

Algernon Charles
Swinburne

SAMPLER

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Our Lady of Pain

Poems of Eros and Perversion

Algernon Charles
Swinburne

Edited and introduced by
Mark Scroggins

Shearsman Books

SAMPLER

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Introduction

The scion of two aristocratic families, Algernon Charles Swinburne was born in 1837 in London and spent his childhood on the Isle of Wight and at his grandfather's estate in Northumberland. He attended Eton and then Balliol College, Oxford, where he met and became fast friends with the Pre-Raphaelites Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Morris, and Edward Burne-Jones. He had already published two verse plays when *Atalanta in Calydon* was released in 1865 to considerable acclaim. The following year, *Poems and Ballads* generated a firestorm of critical and public controversy: without gainsaying their extraordinary formal and musical accomplishments, reviewers attacked Swinburne's poems for their licentiousness and anti-theism. His publisher withdrew the book within days of publication, and he was forced to transfer his works to another house.

Swinburne had invoked the doctrine of 'art for art's sake' (derived from Théophile Gautier and Charles Baudelaire) in defence of *Poems and Ballads*, but his next collection *Songs Before Sunrise* (1870) was a profoundly politically committed book, its poems dealing with the Italian *Risorgimento* and the more general human striving for freedom. That collection, the plays *Bohemia* (1874) and *Erectheus* (1876), and the 1878 *Poems and Ballads, Second Series* were far more favourably received by critics and the general reading public than the first *Poems and Ballads* had been.

Through the 1870s Swinburne was prodigiously active, publishing collections of poetry, plays, and critical studies. But his personal life was in alarming disarray, and his alcoholic dissipation forecast an almost certain early grave. In 1879, he was 'rescued' by the lawyer and writer Theodore Watts (later Watts-Dunton), who took him to a suburban retreat in Putney, weaned him from his drinking habit, and became his companion and *de facto* guardian for the rest of his life.

In Putney, Swinburne enjoyed a remarkably serene and sheltered existence and continued to produce poetry, dramas, and criticism. Although the scandal of the 1866 *Poems and Ballads* was never quite forgotten by readers of Swinburne's later, far less transgressive verse, moral opprobrium was largely displaced by respect for his lyrical and metrical talents. By the last decade of the century Swinburne was widely regarded, with Tennyson and Browning, as one of the three greatest poets

of his time. On the laureate Tennyson's death in 1892, Queen Victoria is said to have observed, 'I am told that Mr Swinburne is the best poet in my dominions'. (He was not offered the laureateship.) When Swinburne died peacefully of pneumonia in 1909, W. B. Yeats pronounced, 'Now I am king of the cats'.

No Victorian poet suffered a more precipitous decline in reputation in the twentieth century than Swinburne. T. S. Eliot's criticisms (in 'Swinburne as Poet', 1920)—that Swinburne's work is 'diffuse', 'imprecise', metrically over-facile, and ultimately untethered to concrete reality—became common currency of dismissals of the poet. There is some truth to these critiques, and Swinburne certainly wrote far too much on trivial subjects in his later years. His formal and musical mastery, however, cannot be denied, and more recent readers have found in his work a surprising precision of language and subtlety and complexity of thought.

* * *

The present selection of Swinburne's verse focuses precisely on what the first reviewers of the 1866 *Poems and Ballads* found most objectionable: erotic passion, in both its 'normal' and 'perverse' varieties. The anonymous review for the *London Review* called the poems 'depraved and morbid in the last degree'; Robert Buchanan in the *Athenaeum* pronounced Swinburne 'unclean for the sake of uncleanness'; and John Morley, in the most thorough and eloquent of the attacks (in the *Saturday Review*), called the poems 'nameless shameless abominations', Swinburne's 'a mind all aflame with the feverish carnality of a schoolboy over the dirtiest passages in Lemprière', and Swinburne himself 'the libidinous laureate of a pack of satyrs'.

Contemporary readers are less likely to condemn a poet for hinting at or even outrightly depicting sex, but Swinburne's treatment of physical passion, and the varieties of passion about which he chose to write, retain the power to shock. Certainly there are a variety of non-normative sexual situations to be found in his poems: same-sex desire in 'Anactoria' and other 'sapphic' poems; necrophilia in 'The Leper'; transsexualism in 'Hermaphroditus' and 'Fragoletta'; bestiality in the fragment 'Pasiphae'. Most evident in the *Poems and Ballads* selections is Swinburne's algolagnia, in which sexual 'pleasure' is closely associated with physical or spiritual 'pain'.

Swinburne's own sexuality remains somewhat mysterious. One suspects that the hearty homoerotic banter and the schoolboy enthusiasm for de Sade that runs through much of his correspondence are a bluff masking a paucity of actual experience. Oscar Wilde called Swinburne 'a braggart in matters of vice, who had done everything he could to convince his fellow citizens of his homosexuality and bestiality without being in the slightest degree a homosexual or bestializer'.

It appears that Swinburne had one great romantic passion—biographers now agree—for his cousin Mary Gordon, but after she married another man (the parting commemorated in 'The Triumph of Time') he never formed another. For a while he enjoyed the company of the American actress and poet Adah Isaacs Menken; apparently Swinburne's friends, dismayed that the poet remained a virgin at thirty, had arranged the liaison. To no avail: Menken could not bring him 'up to scratch'; 'I can't make him understand that biting's no use!,' Edmund Gosse reported her as saying.

The one sexual—or quasi-sexual—activity in which we can be certain Swinburne participated is passive flagellation. It appears that Swinburne conceived a taste for being whipped while at Eton, and continued to take pleasure in real or imagined flagellation for the rest of his life. In the 1860s, according to Gosse, he patronized 'a mysterious house in St. John's Wood where two golden-haired and rouge-cheeked ladies received, in luxuriously furnished rooms, gentlemen whom they consented to chastise for large sums'. Being whipped was at the centre of Swinburne's sexual imagination, and through most of his life he recorded explicit masochistic fantasies—in his novels, in his correspondence, and in a quantity of flagellant poems, some of them published anonymously while he was alive, but aside from metrical fluency and occasional wit not to be distinguished from the rest of the vast outpouring of Victorian flagellant pornography.¹

Swinburne's taste for punishment as a fundamental element in the sexual relationship is epitomized in the *femmes fatales* who dominate 'Laus Veneris', 'Dolores', and 'Faustine', but the poet's masochism suffuses his works, so that even in 'The Triumph of Time', a grand and melancholy poem of leave-taking not included here, the speaker figures his greatest

¹ Two extensive examples are reprinted in Ian Gibson's *The English Vice: Beating, Sex and Shame in Victorian England and After* (Duckworth, 1978) and others can be read in *The Whippingham Papers* (c. 1888; Wordsworth Editions, 1999). After serious consideration, I have elected not to include any of these poems in this selection; they are of historical, biographical, and psychological—but not literary—interest.

intimacy with his beloved as one of painful submission: 'O sweet, | had you felt, lying under the palms of your feet, | The heart of my heart, beating harder with pleasure | To feel you tread it to dust and death'. Throughout his works, the word 'pleasure' is rarely encountered without 'pain' in its near neighbourhood.

There is surely an element of *épater le bourgeois* in Swinburne's assembling so many perversely erotic poems in *Poems and Ballads*, but this was part and parcel of his most basic impulse, that of rebellion against established conventions and powers. He is fundamentally a poet of liberty, setting himself in a line of such great rebels as Milton, Blake, Shelley, and Victor Hugo. It is a paradoxical identity, to be sure, as a number of critics have noted: for Swinburne's passionate love of freedom, his desire to be unconstrained by any social mores, religious dogmas, or other 'mind-forg'd manacles', coexists with a deep desire to abase himself before a hero-figure, whether it be a literary idol like Walter Savage Landor or Hugo, or a political leader like Giuseppe Mazzini.

This paradox is played out in his erotic poetry. Swinburne, and the speakers of his poems, crave the freedom to speak their desires and passions in ways not allowed by the constricted vocabulary of the Victorian moment. But those desires and passions themselves are, more often than not, experiences of domination, torment, and excruciating pain. Swinburne, in the prose pamphlet *Notes on Poems and Reviews*, writes of the abasement of 'Dolores' as a stage that must be passed through to reach the calm *apatheia* of 'The Garden of Proserpine' and 'Hesperia'; but his discussion glosses over the zest with which his poem recounts and revels in the cruelty of 'Our Lady of Pain'. Pain is not merely a stage through which one must pass to reach freedom; pain is itself pleasure.

If Swinburne is probably the *kinkiest* poet of the Victorian era, it's worth emphasizing that he is a master of the erotic in all its forms, to be ranked with the greatest English poets of physical love—Marlowe, Herrick, Cleveland, or Keats. His first readers were appalled by the varieties of 'perversion' on display in *Poems and Ballads*, but Victorian audiences were almost equally appalled by the forthrightness and intensity of his depiction of (non-masochistic) heterosexual passion in such poems as 'Before Dawn' and 'Love and Sleep'. The passages here included from his long Arthurian narrative *Tristram of Lyonesse*, along with the earlier selections, go far towards establishing the case for Swinburne as the greatest nineteenth-century English poet of sexual desire.

from *Chastelard: A Tragedy* (Act V, scene ii)

CHASTELARD

So here my time shuts up; and the last light
Has made the last shade in the world for me.
The sunbeam that was narrow like a leaf
Has turned a hand, and the hand stretched to an arm,
And the arm has reached the dust on the floor, and made
A maze of motes with paddling fingers. Well,
I knew not that a man so sure to die
Could care so little; a bride-night's lustiness
Leaps in my veins as light fire under a wind:
As if I felt a kindling beyond death 10
Of some new joys far outside of me yet;
Sweet sound, sweet smell and touch of things far out
Sure to come soon. I wonder will death be
Even all it seems now? or the talk of hell
And wretched changes of the worn-out soul
Nailed to decaying flesh, shall that be true?
Or is this like the forethought of deep sleep
Felt by a tired man? Sleep were good enough—
Shall sleep be all? But I shall not forget 20
For any sleep this love bound upon me—
For any sleep or quiet ways of death.
Ah, in my weary dusty space of sight
Her face will float with heavy scents of hair
And fire of subtle amorous eyes, and lips
More hot than wine, full of sweet wicked words
Babbled against mine own lips, and long hands
Spread out, and pale bright throat and pale bright breasts,
Fit to make all men mad. I do believe
This fire shall never quite burn out to the ash
And leave no heat and flame upon my dust 30
For witness where a man's heart was burnt up.
For all Christ's work this Venus is not quelled,
But reddens at the mouth with blood of men,
Sucking between small teeth the sap o' the veins,
Dabbling with death her little tender lips—

A bitter beauty, poisonous-pearlèd mouth.
I am not fit to live but for love's sake,
So I were best die shortly. Ah, fair love,
Fair fearful Venus made of deadly foam,
I shall escape you somehow with my death—
Your splendid supple body and mouth on fire
And Paphian breath that bites the lips with heat.
I had best die.

40

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A Ballad of Life

I found in dreams a place of wind and flowers,
Full of sweet trees and colour of glad grass,
In midst whereof there was
A lady clothed like summer with sweet hours.
Her beauty, fervent as a fiery moon,
Made my blood burn and swoon
Like a flame rained upon.
Sorrow had filled her shaken eyelids' blue,
And her mouth's sad red heavy rose all through
Seemed sad with glad things gone. 10

She held a little cithern by the strings,
Shaped heartwise, strung with subtle-coloured hair
Of some dead lute-player
That in dead years had done delicious things.
The seven strings were named accordingly:
The first string charity,
The second tenderness,
The rest were pleasure, sorrow, sleep, and sin,
And loving-kindness, that is pity's kin
And is most pitiless. 20

There were three men with her, each garmented
With gold and shod with gold upon the feet;
And with plucked ears of wheat
The first man's hair was wound upon his head:
His face was red, and his mouth curled and sad;
All his gold garment had
Pale stains of dust and rust.
A riven hood was pulled across his eyes;
The token of him being upon this wise
Made for a sign of Lust. 30

The next was Shame, with hollow heavy face
Coloured like green wood when flame kindles it.
He hath such feeble feet

They may not well endure in any place.
His face was full of grey old miseries,
And all his blood's increase
Was even increase of pain.
The last was Fear, that is akin to Death;
He is Shame's friend, and always as Shame saith
Fear answers him again.

40

My soul said in me; This is marvellous,
Seeing the air's face is not so delicate
Nor the sun's grace so great,
If sin and she be kin or amorous.
And seeing where maidens served her on their knees,
I bade one crave of these
To know the cause thereof.
Then Fear said: I am Pity that was dead.
And Shame said: I am Sorrow comforted.
And Lust said: I am Love.

50

Thereat her hands began a lute-playing
And her sweet mouth a song in a strange tongue;
And all the while she sung
There was no sound but long tears following
Long tears upon men's faces, waxen white
With extreme sad delight.
But those three following men
Became as men raised up among the dead;
Great glad mouths open and fair cheeks made red
With child's blood come again.

60

Then I said: Now assuredly I see
My lady is perfect, and transfigureth
All sin and sorrow and death,
Making them fair as her own eyelids be,
Or lips wherein my whole soul's life abides;
Or as her sweet white sides
And bosom carved to kiss.
Now therefore, if her pity further me,
Doubtless for her sake all my days shall be
As righteous as she is.

70

Forth, ballad, and take roses in both arms,
Even till the top rose touch thee in the throat
Where the least thornprick harms;
And girdled in thy golden singing-coat,
Come thou before my lady and say this;
Borgia, thy gold hair's colour burns in me,
Thy mouth makes beat my blood in feverish rhymes;
Therefore so many as these roses be,
Kiss me so many times.
Then it may be, seeing how sweet she is,
That she will stoop herself none otherwise
Than a blown vine-branch doth,
And kiss thee with soft laughter on thine eyes,
Ballad, and on thy mouth.

80

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Laus Veneris

Lors dit en plourant; Hélas trop malheureux homme et mauldict pescheur, oncques ne verrai-je clémence et miséricorde de Dieu. Ores m'en irai-je d'icy et me cacherai dedans le mont Horsel, en requérant de faveur et d'amoureuse merci ma doulce dame Vénus, car pour son amour serai-je bien à tout jamais damné en enfer. Voicy la fin de tous mes faicts d'armes et de toutes mes belles chansons. Hélas, trop belle estoit la face de ma dame et ses yeulx, et en mauvais jour je vis ces chouses-là. Lors s'en alla tout en gémissant et se retourna chez elle, et là vescu tristement en grand amour près de sa dame. Puis après advint que le pape vit un jour esclater sur son baston force belles fleurs rouges et blanches et maints boutons de feuilles, et ainsi vit-il reverdir toute l'escorce. Ce dont il eut grande crainte et moult s'en esmut, et grande pitié lui prit de ce chevalier qui s'en estoit départi sans espoir comme un homme misérable et damné. Doncques envoya force messaigers devers luy pour le ramener, disant qu'il aurait de Dieu grace et bonne absolution de son grand pesché d'amour. Mais oncques plus ne le virent; car toujours demeura ce pauvre chevalier auprès de Vénus la haulte et forte déesse ès flancs de la montagne amoureuse.

*Livre des grandes merveilles d'amour,
escript en latin et en françois par
Maistre Antoine Gaget. 1530.*

Laus Veneris

Asleep or waking is it? for her neck,
Kissed over close, wears yet a purple speck
Wherein the pained blood falters and goes out;
Soft, and stung softly—fairer for a fleck.

But though my lips shut sucking on the place,
There is no vein at work upon her face;
Her eyelids are so peaceable, no doubt
Deep sleep has warmed her blood through all its ways.

Lo, this is she that was the world's delight;
The old grey years were parcels of her might;
The strewings of the ways wherein she trod
Were the twain seasons of the day and night.

10

Lo, she was thus when her clear limbs enticed
All lips that now grow sad with kissing Christ,
 Stained with blood fallen from the feet of God,
The feet and hands whereat our souls were priced.

Alas, Lord, surely thou art great and fair.
But lo her wonderfully woven hair!

 And thou didst heal us with thy piteous kiss;
But see now, Lord; her mouth is lovelier.

20

She is right fair; what hath she done to thee?
Nay, fair Lord Christ, lift up thine eyes and see;
 Had now thy mother such a lip — like this?
Thou knowest how sweet a thing it is to me.

Inside the Horsel here the air is hot;
Right little peace one hath for it, God wot;
 The scented dusty daylight burns the air,
And my heart chokes me till I hear it not.

Behold, my Venus, my soul's body lies
With my love laid upon her garment-wise,
 Feeling my love in all her limbs and hair
And shed between her eyelids through her eyes.

30

She holds my heart in her sweet open hands
Hanging asleep; hard by her head there stands,
 Crowned with gilt thorns and clothed with flesh like fire,
Love, wan as foam blown up the salt burnt sands—

Hot as the brackish waifs of yellow spume
That shift and steam—loose clots of arid fume
 From the sea's panting mouth of dry desire;
There stands he, like one labouring at a loom.

40

The warp holds fast across; and every thread
That makes the woof up has dry specks of red;
 Always the shuttle cleaves clean through, and he
Weaves with the hair of many a ruined head.

Love is not glad nor sorry, as I deem;
Labouring he dreams, and labours in the dream,
Till when the spool is finished, lo I see
His web, reeled off, curls and goes out like steam.

Night falls like fire; the heavy lights run low,
And as they drop, my blood and body so 50
Shake as the flame shakes, full of days and hours
That sleep not neither weep they as they go.

Ah yet would God this flesh of mine might be
Where air might wash and long leaves cover me,
Where tides of grass break into foam of flowers,
Or where the wind's feet shine along the sea.

Ah yet would God that stems and roots were bred
Out of my weary body and my head,
That sleep were sealed upon me with a seal,
And I were as the least of all his dead. 60

Would God my blood were dew to feed the grass,
Mine ears made deaf and mine eyes blind as glass,
My body broken as a turning wheel,
And my mouth stricken ere it saith Alas!

Ah God, that love were as a flower or flame,
That life were as the naming of a name,
That death were not more pitiful than desire,
That these things were not one thing and the same!

Behold now, surely somewhere there is death:
For each man hath some space of years, he saith, 70
A little space of time ere time expire,
A little day, a little way of breath.

And lo, between the sundawn and the sun,
His day's work and his night's work are undone;
And lo, between the nightfall and the light,
He is not, and none knoweth of such an one.

Ah God, that I were as all souls that be,
As any herb or leaf of any tree,
As men that toil through hours of labouring night,
As bones of men under the deep sharp sea.

80

Outside it must be winter among men;
For at the gold bars of the gates again
I heard all night and all the hours of it
The wind's wet wings and fingers drip with rain.

Knights gather, riding sharp for cold; I know
The ways and woods are strangled with the snow;
And with short song the maidens spin and sit
Until Christ's birthnight, lily-like, arow.

The scent and shadow shed about me make
The very soul in all my senses ache;

90

The hot hard night is fed upon my breath,
And sleep beholds me from afar awake.

Alas, but surely where the hills grow deep,
Or where the wild ways of the sea are steep,
Or in strange places some where there is death,
And on death's face the scattered hair of sleep.

There lover-like with lips and limbs that meet
They lie, they pluck sweet fruit of life and eat;
But me the hot and hungry days devour,
And in my mouth no fruit of theirs is sweet.

100

No fruit of theirs, but fruit of my desire,
For her love's sake whose lips through mine respire;
Her eyelids on her eyes like flower on flower,
Mine eyelids on mine eyes like fire on fire.

So lie we, not as sleep that lies by death,
With heavy kisses and with happy breath;
Not as man lies by woman, when the bride
Laughs low for love's sake and the words he saith.

For she lies, laughing low with love; she lies
And turns his kisses on her lips to sighs, 110
To sighing sound of lips unsatisfied,
And the sweet tears are tender with her eyes.

Ah, not as they, but as the souls that were
Slain in the old time, having found her fair;
Who, sleeping with her lips upon their eyes,
Heard sudden serpents hiss across her hair.

Their blood runs round the roots of time like rain:
She casts them forth and gathers them again;
With nerve and bone she weaves and multiplies
Exceeding pleasure out of extreme pain. 120

Her little chambers drip with flower-like red,
Her girdles, and the chaplets of her head,
Her armlets and her anklets; with her feet
She tramples all that winepress of the dead.

Her gateways smoke with fume of flowers and fires,
With loves burnt out and unassuaged desires;
Between her lips the steam of them is sweet,
The languor in her ears of many lyres.

Her beds are full of perfume and sad sound,
Her doors are made with music, and barred round 130
With sighing and with laughter and with tears,
With tears whereby strong souls of men are bound.

There is the knight Adonis that was slain;
With flesh and blood she chains him for a chain;
The body and the spirit in her ears
Cry, for her lips divide him vein by vein.

Yea, all she slayeth; yea, every man save me;
Me, love, thy lover that must cleave to thee
Till the ending of the days and ways of earth,
The shaking of the sources of the sea. 140

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