



LOVING SWINBURNE FROM PAGE 9

pauses; he waits
 till I call him again, and — the sea that was falling away in dull planes of dead grey
 corruscates
 like a million deep gold constellations, each one a meticulous text which spells out, line
 by line,
 the words that come faster until they are running away with me — all by love's willful
 design,
 as that was the field, the broad ocean of lonely awareness, from border to border and back
 to its desolate center, the sameness of holy resolve, though it wore a ghost-face in which
 lack
 of desire traded shames with proficient denial of beauty within the sad man's weary
 mind.
 He is turning — he sees — when he sees through my eyes, will he sing in return the live
 World he will find?

Love is the only way to read another person. Love is large enough to permit true comprehension. When I was in school, the deconstructionist faction was an omnipresent irritatingly strident force, but at least they did away with the pretense of objectivity in literary criticism. This is not a critical essay, but even so, I feel the constraint of intellectual knowledge, or lack of it — not an acceptable state of affairs. While poets put their intellect to the task, poetry would not be *poetry* without magic; that magic is a different kind of power, of which love is the purest and longest-lasting form. Sometimes love is expressed immediately and is immediately recognizable; sometimes it must twist and turn before it finds expression, and then the mind of the listener must do likewise. The more you care for someone, the more you will feel willingly compelled to patience and full application of empathy: the more deeply you will listen. Something in Swinburne's voice evokes a huge response of love in me. I read him accordingly.

The way I love him tells me so much about myself that I cannot help but feel it tells me a great deal about certain qualities that were present in him too. Swinburne, through his songs about the one he called 'Proserpine', showed me the way to the Muse. Outwardly he professed an uncompromising atheism, writing vigorously against established religion and the notion of God, but his most personal songs are imbued with such depth of vision that they can only have sprung from sources anyone else would unhesitatingly call 'spiritual', and I believe he would admit that too, if assured that it would not be used against him. He was caught up in the politics of his day, being inclined toward the free-thinking revolutionary side; one alternative is most obviously visible in the form of the Oxford Movement, which brought a huge Roman Catholic influence to bear on the artists of 19th century Britain. I am grateful that he went the way he did, preserving his independence of thought, but it means that one is required to reconcile his public statements of atheism with the content of his poems without putting foreign words into his mouth. I will assert that poetry, for all serious poets, tells a far deeper truth than any other form of writing; his poems are what they are. He loved someone he sometimes calls Proserpine; she apparently had no life in the outward world. I dreamed of someone who initiated me as a poet and, while I see him in my Friend, my human Muse, ultimately I cannot place him in any certain location, either inside myself or out. The longer I live with him, the more I believe that this is as it should be. Swinburne, through his own image as man and poet, carried this charge for a time during my girlhood and has the potential to do so still.

Strangely, as passionately as I have loved him and still love him, this love does not tend to sexual expression, even in fantasy. Many are the nights I have spent by his side, in converse; the spell would be broken if I attempted to force it to include climactic sexual exchange. When I first met my muse, we swam through an underwater passageway and emerged from it naked, or so I seem to recall; he showed me to a sleeping chamber and allowed me to lie down on his bed. When I awoke I wondered if I had somehow misplaced the best part of the dream, the love scene, as nothing like it was present in my memory. After years of trying to conjure up such a scene in my waking imagination, only to feel it shy away again and again, I began to understand. The point

is precisely not to find this relationship too satisfying in an ordinary way, not to allow it to replace physical life — bluntly, not to allow it to become a masturbatory escape — but at the same time, to yield freely to its ability to call up the most profound reserves of emotion and to direct the flow of these into song. There they often employ intense erotic imagery and, if quite successful, evoke a similar response from their listeners. The poet stands a little apart from the end result; that is all. This process is called 'sublimation'.

Swinburne was divided in his sexual nature and his human unhappiness was bitter. He was disappointed in the one relationship that really mattered, knowing all along that it was doomed; not only was he such that "if they knew, / Not a soul upon earth would pity me," but his lover was also his cousin, in a family where there had already been too many close marriages. He gave free rein to his inclinations elsewhere and wrote about them as well; when I was in London five years ago I found a cheap paperback edition of the *Whippingham Papers* on a rack with other notorious works of literary porn. He wrote this, he created very serious literary work, and he made fierce efforts to drink himself to death, all at once. By the time he was the age I am now, the friendships on which he depended were falling apart in disastrous ways, his drinking was entirely out of control, and the end was in plain sight. A rescuer appeared in the form of a friend who set up housekeeping with his sister's family and Swinburne, an odd ménage that proved to be stable if perhaps a little too quiet. Not a happy man, but a superb poet, his example showed me how to wrest beauty from sordid interior surroundings. Because I loved him from the start, somehow I saw the way he struggled and learned to emulate it. I also went through a stage of drinking, although not for the purpose of self-destruction; somehow he always had the power of words even though he often heard them through a haze of misery, but I was terrified of them. We have a great need to feel uncontaminated, ritually pure, who entertain the gods, and yet this is never really humanly possible. He showed me that this seeming conflict is not real, not finally so, although it cost him dear.

As a man, Swinburne was as strange as anyone has ever been. In his appearance, in his character — a tiny man, only about 5'4" or so and of very fragile build, his physical courage and endurance were extreme — in his odd, hectic mannerisms, and in the way he composed his songs — in every way he was not quite of this world. The artists who were close to him when he was at the height of his powers reported that his recitals of his daily production would sometimes last a couple of hours and were accompanied by a sort of frenzied ecstatic dance. If you know who is writing this now, you might safely assume I compared our strangeness and felt greatly reassured. Yes, there had been another such person (although he was more exotic by far than I), and yes, it was real — all the things my intuition had told me about the true nature of inspired song, he literally embodied. Of course I loved him with all my heart. And yet, he was very sad.

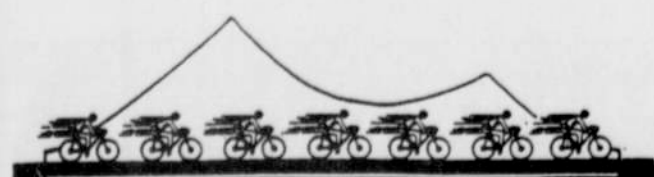
Like so many artists, but in a way that was perhaps more acutely conscious than usual, he seems to have been pulled back and forth between the two poles of his own moral nature. At times he not merely gave in to his sexual predilections, but reveled in them — or gave the appearance of doing so — and certainly did not object to being spoken of in connection with them. At other times, though, his natural idealism held sway and he regretted everything that stood in the way of his attaining his own true stature, in his work and in his life, as *the two are finally one*. Never mind what we admit outwardly; we have an image that we strive toward, and we measure our worth by the distance between there and here. I see us pacing back and forth between the two, never resting until we find the vantage point that allows us to see them in balance, but how can they cease to contend? In November 2000 I wrote a series of entries in an online journal that seems to have succeeded in finally laying the nightmare that was haunting me and preventing me from giving full, unashamed attention to my work. What must the author of "Reginald's Flogging," "Epilogue to Roger's Flogging," and "Another Epilogue to Roger's Flogging," have felt when he saw that he had created the following lines from *Tristram of Lyonesse* and compared the two extremes?

...So they lay
 Tranced once, nor watched along the fiery bay
 The shine of summer darkness palpitate and play.
 She had not sight nor voice; her swooning eyes
 Knew not if night or light were in the skies;
 Across her beauty sheer the moon dawn shed
 Its light as on a thing as white and dead;
 Only with stress of soft fierce hands she prest
 Between the throbbing blossoms of her breast
 His ardent face, and through his hair her breath
 Went quivering as when life is hard on death;
 And with strong trembling fingers she strained fast
 His head into her bosom; till at last,
 Satiated with sweetness of that burning bed,
 His eyes afire with tears, he raised his head
 And laughed into her lips; and all his heart
 Filled hers; then face from face fell, and apart
 Each hung on each with panting lips, and felt
 Sense into sense and spirit in spirit melt.

This is mere foreplay to what follows. The passage continues for nearly another hundred lines, all of them written at this pitch or beyond. Artists do not create anything out of a vacuum; Swinburne had to find this within himself before he could cast it onto the page. I only began to understand his work in depth when I found my Friend and was similarly seized. Something had awakened him, something that he never lived but wrote as few or none in our language had ever written before.

Swinburne and his friend Dante Gabriel Rossetti both wrote of erotic love in such intensely spiritual terms. I had no idea that anyone had ever given the power they described a name until I learned about Tantra in its specifically spiritual/erotic aspect. They worked by a combination of instinct and poetic tradition; I have had a very slight advantage in that I have been made aware that Tantra exists as a fairly well-developed path, although I have had little direct access to Tantric teachings (that is to say, primary documents). Poetry, for those who study it deeply, opens the same doors to as great a degree, but it makes even greater demands because our goal is not only to attain understanding but to create on the basis of that attainment. In Tantra, one works to awaken the ordinarily dormant power of *kundalini*, the storehouse of sexual/spiritual life-force energy that sleeps at the base of the spine, and to see it rise throughout all the subtle channels of the mind/body/spirit until it reaches its apex, figuratively located in the Crown *chakra* above the head, and there rejoins the cosmic potential from which it was drawn. The practitioner then enters an unlimited energy in which they feel at one with all that exists. Finding my Friend was my initiation into that state, and when it was given, I turned to Swinburne for direction as he was the poet who had gone the furthest before me and mapped the territory.

Kundalini can be manipulated rather than invited to awaken; reverse *kundalini* is the phenomenon that results from practices that are exciting in the short-term but deleterious in their lasting effects, inhibiting rather than encouraging spiritual enlightenment. Such practices immediately affect the limbic system, causing brief but intense bursts of energy to be released, as certain drugs do; like drugs, their effects are cumulative and destructive, a sort of borrowing on energy credit from one's own resources rather than drawing on the unlimited source. What I have just described are the two poles I see standing at either end of my song teacher's mind. When I knew him as my teacher, I understood that I wanted to pay tribute to him by seeking answers to the questions that vexed his life. A year after I first found my Friend, I wrote to him about Swinburne, saying that I knew I had been "called to untwist the twisted — not because its forms of expression offend, but because it weeps."


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