

Wagner, Baudelaire, Swinburne: Poetry in the Condition of Music

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I. Swinburne's Ideal of Harmony

Have you practiced so long to learn to read?
Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?
Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin
of all poems.

Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*¹

Whitman made this remarkable challenge a keynote of his epochal book, and since then many—poets and scholars alike—have sought to demonstrate the truth of his bold claim. Swinburne, as we know, responded enthusiastically to the “majestic harmony” of Whitman’s verse.² Enthusiastically but not uncritically. “Whitmania,” as he called it, drew Swinburne to lay out his 1872 critical analysis of the American’s work. Whitman’s free verse led the classicist Swinburne to his analysis of “the radical fault in the noble genius of Whitman,” his “formalism”:

For truly no scholar and servant of the past, reared on academic tradition under the wing of old-world culture, was ever more closely bound in with his own theories, more rigidly regulated by his own formularies, than this poet of new life and limitless democracy.

(“Under the Microscope,” Hyder, p. 62)

This is acute, as is the entire extended discussion of Whitman in “Under the Microscope.” Swinburne argues that “as an original and individual poet, it is at his best hardly possible to overrate him” but “as an informing and reforming element, it is absolutely impossible” (Hyder, p. 67). Swinburne makes this distinction because he is thinking of what he calls “the everlasting models” (p. 67) of verse practice. For Swinburne, Whitman is a world poet because he brought to America and American poetry exactly what they needed to escape the “overweening ‘British element’” (p. 67) that had such a crippling effect

on American verse from Bryant to Lowell and Longfellow.

Swinburne had one word for the meaning and origin of all poems: harmony. The word, the idea, is the gravitational center for an aesthetics—a theory that was also a practice—that pervades his work. Despite some excellent scholarly work, this aesthetics has remained *terra incognita* for a long time.³ The great prosodic scholar George Saintsbury was one of the last to have a clear grasp of what Swinburne's work involved and how it was announced—and demonstrated—in the 1866 *Poems and Ballads*, a book quite as epochal as Whitman's 1855 *Leaves of Grass*.⁴

Swinburne's relation to that congeries of thought and practice called "art for art's sake" often confuses critical discussion. His spirited commentaries on Baudelaire and Blake in the 1860s led Swinburne to clarify his views later, most notably in his 1872 essay on Hugo, "*L'année terrible*," where he makes another important distinction:

Taken as an affirmative, [art for art's sake] is a precious and everlasting truth. No work of art has any worth or life in it that is not done on the absolute terms of art. . . . We admit then that the worth of a poem has properly nothing to do with its moral meaning or design . . . but on the other hand we refuse to admit that art of the highest may not ally itself with moral or religious passion, with the ethics or the politics of a nation or an age.⁵

The discussion reflects upon the entire cultural record, where "the ethics or the politics of a nation or an age" are regularly drawn upon, even promoted, by artists and poets. For Swinburne, the "rapture of inspiration" of "Hebrew psalmist or prophet" obeys the same poetical laws as those governing the conclusion to Hugo's *Les Chatiments*, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, or Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal*. "The reader impervious to [poetical] impressions," Swinburne argues, "may rest assured that what he admires in the prophecies or the psalms of Isaiah or of David is not the inspiration of the text [i.e., the poetry as such], but the warrant and the sign-manual of the councils and the churches" (*A Study of Victor Hugo*, in *Works*, 13:64).

In 1872 and thereafter Swinburne accommodates the ethical and moral commitments of writers like Shelley and Hugo, two of his touchstone poets, as well as his own recent poetical work, most notably the *Songs before Sunrise* volume (1871). Nonetheless, he remains firm in his view, strongly asserted in his study of Hugo, that "the rule of art is not the rule of morals" (*Works*, 12:242). Hence his summary comment: "Art for art's sake first, and then all things shall be added to her—or if not, it is a matter of quite secondary importance" (12:243).

When Swinburne argues against Whitman's "formalism," or against Arnold's view that the function of literature is to provide "a criticism of life,"

he is maintaining that poetry (and by implication all forms of art) operates according to standards—which he called “laws”—peculiar to itself as a type of practice or action. Poetry, he writes, has only “one final and irreplaceable requisite”: “inner harmony” (“Emily Bronte,” *Works*, 14:46). The point is insistent even when Swinburne discusses a poet like Wordsworth, so dear to Arnold’s moral program: though “rare, uncertain, [and] intermittent” in his verse, “though unable to command his music at will with the assurance of a Milton or a Shelley,” nonetheless Wordsworth is a great poet when he achieves what poetry requires—“profound and majestic harmony” (“Wordsworth and Byron,” *Works*, 14:240).

This “harmony” is the meaning of all poems, whatever moral ideas they may carry along or even profess. The thought seems simple enough, perhaps even banal. But much more is involved here than a Romantic formalism akin to Coleridge’s famous idea of poetry as “the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities.”⁶ When Swinburne speaks of a poem’s harmony, his thought is always tied to a set of musical ideas and analogies. The significance of that relationship, though well known, has scarcely begun to be understood or appreciated.

Part of the problem lies with an early essay by Edmund Gosse, who observed that Swinburne “lacked all capacity to appreciate or distinguish musical compositions by hearing them.”⁷ Gosse’s point—that Swinburne did not understand music on its own terms—has obscured the specific set of musical materials that ground his critical and poetic practice alike. “Most unmusical of men,” in Gosse’s sense, he may have been.⁸ His critical prose is nonetheless everywhere inflected with a musical vocabulary when he writes about the theory and practice of verse. Most have read those writings according to the mighty working of this kind of judgment: “nearly all of Swinburne’s musical references are general, and too many are impressionistic.”⁹ The statement is doubly misleading. It suggests, on one hand, that we will not get anywhere by investigating Swinburne’s musical ideas; and, on the other, that their “impressionistic” critical implementation is simply fatal. This is scholarship lost on both sides. Thanks to recent efforts to recover the methodology of impressionist prose—most particularly the prose of Swinburne’s greatest inheritor, Walter Pater—we no longer run in fright from “impressionistic” criticism, and the relation of this kind of writing to musical ideas is also growing more precise and clear. Nonetheless, although Swinburne is a pivotal figure in this context, his work—prose and verse alike—remains poorly understood.

II. Wagner, Baudelaire, and the Poetics of Endless Melody

Let’s begin afresh. We want to remember, as Lang goes on to observe of this unmusical man, that “he attended Clara Schumann’s concerts [and] he sought out and turned to account the music of Wagner, which, he said,

explicitly 'stimulated' him in composing 'Tristram of Lyonesse'" (*Letters*, 1: xxx-xxxii). Lang is here recalling Swinburne's friendship with the learned and passionate Wagnerite George Powell. Their intimacy began in 1866, as Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* was just appearing, and it lasted until Powell's death in 1882. A key section of Swinburne's *A Century of Roundels* (1882)—sections XIII-XXXIV—is an integral group that begins with "Plus Intra" and ends with "Plus Ultra." The verses comprise an elegy for Powell and, through Powell, for Wagner, who died three months after Powell. Nor were Swinburne's three Wagnerian roundels—"The Death of Richard Wagner," "Lohengrin," and "Tristan und Isolde"—his only explicit tributes to Wagner and his music. In the summer of 1872 and at the request of the editors of a French journal, he began writing "a French poem . . . on the effect of Wagner's overture to Tristan" (*Letters*, 2:182, 183). Unfortunately, this work was not published and no manuscript has yet appeared.¹⁰

But Swinburne was interested in Wagner well before 1866—certainly at least by 1863, when he received from Baudelaire a gift of *Richard Wagner et Tannhäuser à Paris* (first published in 1861), and possibly as early as 1861. Anne Walder judges that Swinburne knew Baudelaire's pamphlet before 1863¹¹ since he kept up with the French cultural scene, was in France and Paris in 1860-1861, and could scarcely have failed to notice the uproar that broke out in Paris at the French debut of *Tannhäuser* in the spring of 1861. That scandal may well have led Swinburne to his famous 1862 review of Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal*, which in turn led Baudelaire to send Swinburne the copy of the Wagner pamphlet in 1863. In any event, Swinburne had certainly read Baudelaire's explication of Wagner by the autumn or early winter of 1863. We also know that Swinburne possessed and prized a copy of Wagner's *Quatre Poèmes d'Opéra* (1861), with its important introductory essay "Lettre sur la musique." This essay gives a succinct account of Wagner's central ideas about the relation of music to poetry and specifically about Wagner's commitment to what he called "The Art-Work of the Future." Whether Swinburne acquired this book before Baudelaire sent him his essay on Wagner is not known.

Since Wagner's ideas would prove so important for both Baudelaire and Swinburne, we begin with him, and in particular with the pivotal text that, as we know, both poets read, the prose introduction to *Quatre Poèmes d'Opéra*, the "Lettre sur la musique." This is a summary account of the ideas about poetic theater that Wagner had been expounding for ten years, most famously—or infamously—in the three volumes of *Oper und Drama* first published in Leipzig in 1852. Baudelaire knew the English translation of this work published in 1855-56, and Swinburne would certainly have become acquainted with it at least by 1866, when his close friendship with Powell was established.

Key to all of Wagner's polemics is the argument for a synthesis of the resources of poetry on one hand, and music on the other. Taking the former

as a discourse of semantic and abstract expression, the latter of intuitive and aesthetic, Wagner argued that the music of the future "has a need which only poetry can fulfill":

To explain this need we have to remind ourselves of the human mind's ineradicable impulse, when confronted by an impressive phenomenon, to put the question: Why? . . . [T]he symphony is least of all able to provide an answer. . . . Only a poet can provide this disturbing, yet inescapable question with an answer which would, as it were, by circumvention prevent it from ever being put.¹²

Wagner mentions the symphony because it represents for him that most accomplished state of musical form in which simple melodic lines could be "doubled or quadrupled . . . in order to make possible a richer development of harmony" (*Three Wagner Essays*, p. 26; *Quatre Poèmes*, p. xxxii). Wagner's account of the development of western music traces a history from pagan dance melody to Medieval "four-part harmony on the basis of the four-part chord":

Here we find voices, originally employed merely to provide the melody's supporting harmony, manipulated in a free, continuously expressive development; through the so-called art of counterpoint each voice could be employed independently and expressively beneath the melody proper. (*Three Wagner Essays*, p. 25; *Quatre Poèmes*, p. xxviii)

Implicit in that passage is the entire Wagnerian program for an "endless melody" built up from a complex and modulated development of related motivic elements.

From such "harmony and harmony-embodying polyphony" emerged the Bach fugue and, after that, the supreme consummation of the symphony, along with what was for Wagner its limit case, Beethoven's Ninth.

The artistic device of fugue, . . . made for a longer duration in that it enabled voices to deliver the melody in diverse ways: diminished or augmented; reflected in the shifting light of modulation; enlivened by counter-themes and contrapuntal figures. Another procedure was to line up a succession of melodies, with an eye to the effect of their alternating expression, and to link them by means of transitions, in which contrapuntal skill was of especial value. It was upon this simple basis that the symphony was built. (*Three Wagner Essays*, p. 26; *Quatre Poèmes*, p. xxxii)

In this context of thought, Beethoven, Wagner argued, had brought music to the limit of its ability to deal with the question "Why." The finale of the Ninth is, for Wagner, the demonstration that music has a need to answer the

question "Why?" has an internal demand to explain itself. But music cannot do this adequately or clearly. The musician bent on addressing that question would have to become a poet—or rather, a very particular kind of poet.

Wagner's "poet" is a clear derivation from the idea of the poet he inherited from the sentimental and romantic traditions. This is the poet who determines "to employ words, the material of abstract thought, in such a way as to arouse feeling." In making that statement Wagner is arguing that the poet must so treat his language that it aspires to the condition of music.

The poet's handling of words subordinates their abstract conventional meaning to their elemental sensuous quality: through the organization of metre and quasi-musical embellishment of rhyme his phraseology acquires a magical power of evoking and determining feeling. In this tendency, inherent in his very nature, we see the poet being drawn to the frontiers of his art and brought into direct contact with music; from which it follows that we must say of his poetry that at its best it would in its final consummation become completely music. (*Three Wagner Essays*, pp. 23-24; *Quatre Poèmes*, p. xxv)

So far as the musician Wagner is concerned, therefore, "the only poet who can do this" is one who can "dissolve [the poem's] spoken thoughts," that is, its abstract expressions, into forms that function primarily as musical expressions (*Three Wagner Essays*, p. 28). Because Wagner was pursuing a renovation of music through opera, he frames the issue of "poetic form" in terms of dramatic form. "The only poetic form that would serve is one in which the poet does not merely describe his subject, but presents it in direct living terms—that is to say, in the form of drama" (*Three Wagner Essays*, p. 29; *Quatre Poèmes*, p. xxxvii). In that form, the expository contents borne through poetry's semantic elements (its ideas) can be stripped of their expository character and treated as the elements of a musical composition. Furthermore, Wagner argued that these dramatic materials should be drawn from ancient myth so that the stories, unburdened of distracting realistic details, could keep the focus on (a) simple and elemental structures and (b) those primal feelings and emotions threatened and blunted by the busyness of contemporary quotidian life.

Keying off Wagner's argument about music's affective relation to its audience, *Richard Wagner et Tannhäuser à Paris* explicates Wagner by offering a manifesto for Baudelaire's own aesthetic thought and poetic practice. Baudelaire observes that "true music suggests analogous ideas to different minds," illustrating his point by quoting first Wagner, then Liszt, and finally himself on the effect of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*.¹³ In the midst of this discussion he quotes the first two verses of his sonnet "Correspondances" in order to demonstrate the Wagnerian idea—that "a complex and invisible whole" pervades "the world"—in Baudelairean terms. This move is made in

conscious sympathy with Wagner's idea that only poetical expression can explain the meaning of musical expression, supplying what Baudelaire calls, echoing Wagner, its "pourquoi" (Pichois, 2:786).

As Baudelaire remarks, Wagner's complex motivic modulations—"frequent repetitions of the same melodic phrases, in passages drawn from the same opera" (Hyslop, p. 201; Pichois, 2:86)—comprise an explanatory mechanism for the work itself. Baudelaire then quotes at length Liszt's explanation of Wagner's musical procedures. In this long passage from the heart of Liszt's *Lohengrin et Tannhäuser de Richard Wagner* (1851), we are told how Wagner "succeeds in extending the dominion and claims of music" (Hyslop, p. 217; Pichois, 2:801-802). That dominion rests in music's emotional or expressive force, its primitive capacity to bypass "rational thinking"—the dominion of language and poetry—and assert "significance . . . in a purely sensuous, subjective way." Building on "the melodic content . . . that the Beethoven symphony . . . brought into the world" (*Three Wagner Essays*, p. 27; *Quatre Poèmes*, p. xxxiii), Wagner fashions musical works, according to Baudelaire and Liszt,

capable of stimulating our ideas, of appealing to our minds, of stirring our reflections, and [endowing the work] with a moral and intellectual meaning. . . . He draws the character of his personages and their main passions melodically, and the melodies appear in the lyrics or in the accompaniment each time that the passions and the sentiments that they express are involved. This systematic recurrence is joined to an art of arrangement which would offer, through its psychological, poetic, and philosophical insights, an exceptional interest even for those to whom quavers and semiquavers are meaningless hieroglyphics. (Hyslop, pp. 217-218; Pichois, 2:802)

Because Wagner proceeds in this way, his "melodies are," Liszt goes on to say, "in a sense, *personifications of ideas*."

Two matters are crucial to understand in this Baudelairean/Lisztian analysis of Wagnerian *leitmotiv*. First, the musical structure is aspiring to the condition of language and meaning (or what Wagner called "poetry"). Crucially, the aspiration is executed in purely musical forms, which seize control of the linguistic and poetical elements and organize them by motivic modulations so that "logical thinking is confounded and disarmed" (*Three Wagner Essays*, p. 27; *Quatre Poèmes*, p. xxxiii). Second, this musically organized intellectual condition creates a reciprocity between the structure of the music, on one hand, and on the other, the intellectual engagement of hearers moved to thought and reflection by the stimulus of the musical forms. This second feature of the Wagnerian program reflects Wagner's interpretation of human and musical history. Wagner's "music of the future" represents his conviction that because language and thought had become "trammelled" by "convention,"

a deep-seated human need was emerging to recover more adequate modes of thought and expression. "It is as though purely human feeling had been driven by the oppression of conventional civilization to seek an outlet for the assertion of its own peculiar laws of speech, an outlet through which it could make itself understood untrammelled by the rules of logical thinking" (*Three Wagner Essays*, p. 28; *Quatre Poèmes*, p. xxxv). Wagner's new music is written to "make itself understood" to this audience of the future—an audience represented by people like Baudelaire, Liszt, and (later) by Swinburne's close friend George Powell.

III. The Condition of Music in "Anactoria"

Assessing the impact that Wagner and Baudelaire had on Swinburne begins with assessing the importance of the year 1863. Swinburne was, of course, well aware of Baudelaire's work before 1863, and while he must have known of Wagner's work, nothing indicates a close acquaintance before 1863. Swinburne's 1862 review of *Les fleurs du mal* reads the book primarily in light of Baudelaire's famous 1856 study *Edgar Poe, sa vie et ses oeuvres*, emphasizing the sensuous perfection of a poetry written in opposition to "l'hérésie de l'enseignement."

The schedules of Swinburne's writings given in Lafourcade and Walder demonstrate the major shift in Swinburne's work that took place between the autumn of 1862, when Swinburne sent Baudelaire a gift of his review, and the following autumn, when he received in return the gift of *Richard Wagner et Tannhäuser à Paris*.¹⁴ *Atalanta in Calydon*, "The Triumph of Time," "Laus Veneris," "Anactoria," and his key prose study *William Blake*—in many respects a poetic manifesto—were all begun that autumn. Nothing that Swinburne had previously written, except perhaps the "Hymn to Proserpine," reflects the kind of intellectual and poetic ambition represented by these works.

In the two prose writings by Wagner and Baudelaire just examined, both stressed the importance of dramatic form (in particular the form of Greek drama), of mythic content, and of an inner musical structure based on the melodic transformations of key motifs. These ideas all emerge as major features of Swinburne's writings in the key works of late 1863. The relation of "Laus Veneris" to both Wagner and Baudelaire is obvious and has been shrewdly examined by Walder (pp. 88-97). *Atalanta in Calydon* is not only a pastiche Greek drama, its manuscript, as we shall see, connects itself to the Wagnerian prosodics of "Anactoria." Like *William Blake*, "The Triumph of Time" and "Anactoria" are each presented as an *ars poetica*, the former cast as an autobiographical myth of Swinburne's poetical emergence, the latter as a dramatic fiction of Sappho, *sa vie et ses oeuvres*. Like its companion piece "Sapphics," "Anactoria" affects a performative demonstration of why and how Swinburne assigns Sappho her mythic aesthetic position,

The wonderment and scandal that Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* caused in 1866 would distract everyone, even (for a time) Swinburne, from what had been achieved in the volume's pivotal work, "Anactoria." What makes the poem so important is its relation to Swinburne's *chef d'oeuvre*, *Tristram of Lyonesse*. Swinburne began *Tristram*—specifically, the "Prelude"—in late December 1869, provoked to composition by having read Tennyson's recently published *Idyls* installment *The Holy Grail* (1869). Swinburne's *Tristram* "Prelude" was to be "an overture of the poem projected," he told Dante Gabriel Rossetti, adding that the "cadence" was "modelled. . . after my own scheme of movement and modulation in Anactoria, which I consider original in structure and combination" (*Letters*, 2:73, 74).

Swinburne's musical vocabulary here is important. The originality of "Anactoria"'s (and *Tristram*'s) prosody is related to what Swinburne was reading about music and poetry in the "Lettre sur la musique," in *Richard Wagner et Tannhäuser à Paris*, and perhaps as well in the English translation of Wagner's *Oper und Drama*, referenced in Baudelaire's pamphlet on Wagner, where the ideas summarized in *Quatre Poèmes d'Opéra* are presented in much greater detail.

The "scheme of movement and modulation" in "Anactoria" is most fully exposed in the pair of mirror texts at lines 35 to 46 and 47 to 58.¹⁵ The repetition of six couplets with identical rhyme words defines a prosodic scheme where musical rather than linguistic structure governs the poetic transformations. The terminal rhyme words epitomize a scheme where verbal units—words, word phrases, and even sentential units—are handled primarily as prosodic rather than semantic elements, with grammar therefore emerging as a formal rather than a logical structure. The twenty-four lines play astonishing transformations on words like "All," "fire," "flower," "eyes," "blue," and these in turn play out further transformations in phrasal units both large and small:

Fierce at the heart with fire that half comes through,
But all the flowerlike white stained round with blue. (ll. 41-42)

Coloured like night at heart, but cloven through
Like night with flame, dyed round like night with blue. (ll. 53-54)

Thine amorous girdle, full of thee and fair,
And leavings of the lilies in thine hair. (ll. 45-46)

Thy girdle empty of thee and now not fair,
And ruinous lilies in thy languid hair. (ll. 57-58)

This is poetry aspiring to the condition of music, as the poem re-emphasizes. Paradoxically, because the aspiration appears through such deliberated artifice,

Liszt's comment about Wagner's "melodies" reveals its pertinence here. These Swinburnian "melodies are, in a sense, *personifications of ideas*." At the most general level, the verse embodies ("personifies") the idea of poetry as a self-aware and purposive intellectual practice. Furthermore, as "personified" the ideas resist being translated into abstract terms. Although translations and transformations emerge and mutate through the verse of "Anactoria"—through all of Swinburne's verse-making—the linguistic forms (words, phrases, syntaxes) come before us so purified of abstract reference that even the poem's semantic features—the idea of being sickened with love, for instance—get subordinated to the logic of musical and sensuous transformation. So the idea of love is here musically translated into multiple possibilities of meaning: it lifts and abashes, it is insatiable, it is wearied out, it is sweet, it is bitter. In short, the forms it can assume are numberless.

So far as poetry is concerned, the forms are limited only by the expressive capacities implicit in the stylistic procedure. Lines 35 to 58 are much more than a *tour de force* demonstration of Swinburne's virtuosity. Framing the passage as he does, Swinburne constructs a Peircean index of the prosodic "scheme" that pervades "Anactoria." The passage is, in a sense, a personification of the idea of the poem, just as the poem is, in a sense, a personification of the idea of poetry as such. Those ideas are demonstrated by the motivic recurrences that emerge in the verse. Many of these trace themselves back to specific couplets and phrases—for example, lines 45 to 46 and 57 to 58 forecast this later couplet:

Ah sweeter than all sleep or summer air
The fallen fillets fragrant from thy hair. (ll. 119-120)

And out of that form will come further forms and transforms, as "note is struck from note" (l. 137):

With thwartings of strange signs, and wind-blown hair
Of comets, desolating the dim air. (ll. 161-162)

Including forms that reach beyond themselves—in prosodic terms, forms that escape their normative couplet structure—to expose another kind of generative rhythm:

Nor any memory of thee anywhere;
For never Muse has bound about thine hair
The high Pierian flower whose graft outgrows
All summer kinship of the summer rose
And colour of deciduous days, nor shed
Reflex and flush of heaven about thine head,
Nor reddened brows made pale by floral grief

With splendid shadow from that lordlier leaf. (ll. 193-200)

The first couplet both rhymes its precursors (ll. 45-46, 57-58, 119-120, 161-162) and breaks their prosodic pattern with its extreme end-stop. Paradoxically, from the platform of that cloven couplet flows a heavily enjambed movement that enacts a flowering inertia working beyond the cycles of nature.

The soft strange ways of such verse seem endless, like the endless ways of love:

And all the broken kisses salt as brine
That shuddering lips make moist with waterish wine. (ll. 37-38)

Yea, thou shalt be forgotten like spilt wine,
Except these kisses of my lips on thine. (ll. 201-202)

Motivic though they are, the end rhymes need not key the poetic transformations. When words and phrases recur—for instance, “reluctation” (l. 33); “reluctance” (l. 164)—the altered contexts supply them with verbal associations and relationships that can be exploited. “Shuddering” (ll. 34, 38) gets defined as a motivic word explicitly associated with the “Intense device” (l. 28) of Swinburne’s versification:

Relapse and reluctance of the breath,
Dumb tunes, and shuddering semitones of death. (ll. 33-34)

But in the light and laughter, in the moan
And music, and in grasp of lip and hand
And shudder of water that makes felt on land
The immeasurable tremor of all the sea,
Memories shall mix, and metaphors of me.
Like me shall be the shuddering calm of night. (ll. 210-215)

So the staged couplets of lines 35 to 58 do not locate the poem’s motivic resources—the passage is not, so to say, “an overture to the poem projected,” as *Tristram*’s “Prelude” is. But like an overture and like that “Prelude,” lines 35 to 58 exemplify those resources by framing a clear idea of them that we recognize rising and falling through later specific passages. The poem’s unfolding network of motivic modulations are less keyed to the actual words and phrases of lines 35 to 38 than to the transformational rule—a kind of fractal form—they instantiate.

Coda

The “scheme of music and modulation” that Swinburne deployed in “Anactoria” and *Tristram of Lyonesse* is latent in all his verse. A similar musical structure can be tracked in *Erechtheus*, and the fact that an early attempt at

lines 155 to 188 of "Anactoria" is drafted on a page of the *Atalanta in Calydon* manuscript suggests more than just a thematic kinship between those works. "Anactoria" is crucial, however, because it is the first poem Swinburne consciously constructed on his new prosodic scheme.

The last passage quoted above from "Anactoria" (ll. 210-215) is particularly interesting for the connection it draws between the world of nature and the world of Sapphic/Swinburnian prosody. Sappho's music involves an "immeasurable" set of musical measures because it is "one with all" (l. 276) of the endlessly changing forms of the physical universe (ll. 268-276). The argument is that Sappho is only "visible" as "song" ("Sapphics,"), and song—for instance, a poem like "Anactoria"—exists as a structure of movements and modulations that can only be known when its various particular forms expend themselves through perpetual transformation. Sappho can therefore say that "albeit I die indeed" (l. 265), still—like Shelley's cloud—"I say I shall not die" (l. 290). Swinburne's Sappho is the poet of the music of Lucretian spheres.

The reader therefore transacts the verse as a set of forms—metaphors, memories, and images, morphemes and phonemes—that are perpetually fleeing beyond themselves, dissolving into their single pervasive scheme of musical transformation.

I sleep not: sleep would die of a dream so strange;
 A dream so sweet would die as a rainbow dies,
 As a sunbow laughs and is lost on the waves that range
 And reck not of light that flickers or spray that flies,
 But the sun withdraws not, the woodland shrinks not or sighs,
 No sweet thing sickens with sense or with fear of change;
 Light wounds not, darkness blinds not, my steadfast eyes.

("A Nympholept," ll. 218-224)

The poem's general argument—that the natural world "Conceals and reveals in the semblance of things that are/ [Pan's] immanent presence" (ll. 104-105)—gets translated into prosodic semblances. The verbal play in the first two lines is so extreme that its key words—sleep, die, dream—give up all possibility of semantic fixity, plunging into lines three and four largely as phonemic counters. In that movement the poem uses its musical resources to unbuild the illusions of meaning that have been worked into those words by convention. The subtle but central ambiguity that emerges in the word "would" indexes the order of things being revealed here, and ultimately why the revelation of that order is a function of "steadfast eyes." The idea of an autopoietic universe of endless transformation emerges through a prosodic movement that is one with—is another instance of—those transformations, but an instance of a higher order because it knows itself to be such an instance.

Wagner sought to bring poetry, with its semantic content, into the

structure of his music so that the idea of the music, its intellectual beauty, might have a language that could index its idea. Swinburne seized on the aesthetic issues addressed by Wagner (as they were also seized upon by Poe and Baudelaire) in order to show that the essential content of any aesthetic form must not be constrained to semantic meaning—*l'heresie de l'enseignement*. The natural world for Swinburne is therefore not a forest of symbols, it is a vast and complex autopoietic machine whose “growth ha[s] no guerdon/ But only to grow” (“Hertha,” ll. 138-139). The function of poetry is to re-present our phenomenal world in a musical form so that the phenomena will be taken for what they are: unique sets of appearances whose very transient passages expose and define the dynamic event that realizes and sustains them. The “I” here is the voice of the text, that is, the poem itself, whose identity is given the name “Hertha” so that the poem may avail itself of a set of special *figurae* drawn out of the mythologies—generated, from India to Iceland—through their Aryan linguistic roots.¹⁶

I am that which began;
 Out of me the years roll;
 Out of me God and man;
 I am equal and whole;
 God changes, and man, and the form of them bodily; I am the soul.

.....
 First life on my sources
 First drifted and swam;
 Out of me are the forces
 That save it or damn;
 Out of me man and woman, and wild-beast and bird; before God was,
 I am. (“Hertha,” ll. 1-15)

Here, then, “song,” “music,” and poetry are the “first and last of all things made” (“Prelude,” *Tristram of Lyonesse*). It is as much as to say, in a famous later idiom: “A poem should not mean / But be” (Archibald Macleish, “Ars Poetica”).

Notes

- 1 Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass, The Original Edition*, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), ll. 23-25.
- 2 Clyde K. Hyder, ed. *Swinburne Replies: Notes on Poems and Reviews, Under the Microscope, Dedicatory Epistle* (Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1966), p. 65.
- 3 The two standard works are Thomas E. Connolly, *Swinburne's Theory of Poetry* (Albany: State Univ. Press of New York, 1964); and Robert L. Peters, *The Crowns of Apollo: Swinburne's Principles of Literature and Art* (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1965).

- 4 George Saintsbury, *Collected Essays and Papers, 1875-1920*, vol. 2 (London: J. M. Dent, 1923).
- 5 Algernon Charles Swinburne, *The Complete Works* (Bonchurch Edition), ed. Edmund Gosse and T. J. Wise, 20 vols. (London: William Heinemann and Gabriel Wells, 1925-1927), 13:242-243.
- 6 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 2 vols in one (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, [1984] c. 1983), 2:16.
- 7 Edmund Gosse, "Swinburne and Music," *Spectator* 118 (1917): 516.
- 8 *The Swinburne Letters*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang, 6 vols. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1959-62), 1:xxx.
- 9 Robert L. Peters, *The Crowns of Apollo: Swinburne's Principles of Literature and Art* (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1965), p. 104.
- 10 See the correction by Terry L. Meyers to what he thought was the missing poem, "Swinburne on Wagner's Music: A Misattribution," *VP* 37, no. 4 (1999): 551.
- 11 Anne Walder, *Swinburne's Flowers of Evil: Baudelaire's Influence on Poems and Ballads*, First Series, *Studia Anglistica Upsaliensia* 25 (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1976), pp. 62-63, 88-89.
- 12 Richard Wagner, *Three Wagner Essays*, trans. Robert L. Jacobs (London: Eulenburg Books, 1979), p. 28; *Quatre Poèmes d'Opéra, traduits en prose français* (1860; Paris, 1861), pp. xxxvi.
- 13 *Baudelaire as a Literary Critic*, ed. Lois B. Hyslop and Francis E. Hyslop (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1964), p. 199; Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Claude Pichois, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 2:784.
- 14 Georges Lafourcade, *La Jeunesse de Swinburne (1837-1867)*, 2 vols. (Paris: Société d'Éditions, 1928).
- 15 *The Poems of Swinburne*, 6 vols. (London: Chatto and Windus, 1905), 1:57-66. All quotations from the poetry are from this edition.
- 16 A companion essay to this one, "Swinburne, 'Hertha,' and the Voice of Language," *VLC* 36, no. 2 (2008): 283-297, gives a detailed account of the ethnopoetics of "Hertha"