

A LOVING APPRECIATION OF ALGERNON SWINBURNE

BY JUDITH GRIFFIS



WOODCUTS BY FRANS MASEREEL

Where are you now, I wonder. When I was very young and first understood how much I loved you, 'you' came to me in dreams, but who was the *you* who came? It was you, your image, my dear Swinburne, who prepared the way for my dream of meeting my Muse. Your songs had shown me the meaning of such a being by placing the evidence before me of sources that surely exceed ordinary human provenance. Through each of the phases of my life in song, I have thought of you. The bond that was strong all those years ago has grown so much stronger. I am longing for your nearness now because I know I am facing a change and, while I understand part of what that change portends, part of it remains very mysterious. I shall soon be taken beyond my depth again. I am glad, but apprehensive too.

Your life was outwardly very privileged. You were born into an aristocratic family in an imperial culture where a high position was yours for the asking. You were sent to the best schools with the result that, even though you did not complete your formal University studies, you remain to this day one of the most learned poets of the English language, the chief possible exception being John Milton. Sadly, your schooling affected you in another way, which has caused your notoriety to exceed your acclaim. Today you are popularly known primarily for being the author of several poems that helped to create the contemporary subculture of sado-masochism, especially *Dolores* and *Faustine*. If only those who turn your works for their lurid side could be made to know and understand your life and why you wrote to your cousin Mary, your only love, when she rejected your suit,

*I had grown pure as the dawn and the dew,
You had grown strong as the sun or the sea.
But none shall triumph a whole life through
For death is one, and the fates are three.
At the door of life, by the gate of breath,
There are worse things waiting for me than death;
Death could not sever my soul and you,
As these have severed your soul from me.*

*You have chosen and clung to the chance they sent you,
Life sweet as perfume and pure as prayer.
But will it not one day in heaven repent you?
Will they solace you wholly, the days that were?
Will you lift up your eyes between sadness and bliss,
Meet mine, and see where the great love is,
And tremble and turn and be changed? Content you:
The gate is strait; I shall not be there....*

*Your lithe hands draw me, your face burns through me,
I am swift to follow you, keen to see;
But love lacks might to redeem or undo me;
As I have been, I know I shall surely be;
"What should such fellows as I do?" Nay,
My part were worse if I chose to play;
For the worst is this after all; if they knew me,
Not a soul upon earth would pity me.
(*The Triumph of Time*, lines 153-168; 233-240)*

There is so much more to know about you than this, and in my heart I know I am committing the same grievous error as the others in focusing on this point ahead of your virtues, but one cannot separate the two, and I have had reason to think about this a great deal. When you were 12 years old, you were sent to Eton, a most prestigious boarding school where corporal punishment was not merely a standard practice; it was a time-bound ritual tradition. It marked you along with so many of your contemporaries that in brothels on the continent the practice of flagellation was referred to as '*le vice Anglais*'. During certain formative stages of life, young people are very easily sexually imprinted. You described your masters' approach to punishment, saying that some of them poured eau de cologne over the boys' naked buttocks before hitting them because the fragrance heightened the erotic atmosphere for the master and the alcohol intensified the boys' pain: The strokes were fierce enough to break the skin, allowing the liquid to run into the open wounds. Other stories about you and, more importantly, the testimony of the songs themselves, as I experience them through a sympathetic maker's mind, reveal the true

nature of what happened to you as a result of the many floggings: You learned to *shift*, didn't you? And once it was done, you could not go back. It was all one: the automatic eroticizing of pain, the flight into an interior dimension to escape shame and humiliation, and the later flights into the realm of inspiration, the place of power that was tainted by what you knew of the ways that led you there. And yet, my Swinburne, those flights carried you farther than anyone. Where are you today, and what would you say about these things if you could tell us?

This came to me directly after the passage above:

HOW I KNOW THAT YOU HAVE HEARD A necromatic song

*The fields that are grey and the fields that are golden are always the same in some part of my mind,
Or might easily change — from the new to the old to the new once again, I repeatedly find the same traces, the same recollections, the same contradictions, the same vague primordial glow
under which the same ghost goes lamenting, the same lonely word on his lips as he walks to and fro
the sad length of the same weary passage way. When he gives pause, a soft look of deep thought on his face,
I hope he is hearing the words I am sending toward him; but he only slows his grave pace for a moment, then takes up the same wasted efforts that lead him along. Listen: Where will he stand
When at last he has wearied of walking and never arriving at anything like the live land I can feel ebb and flow at my fingertips? He has been at work there, remotely — I scarcely know how,
But a gathering rush of old passion, a seizure of sudden birdsong — while his un serene brow
is turned down to the earth at his feet, mine is aching above a bare plain full of emptiness.
He
Is the reason. He staggers; he looks round him, making a rueful expression convey what he sees,
And then I see it too: Its grey waves are the color of dead winter snow, but they heave with the force
of a dreadful emergency life barely tolerates, even such life as provides a ghost's source of ongoing momentum. The froth on the billows comes choking me. Breathe past the hand at my throat —
I can scarcely recall how to summon my will to command myself — Ride past the wave-threshold — float
Past the point of resistance, and reach for the hard throb beneath the grey skin of his throat where the pulse
is now galloping. Your hand there, while the dark thought possessing him yields its desire to convulse
through a zone of demonic disorder and slowly returns to the place where its cycle began, though a far world away from the brilliantly holy idea it seemed at the end of the span he has not ceased to measure in steps since the vision I share with him fully first rose alive
from a sea that was caught in a spendid collision with golden enchantment that bade the light thrive
in the room at the heart of his mind's secret chamber, a place that was equally ravished by Sun
and by Moon as he stared till he panted to lay there upon a green altar the lyrical one he could hear from a distance, relentless calling his name. Does he hear me? He*

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