Swinburne: The Will to Believe

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"SWINBURNE," as Cecil Lang has observed, "was a thinker." He was a thinker, moreover, who brought to English letters an unusually well educated and wide ranging mind. A master of Greek, Roman, and Elizabethan literature, a perceptive critic of his own contemporaries both in England and abroad, he was a man of intellect as well as ingenuity. But despite the post-war rehabilitation of such Victorian luminaries as Tennyson and Browning, Swinburne is still too often remembered as a souvenir rather than a monument of his age and, like embroidered silk discovered by chance in a great-aunt's attic, judged elegant but unsubstantial. Long praised, in Tennyson's words, as "a reed through which all things blow to music," he cannot really be defined by that limited metaphor since he was not merely an instrument but, more importantly, a composer. Attention must be given to the meaning of the score. Like all great poets, Swinburne is worth thinking about as well as listening to; he is important not only for his mastery of language but also for the power of his mind, important, in short, for substance as well as style.

Abstract, diffuse, and often dependent upon knowledge of increasingly obscure writers like Walter Savage Landor, much of Swinburne's thought seems destined to remain shrouded in a mist as impenetrable as those of the Northumberland coast which he loved so well. This much, however, remains clear — that for all of his anti-Catholicism and antipathy towards organized religion of any sort, for all of his almost adolescent delight in blasphemy, birch, and the bottle, Swinburne was throughout his life preoccupied with essentially religious concerns.

Swinburne never escaped from the *idea* of God; his poems are haunted by the sensation of Immanence. He addresses them to Pan and Proserpine as well as the "pale Galilean" but in each case his universe is extraterrestrial. Sixty years after his death one is impressed not so much by his disavowal of any God but man as by the extent to which the very fire of his renunciation indicates how immediate to him was the question of faith. The intensity of this concern links Swinburne more closely to his times than to our own radically secular age in which unbelief is a commonplace.

Writing in an age in which Arnold's "sea of faith" was fast receding, Swinburne frequently sounds an elegiac note which establishes an ever-present tension between what once was, and what is now. In *Tiresias* he observes:

> It was long since: yea, even the sun that saw
> Remembers hardly what was, nor how long.
> And now the wise heart of the worldly song
> Is perished, and the holy hand of law
> Can set no tune on time, nor help again
> The power of thought to build up life for men.
> (ll. 25-30)

Characteristically he mourns not only for "the wise heart of the worldly song" but also for "the holy hand of law" which has lost its power to shape the lives of men. This is an important point. Swinburne was no closet Anglican. His poetry does not reveal subtle adherence to the Thirty-nine Articles. He perceived the importance of the "holy hand of law"; the impossibility of imposing external order upon lives which were becoming increasingly complex and fragmented.

Swinburne remained, however, fascinated by the problems of spiritual and social decay. He rejected the Arnoldian response to the loss of faith in which man seeks refuge from decay in domesticity, and turned instead to a mythic vision of nature. Although the message of the sea in "On the Downs" is that "There is no God, O Son,/If thou be none," a message which in the century of Feuerbach, Strauss, and Comte is by no means as shocking as

it may seem at first glance — the main thrust of the poem asserts otherwise:

> And with divine triumphant awe
> My spirit moved within me saw,
> With burning passion of stretched eyes,
> Clear as the light's own firstborn law,
> In the windless wastes of skies
> Time's deep dawn rise.
>
> (ll. 150-156)

Clearly there is suggested here some other God than man, as John Rosenberg has recognized,[2] some premortal force long existent before "anything called God or man drew breath."[3] Nature has become representative of mystery and the supernatural.

In one very important sense Swinburne envisions nature as an extension and reflection of the gradual disintegration of the society of which he was a part. The apocalyptic conclusion of "A Forsaken Garden" describes much more than geological history:

> Till the slow sea rise and the sheer cliff crumble,
> Till terrace and meadow the deep gulfs drink,
> Till the strength of the waves of the high tides humble
> The fields that lessen, the rocks that shrink,
> Here now in his triumph where all things falter,
> Stretched out on the spoils that his own hand spread,
> As a god self-slain on his own strange altar,
> Death lies dead.
>
> (ll. 73-80)

Swinburne's obsession with the landscape of despair, the landscape of twilight, thorns, and timelessness is connected not only to his vision of a Victorian Deluge but also to his own personal loss of faith and subsequent search for alternative meaning.

Nowhere in Swinburne's poetry is there a greater love than his love for the sea. Nowhere does he portray the sexual curiosities with which he is so often associated as satisfactory substitutes for the semi-mystical relationship he enjoys with the raw power and barren beauty of nature. Human love is frail by comparison. Poems like "Delores",

"Faustine", and "The Leper" illustrate the inadequacies of temporal passion, not its varied delights. Swinburne instinctively reaches beyond the world of men and women. If he has abandoned the formalized God of his upbringing and youth he is still urged to reach beyond the immediate in order to find the real meaning of things. He turns ultimately to nature; not like Wordsworth towards the intrinsic vitality which moves through all things, but towards the energy which preexists and may well scorn its physical manifestations.

It is Chaos, the time before all time, which inspires Swinburne to his greatest poetry. In poems such as "Evening on the Broads", "By the North Sea", and "On the Downs" Swinburne found the gratification of religious sentiment without the restraint of unpalatable doctrine. In the elemental forces of a formless universe he found a spiritual surrogate for Christ — "a spirit unsleeping and deathless/Ghost or God, evermore moves on the face of the deep" ("Evening on the Broads" ll. 139-140).

In an 1861 review of Baudelaire, Swinburne wrote, "There is not one poem in the *Fleurs du Mal* which has not a distinct and vivid background of morality to it."[4] The same might be said of his own work, however macabre. In the early *Atalanta in Calydon* he noted the "clean offering and chaste hymns" of others but declared, "me the time/ Divides from these things." (l. 61) Accordingly he developed his own manner of offering which is none the less moral in intent. He asserts traditional values by offering their antithesis. This is seen most clearly in the satirical poems, for example, "Before A Crucifix," in which Swinburne attacks not Christ but the priests who defile that for which He stood. He is urged to blasphemy not simply by contempt, but more importantly by a deep sense of outrage at the corruption of sacred things.

> The tree of faith ingraffed by priests
> Put its foul foliage out above thee,
> And round it feed man-eating beasts
> Because of whom we dare not love thee;

> Though hearts reach back and memories ache,
> We cannot praise thee for their sake. (ll. 163-8)

The line "Though hearts reach back and memories ache" reveals not only Swinburne's continued longing for reunion with the faith of his past — the man "sad with glad things gone" — but also his continued reserve, the strength of mind which kept him from accepting established doctrine which he could desire but never believe. Swinburne never returned to the Anglican Church, to which as a youth he was strongly attached; nor did he ever evolve any set of systematized beliefs which might really be called Christian.

Swinburne was, then, a confirmed agnostic. But he was not amoral; no more so than George Eliot or J. S. Mill. While he rejected the deification of Christ he was, like the translator of Strauss, nevertheless attracted to Him as an historical figure. Referring to Mazzini he wrote, "Ever since I knew him I have been able to read the Gospels with such power of realizing and feeling the truth of the human character of Christ."[5] That Swinburne could compare one of his greatest heroes to the historical figure of Christ indicates that his attitude towards Him was more complex than he allows in a poem like "Hymn to Proserpine": "Thou hast Conquered, O pale Galilean; the world has grown grey from thy breath" (1.35). His attraction to Christ as a teacher is a reflection of his own deep concern for the sanctity of human life and his opposition to all forms of social oppression.

In the splendid "Prelude" to *Tristram and Iseult,* Swinburne offers a moving hymn to the central impulse of Christianity, although to be sure, his conception of love is essentially ambiguous:

> Love, that is first and last of all things made,
> The light that has the living world for shade,
> The spirit that for temporal veil has on
> The souls of all men woven in unison.
>
> (ll. 1-4)

Love is eternal; it is a spirit of which earthly manifestations are only a temporal veil. Consider the comparable

use of "veil" in the opening lines of "Ave Atque Vale":

> Shall I strew on thee rose or rue or laurel,
> Brother, on this that was the veil of thee?
> (ll. 1-2)

The dead poet's body is less important than the spirit which it had housed. Swinburne writes frequently of veils, shadows, and dreams in a way which suggests that the immediate is only a reflection of the eternal. The love of Tristram for Iseult is only an element of a larger abstract passion just as the North Sea or the Northumberland moors are microcosms of primordial power. In each case there is growth of meaning away from the specific and towards the universal. Love is more than sensuality; it is a spirit which both transcends and defines men, and as such is closer to St. John than to St. John's Wood.

The frequent references in Swinburne's poetry to spirits which are somehow distinct from the flesh suggest an ambivalent attitude towards death. While there is no explicit belief in a life after death, death is often described as not final. Perhaps the most memorable line in this respect is the conclusion to "Hymn to Proserpine": "For there is no God found stronger than death; and death is a sleep." And then there are the syntactically confused lines in "Genesis":

> And as a man before was from his birth,
> So shall a man be after among the dead.
> (ll. 63-64)

This cannot be read "as a man was before his birth . . ." because of the preposition "from" and the inversion of "before" with "was". It can only be read: "As a man, now dead, was in life — from his birth — so is he now, among the dead," which is the closest Swinburne comes to asserting in art a belief which he could never really accept, although he could not entirely reject it either. Like most men he felt an emotional need at times of stress to believe in some form of eternity. This is witnessed again in his ode to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, "A Death on Easter Day," in which Rossetti is associated with the resurrection of Christ:

Albeit the bright sweet mothlike wings be furled,
Hope sees, past all division and defection,
And higher than swims the mist of human breath,
The soul most radiant once in all the world
Requickened to regenerate resurrection
Out of the likeness of the shadow of death.
(ll. 9-14)

In a letter dating from the time of the poem, Swinburne wrote, "I do now — on the whole — strongly incline to believe in the survival of life — individual and conscious life — after the dissolution of the body."[6] What is important here, however, is not the momentary testament of faith but the fact that even at a time of stress, Swinburne could not bring himself to believe but only to "incline to believe."

There are a number of poems which can mislead the reader into an erroneous perception of Swinburne as a Christian poet. He was, after all, an unrivalled master of pastiche who could produce a reverential seventeenth-century lyric as easily as he could evoke the style of Baudelaire, Hugo, or Villon. Among such poems are "Siena", "Inferiae", and "A Baby's Epitaph":

April made me: winter laid me here away asleep
Bright as Maytime was my daytime; night is
soft and deep:
Though the morrow brings forth sorrow, well
are ye that weep . . .
Here I sleep not: pass, and weep not here
upon your child.
(ll. 1-3/9)

One of the loveliest of these exercises is the first part of "Christmas Antiphones" — "In Church". Swinburne writes here as though he were a believer:

God whose eyes are skies
Love-lit as with spheres
By the lights that rise
To thy watching eyes,
Orbed lights of tears . . . (ll. 21-25)

Thou whose ways we praise,
Clear alike and dark,
Keep our works and ways
This and all thy days
Safe inside thine ark . . . (ll. 71-75)

But the part cannot be isolated from the whole. Swinburne goes on to attack, in "Outside Church" and "Beyond Church", the conception of a righteous God in a world full of poverty and pain and argues finally:

> Man shall do for you,
> Men the sons of man,
> What no God would do
> That they sought unto
> While the blind years ran.
> (ll. 11-15)

There is no order to the universe, the years blindly run and man is the son of no being save himself. The meaning of the poem lies in its final statement; "In Church" serves only as a device to evoke a sentiment which Swinburne wishes to destroy.

A more accurate understanding of Swinburne's attitude towards death than that which is yielded by these seemingly devout pieces comes from a reading of "A Forsaken Garden" in which Death ultimately feeds upon and destroys itself. What is important then for Swinburne is not death itself nor any conscious survival of what in *Atalanta* he calls "the holy spirit of man" (1.341), but the larger timeless cosmos in which such things are inconsequent. The significance of mortal life and death is dwarfed not by divine order, but by the raw primitive powers of Chaos:

> One forecful nature uncreate
> That feeds itself with death and fate
> ("On the Downs" ll. 127-28)

The most developed of Swinburne's attempts to describe this principle of life-force is in the poem "Hertha". The speaker is the Germanic goddess of fertility, a huge earth-mother who emerges as the timeless source of all things. She is before and beyond, but also part of, all that is. All things being imbued with her spirit, it follows that man, her son, is not only an integral part of all life but is himself divine: "For behold, I am with you, am in you and of you: look forth now and see." (1.175) And again:

> One birth of my bosom;
> One beam of mine eye:

> One topmost blossom
> That scales the sky;
> Man equal and one with me, man that is
> made of me, man that is I.
> (ll. 195-200)

The Christian God "trembles in heaven" since recognition of this truth will lead to his destruction. He is only a creation of the minds of men: "Thought made him and breaks him," (1.186). (Compare the similar line in "Genesis": "And God, the shade cast by the soul of man" l. 20.) He is not real, not eternal like Hertha or divine like all into which she enters. He is only a worm grown on fallen bark (1.105); a parasitical creature associated with destruction and subjection, while Hertha breathes life and equality.

"A Nympholet" continues the argument:

> But in all things evil and fearful that fear may scan,
> As in all things good, as in all things fair that fall,
> We know thee present and latent, the lord of man . . .
> (ll. 120-123)

Pan is Hertha in another guise. By the end of the poem it is impossible for the poet to distinguish between himself and "the God who art all" (1.126):

> My spirit or thine is it, breath of thy life
> or of mine,
> Which fills my sense with a rapture that
> casts out fear?
> (ll. 260-61)

Truth banishes distinctions. All is one:

> Heaven is as earth, and as heaven to me
> Earth: for the shadows that sundered them here
> take flight:
> And nought is all, as am I, but a dream of thee.
> (ll. 271-73)

But too much can be made of Swinburne's pantheism just as one might overemphasize the occasional half-movements towards Christianity. Swinburne's evocation of classical gods does not prove that he was a latter-day pagan any more readily than his profound knowledge of the Bible immediately establishes him as a Nonconformist. It

is well to remember his defence in "Notes on Poems and Reviews": "With regard to any opinion implied or expressed throughout my book, I desire that one thing should be remembered: the book is dramatic, many-faced, mutifarious; 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."[7] This is the particular problem for the critic who attempts to unravel the thought of an artist who spoke in so many different voices. It is impossible to point to any one Swinburne poem and say: "This is what Swinburne believed."

There are, however, certain generalizations that can be made. As is seen most clearly in his political poems, Swinburne was an intensely moral man concerned not only with freedom — so often read by critics as license — but with the quality of human life. It was his despair in a world where evil is manifest which moved him to blasphemy, not any inherent love for the profane. This moral consciousness operates in even his most remote pieces and accounts, I think, for the profound sense of melancholy which is so often present, the vision of earthly things not in triumph but decay. His world is supernatural. His poetry is marked by a constant attempt to account for that world's mystery; to understand death and the meaning of time. There is no final solution in Swinburne to problems which he himself realized to be infinitely complex. But his concern for the spirit as well as the flesh makes him an essentially religious — if not specifically Christian — poet, religious for his will to believe.

NOTES

[1]Introduction to *The Swinburne Letters* (New Haven: Yale University Press; London: Oxford University Press, 1959-62), I, xix.

[2]Introduction to *Swinburne: Selected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Modern Library, 1968).

[3]"Genesis," l. 6.

[4]*The Swinburne Letters*, III, 422-3.

[6]*The Swinburne Letters*, I, xxv.
[6]*The Swinburne Letters*, I, xxv.
[7]Reprinted in *Swinburne: Selected Poetry and Prose*, p. 326.

Vestibule in Hell

Time, that mournful player of old bones,
Sits aging on his pile of rusted tools,
Tortures himself by staring at clock.
Clock clicks back — that little rat. Time spits.
Sucks on hollow tooth. Jokes with old friend Scythe
About the head-lopping days. Scythe loves it,
Laughs a scrape out of his old dark scratches.
The two get screwed up into a catastrophe.
Think they'll go out and manage a few old whores.
Time, that mournful player of old bones,
Figures he'll call up Jimmy Death for laughs.

John Dean