

Reconsidering Swinburne's Relation to Whitman

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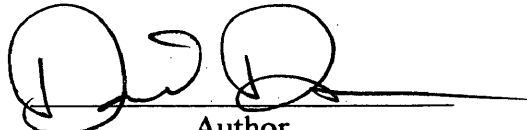
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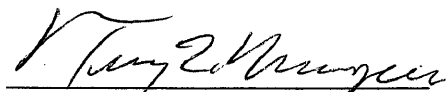
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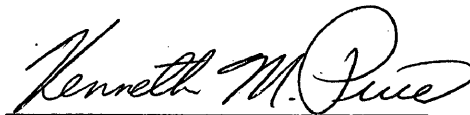


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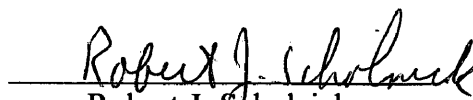
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to analyze the relationship between the poetry of Algernon Charles Swinburne and Walt Whitman. It has long been known that Swinburne admired much of Whitman's work, but that he later grew cool towards the American poet. Few critics have gone much further than Swinburne's explicit public attitude, yet it can be shown that Swinburne, throughout his career, but especially in his later days, drew a good bit of his imagery from Whitman's poetry. By tracing a line of sea imagery in Whitman's poetry, and taking note of Whitman's poetic response to that imagined locale, one can see clearly that there is an element of Swinburne's work which takes over the same ground and seeks to provide the English poet's unique response.

RECONSIDERING SWINBURNE'S RELATION TO WHITMAN

INTRODUCTION

Making a claim of influence is at best troublesome, for several reasons. Firstly, influence studies are concerned with associations between interpretations of symbols and fields of meaning shared by authors who have not necessarily left a record of their thoughts on the subject. In the case of Walt Whitman and Algernon Charles Swinburne this is true, for although the two poets sometimes spoke of one another, they never spoke of any kind of influence passing between them. This is only to be expected, given the high value the late nineteenth century placed on originality of thought and expression, and the fact that the idea of influence that we work under now is a twentieth century construction. Secondly, influence is a complex concept. There is no simple way of conceptualizing it, though many have tried; among those who have, perhaps the most notable is Harold Bloom. However, if we take one of the theorists of influence as our starting point we may run into the danger of being too controlled by ideas which somewhat limit the complex relations we are trying to uncover. For instance, in the terms offered by Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*, we would conceptualize Swinburne as "misreading" Whitman to be a failed poet. Swinburne would do this in an attempt to defend his own psyche against the strength of Whitman's poetic production. Bloom would have us believe that Swinburne knows, on an unconscious level, that

Whitman has *preceded* him in the realm he most wishes to take for his own. Therefore, he must, in the terms of Bloom's *six revisionary ratios*, execute a *tessara*, or a creative act which "'completes' his precursor, by so reading the parent-poem as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense, as though the precursor had failed to go far enough" (Bloom, 14). In a sense this is a perfect description of what we shall be able to show Swinburne actually did. He did indeed see Whitman's best poetry as fatally flawed by a weakness, which he corrected in his own versions of those same poems. But in another sense Bloom's psychology of the poetic "family romance," borrowed from Freud (56-7), is not a perfect description at all, for Swinburne did not hide these facts from himself by repressing them. He was conscious of what he was doing. Even if he didn't leave explicit evidence, he did leave us with enough evidence to make a solid case that this is so. This fact need not be seen as evidence that Bloom's brand of psychological criticism cannot help us, but only that the case of the influence between Whitman and Swinburne is not a perfect one as a case study for Bloom.

A difficulty that should be avoided from the outset is any confusion of terms. It will be necessary to use a term that has become very rich and complicated over time. However, whatever may have accreted to it over the years, the word "mythos," when we use it, will refer to the figures, devices and depictions of the world that we find in the poetry we are examining. Therefore we shall let the word "mythos" stand for the entire "world-view" a certain poem, or set of poems, assumes, and not for any particular discrete part of that world view (i.e., a figure of speech or a symbol), in evidence in the poem or poems. And, as a reminder that we only mean the word in the sense that we have just outlined, "mythos" shall be hereafter italicized.

As this thesis treats poetry and shows that Swinburne assumed Whitman's *mythos*, these terms will be very useful. But what does it mean to say that Swinburne assumed Whitman's *mythos*? It does not mean that Swinburne simply rewrote Whitman's poetry to his own liking. It would be more accurate to say that Swinburne found Whitman's *mythos* of the poet on the verge of the dangerous but amorous mother-sea so attractive that he wanted to use it in his own poetry, as he saw fit. He was never in any way controlled by Whitman's *mythos* in the way a slavish imitator would be, and it can be shown where Swinburne parted ways with Whitman in terms of *mythos*. We shall be able to show that there are elements of Whitman's *mythos* that Swinburne obviously felt he could not do without in his poetry.

What will be shown, finally, is that consistently over time Whitman developed a *mythos*, which shall be defined fully later, but which included the element of an "angry mother sea" who threatens death. In the face of this threat, it will be shown that Whitman's personae grow complacent or become paralyzed. Out of this physical paralysis grows the creative urge, such that poems stand for acts, and this is figured as a triumph. Swinburne, though he assumes the broad outlines of the *mythos*, reverses the meaning of the myth, such that poetry is what comes of a *failure* to challenge the "mother sea" symbol. In this way does Swinburne turn Whitman's greatest poems into monuments of failure.

In some ways, it may seem, this helps to clear up Swinburne's complicated stance toward Whitman. He did admire Whitman's poetry and the poet himself, so long as the poetry and the man could be interpreted actively. But as Swinburne's evaluation of Whitman the man changed from the active sense-seeker to the passive poet, so too did

his evaluation of the poet's work change, from enthusiastic approval to tempered ambivalence.

In the end it will be seen that, for Swinburne, Whitman's influence was a rich and deep source for some of the younger poet's best work, but the case will need some drawing out. In fact, on the evidence of a simple reading, what could appear to be more different than Walt Whitman's "Out of the Cradle, Endlessly Rocking" and A.C. Swinburne's "To a Seamew"? Here are the first few lines of each, first Whitman:

Out of the cradle endlessly rocking,
 Out of the mocking-bird's throat, the musical shuttle,
 Out of the Ninth-month midnight,
 Over the sterile sands and fields beyond, where the child
 leaving his bed wander'd alone, bareheaded, barefoot,
 Down from the shower'd halo,
 Up from the mystic play of shadows twining and twisting as if
 they were alive,
 Out from the patches of briars and blackberries,
 From the memories of the bird that chanted to me,
 From your memories, sad brother, from the fitful risings and fall-
 ings I heard . . . (246-7, ll. 1-9)

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. (vol. III, 211, ll. 1-8)

Aside from the similarity in the term "brother" applied to a bird, in form and content it is hard to make an immediate case that these two poems resemble each other at all. Where Whitman's lines are incantatory, flowing and long, Swinburne's are compact. Where

Whitman uses free verse, Swinburne uses a singing eight line iambic trimeter, the first and last couplets matching as in the rondel. Surely, the casual observer will think, any similarities are accidental. Yet Whitman and Swinburne are singing from the same chorister, so to speak, and while Whitman wrote it, Swinburne, from one perspective, improved it.

Of course the use of a bird as a symbol for something else was well established by the time Swinburne wrote his poem. Frequently the bird symbolizes the poet or poetic inspiration, or the imagination, or the sublime. One can easily recall some fine nineteenth century examples in this tradition -- Shelley's "To a Skylark," Keats' "Ode: To a Nightingale," Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and Poe's "The Raven." Surely these precursors were on both poets' minds as they wrote their poems. And one could surmise that Swinburne was thinking about Whitman's poem too.¹

On further examination, one recognizes a similarity between the *choice* of birds at least, for both poets had chosen a bird native to their own lands, and known to be ugly and ill-tempered. According to Kenneth M. Price's *Whitman and Tradition*, Whitman had in fact chosen the North American Mocking-bird at least partly because of its being a unique inhabitant of his part of the world, allowing him to separate his "barbaric yawp" from the Europeans who had come before. This thesis does not mean to argue that Swinburne chose the Seamew for identical reasons, although he surely was happy to have as his symbol a bird actually found in England. Yet his choice was not arbitrary either -- nor was he joking, though he may have enjoyed the self-irony of using a bird not popularly loved to stand in for his own poetry.

The interaction between the two poets is rich, and it seems to me there is a strain

in Swinburne's writing which provides a key to understanding how much influence Whitman's work had on him in his poetry. That Swinburne could be influenced by other artists has been noted many times.² I will show that Swinburne's choice of the Seamew was directly influenced by Whitman's great poem, yet not so much because "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" uses a bird as symbol, but because of Whitman's powerful symbolic associations with the sea, which he identified with sex and death, and which induced him to accept the tragic element of life, and more importantly, devote himself to poetry.

Swinburne's initial opinion of Whitman as a poet was high, but he modified that view somewhat over time (though even at their most critical his comments usually left room for an appreciation of at least a part of Whitman's poetic output).³ In fact, Swinburne could be quite enthusiastic: of the poem "A Word out of the Sea" (Whitman's title in the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* for what became "Out of the Cradle, Endlessly Rocking") in particular, he wrote in a letter to Richard Monckton Milnes that it was "the most lovely and wonderful thing I have read for years and years. I could rhapsodize about it for ten pages, there is such beautiful skill and subtle power in every word of it" (Lang, II, 58). Later, as Terry Meyers' "Swinburne and Whitman: Further Evidence" makes clear, Swinburne turned on Whitman publicly and in his letters, perhaps because of Whitman's sexual attitudes, against which Swinburne may have developed "a defensive homophobia" (Meyers, 2). Even as early as 1872, Swinburne wrote to John Addington Symonds, one of Whitman's great admirers, that he could not "pretend to enter in full into the Whitmanolatry or Whitmania which seems to beset the esoteric disciple of the first American poet, with whom I am nonetheless proud to be on

reciprocal terms of affectionate regard” (unpublished letter, qtd in Meyers, 4). By 1886, the year “To a Seamew” was written, Swinburne wrote to Ramsey Colles (another Whitman admirer):

I am by no means a Whitmaniac, though I still genuinely admire his best earlier work. His indiscriminate admirers have almost wearied & sickened me (among many others) of the man’s very name: & he has written so much sheer twaddle, of the feeblest & emptiest kind, that I doubt whether posterity will have patience to pick out his plums from such a mass of indigestible dough. (unpublished letter, qtd. in Meyers, 5)

An influence passing from Whitman to Swinburne, as I have mentioned, has been noticed before: David G. Riede (indicating a debt to Jerome McGann for pointing it out) in particular has called attention to the conscious similarity between Swinburne’s “On the Cliffs” and, interestingly enough, Whitman’s “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking.” As in Whitman’s poem, the speaker in “On the Cliffs” is waiting for a “word” from the sea.⁴ Riede goes on to delineate the similarities between the two. Clearly Swinburne did indeed admire this *one* poem, at least enough to let it influence his own poetic creativity. In fact, if we trace the oceanic imagery in Whitman, we can find some undeniable parallels in Swinburne.

To understand why Swinburne was drawn to the elder poet, it is helpful to look at a letter Swinburne wrote to M. D. Conway, on November 7, 1866, in which Swinburne makes clear an identification he would like to see between himself and Whitman:

I have just read your article on Walt Whitman, which you had sent me before but which has only reached me today. One passage, above all others delights me -- that in which you speak of his amorous embrace of the sea in bathing. I am sure he would, and hope that you will excuse me for not having read or enjoyed it till now; for at the time it appeared, and for a fortnight after, I was fighting the tides as a swimmer on the west

coast of Wales. I know that the man who had spoken as he has of the sea must be a fellow seabird with me, and I would give something to have a dip in the rough water with him. This at least we have in common, for after twenty minutes' profane swearing at the keepers of the shore, I did last week frighten them into giving me entrance to the sea, which they thought too fierce to be met and swum through; and the result of my swim, I am told, is that I have 'won their hearts forever.' Since I was thirteen I have always got on with sailors and fishermen and such like men, so from what you say, I judge and hope I must have some points in common with Walt Whitman. (Lang, I, 207)

It remains only to connect Swinburne's identification with Whitman's image of the sea with Whitman's own lines, and then Swinburne's, and there will be unmistakable evidence that Swinburne, no matter what he might have said of Whitman's poetry, loved the *mythos* so dearly he could not do without it in his own poetry.

PART I. Whitman's Sexualized Maternal Sea of Death: Synthesizing the Critical Heritage

No studies have been done which trace specifically the ocean imagery in Whitman's poetry, though there are many excellent studies of individual poems--most often "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" -- Chase (1955) and Miller (1968) stand out as early examples, while Moder (1988) and Gilbert (1994) have done some interesting recent work. Nathanson (1992) has an extended section concerning "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life," and Marcus (1993) investigates Whitman's death themes in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." It will be possible to borrow a little from each of these critics -- for each work in its way has some element of the "truth" about Whitman's symbolic use of the sea. A synthesis of their ideas seems possible, and productive.⁵

As early as Whitman's 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* the poet was already combining the imagery of water with some of his most sexual passages. The twenty-eight bathers of section 11, for example, constitute a frankly erotic scene which combines the water imagery with an unseen female sexuality:

Twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore,
Twenty-eight young men, and all so friendly;
Twenty-eight years of womanly life, and all so lonesome.

She owns a fine house by the rise of the bank,

She hides handsome and richly drest aft the blinds of the window.

Which of the young men does she like the best ?
Ah the homliest of them is beautiful to her.

Where are you off to, lady ? for I see you,
You splash in the water there, yet stay stock still in your room.

Dancing and laughing along the beach came the twenty-ninth bather,
The rest did not see her, but she saw them and loved them.

The beards of the young men glisten'd with wet, it ran from their long hair,
Little streams pass'd all over their bodies.

An unseen hand also pass'd over their bodies,
It descended tremblingly from their temples and ribs.

The young men float on their backs, their white bellies bulge to
the sun, they do not ask who seizes fast to them,
They do not know who puffs and declines with pendant and bending arch,
They do not think whom they souse with spray. (38-9, ll. 199-216)

It is significant that the feminine agency in this section *is* unseen. Though it is in no way dangerous to the young men, the sexuality involved is urgent and aggressive. Ironically, and importantly, this is so only in an imagined, and therefore, *passive* way. And too, the feminine sexuality present is apparently ravenous, as it is imagined sexually involved with all twenty-eight young men.⁶

In section 22, Whitman combines the sexualized sea image with the idea of death
(and also life):

You sea ! I resign myself to you also -- I guess what you mean,
I behold from the beach your crooked inviting fingers,
I believe you refuse to go back without feeling of me,
We must have a turn together, I undress, hurry me out of sight of
the land,
Cushion me soft, rock me in billowy drowse,
Dash me with amorous wet, I can repay you.

middle aged man: "I, now thirty-seven and in perfect health begin" (l. 8).⁷ Let it stand, therefore, as a marker of how passive Whitman could become in the face of the hostile sexuality of the sea, the force of which he cannot withstand and live.

Yet in "Sleepers," the mother imagery is, as Chase observes, "insistently present" throughout the poem; if it is carefully separated from the hostile sea imagery, it is there nonetheless:

. . . the encompassing image of the mother . . . appears in the guise of the young woman who receives a shadowy lover, as the 'sleepless widow' who looks out on the 'winter midnight' and sees the shrouded coffin of her husband, and as the goddess-like squaw whom, like so many things in this poem, Whitman recalls from childhood experience. (55)

The mother is present, and she "plays her part among the shifting scenes" of the poem. If Whitman does not name her here as the actively hostile agent, her presence is an undeniable and curiously unexplained element in the poem.

In two poems which made their first appearance in *Leaves of Grass* in the third (1860) edition, "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" and "As I Ebb'd With the Ocean of Life," one can see that the working of the imagery in terms of maternalized sex and death is much less ambiguous, and that it is diffused throughout the entire poem. In "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" Whitman combines the image of sexual love and death in the form of the she-bird who is lost to her mate. She is sometimes glimpsed (or hallucinated) as a speck in the sea-foam, or flying between the lover-bird and the moon. The he-bird's only power is to sing to his lost mate -- he cannot (or is unwilling to) fly out above the waves to join her. He is land bound. He comes "almost amid the slapping waves" (l. 59), but does not test them; we do not know why. (Perhaps they are too dangerous?) Whitman himself appears in the poem as a man recollecting his youthful

self. The imagined youth is secretive, for some reason careful in his visits to the bereaved male bird -- is "Silent, avoiding the moonbeams, blending myself with the shadows" (l. 64). Maybe this is because he does not wish to disturb the bird, but perhaps it is also because he does not wish to reveal himself to the "obscure shapes, the echoes, the sounds and sights after their sorts, / The white arms out in the breakers tirelessly tossing" (ll. 65-66). It may be profitable to compare these "white arms . . . tirelessly tossing" to the sea's "crooked, inviting fingers" in "Song of Myself" -- are they perhaps an invitation to sexual experience? If they *can* be seen in this way, how shall we read the poem?

In his book *Walt Whitman's Poetry* Edwin Haviland Miller, drawing on a quote from psychiatrist-critic Gustav Bychowksi, sees "Out of the Cradle" in terms which are guided by Freudian psychology, as a "reaction to the experience of loss, ultimately the loss of the beloved mother" (175) which leads the poet to psychological truth:

When we reduce the poignant beauty of this poem to its unconscious core, we see the first separation of infancy, the first anguish of infantile love underlying all the future pain of love. Sweet death emerges then as the great benefactor, as a supreme salvation, since it promises a reunion with the beloved mother, earth, sea, and maybe the universe. (175)

Miller considers Whitman to have used "unconscious and cultural" (177) associations in his depiction of the sexualized sea imagery.⁸

A more recent psychological investigation, Donna Moder's "Gender Bipolarity and the Metaphorical Dimensions of Creativity in Walt Whitman's Poetry: A Psychobiographical Study," seeks to establish a firm libidinal connection between Whitman and his mother. For Moder, Whitman had a "pathological dependency on his mother's love as an inspiration for his artistic creativity" which stemmed from a sublimation of his incestuous desire for her into art (40). Whitman, Moder asserts,

“libidinizes art and finds in artistically creative activity a substitute for sexually procreative activity. The poem, by virtue of its equation with the phallus, a symbol of his potency, becomes a substitute child” (40) -- the progeny of Whitman and his mother.

Moder sees Mrs. Whitman as a “nagging, parasitic mother,” who

frequently induced guilt feelings in Walt through her letters which followed him wherever he went, either hinting at the destitute family’s need for mortgage money, or bluntly requesting contributions. Walt, who hungered for her approval, obliged submissively with each pay increase, a gesture implying that the mother’s love was not experienced as being unconditional; Allen notes, too, that whenever Walt got a good review in a New York magazine, he would write to ask his brothers to be sure to buy a copy of the magazine for their mother. (37)

Moder goes on to point out that Whitman early removed himself from the family home:

“the fact that Walt chose to live away from home prematurely at the age of twelve while working as an office boy for a newspaper editor, yet maintained a tie with his mother through letters, implies a split need and fear of the mother as a love object” (37). It

seems to me that, although Moder uses many value laden words which tend to unproblematically depict a one way power relationship between Whitman and his mother (for instance, Walt’s “submissiveness” in the face of his mother’s dogged requests for money in the quotation above), there *is* an antagonism in the relationship which has been largely unexplored in terms of Whitman’s poetry. After all, if the sea is revealed to be maternal, it is not in the sense of the traditionally evoked “motherly” maternal --

Whitman’s sea is a “fierce” “savage” mother: “With angry moans the fierce old mother incessantly moaning” (l. 132); “The undertone, the savage old mother incessantly crying” (l. 141); “like some old crone rocking the cradle, swathed in sweet garments, bending aside” (l. 183). The poem presents an aggressive maternal sex object which is at once (in

With love, with love. (249, ll. 71-78)

Here, it is important to note, the sea is associated with an aggressive femininity which “pushes” “madly.”

In his book *Whitman Reconsidered*, Richard Chase (in what has become the “classic” reading of the poem) has tended to see “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” as a poem that celebrates the awakening of the poet’s poetic power. Chase feels the sense of “bereavement” is largely “generalized into the sense of loss incident to all human life” (121-22). Yet Chase seems to be mostly interested in *preempting* a literal reading of the bird’s “lost mate” as autobiography. He also makes little biography out of Whitman’s curious tendency to render the sea imagery in terms of the maternal, preferring to see this not as any kind of personal statement, but as a phase which leads to the general.¹⁰

While Chase picks up the “savage” maternal aspect of the ocean imagery, he ignores the sexual aspect. Further, he is too quick to judgment when he writes

The ocean, which in ‘Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking’ is felt as the source of being and is said to be paradoxically fearful and infinitely delightful, is, in the later poems, *merely a featureless and homogeneous medium* in which the soul seeks its perfect equalization with all things. (149, emphasis added)

On the contrary, many of Whitman’s later poems (and the earlier works as well) tend to depict the sea as a maternal (or at least feminized) hostile environment -- most notably “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d.”¹¹

Taking his cue from Chase, Mordecai Marcus proposes, in his essay “‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry’: Whitman’s Sexual Dying Into Eternity,” that Whitman’s idea of death is in terms of sex, and that he saw death as a kind of final sexual act which creates a cosmic

union:

Whitman argues that if his readers and he can realize that their yearnings for unity are primarily sexual and that they should feel joy rather than guilt over these sexual desires, they will overcome all barriers and be assured that death is the final consummation of their desire for unity. (122)

Marcus' is a conception which is closely related to Sandra M. Gilbert's idea about

Whitman's ability to use death (formulated in terms of Stevens' poem "Sunday

Morning"). In her essay "Now in a Moment I Know What I Am For," Gilbert wrote that

Whitman is able to

see death as, in Wallace Stevens' phrase, somehow a 'mother' of the 'Beauty' that [he has] been . . . strengthened to create . . . [S]uch beauty . . . is paradoxically retrieved from, and in the context of, the flux, even the ferocity of a natural world which the initiate must distance and conquer through language. (170)

To these critics, Whitman's artistic conception of death as sex, and death as creative of beauty is the central *mythos* within which he has the power to write transcendent poetry.

Indeed, the tensions arising out of the aggressively sexualized maternal ocean were productive of some of Whitman's finest poetry. But these critics, perhaps wisely, have sought to stay away from biography.

It is possible to view the "psychobiographical" symbolism of the poetry without wondering how this relates to Whitman's actual biography. For whatever reason, Whitman chose to depict the sea as a sometimes hostile, dangerous, sexually aggressive maternal figure (as in section 22 of "Song of Myself" and "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking") which can kill (as it does the "courageous giant" in "The Sleepers") and can be an insurmountable "blocking figure" (as in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking") when it prevents the mockingbird, and by identification, Whitman, from attaining its love

object; and, paradoxically, the hostile mother figure can be the impetus to great creative activity.

Most critics see the second great poem of 1860, “As I Ebb’d With the Ocean of Life,” as Whitman’s gesture of despair. Chase regards it as expressive of “the final helplessness of man before the mystery of the universe” (*Whitman Reconsidered* 124). He sees the continued presence in the poem of the “fierce old mother” from “Out of the Cradle,” but finds Whitman to be powerless against her (124-127). Tenney Nathanson, in *Whitman’s Presence: Body, Voice and Writing in Leaves of Grass*, virtually ignores “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” but has an extended section dealing with “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life.” Nathanson sees “As I Ebb’d” as “the last great poem Whitman wrote” (444) and sees it as the poet’s “turn[ing] against verse” in a reaction to being caught between the withdrawing mother (figured in Nathanson as being the source of Whitman’s oceanic sense of self in the 1855-56 poems) and the caustic, imagination destroying father (444-61). It is Nathanson’s project to relate “As I Ebb’d” to the Calamus poems, and he does find some fairly convincing relationships, but he misses an opportunity for greater understanding in not comparing the poem to “Out of the Cradle.” Further, he too easily equates the negativity of “the real Me” in “As I Ebb’d” with the father and is perhaps confusing two separate elements of the poem:

‘As I Ebb’d’ displays [Whitman’s] disillusion without assuaging it, giving vent to mutually contradictory and ultimately self-canceling recriminations. The complex, self-lacerating bitterness that accompanies this irresolution is most dramatically evident in what I earlier called Whitman’s psychomachia, in which competing personae challenge one other [sic] . . . [the poem’s] scenes . . . gradually shift in focus: beginning by pitting enigmatic icons of the poet himself against one another, they end by confronting equivocal figurations of the father. The scenes that make up the poem’s psychomachia thus roughly re-trace the trajectory of

Whitman's career; they suggest that it has issued onto a dead end . . . 'As I Ebb'd' leaves the poet caught in an Oedipal configuration from which there seems no longer any possible escape. (458)¹²

In section 3 of "As I Ebb'd With the Ocean of Life" (which was written at about the same time as "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking"), Whitman makes the gender associations of the sea and land plain. Here the masculine shore is glutted with the wreckage of the hostile feminine sea, the "fierce old mother" (l. 5). Whitman compares himself and his poetry to the "Chaff, straw, splinters of wood, weeds, etc." (ll. 11-12) by the "thought of likenesses": ("I too but signify at the utmost a little wash'd up drift, / A few sands and dead leaves to gather" ll. 22-23). The poet is brought to this realization "As the ocean so mysterious rolls toward me closer and closer" (l. 21) and with "Nature here in sight of the sea taking advantage of me to dart upon me and sting me" (l. 33). Exposed to the hostile feminine principle, the masculine "fish-shaped island" is the *ground* of Whitman's self and poetry:

You friable shore with trails of debris,
You fish-shaped island, I take what is underfoot,
What is yours is mine my father. (255, ll. 35-40)

The masculine shore is fragile, and scarred, yet the ground of a possible love:

I throw myself upon your breast my father,
I cling to you so that you cannot unloose me,
I hold you so firm till you answer me something.

Kiss me my father,
Touch me with your lips as I touch those I love,
Breathe to me while I hold you close the secret of the murmuring
I envy. (255, ll. 45-50)

In an action which parallels "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," Whitman invites the masculine to "breathe to me . . . the secret." What this secret may be he does not tell,

but immediately after the request, there is a stanza break, and Whitman returns to his old self, more assured, more commanding:

Ebb, ocean of life, (the flow will return,)
Cease not your moaning you fierce old mother,
Endlessly cry for your castaways, but fear not me, deny not me,
Rustle not up so hoarse and angry against my feet as I touch you
or gather from you. (255, ll. 51-5)¹³

In this poem, which has seemed to so many so negative, Whitman has reached an accommodation with the feminine sea by atonement (in the sense of the popular phrasing “at-one-ment”) with the masculine principle, or father. In contrast to the way Nathanson sees the poem, there is a sense of triumph over the destructive femininity that the sea has represented. Even the final apostrophe to God, not characteristic of Whitman, has a kind of daring authority in tone.

It is constructive to see how this poem mirrors Whitman’s poem about a boy and a bird, and the whispering sea. In “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” Whitman had been able to imaginatively construct meaning out of death by passively accepting the whispered “low and delicious word death” as the answer to his sexual dilemma. In “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life” Whitman’s imaginative constructions are shown to be illusory (as Nathanson has suggested) -- yet, by accepting new knowledge from the father, Whitman is able to gain a power over the “fierce old mother” sea. This newfound power would show itself again in Whitman’s great elegy for Lincoln.

“When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” combines the elements of the two great poems of 1859. As in “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life,” it is by communion with the masculine earth, “the fields of spring and the farmers preparing their crops, / In the large unconscious scenery of my land” (ll. 109-10), that the poet finally gains

knowledge (in this case “the knowledge of death” and “the thought of death” ll. 120, 121) with which he is able to get command of his situation. Then, paralleling “Out of the Cradle, Endlessly Rocking,” he goes to the shore where he finds a “singer so shy to the rest” who sings to him a song of the death-mother ocean, reminiscent of the song sung by the mockingbird in “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking”:

*Dark mother always gliding near with soft feet,
Have none chanted for thee a chant of fullest welcome?
Then I chant it for thee, I glorify thee above all,
I bring thee a song that when thou must indeed come, come unfa-
lteringly.*

*Approach strong deliveress,
When it is so, when thou hast taken them I joyously sing the dead,
Lost in the loving floating ocean of thee,
Laved in the flood of thy bliss O death. (335, ll. 143-150)*

As it was in “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” the “loving floating ocean of thee” is figured positively, yet it is not figured as an overwhelming sexual force. Whitman’s “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life” shows the poet coming to terms with, at last, his masculine nature, with which he is able to withstand the destructive sexuality of the maternal sea, and it is for this reason that Whitman is able to render the ocean, its associations with death yet intact, as a “strong deliveress” instead of as a “fierce old mother.”¹⁴

Through this synthesis, it has been established that Whitman did indeed often figure the sea in terms of a hostile, sexually aggressive maternal force -- a force sometimes balanced by a paternal land figure. In the face of these opposing forces Whitman’s persona became passive -- and this is where Swinburne most saw room for improvement early in his life, and found a bitter nostalgia later.

PART II. Swinburne's Use of Whitman's *Mythos*

With Whitman there appears a progression or evolution of the image of the sea toward a site that is at once a hostile maternal force and the source of his poetic strength. If Swinburne borrowed Whitman's *mythos*, making important modifications of his own, then an evolution of Whitman's imagery should appear in Swinburne's own poetry.

Critics of Swinburne have in the past relied on the younger poet's own overt statements regarding Whitman, both in prose and verse, to form an idea of Swinburne's regard for Whitman. Swinburne's negative reactions to Whitman as a poet have been well documented; yet Whitman at his best could move Swinburne to euphoria. And that Swinburne later began to distance himself from Whitman does not in any way assault the argument presented here. By the time Swinburne wrote "Whitmania" (1887), Whitman had already written, and Swinburne had already read, all that was important between them. A clearer idea of how pervasive Whitman's influence was on Swinburne (throughout his career, in fact, though particularly in his later writings) is evidenced by a few strong examples -- the first of which is one of Swinburne's best known early poems, "The Triumph of Time."

Both "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" and "The Triumph of Time" deal with the loss of a mate. Though in Whitman's poem the loss is that of the male mockingbird, one can easily see parallels between the two. The most significant passages

of Swinburne's early poem (first published in 1866) begin with stanza 33, where Swinburne makes a striking connection to Whitman's "Song of Myself," specifically section 22, in which Whitman visualizes himself having sexual relations with the sea, a sexual union with the hint of death. Here are Swinburne's lines:

33

I will go back to the great sweet mother,
 Mother and lover of men, the sea,
 I will go down to her, I and none other,
 Close with her, kiss her, and mix her with me;
 Cling to her, strive with her, hold her fast.
 O fair white mother, in days long past
 Born without sister, born without brother
 Set free my soul as thy soul is free.

34

O fair green-girdled mother of mine,
 Sea, that art clothed with the sun and the rain,
 Thy sweet hard kisses are strong like wine,
 Thy large embraces are keen like pain.
 Save me and hide me with all thy waves,
 Find me one grave in thy thousand graves
 Those pure cold populous graves of thine
 Wrought without hand in a world without stain.

35

I shall sleep, and move with the moving ships,
 Change as the winds change, veer in the tide;
 My lips will feast on the foam of thy lips,
 I shall rise with thy rising, and with thee subside. (vol. I, 42-3)

Here we have a large part of Whitman's *mythos* intact, with little modification. Compare Swinburne's "Close with her, kiss her, mix her with me" with Whitman's "Song of Myself," section 22:

You Sea! I resign myself to you also -- I guess what you mean,
 I behold from the beach your crooked inviting fingers,
 I believe you refuse to go back without feeling of me,
 We must have a turn together, I undress, hurry me out of sight of
 the land,

Cushion me soft, rock me in billowy drowse,
Dash me with amorous wet, I can repay you. (49, ll. 447-53)¹⁵

While Swinburne's style is his own, the hostile sea, and the poet's passivity in the face of it, is reminiscent of Whitman. The only real novelty in this situation is the hint of Swinburne's sexual masochism in the lines "Thy sweet hard kisses are strong like wine" and "My lips will feast on the foam of thy lips," yet even this is perhaps suggested in the very image of Whitman and the "howler and scooper of storms" having "a turn together."

But if both poets see the sea as an amorous yet dangerous force, their attitudes *toward* that force are completely different in these two poems. Whitman is euphoric at the awakening of song within him, liberated by the word from the sea. But Swinburne is dejected, and complains of a loss of the ability to appreciate beauty. Note in particular stanzas 45 - 47:

45

I shall never be friends again with roses;
I shall loathe sweet tunes, where a note grown strong
Relents and recoils, and climbs and closes,
As a wave of the sea turned back by song.
There are sounds where the soul's delight takes fire,
Face to face with its own desire;
A delight that rebels, a desire that reposes;
I shall hate sweet music my whole life long.

46

The pulse of war and the passion of wonder,
The heavens that murmur, the sounds that shine
The stars that sing and the loves that thunder,
The music burning at heart like wine,
An armed archangel whose hands raise up
All senses mixed in the spirit's cup
Till flesh and spirit are molten in sunder---
These things are over, and no more mine.

47

These were a part of the playing I heard
 Once, ere my love and my heart were at strife;
 Love that sings and hath wings as a bird,
 Balm of the wound and heft of the knife.
 Fairer than earth is the sea, and sleep
 Than overwatching of eyes that weep,
 Now time has done with his one sweet word,
 The wine and leaven of lovely life. (45-6)

Here is a keen loss, particularly in stanza 46, in which Swinburne seems to be saying the poetry of others no longer has any power to move him. Yet even while Swinburne's tone is different from that in "Out of the Cradle," in fact one might say opposite, the *mythos* here is still Whitman's. For in stanza 47 we have the conjunction of a bird and an unrevealed word. It is clear that here the word is "love," not "death" as it was in Whitman's poem. There is, however, a powerful link between the two poems; in fact, Swinburne has only succeeded in turning Whitman's poem on its head. Indeed, this early poem is entirely dominated in its mythical dimension by Whitman's powerful *mythos*: the amorous but dangerous sea, the bird, the wounded boy, the word -- even the awakening. For although Swinburne states he "shall hate sweet music my whole life long," he states it in the context of one of his finest early poems. There is undoubtedly an overlay of Swinburne's classical learning, and a hint of his masochism, but the realm in which he works is Whitman's.

Actually, one finds that Swinburne had a great affection for Whitman's idea of "a word out of the sea." Swinburne, because of his classical training, knew of the Greek myth of the goddess rising from the sea, and knew of the term "thalassian," which translated from the Greek means "one out of the sea" (we recall that Whitman first called "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," by the title "A Word from the Sea").

Swinburne's first use of the term comes, significantly, in the early poem "Dolores," in which poem Swinburne already is conflating the images of sex, pain and motherhood with the sea. We shall find Swinburne returning to the image of revelation from the sea in several of his poems; this in itself ought to be seen as a major point of communication between the two poets.

One can trace a thematic relationship between Swinburne's poem "Thalassius" and Whitman's great poem of the birth of his poetic power. Once again, Swinburne is confronting the amorous yet dangerous sea from which he derives his poetic power. At the start of this section Swinburne compares himself to a sea-bird, and already Swinburne is revising Whitmanian imagery. He will not be anxiously passive. He will not be compared to a "dead leaf drained and thinned."

... and in following all his blood grew glad
 And again as a sea-bird's; for the wind
 Took him to bathe him deep round breast and brow
 Not as it takes a dead leaf drained and thinned,
 But as the brightest bay-flower blown on bough,
 Set springing toward it singing: and they rode
 By many a vine-leafed, many a rose-hung road,
 Exalt with exultation; many a night
 Set all its stars upon them as for spies
 On many a moon-bewildering mountain-height
 Where he rode only by the fierier light
 Of his dread lady's hot sweet hungering eyes. (vol. III, 306-07, ll. 378-389)

Here is the sexually dangerous feminine element, whose "sweet hot hungering eyes" provide the "fierier light" by which the young poet travels, "set springing toward it singing." Swinburne has traded Whitman's anxiety in the face of the mysterious feminine power for joy.

For the moon wandered witless of her way,
 Spell stricken by strong magic in such wise

As wizards use to set the stars astray.
 And in his ears the music that makes mad
 Beat always; and what way the music bade,
 That alway rode he; nor was any sleep
 His, nor from height nor deep.
 But heaven was as red iron, slumberless,
 And had no heart to bless;
 And earth lay sere and darkling as distraught,
 And help in her was nought. (307, ll.390-400)

In this stanza we see that Swinburne is carried away by “the music that makes mad.”

That this is felt to be an uncomfortable, perhaps unwanted condition, is made clear by the last six lines. The poet cannot sleep, and receives neither blessings nor aid from heaven nor earth. The youthful Swinburne’s restlessness in the face of the sexually charged sea is different from that of Whitman’s young self in his poem. It is obvious there is a great sense, perhaps even a greater sense of pain in Whitman’s lines, the cause of which is hidden from the reader. In Swinburne’s lines so far there is only the sort of mad romantic panting that speaks of juvenile passions, passions the young poet would indulge. The next stanza speaks of how this indulgence prevents the bestowing of a proper poetic gift, the “bay-leaf braid” and “the land’s laurel and sea-dew.”

Then many a midnight, many a morn and even,
 His mother, passing forth of her fair heaven,
 With goodlier gifts than all save gods can give
 From earth or from the heaven where sea-things live,
 With shine of sea-flowers through the bay-leaf braid
 Woven for a crown her foam white hands had made
 To crown him with the land’s laurel and sea-dew,
 Sought the sea-bird that was her boy: but he
 Sat panther-throned beside Erigone,
 Riding the red ways of the revel through
 Midmost of pale-mouthed passion’s crownless crew.
 Till on some winter’s dawn of some dim year
 He let the vine-bit on the panther’s lip
 Slide, and the green rein slip,

And set his eyes to seaward, nor gave ear
 If sound from landward hailed him, dire nor dear;
 And passing forth of all those fair fierce ranks
 Back to the grey sea-banks,
 Against a sea-rock lying, aslant the steep,
 Fell after many sleepless dreams on sleep. (307-08, ll. 401-420)

Through overindulgence Swinburne exhausts the “music that makes mad” within him, and in his exhaustion, as we see in the next stanza, comes a reawakening to his life’s purpose, and a “grace of sleep to see / The deep divine dark dayshine of the sea.”

And in his sleep the dun green light was shed
 Heavily round his head
 That through the veil of sea falls fathom-deep,
 Blurred like a lamp’s that when the night drops dead
 Dies; and his eyes gat grace of sleep to see
 The deep divine dark dayshine of the sea,
 Dense water-walls and clear dusk water-ways,
 Broad-based, or branching as a sea-flower sprays
 That slide or this dividing; and anew
 The glory of all her glories that he knew.
 And in sharp rapture of recovering tears
 He woke on fire with yearnings of old years,
 Pure as one purged of pain that passion bore,
 Ill child of bitter mother; for his own
 Looked laughing toward him from her midsea throne,
 Up toward him there ashore. (308, ll. 421-436)

Here we have something which is quite close to Whitman’s own song of awakening involving the sexually aggressive sea, though in Swinburne’s poem it is figured as a re-awakening. Yet although there are many features of the poem which resemble Whitman’s “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” there are some important differences too. It is in these differences that one begins to see the “correction” Swinburne sought to make of Whitman’s *mythos*. Where Whitman and the he-bird are careful of the waves, Swinburne is not. As will be explained more fully later, this will become a key to

understanding the differences between the two poets.

“Thalassius” sits in the complex of Whitman’s *mythos* precisely between “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” and “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life.” The associations with “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” are easy enough to find. But one can find also hints of a connection with Whitman’s second great poem of 1860. For instance, where Whitman had referred to himself as “a little washed up drift, / A few sands and dead leaves to gather,” in the passage just quoted Swinburne had figured himself as a windblown flower. Again, note how Swinburne insists on a difference between himself and Whitman: where Whitman was a passive “little washed up drift,” Swinburne is something taken by the wind “Not as it takes a dead leaf drained and thinned, / But as the brightest bay-flower blown on bough,” and it is his grief which is “as last year’s leaf / Blown dead far down the wind’s way.”

Though these differences will become important, the focus must first be on how Swinburne’s re-awakening integrates the missing element of the male power, which Whitman had confronted and perhaps come to terms with in “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life.” If Swinburne was a careful reader of Whitman’s poetry, he must have realized how crucial the masculine “friable shore” was to this particular poem. And in the same way that Whitman reached an accommodation with the feminine sea by atonement with the masculine, so too does Swinburne here in his poem:

Till one clear day when brighter sea-wind blew
And louder sea-shine lightened, for the waves
Were full of godhead and the light that saves,
His father’s, and their spirit had pierced him through,
He felt strange breath and light all around him shed
That bowed him down with rapture; and he knew
His father’s hand, hallowing his humbled head,

And the old great voice of the old good time, that said:

‘Child of my sunlight and the sea, from birth
 A fosterling fugitive on earth;
 Sleepless of soul as wind or wave or fire,
 A manchild with an ungrown God’s desire;
 Because thou hast loved nought mortal more than me,
 Thy father, and they mother-hearted sea;

 Have therefore in thine heart and in thy mouth
 The sound of song that mingles north and south,
 The song of all the winds that sing of me,
 And in thy soul the sense of all the sea.’ (310, ll. 471-488, 497-500)

Note that in this poem, the action for the poet is still parallel to that in Whitman’s “Out of the Cradle, Endlessly Rocking” in that the poet receives his poetic powers by the shore as a gift. In Whitman’s case, it is a recognition of the powerful “word” and what it rouses in him which is the overt cause, but we should also note how important the hostile maternal force had been, separating the mated pair of mockingbirds, causing the male bird to pour “forth meanings which I of all men know.” Somehow it is the absence of sexual relationship with a woman which creates the ground of creativity in these two poets, at least as they figure it in their poetry. Yet “Thalassius” is really not Swinburne’s own interpretation of the myth, but a stylistic recasting of Whitman’s.

In another of Swinburne’s poems of 1880, “On the Cliffs,” which, as other critics have noted, bears a close resemblance to Whitman’s “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” there is a striking passage -- beginning in the sixth stanza of the poem.

God, if thou be God, --bird, if bird thou be, --
 Do thou then answer me.
 For but one word, what wind soweever blow,
 Is blown up usward ever from the sea.
 In fruitless years of youth dead long ago
 And deep beneath their own dead leaves and snow
 Buried, I heard with bitter heart and sere

The same sea's word unchangeable, nor knew
 But that mine own life-days were changeless too
 And sharp and salt with unshed tear on tear
 And cold and fierce and barren ; and my soul,
 Sickening, swam weakly with bated breath
 In a deep sea like death,
 And felt the wind buffet her face with brine
 Hard, and harsh thought on thought in long bleak roll
 Blown by keen gusts of memory sad as thine
 Heap the weight up of pain, and break, and leave
 Strength scarce enough to grieve . . . (313-14, ll. 70-88)

Here is Swinburne working the old ground again, hitting all the necessary notes, even the address to the bird, the image of the dead leaves, and of course the unnamed word “blown up usward ever from the sea.” Ever since he first read Whitman’s great poems of 1860, Swinburne was in some ways captured by Whitman’s *mythos*, and his own poetry, as we have seen, was largely directed by it. To be sure, Swinburne’s knowledge and use of the myth of Aphrodite create a complicating factor, especially in, for instance, poems like *Atalanta in Calydon* which are based on Greek or Roman myth. But it is clear that Swinburne was drawn toward the *mythos* of the shore and the hostile mother sea, and the knowledge and power (or the word) which comes from that ground because of his identification with Whitman’s great poems.

A review of Swinburne’s letters of that twenty year period shows that he remained an enthusiastic supporter of Whitman, and an excellent critic of Whitman’s best work.¹⁶ Yet Swinburne was ultimately not completely satisfied with Whitman’s *mythos*.

We can speculate about why the *mythos* fascinated Swinburne. Psychological critics help us see that the hostile sexualized ocean stands for a taboo -- a transgressive sexual experience, either Oedipally, with the mother, or at the very least with an antagonistic feminine force. In the face of this invitation to sexual experience, we have

seen that Whitman grew passive. But Swinburne does not necessarily go passive, or at least not in the same way. We shall examine some examples which show how Swinburne modified the myth, specifically “To a Seamew” and “The Lake of Gaube.”

We ought to be able, at this point, to imagine how Swinburne could have been thinking of Whitman’s poem when he wrote “To a Seamew.” There are some immediate superficial similarities that demand notice: both poems, of course, take place by the sea; both poets address a bird, in fact both call the bird “my brother” several times. The crux, however, of the similarity lies within the image of the sea figured as a sexualized ground of death. This is made plain in Whitman’s poem:

A word then, (for I will conquer it,
 The word final, superior to all,
 Subtle, sent up-- what is it? --I listen,
 Are you whispering it, and have been all the time, you
 seawaves?
 Is that it from your liquid rims and wet sands?

Whereto answering, the sea,
 Delaying not, hurrying not,
 Whispered me through the night, and very plainly before
 daybreak,
 Lisp’d to me the low and delicious word death,
 And again death, death, death, death. (252-53, ll. 160-69)

Yet while Whitman’s poem is written as a chronicle of the moment in his childhood when his “own songs awaked from that hour” (l. 178), -- i.e., the moment of his awareness of death -- Swinburne’s is written from the perspective of an aging poet who has lost some power, which he equates with the power of the Seamew’s wings. It would be easy to see Swinburne’s poem as an indication that he felt his poetic powers were slipping, and to therefore call Swinburne’s poem a negative image of Whitman’s, like the much earlier

poems “The Triumph of Time,” “Thalassius” and “On the Cliffs,” in the sense that Swinburne’s poem turns Whitman’s upside down -- and there is plenty to suggest this may be a correct reading in its own way. But it is important to push a little further.

For it seems that, like Whitman’s poem, “To a Seamew” does look backward in time with nostalgia, yet *not* with the intention of recalling a time when his poetic powers were awakened, but rather, to a time when he had been able to live in a freer, albeit more self destructive way. It is legendary to Swinburne devotees that Swinburne had nearly drunk himself to death, and had had to be “rescued” by his friend Theodore Watts-Dunton, and that he was watched over, and reined in by his friends for the rest of his life. Surely, it is probably also valid to see the poem as a more standard reminiscence of lost youth, a look back at the time when Swinburne had been able to live in ignorance, even in celebration of death -- something he would have found hard to do in 1886, the year before his fiftieth birthday.

Whitman’s *mythos* is intimately involved in Swinburne’s later poetry (there are several further examples that we did not touch on, sections of “A Midsummer Holiday” and “Hertha” for instance). And at first it may look as if “To a Seamew” is another uncomplicated example. Indeed, in “To a Seamew” the sea is figured in terms of its destructive capability -- storms “clothe seas with sorrow” (l. 19) for men “whose home is all the sea” (l. 26) and whom the heavens treat as their “toys” (l. 46). But the difference, and it is an important one, is in the bird. While Whitman’s mockingbird is helpless, even distressed in the face of the sea’s power, the Seamew is literally above all this destruction and sorrow:

For you the storm sounds only

More notes of more delight
 Than earth's in sunniest weather:
 When heaven and sea together
 Join strengths against the lonely
 Lost bark borne down by night
 For you the storm sounds only
 More notes of more delight. (212, ll. 33-40)

Heaven and the sea are in league against the “lonely lost bark,” which is at the mercy of the waves, while the seamew, with the power of flight Swinburne envies, soars above “With wider wing and louder / Long clarion call for joy” saluting “the terror / Of darkness, wild as error” (ll. 41-4).

In terms of the poem, though Swinburne had been able to soar at some unspecified earlier point, as the first stanza indicates, he is now rendered wingless. Yet we have not decided what it means to lose the power of flight. *Is it the loss of poetic power, rendering this then a complete negative of Whitman's “Out of the Cradle,” or something else? Somehow Swinburne has become an ordinary mortal, one of the “seamen” at the mercy of the waves, who are*

. . . fallen, even we, whose passion
 On earth is nearest thine;
 Who sing and cease from flying;
 Who live and dream of dying,
 Gray time in gray time's fashion
 Bids wingless creatures pine:
 We are fallen, even we, whose passion
 On earth is nearest thine. (213, ll. 73-80)

The phrase “who sing and cease from flying” is echoed two stanzas later by “And we, whom dreams embolden, / We can but creep and sing” (ll. 95-6). It is these two phrases that show Swinburne is *not* speaking of any *loss* of poetic power, for these phrases indicate poetry is a *result* of a loss, figuratively the loss of wings, but literally, perhaps, a

loss of courage in the face of, or freedom from the knowledge of death.

Like Whitman, Swinburne intuitively feels poetry's birth in death, but for Swinburne finally it is not a victory, nor a gift from the "father sun" as he had figured it in "Thalassius," but an indication of, and the consolation for, defeat. This is why he ends the poem in the way that he does -- with a wish to exchange his "song's wild honey" for "wings that search the sea" (ll. 15,18). He is, perhaps, longing for his old dissolute ways, when he had been able to tempt death, and figuratively soar above it like the Seamew. This is finally why the seamew is such an attractive symbol for Swinburne, who would have considered his choice of birds a natural one, considering

Such life as thrills and quickens
 The silence of thy flight
 Or fills thy note's elation
 With lordlier exultation
 Than man's whose faint heart sickens
 With hopes and fears that blight
 Such life as thrills and quickens
 The silence of thy flight. (211, ll. 9-17)

The seamew lives naturally in a condition impervious to death, a "free bird" above the waves ("higher than freemen"[l. 29]) for whom "the storm sounds only / More notes of more delight" [34-5]). Yet it is not only the bird's immortality that attracts Swinburne, for Keats' nightingale had been called immortal too, but in lines 81-88 the poet claims the superiority of the seamew over the nightingale *and* the lark, taking on Shelley's symbol for the high-flying intellect in "To a Skylark" as well.

If the seamew's transcendence of death is only partly the attraction, what else can account for Swinburne's praise of the bird? Perhaps it is the seamew's position soaring *above* the ground of death as figured in the sea, interacting with it with graceful

ease. Further, Swinburne's attraction to the sea as symbol for death comes from Whitman. "To a Seamew," perhaps, can give us a suspicion that Swinburne is attracted to death itself, and finds some power in an active interaction with it -- not passiveness in its face. But to become certain that this is an idea operating in Swinburne's poetry, and importantly, an idea which breaks from Whitman's *mythos*, we shall have to turn to a later poem.

In "The Lake of Gaube," published in 1899, Swinburne uses a local legend from the Pyrenees that the lake in question is too cold to be endured by mortals. The lake is literally the ground of death for the local inhabitants, yet the poet takes obvious pleasure in defying their fears and swimming in it. It is instructive to recall at this point what Swinburne had written in the letter to M. D. Conway about defying the fears of others concerning the perilous water:

. . . for after twenty minutes' profane swearing at the keepers of the shore, I did last week frighten them into giving me entrance to the sea, which they thought too fierce to be met and swum through; and the result of my swim, I am told, is that I have 'won their hearts forever.' (Lang, I, 207)

It isn't hard at all to think that Swinburne could have been thinking of Whitman, whom Swinburne knew enjoyed bathing in rough water, when the younger poet wrote "The Lake of Gaube." One can hear Whitman's influence in some of the phrasing in the poem: for instance "Death-dark and delicious as death"(l. 37) is reminiscent of "the low and delicious word death" (l. 168) of "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking." But in this poem, Swinburne's active masochism, his urge to tempt death, is made explicit:

The spirit that quickens my body rejoices to pass from the sunlight
away,
To pass from the glow of the mountainous flowerage, the high multi-

tudinous bloom,
 Far down through the fathomless night of the water, the gladness of
 silence and gloom.
 Death-dark and delicious as death in the dream of a lover and dreamer
 may be,
 It 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 peri-
 lous breath,
 And living, though girdled about with the darkness and coldness and
 strangeness of death. (vol. VI, 285, ll. 33-40)

Compare this to Whitman's dead swimmer in "The Sleepers." Where in Whitman's poem the sea is the ground of tragedy, here death defying is figured as "delight," and is shown to be something that makes the soul "glad as a bird whose flight is impelled and sustained of love" (l. 48). This seems fairly plain, and it bears a clear connection to the earlier poem "To a Seamew." In fact, the latter is the key to unpacking the meaning of the former:

As a Sea-mew's love of the sea-wind breasted and ridden for rapture's
 sake
 Is the love of his body and soul for the darkling delight of the soundless
 lake:
 As the silent speed of a dream too living to live for a thought's space
 more
 Is the flight of his limbs through the still strong chill of the darkness
 from shore to shore.
 Might life be as this is and death be as life that casts off time as a robe,
 The likeness of infinite heaven were a symbol revealed of the lake of
 Gaube. (286, ll. 49-54)

Finally we have the answer to the mystery of the Seamew -- Swinburne prefers this bird because it flies *above the ground of death*, which is the entry to, and point of interaction with "infinite heaven." This is an idea, and a rendering of the myth which is beyond Whitman's "Out of the Cradle." And therefore, in the terms of "To a Seamew," it is the

loss of the courage to attempt this interaction with death which causes the poet to sing, and the singing here is compensatory, and not something to be celebrated -- Swinburne does not sing rapturously "I know now what I am for," but eulogizes the loss of his entrance to "infinite heaven." Here, finally, Swinburne has changed the *mythos* into one built on his own terms, while retaining those elements he found in Whitman that he thought most convenient and suitable.

Conclusion

We have shown how Swinburne's later poetry ought to be seen as his correction of Whitman. Swinburne does *revise* Whitman, demonstrating his belief that while Whitman was content to learn his lesson from death, that the elder poet turned his back on any interaction with the sublime and chose instead to become a poet. For Swinburne, especially the later Swinburne, it seems this is in some ways a defeat, for to sing about something is different from the experience of it. It is not an accident, perhaps, that Swinburne praises "The silence of [the seamew's] flight" (10) and identifies singing with creeping (90, 96). The regret, then, is that Swinburne has given up a life of interaction with the sublime ground of death, and had taken up a life "other, / Though sweet, than once was mine."

Now we fully understand the lament behind the first lines:

When I had wings, my brother,
Such wings were mine as thine. (211, ll. 1-2)

Swinburne is eulogizing a real loss, which he may have felt Whitman had not been sophisticated enough to realize in his own poetry. It is in the spirit of a revision, then, of Whitman's poetic evocation of the ground of death that Swinburne writes -- where Whitman found his poetic voice in a somehow joyful recognition of death, Swinburne finds his last, and most individuated voice, in a sorrowful recognition that the time of his participation with the sublime has passed.

But we need not be wholly guided by Swinburne's assessment of Whitman, for

there are some elements of the *mythos* which Swinburne was never able to fully integrate into his own poetry. For, as we have shown, Whitman did not simply give up in the face of the hostile mother sea. We recall the various strengths he gained from the masculine shore in “As I Ebb’d With the Ocean of Life,” and later used so productively in “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d.” By accepting masculine love Whitman gains power over the sea, while Swinburne never does. Even though Swinburne had cast his own poetic re-awakening in “Thalassius” in the same terms, as his poetry developed its own response to the *mythos* the masculine element is dropped in favor of a submersion in the feminine. Perhaps, as has been suggested by Professor Meyers (2), it was Swinburne’s “defensive homophobia” which caused this important change in the *mythos*. However that may be, Swinburne is reduced to eulogizing, if brilliantly and beautifully, his days of transgressive dalliance, while Whitman was able to discover new terms of relationship for what so terrified and attracted him.

The difference between them, then, is really shown in the two different birds and their reactions to the sea. The mockingbird frets helplessly in the face of the sexualized hostile sea, while turning its frustration into song. Whitman finally accepts this as his own course in “As I Ebb’d and Flow;’d with the Ocean of Life,” identifying the move as a move toward the masculine. Swinburne’s sea-mew soars over the ground of feminine death, transcendent above it while somehow also immersed in it. Swinburne, in his youth, soars with the sea-mew, but finally must let go of the experience and accept the position of an onlooker, while eulogizing his lost power of flight.

NOTES

1. Though there is a question whether Swinburne knew Whitman's poem in its final form as it was published in 1881, it is certain he knew "A Word Out of the Sea," the version appearing in the 1860 and 1871 editions of *Leaves of Grass*. Although the poem does change somewhat between 1871 and 1881, the changes are on the whole stylistic, and it should not matter to our argument which version Swinburne read, or even whether he read more than one.

2. On Swinburne's "verbal reminiscences of the work of other poets" see John Overton Fuller (262); of Shelley's influence on Swinburne, see Terry L. Meyers "Swinburne, Shelley and *Songs before Sunrise*" in Rooksby and Shrimpton's *The Whole Music of Passion: New Essays on Swinburne*, (40-51); of the many echoes of past works heard in Swinburne's "The Triumph of Time" see Cecil Y. Lang's *The Pre-Raphaelites and Their Circle* (514, n.). See also Chew's discussion of Wagner's influence on Swinburne's writing (168, n); on Whitman's influence specifically, see Chew's discussion of "Hertha" (113-14).

3. See William J. Goede's "Swinburne and the Whitmaniacs" in *The Victorian Newsletter*, 33 (Spring 1968) and also Terry L. Meyers, "Swinburne and Whitman: Further Evidence" in *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, 14:1 (Summer 1996) 1-11.

4. Though Swinburne does not spell out what the word received ultimately is, Riede is confident that it is death because of "Swinburne's insistence on its 'unchangeable,' 'changeless' (III, 332) character. That the word *is* death becomes a certainty when we realize the extent to which "On the Cliffs" is a conscious recapitulation of and response to Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" (Riede, 144-5).

5. It may be decried in some quarters that two noted critics will not be made use of in this thesis. They are Gay Wilson Allen and Leo Spitzer. In the case of Spitzer's lone article on the topic of Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," there are several reasons why he cannot be helpful here. Firstly, he is quite candid about his lack of knowledge concerning Whitman (alluding to this deficiency three times in his essay); secondly, he makes a claim that Whitman learned a technique from a group of French writers working in the late 1850s -- this seems untenable without some evidence, and Spitzer doesn't offer any; thirdly, the first part of Spitzer's essay focuses on work he did evaluating earlier poets without direct reference to Whitman (and it assumes, without any showing of fact, that Whitman read them, in order to be responding to the tradition);

fifthly, Spitzer's focus is not on the symbols, but on the formal elements, and what he has to say about the symbols does not rescue the essay from its other deficiencies; and lastly, the essay was published in 1949, and I think the authors I quote from have more currency.

In the case of Gay Wilson Allen, it is an unfortunate fact that he has nothing useful to say about A.C. Swinburne's relation to Whitman's *mythos*. It's true that Allen is rightly regarded as a central figure in Whitman criticism, but as the focus here is really on Swinburne and what use he made of the symbols and elements he found in Whitman's poetry, and Allen cannot help there, we must leave him behind.

6. It may not be insignificant that Whitman's revisions of section 11 over nearly forty years concerned mainly punctuation and spelling -- the single exception being the word "bulge" substituted for the original "swell" in the anti-penultimate line.

7. Edwin Haviland Miller, in the discussion of this poem in his book *Walt Whitman's Poetry: A Psychobiographic Study* assumes the swimmer to be Whitman himself and the sea to be the 'female principle' (79). The line I quote from "Song of Myself" is absent in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

8. While I am prepared to entertain psychological analyses of texts, and Miller's is undoubtedly a fine analysis rendered in Oedipal terms, it seems to me that Miller does not sufficiently explain the psychology of Whitman's "present," that is, the time during which he wrote the poem. As Miller points out, it was Whitman's father who had died in 1855. Miller sees this as perhaps the impetus for the poem, but this does not seem to ring true to the Oedipal story, as Whitman's father's death ought to have removed him as a rival for the mother's attentions -- and driven Whitman into a sense of guilt for his father's death. It is hard to see how the poem deals with these components of the psychological story. In fact, the sea is figured as a dangerous, harsh mother, whose sexuality is aggressive and overwhelming, even threatening, and Miller does not account for this in his analysis. Moreover, men who are involved in an unresolved Oedipal complex with the mother tend to find it hard to disengage from her and maintain a separate residence, yet after 1855, according to Allen's biography (1955), Whitman spent little time in residence with his mother. I think it is fair to say these factors must be taken into account in a psychological explication of the poem, and that it cannot be fully explained in simple Oedipal terms.

9. Moder claims that "The boy's translation of the song of the he bird is unconsciously projective of the boy's own personal experience, of fear, of loss"(37). We remember, however, that Moder's strategy is to see the poem in terms of an Oedipal conflict; we need not have faith in that particular of the reading to read a similar symbology.

10. Chase writes:

In 'Out of the Cradle, Endlessly Rocking' Whitman represents the demonic or automatic impulse of poetry by means of the solitary bird-- 'Demon or bird,' he is called. His song is a dirge for the lost mate. But

symbolic ‘drooping’ western star, the same word used to describe the moon/breast in ‘Out of the Cradle’” and the figuration of death as “‘soothing,’ ‘delicate,’ a ‘dark mother’ with ‘sure enwinding arms’, and a ‘strong deliveress’”(38). Yet none have as yet seen the connection with “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life,” which I think shows exactly *how* Whitman comes to “master” death, or at least, sing on in the face of it.

15. Compare also Swinburne’s “Save me and hide me with all thy waves, / Find me one grave in thy thousand graves / Those pure cold populous graves of thine” with Whitman’s “Sea of the brine of life and of unshovell’d and always ready graves” (SOM 22, 456-57).

16. Swinburne wrote of Whitman to his friends and colleagues many times, and usually his tone was enthusiastic, though he did admit some disaffection with some of Whitman’s work even early on. Most of the letters are between 1859 and 1875, with a few letters stretching into the 1880’s.

In a letter to William Bell Scott, December 16, 1859, Swinburne writes “Item -- I have got the immortal Whitman’s Leaves of Grass and there are jolly good things in it, I allow” (Lang, *Letters*, I, 28). [The previously quoted letter to Milnes (“the most lovely and wonderful thing I have read for years”) is from August 18, 1862 (I, 58)].

A letter to Lord Houghton, dated November 2, 1866, states “I daresay you agree with me that his dirge or nocturne over your friend Lincoln is a superb piece of music and colour. It is infinitely impressive when read aloud” (I, 204); the previous letter to M. D. Conway from November 7, 1866: (“I know that the man who had spoken as he has of the sea must be a fellow sea-bird with me”) (I, 207-09).

In a recollection by Arthur J. Munby (with thanks to Dr. Terry L. Meyers for drawing my attention to it) from Sunday, 2 December 1866, Munby writes:

. . . Walked up to the club & dined there . . . Going upstairs afterwards I found Swinburne, & had some talk with him about Poe’s Raven, Walt Whitman (whom of course he frantically praised) and Bourdelaire [sic], a certain ribald French poet . . . He spoke of ‘my unfortunate book’ [*Poems and Ballads*] and its resemblance to Walt Whitman. He was obviously drunk . . . (Hudson, 233)

A year later, according to Munby, Whitman was still on the young poet’s mind:

Monday, 2 December [1867] . . . Dined at the Club, in company with Deutsch and Swinburne . . . After dinner, when I was alone in the back drawing room, he [Swinburne] came to me, & kept up a long and earnest talk, or rather declamation, about the merits of Walt Whitman and W. B. Scott. Having taken a little wine -- not much more than half a pint -- at dinner, he was off his balance at once, & absolutely raved with excitement; leaping about the room, flinging up his arms, blowing kisses to me, & swearing great oaths between whiles. (Hudson, 246)

In a letter to G. B. O'Halloran about Conway's pamphlet, written on the same day as the letter to Conway (November 7, 1866), Swinburne stated,

I have a great admiration for Walt Whitman and knew till now nothing of his private life and character, except that he had been dismissed from office on the same grounds which caused my book to be treacherously withdrawn for a time. It (the pamphlet) is worth your reading and *he* is well worth your study, if he has not already won it. I am sure you will thank me for an introduction (if you want one) to so true and great a poet, faulty and foolish as I think him now and then. (Lang, I, 210)

In a letter to John Nichol dated July 13, 1867 Swinburne wrote "how perfect and how grand is that dirge for President Lincoln 'When Lilacs ...'" (I, 251).

Swinburne wrote to William Michael Rossetti, in a letter dated September 17, 1867 (with a copy of John Burroughs *Notes on Walt Whitman, as Poet and Person*), urging his friend to "say a short and seasonable word on Whitman in the British ear" (I, 263); in another letter to Rossetti, dated October 6 of that same year, Swinburne writes of how "with much delight" he had heard of Rossetti's Whitman project, while also chiding Rossetti for not being critical enough of Whitman's faults:

... to me it seems always that his great flaw is a fault of debility, not an excess of strength -- I mean his bluster ... the frothy and flatulent ebullience of feeling and speech at times is very feeble for so great a poet of so great a people. He is in part, certainly, the prophet of democracy; but not wholly because he tries so openly to be, and asserts so violently that he is: always as if he is fighting the case on a platform. This is the only thing I really and gravely dislike and revolt from. On the whole, my admiration and enjoyment of his greatness grows keener and warmer every time I think of him. (I, 266-7)

On December 19 of the same year Swinburne wrote again to Rossetti, thanking him for forwarding a letter from Whitman, which he found "so thoroughly noble and stimulating" (I, 279); on New Years Day 1868 Swinburne wrote again to Rossetti, saying "Whitman I have looked at -- fine and full of truth and spirit, but again somewhat violent and restless, as I must maintain the seriously strong work of the world is not" (II, 35); reacting to Rossetti's suggestion that Swinburne's new volume of poetry shared too similar a title with a poem of Whitman's, Swinburne wrote, in a letter dated December 7, 1869, "... I don't think Whitman's title of Songs before Parting need act as an impediment to mine of Songs before Sunrise (if suggested by W.'s, that is itself so far a compliment to W.)" (II, 66-7).

Again to Rossetti, on August 28, 1870, Swinburne wrote of "more than doubl[ing] the length of the verses to Whitman ... enlarg[ing] the expression of an appeal from the suffering European democracy to the triumphant American" (II, 121-2), and in a letter dated September 7, 1870, again to Rossetti, Swinburne quotes a line of Whitman from memory (without remembering the source poem): "come naked in

contact with the earth' as Whitman says somewhere . . ." (the quoted line comes from "Song of Myself," stanza 4) (II, 125).

To Rossetti again, Swinburne wrote referring to "Whitman's bedfellows the cleaners of privies" in a letter dated October 19, 1871. A few years later, in a letter to E. C. Steadman, dated February 20, 1875 Swinburne wrote "Now when Whitman is not speaking bad prose, he sings, and when he sings at all, he sings well" (III, 9). Later that same year, in a letter to the Editor of the *Examiner*, dated April 3, Swinburne called Whitman "the first poet of American Democracy" (III, 27).

In a letter written (in French) to Raphaël Parié, dated 27 Août, 1875, apparently in response to a request of information concerning some photographs of Whitman, Swinburne writes "les seules photographies que je connaisse de Walt Whitman sont celles qu'on a publiées es Amérique et que le vieux poète m'a lui-même expédiées. Je crois cependant que mon éditeur actuel M. A. Chatto (Picadilly, 75), pourrait vous renseigner à sujet. Il a publié en Angleterre les poésies complètes de Whitman, et il doit sans doute savoir si l'on peut se procurer de ces photographies à Londres" (III, 59-60).

On February 21, 1885, Swinburne wrote to Edmund Gosse "I am glad to hear of you home again, and to receive so agreeable an account of Whitman. I retain a very cordial admiration for not a little of his earlier work; but the habit of vague and flatulent verbiage seems to me to have grown upon him instead of decreasing; and I must say it is long since I have read anything of his which seems to me worthy of the nobler passages of his 'Drum Taps' and the earliest 'Leaves of Grass.' However, you need not tell him so; but give him my cordial regards if ever you write to him" (V, 100).

Finally, in a letter to John Nichol on August 6, 1887, Swinburne writes objecting to Rossetti's saying Whitman is "only a little below Shakespeare!!!!!" (V, 149).

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VITA

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