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# Disgraceful or thought provoking? Towards a new aesthetic: Algernon Charles Swinburne and the subject matter of poetry

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Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* (First Series),[1] published in 1866, came as a shock to the Victorian reading public. In his poems, Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837–1909) did not hesitate to touch upon a wide range of controversial topics such as homoeroticism, sadistic cruelty and lust, necrophilia, and blasphemy, which were condemned by the critics as repulsive, perverse and obscene.

John Morley, in his review "Mr. Swinburne's New Poems" for the *Saturday Review*, which appeared on 4 August 1866, found the poet "grovelling down among the nameless shameless abominations which inspire him with such frenzied delight", and went on to condemn "the mixed vileness and childishness of depicting the spurious passion of a putrescent imagination, the unnamed lusts of sated wantons, as if they were the crown of character and their enjoyment the great glory of human life" (Morley 2005 /1970/ [1866]: 34).

The torrent of criticism continued, Clyde Kenneth Hyder, in the introduction to his anthology of criticism on Swinburne, quotes Robert Buchanan's remark from the "Rev. of *Poems and Ballads*, by Algernon Charles Swinburne" in the *Spectator* (from 3 November 1866) that "Mr. Swinburne fastens on such subjects [the morbid and sensual] and feasts on them with a greedy and cruel voracity, like a famished dog at raw meat" (Hyder 2005 /1970/: xix).

Finally, as we also learn from Hyder, on 10 November 1866, as if in tune with Morley's another observation that "It is not every poet who would ask us all to go hear him tuning his lyre in a stye" (2005 /1866/: 34), *Punch* granted the poet "his royal licence to change his name to what is evidently its true form – SWINE-BORN" (Anonymous 1866: 189; see also Hyder 2005: xix). And yet, asked to join in the chorus against Swinburne, John Ruskin (1819–1900), an eminent advocate for moral art, refused and instead lauded both the poet's erudition and what he saw as his outstanding poetic talent, as we may learn from Edward Tyas Cook's and Alexander Wedderburn's (1909: xlix) "Introduction to Vols. XXXV and XXXVI of *The Works of John Ruskin*". Were Swinburne's poems,

1 This qualification was given to later editions of Algernon Charles Swinburne's poems starting from 1878 (cf. *Poems and Ballads, Second Series*. London: Chatto and Windus) – editor's note: ZW).

then, only an attempt at incensing the guardians of Victorian morality or was it a significant contribution to the development of the theory of poetics? The aim of this paper is to analyze some of the most controversial poems from the first series of Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* in the light of the late nineteenth century aesthetic approach to the nature of art.

The poems in Swinburne's (1866a) *Poems and Ballad* may collectively be described as love poetry. What was it, then, that his contemporaries found thus revolting about them? The first two poems to be discussed display the poet's rather unusual interest in necrophilia. The title of "Les Noyades" refers to the heinous mass drownings of priests and to the mock "marriages", in which men and women were bound together and drowned in the Loire during the Reign of Terror at Nantes in 1793, described by Thomas Carlyle (1989 /1837/: 350–351).

In his poem, Swinburne omits the ecclesiastical motif, and instead, retells a case of a servant, "rough with labour and red with fight" (Swinburne 1866a: 56) and a blind lady, "noble by name and face, / Faultless, a maiden, wonderful, white" (Swinburne 1866a: 56), who are sentenced to be stripped, shipped and bound together, "[b]osom to bosom, to drown and die" (Swinburne 1866a: 57). This unexpected prospect of the fulfillment in death of an unrequited love the servant has borne for the lady all his life fills him with transports of delight and praise for the judge's mercy:

For never a man, being mean like me,
Shall die like me till the whole world dies.
I shall drown with her, laughing for love; and she
Mix with me, touching me, lips and eyes.

Shall she not know me and see me all through,
Me, on whose heart as a worm she trod?
You have given me, God requite it you,
What man yet never was given of God (Swinburne 1866a: 58).

One may wonder if Swinburne meant here any association between the name commonly given to the historical event, les Noyades, and the Naiades, water nymphs in Greek mythology who led Hylas to his death by drowning. This image is particularly reminiscent of the final part of the poem, in which the speaker portrays his approaching death in the water with his beloved in his arms, as especially alluring. A somewhat similar situation has been presented in "The Leper". The speaker in the poem, "[a] poor scribe, nowise great or fair" (Swinburne 1866a: 137), pining for the love of his high-born scornful lady is finally able to stay close to his beloved after she has contracted leprosy and has been rejected by her knight-lover. While his utmost care and devotion in serving her might seem praiseworthy, there is something disturbing about his reflections upon the beauty of her dead body, which, after six months, he still cherishes:

Yet am I glad to have her dead
Here in this wretched wattled house
Where I can kiss her eyes and head (Swinburne 1866a: 138).

And

Six months, and I sit still and hold
In two cold palms her cold two feet
Her hair, half grey half ruined gold,
Thrills me and burns me in kissing it.

Love bites and stings me through, to see
Her keen face made of sunken bones.
Her worn-off eyelids madden me,
That were shot through with purple once (Swinburne 1866a: 141).

Those verses appear even more alarming when put side by side with the speaker's thoughts on the nature of love in the style reminding one of a medieval troubadour:

Nothing is better, I well know,
Than love; no amber in cold sea
Or gathered berries under snow:
That is well seen of her and me (Swinburne 1866a: 138).

Finally, the ultimate lines of the poem, "still there clings / The old question. Will not God do right?" (Swinburne 1866a: 143) is strongly suggestive of the confessions of another deranged speaker, namely, that of Robert Browning's "Porphyria's Lover", who also seeks the approval of his deeds in God's judgment, or rather, in its apparent absence, as Ryszard Wiesław Wolny has noticed while comparing the creative works of two poets (2004: 150).

Yet, what proved even more outrageous to the nineteenth century tastes was the poet's approach to Hellenism. Unlike Matthew Arnold, to whom ancient Greece signified harmony and intellectual development, an ideal upon which to model a modern Christian society, Swinburne used the classical motifs as a disguise that enabled him to discuss topics which were marginalized and otherwise unacceptable in the Victorian age (cf. Gilmour 1996: 43–44). In "Hermaphroditus", the poet employs a theme derived from Greek mythology to praise the beauty of a statue being an embodiment of bisexuality. This beautiful youth, however, inspires both "[a] strong desire begot on great despair, / A great despair cast out by strong desire" (Swinburne 1866a: 91), and his double sexuality leads to an unresolved strife between the two sexes, "the waste wedlock of a sterile kiss" (Swinburne 1866a: 91). "Anactoria" presents yet another reference to the ancient world, this time providing the poet with an opportunity to envision and delve into the very physical experience of homosexual love.

Moreover, another shocking element which was present in Swinburne's poetry was the use of classical themes as a dramatic frame for blasphemy. The ironic double imagery in "Anactoria", the sadomasochistic pain and pleasure in lovemaking that the lesbian Greek poetess experiences, expressed by means of terms familiar from Christian symbolism has been analyzed in an in-depth study of the poem by Thaïs Elisabeth Morgan (1984). She points to the similarities in imagery and the choice of words in the Biblical "Song of Songs" and in the depiction of Sappho's beloved Anactoria in the first part of Swinburne's poem. She also comments on the dramatic speaker's presentation of cruelty as inherent in both the perverse sexual act and the relation between God and mankind (Morgan 1984: 180–181). A similar technique may be found in "Dolores" and "Hymn to Proserpine". "Dolores", with its repeated invocation to "Our Lady of Pain" may be seen as a subverted litany, addressed to the goddess of sadomasochistic love, "bitter and tender Dolores" (Swinburne 1866a: 181), "[o]f barren delights and unclean / … a pallid / And poisonous queen" (Swinburne 1866a: 180). Her worshipper passes from "the outermost portal / To the shrine where a sin is a prayer" (Swinburne 1866a: 183), where, from the chalice on her altar, he drinks "the new wine of desire" (Swinburne 1866a: 183), and later in the poem he implores Dolores to "[c]ome down and redeem us from virtue" (Swinburne 1866a: 189). In "Hymn to Proserpine", the speaker prays to the "[g]oddess and maiden and queen" to "be near me now and befriend" (Swinburne 1866a: 77) and yearns to rest from the worldly matters, as "the Gods we know not of, who give us our daily breath, / We know they are cruel as love or life, and lovely as death" (Swinburne 1866a: 77).

While the above examples show how the poet plays with allusions to easily recognizable Christian images and phrases, the speaker becomes even more straightforward in his glorification of paganism and his denunciation of God, as in "Hymn to Proserpine" he hails the proclamation of Christianity with the words "[t]hou hast conquered, O pale Galilean; the world has grown grey from thy breath" (Swinburne 1866a: 79) and presents the new God as "dead" and "barren", and his Mother "pale and a maiden, and sister to sorrow" (Swinburne 1866a: 82), who "came weeping, a slave among slaves, and rejected" (1866a: 82). Such an open hostility towards Christian God also appears in "Anactoria", as the speaker accuses Him of cursing "[s]pirit and flesh with longing" (Swinburne 1866a: 71), and sending upon mankind insatiable hunger and thirst. The speaker's rage against God culminates in the sacrilegious "[h]im would I reach, him smite, him desecrate, / Pierce the cold lips of God with human breath, / And mix his immortality with death" (Swinburne 1866a: 71).

From the above-mentioned poems emerges the portrayal of the woman as a mantis, fanged, devouring and sucking the life and blood out of her lover-victim

in a truly vampiric fashion (cf. Wolny 2004: 184). Dolores is presented as one with lips "that no bloodshed could satiate" (Swinburne 1866a: 188); lips as "[c]urled snakes that are fed from my breast" (Swinburne 1866a: 179) which her worshipper encourages to "[b]ite hard, lest remembrance come after / And press with new lips where you pressed" (Swinburne 1866a: 179). The speaker in "Anactoria" wishes that her "mouth for Muses' milk were fed / On the sweet blood thy sweet small wounds had bled!" (1866a: 69) and that she "could drink thy veins as wine" (Swinburne 1866a: 69). As is suggested in "Hymn to Proserpine", the only respite from this continual struggle of love and pain can be found in death and oblivion, an eternal sleep in the underworld garden of poppies and changeless seasons, over which presides the goddess Proserpine.

Such a choice of the subject matter was commented upon by an anonymous critic in the *London Review* (4 August 1866) who accused Swinburne of selecting "the most depraved stories of the ancient world". (Unsigned Review 2005 /1970/ [1866]: 47). In this way, however, the poet was provided with a good argument with which to disarm his opponents. After all, since the themes were not his own invention, why should he be castigated for immorality?

In his *Notes on Poems and Reviews*, Swinburne (1866b) observed that studying Sappho's poetry, the spirit of which he only attempted to render in his native tongue, had for a long time been part of an English gentleman's education, and that in "Laus Veneris", yet another controversial poem of Swinburne's, his "first aim was to rehandle the old story in a new fashion" (Swinburne 1866b: 16). The latter has been shown by Hyder (1930) in his "Swinburne's *Laus Veneris* and the Tannhäuser Legend", and judging from his research into Swinburne's source materials, presented in his "The Medieval Background of Swinburne's *The Leper*" (Hyder 1931), it seems that the same is equally true in the case of "The Leper". In turn, the poet ridiculed the prudishness and moral baseness of the critics, who could find vice with themes which in other epochs had been considered most noble and not unfit for artistic treatment, such as the statue of Hermaphroditus, and claimed that the only poetry that was acceptable in the Victorian age was "milk for babes", appropriate "to be lisped in the nursery or fingered in the schoolroom" (Swinburne 1866b: 14, 20).

Thus, as Oscar Wilde observed: "[t]he highest as the lowest form of criticism is a mode of autobiography. Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. This is a fault" (1996 /1891/: 3). Such a relativization of morality is characteristic of the changing perspective of the late nineteenth century, which resulted from the scientific discoveries of the era and, consequently, led to the loss of faith in stable dogmas, which were replaced by the subjective impressions of personal experience (cf. Gilmour 1996: 102–104, 238–241). In his essay on "Coleridge's Writings", Walter Pater point-

ed out that "[m]odern thought is distinguished from ancient by its cultivation of the 'relative' spirit in place of the 'absolute'", thus, he continued, "[h]ard and abstract moralities are yielding to a more exact estimate of the subtlety and complexity of our life" (1973 /1866/: 1, 2).

In fact, it may be argued that the obscenity of the poems does not lie in the very choice of topics, but in the ambivalence with which Swinburne handles them instead of passing upon them a straightforward moral judgement. While the poet himself protested that "the book is dramatic, many-faced, multifarious; and no utterance of enjoyment or despair, belief or unbelief, can properly be assumed as the assertion of its author's personal feeling or faith" (Swinburne 1866b: 6), his contemporaries saw in them a violation of decorum, a lofty style applied to what was found repugnant and morally questionable: disturbing testimonies of deep spiritual love set in abnormal contexts, the glorification of sexual pleasure and pain, and the exploration of homoeroticism under the guise of ancient Greek tradition. In most cases, such moral ambiguity has been achieved by the elusiveness and obscurity created on both the semantic, and prosodic levels.

Richard Sieburth defines Swinburne's poetic technique as "numbing the analytic faculties of the intellect – an effect achieved not only through trance-inducing music, but through a systematic indefiniteness of reference" (1984: 351). This characteristic feature was also pointed out by William Michael Rossetti, who aptly commented on one of Swinburne's poems that it "looms dim, intangible, almost vague: we read it through, exulting in its exultant flow of rhythm, and find at the end that we scarcely know what the poem is about" (1866: 61). Suffice it to quote such passages from "Hymn to Proserpine" (Swinburne 1866a: 83–84) as

> In the night where thine eyes are as moons are in heaven, the night where thou art,
> Where the silence is more than all tunes, where sleep overflows from the heart,
> Where the poppies are sweet as the rose in our world, and the red rose is white,
> And the wind falls faint as it blows with the fume of the flowers of the night,
> And the murmur of spirits that sleep in the shadow of Gods from afar
> Grows dim in thine ears and deep as the deep dim soul of a star,
> In the sweet low light of thy face, under heavens untrod by the sun,
> Let my soul with their souls find place, and forget what is done and undone.

The rhythmical flow of these lush, languorous metrics and the frequent use of alliteration distract the reader from the immediate grasping of the actual meaning of the words the poet has employed. But once the meaning becomes clearer, the reader is still left with a range of rich metaphors which the poet substitutes for the literal sense of the passages in question. One such example may be found in "Anactoria", in which the act of lovemaking is rendered as mixing and melt-

ing of the lovers into one another: "I feel thy blood against my blood: my pain / Pains thee, and lips bruise lips, and vein stings vein. / Let fruit be crushed on fruit, let flower on flower, / Breast kindle breast, and either burn one hour" (Swinburne 1866a: 65). This emphasis on the formal aspects of poetry may be perceived as an illustration of a new approach to poetry that Swinburne had learnt from his French masters, (Pierre Jules) Théophile Gautier (1811–1872) and Charles (Pierre) Baudelaire (1821–1867), and then attempted to transplant into English verse. In his review of *Les Fleurs du Mal* of 1862, he observed that Baudelaire's "perfect workmanship makes every subject admirable and respectable" (Swinburne 1862: 999). In this statement he seems to have expressed his own viewpoint that the mastery of poetic technique was superior in importance to the poetic subject matter. Such a stance was in striking contrast to the predominant mid-Victorian view on poetry as complementary to religion in moral guidance, the style of which should not take precedence over the content and its message, as it was propounded in the works of the two notable critics of the epoch, Matthew Arnold and John Ruskin, cited by Richard Daniel Altick (Altick 1973: 272–273).

It seems that the preoccupation with the formal side of poetry in the late nineteenth century poets and critics altogether replaced the question of morality and thus was aimed at freeing art from the burden of didacticism. While in his *Notes on Poems and Reviews* Swinburne stated that his poetry was "written with *no moral or immoral design*", yet the result still appeared to him "moral rather than immoral, *if* it must needs be one or the other" [Swinburne 1866b 14–15; emphases is mine, EM], he was much more radical in this respect in his later William Blake: A Critical Essay, where he firmly asserted that "[h]andmaid of religion, exponent of duty, servant of fact, pioneer of morality, she [art] cannot in any way become" and that "[h]er business is not to do good on other grounds, but to be good on her own" (Swinburne 1868: 90). What is more, an additional didactic purpose may even prove damaging to both art and the cause, as it is visible in the following quotation (Swinburne 1868: 91):

> Art for art's sake first of all, and afterwards we may suppose all the rest shall be added to her … ; but from the man who falls to artistic work with a moral purpose, shall be taken even that which he has — whatever of capacity for doing well in either way he may have at starting.

Again, it is interesting to compare this view with a series of statements about the nature of art put forward in Wilde's Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1996 /1891/). In this brief but concise introduction, which could be seen as an aesthetic manifesto, Wilde claimed that "[t]here is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all". He went on

to add that "[t]he moral life of man forms part of the subject-matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium" (Wilde 1996: 3).

It may be argued that the first series of Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* did not merely reveal the sickly and feverish mind of "a little mad boy letting off squibs", as Buchanan called him in his pamphlet *The Fleshly School of Poetry, and Other Phenomena of the Day* (1872: 36). While the poet must have been well aware of the effect his poems would have on the Victorian public, and he apparently enjoyed the thought of being provocative, he also intended to show in practice what he had learnt from the poetry of Baudelaire. In this way, Swinburne propounded a new approach to art based on aesthetic rather than moral principles, art for art's sake, which was to be taken over by the decadent poets and critics of the late nineteenth century. By drawing upon literary sources rather than on his own inventions, he also proved the relativity of what could be accepted as proper topics for a poetic treatment, as dependent on the sociocultural context and moral standards of a given epoch.

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