AN INSIGHT INTO THE POETRY OF A.C. SWINBURNE: ART AND THE IMAGE OF THE POISONOUS FLOWER

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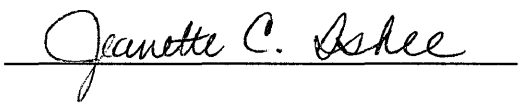

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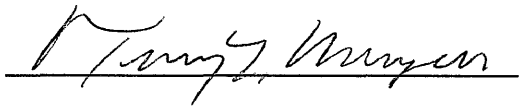

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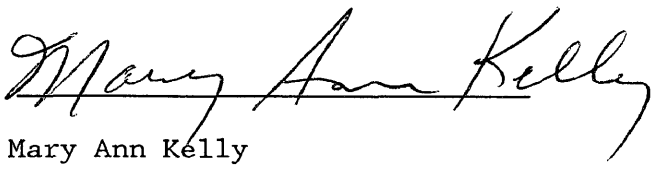

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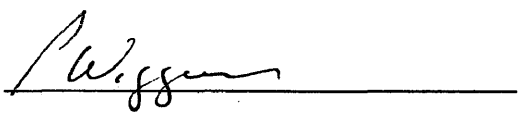

Peter DeSa Wiggins

To Mom and Dad for your patient love and guidance.

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ABSTRACT

Many of Algernon Charles Swinburne's early poems concern themselves with exploring and defining the meaning of art. They assert that art is most importantly the expression of the unique perceptions of the artist laid out in perfect form. These poems are Swinburne's argument for the right of the artist to express his concept of truth freely, regardless of whether this expression of truth is determined to be outside of typically acceptable mores.

Swinburne thus aligned himself with the company of nineteenth century French writers who rallied around the banner of artistic freedom. Charles Baudelaire, a leader in promoting the concept of "art for art's sake," impressed the young Swinburne particularly.

Swinburne adopted, perhaps from Baudelaire, the image of the poisonous flower to express his ideas about truth and about art. He uses this image repeatedly in his early poems to suggest that both good and evil constitute truth. Art, as the expression of truth, is also good and evil--is in form, beautiful, and in subject matter, potentially poisonous.

The paper considers as examples three poems in which Swinburne uses the poisonous flower as a pervasive image. "Ave Atque Vale:" uses the image to honor Baudelaire and to discuss the relation of form and content in poetry; "The Garden of Proserpine" compares life and death by considering expectations versus reality; and "The Sundew" uses the image to characterize art.

These poems are only three examples of the way Swinburne invokes the image in his discussions about art. An understanding of the paradoxical premise of the image of the poisonous flower makes it a valuable tool in helping to decipher many of Swinburne's poems published in the 1860's.

AN INSIGHT INTO THE POETRY OF A.C. SWINBURNE: ART AND THE IMAGE OF THE POISONOUS FLOWER

The literary life of Algernon Charles Swinburne was, beginning in the mid 1860's, contemporaneous with the reign of Victoria as Queen of the burgeoning British Empire--a period so highly moralistic that history has made "Victorianism" synonymous with hypocritical prudery. Into this nineteenth century literary world, dominated by England's Poet Laureate, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, whose poems extolled the greatness of England and the nobleness of human hopes and dreams, Swinburne tossed the gauntlet of his early poems: passionate, exquisite challenges portraying the totality of life; the reality of evil and underlying corruption; the poison often lurking at the heart of a flower. These poems represent Swinburne's crusade for the right of an artist to create freely and to express openly his personal perception of the world, however dark or ugly such perception might be.

As a young artist trying to define himself and to develop a proper medium for his art, Swinburne was greatly influenced by the ideas of Charles Baudelaire, as well as those of other prominent nineteenth century French writers. Like his French contemporaries, Swinburne believed adamantly that "life is composed of contraries,

and that whoever seeks to reconcile them seeks to destroy existence."[1] He saw life as a struggle; felt that it was consistently disappointing, that hopes and dreams always faded or disappeared, and that death was the best man had to look forward to in the end. Yet he was also a dreamer who continually looked for beauty despite the ugliness and hopelessness that he felt characterized human existence. He adopted from Baudelaire the philosophy of "art for art's sake" in the attempt to establish for himself and others the right to self expression.

The push for freedom of expression came at a time well suited for change, despite the overshadowing of Victorian rule. In 1833 De Tocqueville had observed that the nineteenth century was "primarily democratic. Democracy," he said, " is like a rising tide; it only recoils to come back with greater force, and soon one sees that for all its fluctuations it is always gaining ground."[2] This democratic surge accompanied the widespread struggle for more humane laws and greater social and religious freedoms that was occurring throughout Europe. Traditional philosophical and religious beliefs were overturned as a result of growing faith in the verities of science, especially following the publication of Charles Darwin's The Origin of Species in 1859 and The Descent of Man in

1871. The many changes and disruptions brought about by industrialization and a lessening of reliance upon traditional political, social, and religious institutions resulted in a greater willingness to rely on the perceptions of the individual as the foundation of authority and truth.

The focus on the importance of the perceptions of the individual found its way into the literature of the period through the philosophy of "art for art's sake," the concept that suggested that art was a creative act which took its meaning and value from the way in which it expressed the perceptions of the individual who created it, rather than because it was successful in teaching morals or otherwise influencing society. Artists disagreed over the validity of this basic philosophy, which alleged that art need not be didactic, but was ultimately and most simply the self-expression of the artist who created what he wished and as he wished, rather than in accordance with societal norms or mores.

This idea that art was essentially individualistic and was not primarily a reflection of what was considered right and proper by society had begun with Rousseau in France and

was adopted by the English Romantic writers in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. These first generation Romantic writers found that viewing the artist as a 'natural man' (i.e., man in harmony with nature and freed from societal strictures) enabled the artist and his art to escape the otherwise seemingly inevitable degradation and contamination that resulted from man's involvement with civilized society. The Pre-Raphaelites, as the second generation of Romantic writers, echoed the ideas of the early Romantics most obviously in their devotion to the beauty of nature, their use of medieval subject material, and their emphasis on the merit and importance of the perceptions of the individual. Many of these second generation writers, including Swinburne, accepted fully the idea that societal strictures were detrimental to the creation of true art. They felt that these very strictures, displayed in the guise of "propriety," were the basis for all that actually was improper and wrong in society. These writers therefore embraced the idea of "decadence" as something to which they should aspire; something which was a clean, pure, and natural reaction to the hyprocrisy of their society which, while claiming to be moral and virtuous, was in fact, through its restrictions and inhibitions, immoral.

Theophile Gautier was an early advocate for artistic freedom in France. He scoffed at those who castigated writers for writing about unusual or indecent subjects as if they could automatically then judge the writer himself to be "unusual" or "indecent." Gautier argued that writers do not mold society, but simply comment upon it--that art does not mold society, but mirrors it. In the Preface to Mademoiselle de Maupin published in 1834, he wrote "Some one has said somewhere that literature and the arts influence morals. Whoever he was, he was undoubtedly a great fool. It was like saying green peas make the spring grow, whereas green peas grow because it is spring, and cherries because it is summer."[3] Gautier's insistence that art was not the determiner of the morals of society championed the right of the artist to be free to express truth as he perceived it, rather than as societally determined. Gautier's artist was a loner, an objective and awe-inspiring figure who preferred to use society as material for his art rather than allow himself be used as a tool by society. Artistic creation was considered to be, Robert Peters explains, a "private act, mysterious, worthy of worship, removed from the question of success or failure in the marketplace."[4]

Although Theophile Gautier coined the term "art for art's sake," Charles Baudelaire was responsible for claiming it as a standard by which art should be created and judged. Baudelaire promoted the idea that a true artist must be detached from and indifferent to the moral restrictions and social standards imposed on the majority of society. Swinburne shared this view, for although he and Baudelaire lived in different countries, the artistic and social mileau in which they found themselves was very similar. Both England and France were governed by conservatives who opposed the artistic freedoms the artists sought.

This conservatism had a great effect on their ability to publish. As Harold Nicholson points out in his essay Baudelaire and Swinburne,[5] public reaction to the publication of Baudelaire's first and only volume of poems and Swinburne's publication of his first volume of poems was remarkably similar. In France, Les Fleurs du Mal caused Baudelaire to be prosecuted on the charge of offending public morals, and six (6) of the poems in his book were banned from publication. While Baudelaire's poems were considered by many to be exquisite in form and lyricism, they were judged immoral and "evil" because of their perverse subject matter. In England, Swinburne's

volume also was considered by most reviewers as corrupt and, though none of his poems was actually banned, he was forced nevertheless to seek a new (and somewhat disreputable) publisher when Moxon (his original publisher) fearfully withdrew his agreement to publish the volume. Samuel Chew notes that "the press was practically unanimous in condemnation"[6] of Swinburne's Poems and Ballads, First Series, with "some critics uttering warnings against this danger to public morals," and others declaring that such "flippant uncleanliness could do no hurt."[7]

Swinburne considered these legal and social restrictions completely hypocritical. His disgust for such attitudes is clear in the following passage from his defense of Poems and Ballads, First Series, published in 1866.

> The question at issue is wider than any between a single writer and his critics, or it might well be allowed to drop. It is this: whether or not the first and last requisite of art is to give no offence; whether or not all that cannot be lisped in the nursery or fingered in the schoolroom is therefore to be cast out of the library.... if literature indeed is not to deal with the full life of man and the whole nature of things, let it be cast aside with the rods and rattles of childhood. Whether it affect to teach or to amuse, it is equally trivial and contemptible to us; only less so than the charge of immorality. Against how few really great names has not this small and dirt-encrusted pebble been thrown![8]

Thus, while Victoria reigned as Queen, and Tennyson as Poet Laureate, Swinburne, son and heir of English aristocracy, spoke out against prohibitions on artistic expression. He skillfully translated into English the works of the radical French writers such as Baudelaire who fervently espoused the right of the artist to create what he wished, and who decried the right of the government to legislate art as it would tax reform and traffic patterns. Cecil Lang remarks that "his [Swinburne's] was the clearest, purest voice in England directing English attention to French literature: Villon, Hugo, Dumas, Gautier, Baudelaire, Musset, Banville, Vacquerie, Mallarme."[9] In promoting the new approach to art and criticism advocated by the French writers, Swinburne declared:

> When England has again such a school of poetry, so headed and so followed, as she has had at least twice before, or as France has now...[such that the purity of art] is not that of the cloister or the harem; [and] that all things are good in its sight, out of which good work may be produced. Then the press will be as impotent as the pulpit to dictate the laws and remove the landmarks of art; and those will be laughed at who demand from one thing the qualities of another--who seek for sermons in sonnets and morality in music. Then...art will be pure by instinct and fruitful by nature, no clipped and forced growth of unhealthy heat and unnatural air; all baseness and all triviality will fall off from it, and be forgotten; and no one will then need to assert, in defence of work done for the work's sake, the simple laws of his art which no one will then be permitted to impugn.[10]

More significant than their reaction to the hypocrisy of the restrictions placed on art was the realization by Swinburne and Baudelaire that such strictures inhibited the artist in obtaining knowledge of truth. That is, adherence to comfortable and safe social norms prevented the artist from discovering the very truth that he was seeking in himself and expressing in his art as a truth about life. The poets saw virtue in the desire to understand and experience not only the goodness in oneself but also the human propensity towards evil--to understand both the divine and the satanic aspects of man. Edgar Allen Poe had expressed this desire in the following way:

> ...[There is in man] a mysterious force that modern philosophy refuses to take into account; and yet without this unmentioned force, without this primeval tendency, a vast number of human actions will remain unexplained, inexplicable. These actions exercise a pull only because they are bad, dangerous; they have the lure of the abyss.[11]

Anna Balakian notes that this "abyss of evil...is linked in the poet's mind with his passion to know the infinite."[12] She explains that

> The abyss of the unknown is taken to be diabolical and divine at the same time; he who is concerned with it is as metaphysical in character--if his preoccupation is with evil or with the grotesque--as he would be if he occupied himself with a Swedenborgian "good and pure"....[13]

Knowledge of truth, then was dependent upon the artist's willingness and ability to explore this abyss. The goal of the journey was truth; the expression of truth was art, "the apex of human experience, the point of the cone [which defined] all else below it and [was] encompassed within it."[14] As Balakian notes,

> ...All deviation from the normal, whether physical or spiritual, was to be the domain par excellence of poetry....Furthermore, if personal immortality is rejected, death becomes instead the frontline target of metaphysical meditations. The 'gouffre' is the frontier between the visible and the invisible, the conscious and the unconscious, nonlife and the living; how far one can push beyond the accepted frontier and still come back to write about it became the foremost poetic question after Baudelaire....[15]

Many of the poems written by Baudelaire and Swinburne were intended to be manifestations of their own private journeys into this psychological abyss. The poets were well aware of the radical nature of their poems, however, and consequently they attempted to shift the focus of criticism of their poetry from moralistic review of the subject matter to consideration of the skill by which the poems were written. This desire to shift critical emphasis from subject to treatment of subject--the notion that art should be evaluated for the treatment of its contents rather than

simply for the content itself--reinforced the right of the artist to use less than socially acceptable material for his work. They believed that the ability of the artist to express a subjective and often ugly reality in a beautiful and appropriate form was the measure of his skill as an artist. Beauty should always be apparent in the form of the poem, they felt, but was not a necessary component of the subject matter. [An excellent example of this notion is Swinburne's often praised poem, "The Leper," where the disgust one feels in reading about a monk making love to a half-rotted corpse is overridden by the beauty of the composition of the poem.]

For Swinburne, the form of a work of art was like a beautiful flower whose exquisite color, shape, and texture gave it a supernatural beauty. However, because the subject of art is life, the core of this beautiful flower was, to Swinburne, poisoned. This image of the poisonous flower as an explanation of the nature of art occurs so frequently in Swinburne's early poems that it is an important key to understanding the poems and perceptions of the young, radical Swinburne.

Perhaps the most famous of Swinburne's early poems which use the image of a poisonous flower to embody his

vision is, appropriately, his elegy for Baudelaire, "Ave Atque Vale." The elegy is, in fact, a tribute at once to Baudelaire, the "gardener of strange flowers" (l. 68, AAV), and to his volume of poetry entitled Les Fleurs du Mal (The Flowers of Evil), "the sick flowers of secrecy and shade" (l. 182, AAV). The poem is built around the image of the poisonous flower and even in form is effectively a flower with a poisonous center. As Patricia Clements contends,

> Baudelaire's title [Les Fleurs du Mal] stands as the central conceit of Swinburne's elegy, the frame over which he lays the allusions that gather steadily, stanza by stanza.[16]

The poem begins as a closed bud of ignorance and then 'blooms' by unfolding in a series of questions and answers which, like the opening petals of a flower, are an effort to reveal the hidden core or central meaning of the poet's life and death. Each question brings the speaker closer to the center of the opening flower and to the understanding that he seeks. The conclusion of the flower-poem reveals the speaker's understanding and acknowledgement of the finality of the poet's death--the poisonous center. The form of the poem is thus that of a poisonous flower, a "fleur du mal."

As the careful construction suggests, the poem begins in a traditional manner with the speaker wondering how he should go about writing the elegy, and thus how best to honor and appreciate the contributions of the great fellow poet. Almost immediately, however, the speaker begins to force the strange flower to bloom as he embarks on the quest for the truth of Baudelaire's life and death. In stanza IV, the speaker begins the process by trying unsuccessfully to envision the place to which Baudelaire has gone and pondering how it must feel to be dead. In stanza VII, he forces another petal to open when he questions Baudelaire directly about the supposed afterlife, but receives no reply. By stanza IX, he begins to wonder about the worth of his questioning:

> What ails us with thee, who art wind and air?
> What ails us gazing where all seen is hollow?
> Yet with some fancy, yet with some desire,
> Dreams pursue death as winds a flying fire,
> Our dreams pursue our dead and do not find.
>
> (ll. 91-95, AAV)

The speaker then shifts in stanzas X-XV to observation of the 'flower' that his questions are forcing into bloom. He is searching for knowledge of the wherabouts of Baudelaire, but finds only his poetry, an appreciation for his talent, and realization that he is and will continue to be inspiration to present and future poets, including Swinburne.

This knowledge of Baudelaire's importance is the beauty that the gradual opening of the flower-poem has revealed. The beauty is countered, however, by the exposure of the poisonous center, which is the loss of hope and complete acceptance in the last three stanzas of the finality of Baudelaire's death. The speaker says:

> And now no sacred staff shall break in blossom,
> No choral salutation lure to light
> A spirit sick with perfume and sweet night....
>
> (ll. 166-68, AAV)

> Sleep; and if life was bitter to thee, pardon,
> If sweet, give thanks; thou hast no more to live....
>
> (ll. 177-78, AAV)

Thus, the flower-poem in full bloom has proved to be poisonous. The search for the meaning of Baudelaire's death brought the positive beauty of understanding, appreciation for his accomplishments, and inspiration to poets such as Swinburne. It did not reincarnate Baudelaire, but simply confirmed the finality of his death.

The use of the image of poisonous flowers in the poem is also significant because it promotes the idea of "art for art's sake" by praising Baudelaire's radical poetry and lifestyle. In the opening stanza of the poem, the speaker presents an array of possible flowers with which to honor

the dead poet. The flowers with which he chooses to honor Baudelaire are

> Half-faded fiery blossoms, pale with heat
> And full of bitter summer....
>
> (ll. 8-9, AAV)

These fiery blossoms with bitter interiors are an allusion both to Baudelaire and his poetic creations, and to the red poppy from which is extracted opium, a drug often used by Baudelaire. Both the poems he wrote and the drugs he used were expressions of his rebellion against the social restrictions he despised.

Baudelaire's position of being outside the norm is brought out again in stanza III in reference to the "lovely leaf-buds poisonous" (l. 25, AAV). This reference attributes to Baudelaire a clarity of vision about the essence of life above that of the ordinary mortal. Baudelaire's ability to perceive and acknowledge the poison within the closed buds is the result of his ability and willingness to face and acknowledge the truth from which the normal person would hide. He perceives more clearly than most people the fruits of the "hidden harvest of luxurious time" (l. 28, AAV) which are despair, death, and

decay. The poisonous flower thus is used to signify Baudelaire's superior understanding of the meaning of life. Baudelaire is an artist not simply because he can face these bitter truths, however, but because he can mold these truths into a work of art and thus transform them into a thing of beauty. His ability to perceive and to articulate his perception comes from his being free of any need for social acceptance, and free of the attendant bondage of having to teach acceptable moral virtues.

The poisonous flower is also used in "Ave Atque Vale" as a symbol for life itself. In stanza VII, when the speaker questions Baudelaire about what flowers might be found in the afterlife, he is really asking what is <u>life</u> like in the otherworld. By questioning whether the flowers are like those in this life, or, if there are no flowers, whether that means there is no afterlife, he infers that the existence of flowers is indicative of life. He asks:

> O gardener of strange flowers, what bud, what bloom,
> Hast thou found sown, what gathered in the gloom?
> What of despair, or rapture, of derision,
> What of life is there, what of ill or good?
> Are the fruits grey like dust or bright like blood?
> Does the dim ground grow any seed of ours,
> The faint fields quicken any terrene root,
> In low lands where the sun and moon are mute
> And all the stars keep silence? Are there flowers
> At all, or any fruit?
>
> (ll. 68-77, AAV)

The unspoken answer to the final question is no. Baudelaire is dead. The sacred staff whose blossoming would indicate redemption and reincarnation is barren. Flowers, though poisonous, are indicative of life. Death is nothingness--it has neither beauty and nor pain.

The significance of the lack of flowers in the afterlife appears as an issue in "The Garden of Proserpine," as well. In this poem, Swinburne uses the image of the poisonous flower to describe the nature of life by contrasting it with emblems of non-life found in Proserpine's garden. The poem is set in the garden of the dead, a grey place ruled by Proserpine, the pagan Queen of the Underworld. The speaker serves in the poem as an onmiscient observer who, caught somewhere between life and non-life, is able to understand the nature of both.

In the opening stanza, the speaker describes Proserpine's garden as a "world of quiet" (l. 1) and reinforces this description with adjectives such as "dead," "spent," "sleepy," "wan," and "weak." The garden is a place devoid of all emotion, and is ruled by a queen who is characterized as "pale," (l. 49), "cold" (l. 52), and "languid" (l. 53). The garden, as a place of death, serves as the eventual resting place of all things that have died,

including not only people, but hopes, loves, and dreams as well. Proserpine thus is not discriminating about what or whom she allows into her garden, but "gathers" into the garden "all things mortal" (l. 51) with her "cold immortal hands" (l. 52). This mortality list is extensive, and includes both physical beings and emotional experiences:

> And spring and seed and swallow
> Take wing for her and follow
> Where summer song rings hollow
> And flowers are put to scorn.
>
> There go the loves that wither,
> The old loves with wearier wings;
> And all dead years draw thither,
> And all disastrous things;
> (ll. 61-68, GP)

Because it is the eventual destination of everything mortal-- Proserpine "waits for all men born" (l. 58)--one cannot choose to go to this garden.

Nonetheless, the garden is completely neutral, and thus serves as a haven and place of release for those who have suffered the agony of living. As the speaker suggests in the following passage, anything is better than the trauma of life:

> From too much love of living
> From hope and fear set free,
> We thank with brief thanksgiving

Whatever gods may be
That no life lives for ever;
That dead men rise up never;
That even the weariest river
Winds somewhere safe to sea.
(ll. 81-88, GP)

Because of the emotional turmoil that precedes man's arrival there, this garden, which signifies for all men the end of life, is not considered a particularly negative place,

The natural imagery of the poem is carefully constructed to reflect the atmosphere of the garden and the emotional attitudes of the personae. The plants in the garden reflect the emotionlessness around them and do not bloom. The garden, therefore, is characterized by

No growth of moor or coppice,
No heather-flower or vine,
But bloomless buds of poppies,
Green grapes of Proserpine,
Pale beds of blowing rushes
Where no leaf blooms or blushes
Save this whereout she crushes
For dead men deadly wine.
(ll. 25-32, GP)

The "bloomless buds" of the poppies (which suggest opium and the trancelike state induced by using it) and the grapes (which produce a dulling wine) are the only plants that produce "fruits" in the garden, and the fruits serve only to enhance forgetfulness.

The poisonous flowers that inhabit the world of the living are exactly the inverse of the flowers in Proserpine's garden in that, instead of producing forgetfulness, they are symptomatic of man's lost hopes, unmet expectations, and hurt feelings. The flowers in life are beautiful, but poisonous at the core. They bloom, but die. When the speaker states his feelings about life, he uses the phrase "blown buds" (a flower that has proved infertile and rotten at the core) to describe the fate of his dreams and expectations:

> "I am tired of tears and laughter,
> And men that laugh and weep;
> Of what may come hereafter
> For men that sow to reap:
> I am weary of days and hours,
> Blown buds of barren flowers,
> Desires and dreams and powers,
> And everything but sleep.
>
> (ll. 9-16, GP)

The tone is one of weary and frustrated disappointment. His hopes, dreams, expectations, love--all of these were the seeds of his happiness. These seeds, however, always resulted in barren plants. Nothing came from these expectations, except that they bloomed and withered.

This experience is not unique to the speaker, but is shared by all men. The image of the flower that proves to

be fruitless and poisonous occurs throughout. In stanza 7, for example, youth and youthful love, once seen to be "fair as roses" (l. 45), turn out in the end to be "not well" (l. 48). In stanza 10, "dead dreams" (l. 69) are equated with "blind buds" (l. 70) that became blind as a result having been frozen by a winter's indifferent chill.

As it also appears in many of his other poems, Proserpine's garden in the underworld is for Swinburne an image of release, and a longed for escape from a life fraught with activity that brings only pain and disappointment. The poppies in Proserpine's garden are indicative neither of pain nor disappointment because the expectation for their fertility is absent. The underworld, a world of death devoid of emotion, is also devoid of the poisonous flowers that characterize life.

A third example of Swinburne's use of the poisonous flower as an overriding image occurs in "The Sundew." A sundew is a poisonous, flowering plant which, like the Venus flytrap, survives by trapping, killing, and slowly digesting insects that become entangled in the sticky hairs lining the edges of its leaves. The sundew attracts insects by means of the vibrant colors and peculiar scent of its flowers. The paradox inherent in this beautiful but

deadly plant is echoed in its name as well, which brings together the opposing elements of fire (sun) and water (dew). The sundew is thus an appropriate symbol to express the essential dichotomy that Swinburne believes to be a fundamental aspect of life and art.

Though often interpreted as a poem about hopeful but uncertain love, the poem is clearly a discussion about the nature of art and its essential role as an expression of truth. The sundew in this poem is imbued with the basic qualities of art. It is mysterious, beautiful, sensual, divine, sacred, and difficult to approach. These qualities of the sundew--beauty, danger, mystery, elusiveness--bring to mind the sort of truth sought by the artist in his visionary abyss. The sundew, then, is an expression of this truth that the artist seeks and, appropriately, is equally elusive and difficult to understand.

"Seeing" the sundew involves the use of all five senses. The speaker in the poem describes the scene in such a way that we hear the blowing of the wind, see the color of the flower, feel the warmth of the sun, smell the heather, and are mindful of the taste of blood on the plant's 'lip' "pricked...with tender red" (l. 2). The sundew is not merely a physical reality, however, but a

metaphysical truth, and so the quintessence of the flower, though calling forth all five senses, is not perceivable through these five senses alone. In the sixth stanza of the poem, the speaker notes that "you" (referring to the scientific or "realistic" observer of the flower) "call it sundew" (l. 26), but he suggests that such an observer cannot accurately perceive the totality of the poisonous flower. He says:

> You call it sundew: how it grows
> If with its colour it have breath,
> If life taste sweet to it, if death
> Pain its soft petal, no man knows:
> Man has no sight or sense that saith.
> (ll. 26-30, Sundew)

Man thus does not understand the sundew any more than he understands truth. He does not see what makes it grow, or comprehend the "meaning" of its life (life which, like art, has as its essence color rather than oxygen). He does not relate well to the sundew.

The sundew, in fact, is clearly divine in relation to mortal humanity. We are told by the speaker to "bow down and worship"(l. 13) the little flower, because we die and it is immortal. "More than we," says the speaker, "is the least flower whose life returns,/Least weed renascent in

the sea" (ll. 13-15). We are inferior to the sundew both because we die and because we cannot accept this death. Worshipping the sundew is an act of praise to and acceptance of the poisonous truth it represents.

The appropriateness of this act is laid out in the following stanza where the contentment of the sundew is contrasted with our human discontent. The sundew is "glad-growing" (l. 19), whereas we are "vexed and cumbered in earth's sight/With wants, with many memories" (ll. 16-17). These wants and memories are encumbrances, and the cause of our pain and disappointment.

The superior contentment of the sundew over that of man is evident in its relation to nature as well. Because the sundew is both physical and metaphysical, it is in harmony with its natural surroundings but not completely a part of them. Unlike man, who is an intruder on the scene, the sundew is in tune with and protected by her "mother," nature. Consequently, the sun suffers it to exist, the black water in which it grows shoots out to protect it from the tread of humans, the moss makes a bed for it, the heather burns about it as though an incense, and the wind and grass work together to protect it from being trampled by cows and moorhens.

In summary, the sundew, a poisonous flower representative of art, is also a representation of the truth that the artist seeks both outside of himself in the world and in the realm of his own subconscious. This truth is not a purely scientific truth, but a metaphysical one. This sundew is as paradoxical, elusive, and difficult to understand as the truth that the artist seeks. Indeed, it is this knowledge, this understanding of life, that characterizes the sundew and lies at the foundation of all art.

The image of the poisonous flower occurs frequently in Swinburne's early poems. He uses the image in various ways, but it always implies the paradox that he felt was an inherent aspect of life and essential component of art. Along with his French counterparts, Swinburne felt that an artist could create a masterpeice only if he were able to capture this paradox in his work.

In commenting on some drawings by Michelangelo, which he compared with the work of Aeschylus and Shakespeare, Swinburne revealed his admiration for the work of those whom he considered great artists with the following words:

> The least thought of these men has in it something intricate and enormous, faultless as the formal work of their triumphant art must be. All mysteries of good and evil, all wonders of life and death, lie in their hands or at their feet. They have known the causes of things, and are not too happy. The fatal labour of the world, the clamour and hunger of the open-mouthed all-summoning grave, all fears and hopes of ephemeral men, are indeed made subject to them....[17]

These men were great artists because of their ability to understand life and express their understanding in a form that was flawless. Swinburne captured this idea in the image of the poisonous flower, and the poisonous flower is useful, therefore, as a key to understanding both the artist and his art.

Notes

[1] Jerome J. McGann, Swinburne: An Experiment in Criticism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 304.

[2] J.P.T. Bury, The New Cambridge Modern History, Vol.X, 1830-70 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 11.

[3] Theophile Gautier, Mademoiselle de Maupin (London: Gibbings & Company, Ltd., 1899, 1934), pp. 26-27.

[4] Robert L. Peters, The Crowns of Apollo: A Study in Victorian Criticism and Aesthetics (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1965), p. 144.

[5] Harold G. Nicholson, Swinburne and Baudelaire (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930).

[6] Samuel C. Chew, Swinburne (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1929), p. 71.

[7] Chew, p. 71.

[8] John D. Rosenburg, Swinburne: Selected Poetry and Prose (New York: Random House, Inc., 1968), pp. 338-9.

[9] Cecil Y. Lang, The Swinburne Letters, Vol. 1 (1854-1869) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. xviii.

[10] Rosenburg, p. 341.

[11] Patricia Clements, Baudelaire and the English Tradition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, N.J., 1985), p. 35.

[12] Anna Balakian, Literary Origins of Surrealism: A New Mysticism in French Poetry (New York: King's Crown Press, 1947), p. 52.

[13] Anna Balakian, The Symbolist Movement: A Critical Appraisal (New York: Random House, Inc., 1967), p. 57.

[14] Peters, p. 147.

[15] Balakian, Symbolism, pp. 51-52.

[16] Clements, p. 56.

[17] Lang, p. xvii.

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