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ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE

*POEMS AND BALLADS & ATALANTA IN CALYDON*

*Edited by KENNETH HAYNES*

London
PENGUIN BOOKS
2000
I the nightingale all spring through,
   O swallow, sister, O changing swallow,
All spring through till the spring be done,
Clothed with the light of the night on the dew,
   Sing, while the hours and the wild birds follow,
   Take flight and follow and find the sun.

Sister, my sister, O soft light swallow,
   Though all things feast in the spring’s guest-chamber,
   How hast thou heart to be glad thereof yet?
For where thou fliest I shall not follow,
   Till life forget and death remember,
   Till thou remember and I forget.

Swallow, my sister, O singing swallow,
   I know not how thou hast heart to sing.
   Hast thou the heart? is it all past over?
Thy lord the summer is good to follow,
   And fair the feet of thy lover the spring:
   But what wilt thou say to the spring thy lover?

O swallow, sister, O fleeting swallow,
   My heart in me is a molten ember
   And over my head the waves have met.
But thou wouldst tarry or I would follow,
   Could I forget or thou remember,
   Couldst thou remember and I forget.

O sweet stray sister, O shifting swallow,
   The heart’s division divideth us.
   Thy heart is light as a leaf of a tree;
But mine goes forth among sea-gulfs hollow
   To the place of the slaying of Ilythus,
   The feast of Daulis, the Thracian sea.

O swallow, sister, O rapid swallow,
   I pray thee sing not a little space.
   Are not the roofs and the lintels wet?
The woven web that was plain to follow,
   The small slain body, the flowerlike face,
   Can I remember if thou forget?

O sister, sister, thy first-begotten!
The hands that cling and the feet that follow,
The voice of the child’s blood crying yet
   Who hath remembered me? who hath forgotten?
Thou hast forgotten, O summer swallow,
   But the world shall end when I forget.

Anactoria (Ἀνακτορία)
   τίνος αὐτῷ πείθωι
   μάψ σαγηνεύσας φιλότατα;
   SAPPHO.

My life is bitter with thy love; thine eyes
Blind me, thy tresses burn me, thy sharp sighs
Divide my flesh and spirit with soft sound,
And my blood strengthens, and my veins abound.
I pray thee sigh not, speak not, draw not breath;
Let life burn down, and dream it is not death.
I would the sea had hidden us, the fire
(Wilt thou fear that, and fear not my desire?)
Severed the bones that bleach, the flesh that cleaves,
And let our sifted ashes drop like leaves.
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.
Why wilt thou follow lesser loves? are thine
   Too weak to bear these hands and lips of mine?
I charge thee for my life's sake, O too sweet
To crush love with thy cruel faultless feet,
I charge thee keep thy lips from hers or his,
Sweetest, till theirs be sweeter than my kiss:
Lest I too lure, a swallow for a dove,
Erosion or Erinna to my love.
I would my love could kill thee; I am satiated
With seeing thee live, and fain would have thee dead.
I would earth had thy body as fruit to eat,
And no mouth but some serpent's found thee sweet.
I would find grievous ways to have thee slain,
Intense device, and superflux of pain;
Vex thee with amorous agonies, and shake
Life at thy lips, and leave it there to ache;
Strain out thy soul with pangs too soft to kill,
Intolerable interludes, and infinite ill;
Relapse and reluctation of the breath,
Dumb tunes and shuddering semitones of death.
I am weary of all thy words and soft strange ways,
Of all love's fiery nights and all his days,
And all the broken kisses salt as brine
That shuddering lips make moist with waterish wine,
And eyes the bluer for all those hidden hours
That pleasure fills with tears and feeds from flowers,
Fierce at the heart with fire that half comes through,
But all the flowerlike white stained round with blue;
The fervent underlid, and that above
Lifted with laughter or abashed with love;
Thine amorous girdle, full of thee and fair,
And leavings of the lilies in thine hair.
Yea, all sweet words of thine and all thy ways,
And all the fruit of nights and flower of days,
And stinging lips wherein the hot sweet brine
That Love was born of burns and foams like wine,
And eyes insatiable of amorous hours,
Fervent as fire and delicate as flowers,
Coloured like night at heart, but cloven through
Like night with flame, dyed round like night with blue,

Clothed with deep eyelids under and above –
Yea, all thy beauty sickens me with love;
Thy girdle empty of thee and now not fair,
And ruinus lilies in thy languid hair.
Ah, take no thought for Love's sake; shall this be,
And she who loves thy lover not love thee?
Sweet soul, sweet mouth of all that laughs and lives,
Mine is she, very mine; and she forgives.
For I beheld in sleep the light that is
In her high place in Paphos, heard the kiss
Of body and soul that mix with eager tears
And laughter stinging through the eyes and ears;
Saw Love, as burning flame from crown to feet,
Imperishable, upon her storied seat;
Clear eyelids lifted toward the north and south,
A mind of many colours, and a mouth
Of many tunes and kisses; and she bowed,
With all her subtle face laughing aloud,
Bowed down upon me, saying, 'Who doth thee wrong,
Sappho?' but thou – thy body is the song,
Thy mouth the music; thou art more than I,
Though my voice die not till the whole world die;
Though men that hear it madden; though love weep,
Though nature change, though shame be charmed to sleep.
Ah, wilt thou slay me lest I kiss thee dead?
Yet the queen laughed from her sweet heart and said:
'Even she that flies shall follow for thy sake,
And she shall give thee gifts that would not take,
Shall kiss that would not kiss thee' (yea, kiss me)
'When thou wouldst not' – when I would not kiss thee!
Ah, more to me than all men as thou art,
Shall not my songs assuage her at the heart?
Ah, sweet to me as life seems sweet to death,
Why should her wrath fill thee with fearful breath?
Nay, sweet, for is she God alone? hath she
Made earth and all the centuries of the sea,
Taught the sun ways to travel, woven most fine
The moonbeams, shed the starbeams forth as wine,
Bound with her myrtles, beaten with her rods,
The young men and the maidens and the gods?
Have we not lips to love with, eyes for tears,
And summer and flower of women and of years?
Stars for the foot of morning, and for noon
Sunlight, and exaltation of the moon;
Waters that answer waters, fields that wear
Lilies, and languor of the Lesbian air?
Beyond those flying feet of fluttered doves,
Are there not other gods for other loves?
Yea, though she scourge thee, sweetest, for my sake,
Blossom not thorns and flowers not blood should break.
Ah that my lips were tuneless lips, but pressed
To the bruised blossom of thy scourged white breast!
Ah that my mouth for Muses' milk were fed
On the sweet blood thy sweet small wounds had bled!
That with my tongue I felt them, and could taste
The faint flakes from thy bosom to the waist!
That I could drink thy veins as wine, and eat
Thy breasts like honey! that from face to feet
Thy body were abolished and consumed,
And in my flesh thy very flesh entombed!
Ah, ah, thy beauty! like a beast it bites,
Stings like an adder, like an arrow smites.
Ah sweet, and sweet again, and seven times sweet,
The paces and the pauses of thy feet!
Ah sweeter than all sleep or summer air
The fallen fillets fragrant from thine hair!
Yea, though their alien kisses do me wrong,
Sweeter thy lips than mine with all their song;
Thy shoulders whiter than a fleece of white,
And flower-sweet fingers, good to bruise or bite
As honeycomb of the inmost honey-cells,
With almond-shaped and roseleaf-coloured shells
And blood like purple blossom at the tips
Quivering; and pain made perfect in thy lips
For my sake when I hurt thee; O that I
Durst crush thee out of life with love, and die,

Die of thy pain and my delight, and be
Mixed with thy blood and molten into thee!
Would I not plague thee dying overmuch?
Would I not hurt thee perfectly? not touch
Thy pores of sense with torture, and make bright
Thine eyes with bloodlike tears and grievous light?
Strike pang from pang as note is struck from note,
Catch the sob's middle music in thy throat,
Take thy limbs living, and new-mould with these
A lyre of many faultless agonies?
Feed thee with fever and famine and fine drouth,
With perfect pangs convulse thy perfect mouth,
Make thy life shudder in thee and burn afresh,
And wring thy very spirit through the flesh?
Cruel? but love makes all that love him well
As wise as heaven and crueler than hell.
Me hath love made more bitter toward thee
Than death toward man; but were I made as he
Who hath made all things to break them one by one,
If my feet trod upon the stars and sun
And souls of men as his have alway trod,
God knows I might be crueler than God.
For who shall change with prayers or thanksgivings
The mystery of the cruelty of things?
Or say what God above all gods and years
With offering and blood-sacrifice of tears,
With lamentation from strange lands, from graves
Where the snake pastures, from scarred mouths of slaves,
From prison, and from plunging prouws of ships
Through flamelike foam of the sea's closing lips –
With thwartings of strange signs, and wind-blown hair
Of comets, desolating the dim air,
When darkness is made fast with seals and bars,
And fierce reluctance of disastrous stars,
Eclipse, and sound of shaken hills, and wings
Darkening, and blind inexpiable things –
With sorrow of labouring moons, and altering light
And travail of the planets of the night,
And weeping of the weary Pleiads seven,
170 Feeds the mute melancholy lust of heaven?
Is not his incense bitterness, his meat
Murder? his hidden face and iron feet
Hath not man known, and felt them on their way
Threaten and trample all things and every day?
Hath he not sent us hunger? who hath cursed
Spirit and flesh with longing? filled with thirst
Their lips who cried unto him? who bade exceed
The fervid will, fall short the feeble deed,
Bade sink the spirit and the flesh aspire,
Pain animate the dust of dead desire,
And life yield up her flower to violent fate?
Him would I reach, him smite, him desecrate,
Pierce the cold lips of God with human breath,
And mix his immortality with death.
Why hath he made us? what had all we done
That we should live and loathe the sterile sun,
And with the moon wax paler as she wanes,
And pulse by pulse feel time grow through our veins?
Thee too the years shall cover; thou shalt be
190 As the rose born of one same blood with thee,
As a song sung, as a word said, and fall
Flower-wise, and be not any more at all,
Nor any memory of thee anywhere;
For never Muse has bound above thine hair
The high Pierian flower whose graft outgrows
All summer kinship of the mortal 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.
Yea, thou shalt be forgotten like spilt wine,
Except these kisses of my lips on thine
Brand them with immortality; but me –
Men shall not see bright fire nor hear the sea,
Nor mix their hearts with music, nor behold
Cast forth of heaven, with feet of awful gold

And plumless wings that make the bright air blind,
195 Lightning, with thunder for a hound behind
Hunting through fields unfurrowed and unsown,
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,
When all the winds of the world for pure delight
Close lips that quiver and fold up wings that ache;
When nightingales are louder for love’s sake,
And leaves tremble like lute-strings or like fire;
Like me the one star swooning with desire
210 Even at the cold lips of the sleepless moon,
As I at thine; like me the waste white noon,
Burnt through barren sunlight; and like me
The land-stream and the tide-stream in the sea.
I am sick with time as these with ebb and flow,
And by the yearning in my veins I know
The yearning sound of waters; and mine eyes
Burn as that beamless fire which fills the skies
With troubled stars and travailing things of flame;
And in my heart the grief consuming them
220 Labours, and in my veins the thirst of these,
And all the summer travail of the trees
And all the winter sickness; and the earth,
Filled full with deadly works of death and birth,
Sore spent with hungry lusts of birth and death,
Has pain like mine in her divided breath;
Her spring of leaves is barren, and her fruit
Ashes; her boughs are burdened, and her root
Fibrous and gnarled with poison; underneath
230 Serpents have gnawn it through with tortuous teeth
Made sharp upon the bones of all the dead,
And wild birds rend her branches overhead.
These, woven as raiment for his word and thought,
These hath God made, and me as these, and wrought
Song, and hath lit it at my lips; and me
Earth shall not gather though she feed on thee.
As a shed tear shalt thou be shed; but I –
Lo, earth may labour, men live long and die,
Years change and stars, and the high God devise
New things, and old things wane before his eyes
Who wields and wrecks them, being more strong than
they –
But, having made me, me he shall not slay.
Nor slay nor satiate, like those herds of his
Who laugh and live a little, and their kiss
Contents them, and their loves are swift and sweet,
And sure death grasps and gains them with slow feet,
Love they or hate they, strive or bow their knees –
And all these end; he hath his will of these.
Yea, but albeit he slay me, hating me –
Albeit he hide me in the deep dear sea
And cover me with cool wan foam, and ease
This soul of mine as any soul of these,
And give me water and great sweet waves, and make
The very sea's name lordlier for my sake,
The whole sea sweeter – albeit I die indeed
And hide myself and sleep and no man heed,
Of me the high God hath not all his will.
Blossom of branches, and on each high hill
Clean air and wind, and under in clamorous vales
Fierce noises of the fiery nightingales,
Buds burning in the sudden spring like fire,
The wan washed sand and the waves' vain desire,
Sails seen like blown white flowers at sea, and words
That bring tears swiftest, and long notes of birds
Violently singing till the whole world sings –
I Sappho shall be one with all these things,
With all high things for ever; and my face
Seen once, my songs once heard in a strange place,
Cleave to men's lives, and waste the days thereof
With gladness and much sadness and long love.
Yea, they shall say, earth's womb has borne in vain
New things, and never this best thing again;

Hymn to Proserpine
(AFTER THE PROCLAMATION IN ROME OF THE
CHRISTIAN FAITH)

Vicisti, Galileae.

I have lived long enough, having seen one thing, that love
hath an end;
Goddess and maiden and queen, be near me now and
befriend.
Thou art more than the day or the morrow, the seasons that
laugh or that weep;
For these give joy and sorrow; but thou, Proserpina, sleep.
Sweet is the treading of wine, and sweet the feet of the dove;
Itylus

The poem is a monologue by Philomela, the sister of Procne, who is the wife of Tereus, the king of Thrace (line 48). He lures after Philomela, rapes her, and then cuts off her tongue and hides her. Philomela tells her story by weaving the events in the design of a tapestry (line 52), which she sends to Procne. The sisters revenge themselves by killing Itylus, the son of Tereus and Procne, and cooking him. Procne feeds him to Tereus and afterwards reveals what they have done; Tereus pursues them in a rage, but they are saved by the gods, who turn Philomela into a nightingale (line 19) and Procne into a swallow.

In Daulis (line 48), in central Greece, the women murdered Itylus, according to Thucydides (ii. 29). Swinburne appears to locate it on the Thracian coast, perhaps mistaking a detail from Matthew Arnold's 'Philomela' (1853). The wet roofs and lintels (line 51) may suggest the blood of Itylus; cf. Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book 6, line 646 ('manant penetralia tabo', 'the room drips with gore'). 'Itylus' is the name in Homer; 'Itys' is more common. In Greek poetry, it is Procne who becomes the nightingale.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book 6, is the major source of the story. There are references to it in Homer (Odyssey, Book 19, lines 518–523), Aeschylus (Agamemnon, lines 1140–9 and Suppliantis, lines 58–57), and Apollodorus. In addition to Matthew Arnold, Catulle Mendès was inspired by the legend; see 'Le Rossignol' in *Philomela* (1863), which appeared shortly before Swinburne wrote his poem.

Swinburne combines iambics and anapests in stanzas of six tetrameters rhyming abcabc. ‘Swallow’ is a constant feminine rhyme in each stanza.

Anactoria

Swinburne's admiration for Sappho was unbounded. In a posthumously published appreciation ('Sappho', *The Saturday Review*, 21 February 1914, p. 228) he wrote:

Judging even from the mutilated fragments fallen within our reach from the broken altar of her sacrifice of song, I for one have always agreed with all Grecian tradition in thinking Sappho to be beyond all question and comparison the very greatest poet that ever lived. Aeschylus is the greatest poet who ever was also a prophet; Shakespeare is the greatest dramatist who ever was also a poet; but Sappho is simply nothing less — as she is certainly nothing more — than the greatest poet who ever was at all. Such at least is the simple and sincere profession of my lifelong faith.
painting The Slave Ship (1834) and Ruskin's defence of the painting in Modern Painters (1843). ‘Viewless ways’ (line 87) may have been influenced by Shakespeare’s ‘viewless winds’ (Measure for Measure, Act III, Scene 1, line 124) or Keats’s ‘viewless wing’ (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, line 33, 1820). The footnote in Greek by Epicurus is the source of Swinburne’s line 108; the remark survives in Marcus Aurelius’s Meditations, 4.41.


The metre is hexameter with both iambics and anapests. The rhyme is in couplets, and there is an internal rhyme at the end of the third foot. All sentences come to a full stop at the end of a metrical line except for line 105.

Illicit

‘Illicit’ is a Latin exclamation of dismay, ‘It’s all over.’

The stooped urn (line 49) is tilted, inclined (the only OED citation for this meaning); to ‘flash’ is to rise and dash, as with the tide. ‘Date’ (line 195) is the ‘limit, term or end of a period of time’ (obsolete or archaic, OED).

For ‘No memory, no memorial’ (line 39), cf. Milton, Paradise Lost Book 1, line 362 and Nehemiah 2:20. ‘Blood-red’ (line 74) is a common colour in Shelley, Tennyson, and Morris. For watching and not sleeping (line 123), cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:6 and recall Gethsemane.

The metre is iambic tetrameter; the six-line stanza rhymes aabccb, where ‘a’ and ‘c’ are feminine rhymes.

Hermaphroditus

Swinburne’s appended note ‘At Museum of the Louvre, March 1863’ indicates that the poem is a response to the Hellenistic sculpture of the sleeping Hermaphroditus, in the Louvre. On the topic of the androgynous and hermaphrodite in this period, see A. J. L. Busst, ‘The Image of the Androgynous in the Nineteenth Century’ in Ian Fletcher’s Romantic Mythologies (1967), and Franca Franchi’s Le Metamorfosi di Zambellina (1991). Busst contrasts the theme of hermaphrodite as the perfection of human existence (the androgynous universal man of the Saint-Simonians and others), current in the first half of the nineteenth century, with the decadent