to the Pines in August 1895. It shows Swinburne in caricature, with an exaggerated neck and head perched above an exaggeratedly diminutive body. Rothenstein has emphasized Swinburne's baldness, with his high forehead and fringe of hair. His eyes and facial expression, to my mind, at least portray a kind of slyness. And somewhat mysteriously he is depicted, with his left hand just releasing what appears to be a hair, just plucked from his fringe and now floating towards the ground. To the right side of the drawing, near Swinburne's elaborately depicted release of the hair, Rothenstein has added a title, "Sir Swinburne," a title both for Swinburne and for the drawing. It is a wry commentary on Swinburne, aging, outgrowing his youth and the hirsute glory of his crowning head of red hair, even accelerating and encouraging his baldness. The title, "Sir Swinburne," and the sly face suggest a Swinburne that Rothenstein saw as trimming his sails, moving away from his youthful rebellion, and shaping himself, as in his apparent jingoism and admiration of Queen Victoria, as a candidate for Royal recognition. It's important, I think, to note that date again, August 1895, and to recall that the appointment of the new poet laureate to succeed Tennyson was made by the Queen on December 31, 1895. Clearly Rothenstein saw Swinburne as preening himself, as making himself as attractive a candidate as possible for the post.

In turning to the letters themselves, let me point out one letter that exemplifies a considerable number, those having to do with the publication of Swinburne's books. But this letter really illustrates the kinds of dead ends or blinds an editor gets drawn into. Swinburne wrote in 1873 a series of letters to his then solicitor, Walter Theodore Watts. I had noticed as a modest puzzle many years ago that Cecil Lang included in his edition two letters virtually identical to each other, letters to John Camden Hotten dated April 10 [1873] and April 29 [1873], each requesting in only slightly different language that Hotten withdraw his announcement as forthcoming of Swinburne's Bothwell. That the language in the two letters is almost identical was not mentioned by Lang. He offered no footnote beyond directing the reader from the earlier letter to the later one, and vice versa.

My immortal contribution to resolving the minor mystery here of two letters nearly identical and yet dated almost three weeks apart has yet to receive its due admiration. I'll spare you the details, but the solution came with a surprise discovery in the Brotherton Collection at Leeds--yet another version, a third version, of the letter. Though editing surely has something in common with working jigsaw puzzles, in this case I found little pleasure in the several hours I had to spend in working through the interrelationships of what turned out to be subtly different drafts of a letter supervised in detail by Watts-Dunton over the course of a month or so. Things were complicated by the fact that one draft is perhaps yet to find. And then to compound matters, I realized just as I was about to e-mail my manuscript to Pickering and Chatto that I was not convinced by my own explanation of the ordering. So at a harried point in my work, I had to devote yet more time to the matter. It's possible that those drafts might be of some interest to someone at some time, though I seriously doubt it, especially because the whole matter quickly became moot when John Camden Hotten died suddenly on June 14, 1873. I think I'm glad that Andrew Chatto stepped in for

he was a more orderly businessman, helpful therefore both to Swinburne and to the editor of Swinburne's correspondence. But had Hotten lived, my work on those drafts might have served some more point than I suspect it ultimately will.

I mentioned the frontispiece to Volume II as depicting Swinburne at Holmood, his family's home and though the connection may seem serendipitous in that I had few relatively unknown pictures to choose from, it does seem to me that one of contributions of my edition is that it sets Swinburne more firmly than before in a number of contexts, one of them domestic. As it happened, a good deal of the family material that John Mayfield had long before mentioned to me did in fact end up in archives and collections and does ground Swinburne in his family connections. A fair number of the letters in my edition by Swinburne are to members of his family and a fair number of those to Swinburne are from his family. Those letters reveal a family background for Swinburne that is solid, respectable, supporting, and loving.

Swinburne was a regular correspondent with his sisters, with his Mother, Lady Jane Swinburne, and with his aunt, Lady Mary Gordon. I can't pretend that the letters from these correspondents are always significant—indeed they are often concerned with the chitchat that holds any family together — descriptions of illness or of health, the immediate activities of the household, travels of interest to both the correspondents, the weather, and the like. One thing that these letters did reveal to me and that I think might merit someone's general study, and that is the peripatetic lives of the Swinburne ladies. Once the family home, Holmwood, was sold Lady Jane and her daughters seem to have spent what seems to me at least to be an inordinate amount of time looking at possible homes to rent and then moving among those homes in a kind of upper-class gypsydom. I'm a humble student of literature, but I do wonder how widespread this cultural phenomenon might be.

The letters offer sometimes direct and sometimes inferential evidence of the close feeling the family shared. Whatever Swinburne's irregularities as a human being, his mother had an unshakable love for him. And Swinburne's love for her was deeply reciprocated. One of the most moving but generally unknown photographs of Swinburne, one that I could not include, is one that the National Portrait Gallery owns, a photograph taken at the gravesite as Lady Jane's remains are being buried in the churchyard at Bonchurch. Swinburne's own resolution to not have the full text of the Anglican burial service read at his own funeral is supposed to have originated at this service for his mother, and Swinburne's resistance, resolution, and devastation is apparent in his isolation in the picture and especially in his body language. His love for his mother was an anchor to his life.

One of the things in this family correspondence that most surprised me and that has struck several reviewers is the larking tone so often present, especially on matters that many of us today might regard as pathological. Whippings, beatings, and flagellation seem to be unusually present and discussed with an air of levity and delight that I was taken aback by. Many of these exchanges take place in a fictive world, an imaginative space that is shared by the correspondents, virtually as co-authors of a narrative unfolding over time according to broad and unspoken rules but with no particular shape. In other words, these exchanges mark a peculiar collaborative effort interesting on several levels. As a poet and writer Swinburne

participated in a kind of virtual reality, that is, that he placed himself so often in a dynamic dialogue with his contemporaries and predecessors as poets. To a degree that it is hard for my mind to grasp, Swinburne seems to have almost literally passed his life in the continuous and real presence of writers from the Greeks to Baudelaire and Tennyson, all present, all in continuous discussion with him as he wrote. Critics for generations now have patiently teased out the complex interconnections among Swinburne and his literary forbearers. He was not exaggerating when he wrote of his feeling the actual presence of Sappho, for example, in the wind as he walked.

This sense of narrative collaboration carries over too in his family correspondence. The collaboration goes back perhaps to the impact, for example, of Mary Gordon Leith's playing Handel, as Swinburne composed Atalanta in Calydon partly at Northcourt, her family home on the Isle of Wight. And a shared narrative is connected too in the joint work of fiction published by Mary Gordon in 1864 with interludes by Swinburne, The Children of the Chapel. Even one of Mary Gordon Leith's other novels, Trusty in Flight (1893), according to F. A. C. Wilson, had developed, much rewritten from a manuscript version of 1863-1864 that Swinburne had been involved in (III, 53n). The Children of the Chapel is the first manifestation in print of a tantalizing relationship, based in mutually developing narratives with his cousin. There are hints of this shared and developing imaginative narrative in the letters of Lady Mary Gordon—probably, I suspect, because her daughter Mary Gordon Leith can be presumed often to have shared in the writing of her aunt's letters and almost certainly would have read Swinburne's replies.

I won't sketch out the narrative for it is hard to recover now, after more than 100 years, but in my appendix is a manuscript fragment by Swinburne that helps to unite many of the allusions to a young boy, Billy, who is involved in frequent mishaps leading to the need for punishment and a "worthy vicar," a Rev. Jackson, who frequently wields the punishing rod.

The most interesting of the family letters, of course, are those to and from Swinburne's cousin Mary Gordon Leith. Jean Overton Fuller had published the first of these, from the British Library, but the run I include is considerably more extensive and elaborate. And as I turn to those, let me mention a curiosity, that Cecil Lang had known of the letters Fuller published—he very kindly provided to me transcriptions of the letters that he'd made years previously and he made it a point to say to me that Fuller was wrong in suggesting he'd overlooked them. I didn't have the presence of mind to ask why he'd not included them in The Swinburne Letters.

The relationship between Swinburne and his cousin has been one of the most central and abiding interests in biographical scholarship for the better part of a century. Swinburne let it be known to his contemporaries that some devastating loss in love give rise to some of his most moving. W. H. Mallock recorded a scene with Swinburne relaxing with students at Oxford.

[Swinburne] lay back in his chair tossed off a glass of port and presently his mood changed. Somehow or other he got to his own serious poems and before we knew where we were he was pouring out an account of Poems and Ballads and explaining their relation to the secrets of his own experiences. There were three poems he said which

beyond all the rest were biographical, “The Triumph of Time,” “Dolores,” and “The Garden of Proserpine.” “The Triumph of Time” was a monument to the sole real love of his life, a love which had been the tragic destruction of all his faith in woman. “Dolores” expressed the passion with which he had sought relief in the madresses of the fleshly Venus from his ruined dreams of the heavenly. “The Garden of Proserpine” expressed his revolt against the flesh and its fevers and his longing to find a refuge from them in a haven of undisturbed rest. His audience who knew these three poems by heart held their breaths as they listened to the poet's own voice imparting its living tones to passages [from these poems].

That Mary Gordon Leith had destroyed all of Swinburne's faith in woman was suspected even during their lifetime. Edmund Gosse had thought it possible, and even proposed it to Thomas James Wise, though in the end he entered into Swinburne's biography the notion that Swinburne had proposed to a young girl, Boo Faulkner, whose laughter in reaction drove Swinburne to drink and to vice. Mary Gordon Leith took steps at once to squelch the idea of any romance between her and Swinburne--and yet did that in such a way, in the public print, to keep it alive, and even to emphasize it. In her 1917 book on The Boyhood of Algernon Charles Swinburne, she drew attention to what she called “a fiction [that] somehow been built up, and has even got into print” that “a thread of romance” had marked their relationship.

Rikky Rooksby and I believe we may have solved this allusion to some mysterious published intimation of a romantic connection between the two, not perhaps the holy grail of Swinburne scholarship but surely the sacred teacup or blessed beaker. I was amused in writing this paragraph that when I called up a digitized copy of Leith's book to transcribe her words the copy I used, at the University of Toronto Library, had these words bracketed with an emphatic exclamation mark in the left margin.

Rikky and I discovered several years ago that we were both working on an account of Swinburne's funeral, he from a number of newspaper clippings he'd acquired on the Isle of Wight and I from a number of newspaper and magazine photographs I'd come across in various places. Rikky very kindly gave over his work and sent me copies of the clippings. In one those, one from the Daily News, April 13, 1909, I found wording that we believe may well have provoked Mary Gordon Leith's careful phrasing, phrasing that functioned both to deny and to highlight a relationship in ways that she must have known would tease later scholars. In the Daily News account, the reporter anticipated the attendance of several of Swinburne's cousins at his funeral at Bonchurch. The reporter's wording seems delicate – unmistakably artful. He wrote that the cousins attending the funeral would be “including one to whom ... [Swinburne] was especially attached.” The evidence here is not certain, of course, but the phrasing is suggestive, occasions for the two cousins to be mentioned together in print are seemingly pretty rare, and the date is not far removed from Leith's 1917 book, especially taking into account that the book was gathering rtilces that she published in The Contemporary Review of April 1910. And that Watts-Dunton singled out the Daily News account of Swinburne's funeral as one that was “a very sensational account of the whole affair” (April 28, 1909, to WMR, in Peattie, p. 469) may be corroborating evidence.

Most students of Swinburne see in Mary Gordon Leith the innominata who lies behind so many of

his works. That relationship has been explored already in various biographies, starting with Jean Overton Fuller's. F. A. C. Wilson wrote several decades ago a series of articles that remain helpful in teasing out the themes interwoven in Leith's own published works that connect her to Swinburne. I am firmly among those those who believe in Leith, but keeping an eye out still for other candidates might not be unreasonable. I would not go so far as James Hepburn, who has made a case against Leith and in favor of Elizabeth Siddell. At one time I myself wondered if another cousin might be the lady in question—an early poem printed by John Mayfield, "Hide and Seek," for some reason turned me in that direction. And Rikky Rooksby in 1993 turned up some evidence and speculations about Jane Faulkner that made him conclude at that time at least that "the legend of 'Boo' cannot yet be dismissed." Skepticism is always a wise position in scholarship.

I stress that I am not a biographer, nor was meant to be, but I think the next biographer of Swinburne is going to need to spend a good deal of time working with the letters exchanged between Swinburne and Mary Gordon. I suspect there's more to be learned about Mary Gordon's own marriage—her husband to me at least is very much a shade, a shadow. It was apparently his death in 1892 that allowed the cousins to open direct correspondence, though they were surely in communication through their printed works and through the correspondence with Lady Mary Gordon.

I mentioned the larking about so frequent in the family correspondence; that tone is central to the correspondence between the cousins and is endemic to the curious way they write in what I discovered was called at the time "medical Greek," "the Gower Street dialect," or "marrowskying." This is marked simply by the transposition of usually initial letters or sounds in contiguous or nearby words, though sometimes the transposition is of internal letters or syllables. The result is something like pig latin, slightly mystifying at first and often comic. In the case of Mary Gordon Leith and Swinburne the correspondence in this form is sustained and leads frequently to amusing constructions—"choice of days" becomes "doice of chays" and "dealt with a later period" becomes "wealt with a pater leriod." It can and does lead to sometimes equivocal language, sometimes thought better of. In one letter Mary Gordon started to write something about "poreign farts" when she realized that wouldn't do and reverted to "foreign parts" (III, 92). But the words that ring on matters having to do with flagellation, rods, birches, and the like are not censored, and are indeed heightened by exchanges of letters between imaginary school boys who live in a parallel universe, a virtual reality, a world dominated again by various boyish escapades leading to difficulties and ensuing punishments. The psychology manifested by these exchanges seems apparent. Swinburne pretty clearly, even in his old age, wanted his cousin to talk dirty to him, or at least so I infer from such an observation as he wrote Leith in [March 1899]: "Is it possible? A letter from young Clavering to Frederic in which there is no reference to recent flagellation—in which the words birch, block, swished, do not occur & recur." One of Mary Gordon Leith's granddaughters (1619C) wrote John Mayfield about one of these letters, one published by Fuller, calling it "the unfortunate one about 'swishing' at Eton which has had so much publicity and which I am sure on Gran's part had no unhealthy connotation, the 'vice' of flagellation probably unknown to her." But the evidence seems to me to be otherwise, for the letters

exchanged between the cousins in their own personas cover a mixture of family news, Mary Gordon Leith's travels to Iceland, publishing details, visits to the Pines, and so on, but especially the ones from Swinburne are suffused to an extraordinary extent with larking comments about flagellation. Each letter habitually starts with an evocation of flogging—"My dearest cousin" transformed to a count of cuts from a birch, "Cy merest dozen." And frequently the address is elaborated on Swinburne's part to suggest his own experience at Eton, as in his letter of February 22, 1899: "Cy merest dozen that ever the Head Master may or may not have thought sufficient for the 'idlest boy in the school'—whoever 'that young gentleman' may have been—I don't wish to know his name & certainly could not guess it." This explicit and frequent discussion of flogging is pervasive, elaborated in the direct voices of both Mary Gordon Leith and Swinburne but also in the allusions I've mentioned before to the Reverend Jackson and in the escapades in the elaborate charade of letters exchanged among several school boys and their guardians. The letters written in this mode number several dozen or so and run from 1892 until 1902, though with some long gaps. It's inconceivable to me that the correspondence simply stopped, so my guess is that there may still more letters of this sort to surface.

I started my talk by saying that I thought Swinburne has yet to receive his due estimation. I think editorial efforts can help that develop and help biographers to a fuller, more complete picture. But lives and letters work indirectly, by bringing to the attention of critics information that might encourage further interest on their part, and it will be the critics among you who will shape the approaches to Swinburne that will bring him due recognition. I don't fool myself that editors and editions can do that, though Cecil Lang's work helped resuscitate Swinburne's reputation fifty years ago when it was languishing. I think Swinburne is held in greatly higher repute today thanks to the efforts of a further generation of critics, especially Jerry McGann. But Swinburne in his life and letters will always be open to distortion and caricature. I'm not sure I've escaped that even today. But such distortion was true after Lang's edition, when one trade reviewer drew attention to Cecil's waste of ten years of his scholarly life:

the indefatigable and scholarly editor has spent ten years on this collection, which has the incredible quality of being either monstrously dull or clinically revolting. However, Mr. Lang ... tries to disguise what these letters reveal and what most of the poems long since told, that Swinburne's mind was not interesting. All in all, these letters smirch Swinburne's reputation as man and poet, and serve chiefly to supply a footnote to literary history or clinical psychiatry.

And even today psychoanalysts such as Leonard Shengold will have their way with Swinburne. Shengold within this decade has analyzed what he sees as Swinburne's "drives towards cannibalism, murder, and incest" (Soul Murder Revisited, p.200), seeing in Swinburne's critical comments on Zola's L'Assomoir, "anal masochism partly transformed into oral sadism" (p. 187). Caricature is legitimate—Rothenstein's drawing brings something out about the late Swinburne worth considering. But an obsessively narrow view like Shengold's creates a grotesque distortion, one that a fully balanced biography will avoid.

Though a few lines from Swinburne appear with regularity on American greeting cards, he may never enjoy broad, popular appeal—the untidy details of his life and the very richness of melody and

intensity of his imagery plus his early eroticism, his fierce skepticism, and his antitheism will set him beyond the welcoming hearths, the “household fires,” of many good people.

But a life and letters are not the basis for canonical standing. Swinburne’s is an extraordinary voice and a compelling vision that deserves recognition. His is a power attested to time and again by careful and thoughtful readers. The American philosopher Richard Rorty wrote not long before his death two years ago that his thoughts in his dwindling months turned little towards religion and even less towards philosophy, but more and more to poetry. He found himself, he said, “oddly cheered by the most quoted lines of Swinburne’s “Garden of Proserpine,” the lines that “thank with brief thanksgiving / Whatever gods may be / That no life lives forever; / That dead men rise up never; / That even the weariest river / Winds somewhere safe to sea.” The poet with that kind of power deserves a high standing among the major English authors.

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