Algernon Charles Swinburne as a revolutionary poet

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ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE
AS A REVOLUTIONARY POET

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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PREFACE

The writer's interest in the study of Swinburne as a revolutionary poet developed primarily as a result of study and research in Victorian literature and through a growing awareness of the various accounts of Swinburne as a rebel in English literature of the nineteenth century. Previously, very few studies, if any, have been devoted primarily to the elements of revolt in Swinburne's poetry. Therefore, this study is an attempt to examine this aspect of his poetry.

The first chapter treats the author's literary milieu and gives special consideration to Swinburne's position in it. The second chapter represents the writer's attempt to explicate some of the most important poems in Poems and Ballads (1866) and Songs before Sunrise as well as to point out certain rebellious ideas that are in evidence in order to validate the notion of rebellion or revolutionism in his poetry. The third chapter assesses his achievements as a revolutionary poet.

The writer wishes to express appreciation to Dr. Thomas D. Jarrett, whose guidance, suggestions and assistance were invaluable in the successful completion of this study. Sincere gratitude also goes to the writer's husband, Frederick, her children, Dierdre Valencia and Frederick, Jr., and especially to her grandmother, Mrs. Ella Robinson, for their patience and encouragement during the period leading up to the completion of this study.
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CHAPTER I

THE LITERARY MILIEU OF ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE

The years covering 1860-1880 have been designated as the Mid-Victorian Period. This era has been labeled as the most "bourgeois" of the three divisions of Victorian Literature. The middle class, as a result of the various reform bills, was now triumphant. "Everything was middle class, in idea, in standards, and in prejudices."¹ The middle class felt confident that it possessed the best of all possible societies, and it took that stand in dead seriousness.² The gospel of success was preached to every child; "thrift, character, duty and like virtues were instilled in the young as the necessities for any possibility for individual happiness."³ Professor Grebanier points out that:

Life, to this group was a survival of the fittest and God helped those who helped themselves. To be patriotic, happy, moral and successful required of the individual an unflagging pride . . . and an unflinching faith in industry and science to solve

²Ibid.
³Ibid.
the problems of society. The individual was to be a good church-goer and a strict follower of the standards for decency and respectability in society. 1

In the main, the literature of this period was either an absolute conformist writing, lauding and repeating the Victorian message of good cheer and optimism, or it was a literature of doubt and disillusion with that system. The essay was largely concerned with the application of science to society and to industry. In the area of poetry, Browning and Tennyson had written their best work, and the younger poets felt that they had little to lean upon in an industrial, humanitarian, scientific, and what they termed, "pedestrian," field for "aesthetic endeavor." For them the romanticism of Wordsworth and the earlier part of the century was dead, and in it no purposeful aim could be found. "The poets felt a need for a revival of color and imagination." 2 In this direction of mid-Victorian literature two divergent tendencies can be noted: tendencies of the Pre-Raphaelites, and the tendency of other writers to depart from the spiritual, moral, and ethical aspects of Victorian literature. Truly, the mid-Victorian era was an age of transition for poetry, but one which produced some interesting facets, facets which reflected a groping doubt and disillusion, a poetry torn away from an aristocratic banner to follow, and one which had to search in the darkness for a new democratic and human banner to tie to. 3

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2 Samuel C. Chew, Swinburne (Boston, 1929), p. 60.
3 Ibid.
Of the two diverging tendencies of mid-Victorian poetry, one facet is represented by the Pre-Raphaelites. This group chose to pin its faith on a new cult of medievalism in painting. The paintings defined nature in terms of early Italian Renaissance concepts held by painters before Raphael (1483-1520). This movement, then, was a new phase of romanticism and was largely begun to strike deep at the prevailing conventional methods in painting in the period. In poetry, the characteristics due to this cult were evidenced in a tendency toward presentation, symbolism, and a heightening of natural elements to create sensuous effects (by some critics, this cult was called "fleshly" poetry, and the adherents of its philosophy the "fleshly school"). This group devoted its attention to minute detail and to metrical elaboration. It flaunted and studiously avoided the conventional spiritual and moral qualities associated with Victorian poetry. In short, it was interested in "art for art's sake."

The leader of this group was Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and among his associates were William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, Thomas Woolner, William Michael and Christina Rossetti, William Morris and John Ruskin. The work of the "brotherhood" was attacked vehemently by the "Philistines" for its sensousness. To modern readers, however, the poetry of this group hardly seems shockingly pagan or even "fleshly," as labeled by Robert Buchanan in his vehement attack on the group; "it seems rather to be exotic,
colorful, romantic, and beautiful in its form and in its suggestion of the mystical and the remote from life.\(^1\)

On the other hand, the tendency toward revolt (not an organized movement or one associated with any other forms of art) was away from the spiritual, moral, and ethical aspects of Victorian life. This tendency, spearheaded by Edward Fitzgerald and Swinburne, took the form of pagan ideas, the leaning to a philosophy of improvidence and present pleasure as a goal. It was unconventional, daring, had fatalistic attitudes, and made deliberate attempts to shock the conventional elements of Victorian society. Professors Wood, Watt and Anderson aver that

They shocked conservative believers in immorality and thrilled the bold with their near eastern frankness and their spiced imagery. Fitzgerald gained his reputation through his work the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam. In about one hundred rubaiyats or quatrains he sets forth the doctrine of "enjoying the present and ignoring 'the rumble of a distant drum'."\(^2\)

Needless to say, this poetry which does not seem overly shocking to present-day readers, caused a furor of protest against the poets (however skilled they might have been) in this age.

In this era of diverging tendencies arose Algernon Charles Swinburne. Like Fitzgerald, he deviated from the norm of mid-Victorian literature, thus arousing prejudice against himself and his poetry by the unconventional nature of the

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\(^2\) Ibid.
subjects and the candidly pagan quality of his treatment of them.\(^1\) He rebelled against the restraints of conventionality and custom. In his personal views he was a rebel against every established convention of organized society. He loved liberty and would not conform to any form of orthodoxy.\(^2\) In his expression of hatred of tyranny and authority, he represented in his age another Shelley or Byron. By nature he was a rebel, and doubtless the "rebellious strain in his blood" was one of the forces which drew him toward Walter Savage Landor, an ardent supporter of Italian liberation.\(^3\)

In the dedicatory epistle to the collected works of his poems, Landor, Gieuseppe Mazinna and Victor Hugo were named as three gods of his worship. Hugh Walker points out that

>This rebelliousness was the guarantee that Swinburne would do nothing exactly as other men had done it, and it helps to explain the revolution which he began to work in Pre-Raphaelite poetry.\(^4\)

He also points out that

>He was a man with a threefold mission. In the first place, it was his function to wed classicism to romance. Secondly, he was destined to re-establish the vogue of French literature . . . In the third place, it was Swinburne's task to demonstrate the capacity of the English language for lyric measures, and to enlarge its resources to such a degree that there is


\(^{4}\)Ibid.
scarcely a hint from older poets undeveloped by him, while he furnishes the examples of many forms besides which are either original, or he has imported from foreign languages.1

Swinburne's interests were too diverse and too curious to ally himself with any one cult or idea.2 He did not remain permanently with the Pre-Raphaelites, nor did he continue to write in the same vein as he did in Poems and Ballads (First Series), Songs Before Sunrise and A Song of Italy. He was an eclectic, and in his works can be found enthusiasm for the Bible, Greek lyrical poetry, Greek drama, republicanism, medievalism, nihilism, anticlericalism, and radicalism of various types.3 These ideas are sometimes pronounced separately, and at other times we find the enmeshing of several. Nevertheless, this enumeration of ideas presents the diversity of his thought.

In this chapter, the writer has attempted to establish the literary atmosphere of mid-Victorian England, thereby establishing the necessary background for the treatment in Chapter II of the element or elements of revolt as evidenced in Swinburne's poetry. It has been noted that during this period two divergent tendencies in literature existed. The first tendency, represented by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, was characterized by pictorial presentation, symbolism and a heightening of natural elements to create sensuous effects;

1Ibid.

2Grebanier, op. cit., p. 691.

3Ibid.
and the second tendency, as represented by Fitzgerald and Swinburne, which was a deliberate attempt to deviate from the traditional spiritual, moral, and ethical aspects of Victorian life. Moreover, Chapter II will embrace an analysis of Swinburne's revolt as manifested in Poems and Ballads (1866) and Songs before Sunrise as well as his revolutionary ideas which were unnoted in two earlier works, Atalanta in Calydon and Chastelard.
CHAPTER II

ELEMENTS OF REVOLT IN SWINBURNE'S POETRY

Throughout Poems and Ballads and Songs before Sunrise can be detected the element of revolt or revolutionism, varying only in form and degree. Sometimes Swinburne's revolutionary ideas are centered around the theme of the ascent of humanity. Again it is manifested in the form of social protest. At times it takes on a political form.

Beyond the generalization given in the preceding paragraph regarding the revolutionary elements in Swinburne's poetry, the investigator has observed that he attacks specifically, such men as priests, since it is they who represent, in his judgment, political, social and religious tyranny. The very idea of tyranny prompted his immediate disgust and revolt, for tyranny was in direct opposition to love, equality and freedom. Thus, we see him in constant revolt against conventional modes of thought and behavior. Consequently, the church and the state (religion and politics), the very source and authority of much of the evil in the world, are continually attacked. All of Swinburne's attacks on what he considered the evils of society and/or the world may be attributed to his love for mankind and his desire for new world order.

The manner in which Swinburne treats lust and love, death, and the Hericliteanism of the poems in Poems and Ballads
contributed toward his reputation as a rebel in mid-Victorian literature. Although this reputation was based solely on Poems and Ballads, it is of interest to note that some of the same elements which were picked out for criticism in the above works were also present in two of his earlier works, Atalanta in Calydon and Chasterlard.

Mid-Victorian England recognized two categories of passion: love and lust. To them lust was sinful and punished in hell, but it was reported to have pleasant aspects. Swinburne described lust with "licentious frankness," but instead of calling attention to its joys, he associated it with pain, satiety and death. This element is seen in "Faustine," "Felise," "The Garden of Proserpine," as well as in "Laus Veneris," "Delores," and "A Ballad of Life," which were included in Poems and Ballads.

In "Laus Veneris" the knight, on talking to Venus, gives the result of loving:

Alas! for sorrow is all the end of this
0 sad kissed mouth, how sorrowful it is!
0 breast whereat some suckling sorrow clings,
Red with the bottom blossom of a kiss!2
And in "Dolores," Swinburne says, "Ah, feed me and fill me with pleasure, Ere pain come in turn."3 In the same poem the investigator notes the same idea again.

1Granville Hicks, Figures of Transition (New York, 1939), p. 56.

2Clyde K. Hyder, The Best of Swinburne (New York, 1937), "Laus Veneris," lines 9-12, p. 32. All subsequent poetry, unless otherwise stated, will be taken from this source, and will be referred to by title only.

3"Dolores," ll. 8-9, p. 92.
No thorns go as deep as a rose's
And love is more cruel than lust
Time turns the old days to derision,
Our lover into corpses or wives;
And marriage and death and division
Make barren our lives.1

The employing of images connected with sensuous literature makes "A Ballad of Life" itself human flesh. Here Swinburne says:

Forth ballad, and take roses in both arms
Even till the top rose touch thee in the throat
Where the least thornpick harms;
And girdled in the golden singing-coat
Come thy before my lady and say this;
Borgia, thy gold hair's colour burns in me,
Thou 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 thine mouth.2

Borgia in the above quoted lines refers to Lucretia Borgia, who was noted for her beauty, charm, and scandalous conduct. The mere fact that her name was mentioned threw a shadow of sensuality over the poem.

Thus, in "Dolores," as well as the other poems of this group, readers were disturbed by the anatomical frankness of Swinburne in his reference to "quivering flanks," "splendid supple thighs," "white arms and bosoms," "scourged white breast," "ravenous teeth," "blushes of amourous blows," and "bruised lips." Thus the language employed and the

1Ibid., ll. 23-38, p. 95.

treatment of love and lust in these poems caused some of the Victorians to lash out with words of discontent, whereas the younger generation revelled in the lines of "Dolores." Such a treatment of lust and love as this was in direct opposition to mid-Victorian thinking, and as a result, indignation rolled across the British Isles.

In addition to the ambiguous treatment of love and lust, there is a strong pagan, anti-Christian undertone as well as a sexuality of a sadistic sort found in the poems of 1866.¹ In these poems "crueller than God" is a term of comparison, God being a name for the Supreme Being of Christian or Heathen.² But the "pale Galilean" is also accused and his end foretold; in spite even of his power when it was yet new, the worshipper of proserpina could for a while or moment cease to lament and say:³

Wilt thou yet take all Galilean? but these thou shalt not take, The laurel, the palms and the paens, the breast of the nymphs in the broke; Breast more soft than a dove's that tremble with tenderer breath; And all the wings of the doves, and all the joy before death . . . ⁴

This same theme is found in "Dolores" also. The poet asks "What ailed us, O Gods, to desert you/For creeds

²Thomas, op. cit., p. 75.
³"Hymn to Proserpine," ll. 30-35, p. 58.
⁴Ibid., ll. 14-17, p. 57
that refuse and restrain?"1 And again in "Laus Veneris" the knight of Venus compares Venus with Christ: "Alas, Lord, surely thou art great and fair/but lo, her wonderfully woven hair."2

In Poems and Ballads death is looked to for relief from "too much love of living"; and in some of the most celebrated lines the poet thanks "whatever Gods may be" that in Proserpina's domain there shall be "a sleep eternal in an eternal night."3 Swinburne's hostility toward Christianity takes the form of the accusation that "Christianity is hostile to the principle of beauty."4

Thou has conquered, 0 pale Galilean;  
The world has grown grey from thy breath;  
We have drunken on things Lethean,  
And fed on the fullness of death.5

The paganistic idea set forth in "Hymn to Proserpine" is entirely novel.6 In this poem Swinburne attempts to express the feeling of Julian, a Roman pagan living during the time when Christianity was first declared the religion of the empire, and despairing because of the destruction of the older religion of the gods whom he loved. By law Christianity had been made the state-religion, and it was forbidden

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1 "Dolores," ll. 1-2, p. 99  
2 "Laus Veneris," ll. 17-18, p. 32  
3 Chew, op. cit., p. 85.  
4 Ibid.  
5 "Hymn to Proserpine," ll. 4-5, p. 59.  
to worship the other gods; Julian refuses to become a Christian, even after an impartial study of the Christian doctrine. On the contrary, he is so unhappy at the fate of the religion of his fathers that he does not live any longer without his gods. And he prays to death to take him out of this world, from which all the beauty and art, and all the old loved customs and beliefs are departing. Julian thinks of God as a conquerer and destroyer of beauty. He also feels that the Christian religion is one of death, not of life. To him, Christ is no more than a vulgar common criminal executed by Roman law in company with thieves and murderers. Therefore he addresses such a divinity with scorn, even in the hour of his triumph:

O lips that the live blood faints in,
the leavings of rocks and rods!
O ghastly glories of saints, dead limbs
of gibbeted Gods!
Tho all men abase them before you in
spirit, and all knees bend,
I kneel not, neither adore you, but
standing look at the end!2

The world of death is also described as being one where no sun is, where the silence is more than music, where the flowers are white and full of strange sleepy smell, and where the sound of the speech of the dead is like the sound of water heard faraway.3 Death is thought of as either the final cruelty or the final release. There is no joy in Swinburne's tone of speaking about the mystery of death;

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1Ibid., p. 155ff.


3Hearn, op. cit., p. 160.
rather we find ourselves listening to the tone of the ancient Epicureans, in the time when faith was declining and when philosophy attempted without success to establish a religion of duty based upon pure ethics.

Another idea or doctrine underlying Poems and Ballads is Heracliteanism. It sets forth the belief that all things are flux and that nothing remains. The dramatic monologue of the "Hymn of Proserpine," sung by an Epicurean after the proclamation of Christianity at Rome gives the best example of this doctrine. Proserpine is illustrated as the goddess of change; she has overcome Olympus. In the end she will conquer Christianity.

Ye are gods, and behold, ye shall die, and the waves be upon you at last. In the darkness of time, in the deeps of years, in the changes of things, Ye shall sleep as a slain man sleeps, and the world shall forget you for kings.

Thou art more than the gods who number the days of our temporal breath; For these give labor and slumber: But thou, Proserpinadeath.¹

The thought in these lines, which was out of keeping with much of the thought of the time, was in line with much of the poetry of the later century. Meredith accepts this philosophy of change joyfully as an augury of life, but Swinburne hymns it with solemn exultation as though he were the hierophant of the destroying goddess, Proserpine.²

¹"Hymn to Proserpine," ll. 16-18, p. 60. 9-10, p. 62.
²Chew, op. cit., p. 95.
The investigator feels safe in saying that the poems which were included in *Poems and Ballads* were in essence hymns of defiance, gestures of liberation, and paens of revolt which were enmeshed with sensuality, satiety and paganism. It took a person of unusual courage to attempt such writing during a period guarded by prudent Victorians. Swinburne was of such a nature, and as Professor Hearn succinctly points out in one of his lectures on Swinburne concerning the conception of *Poems and Ballads*,

A great idea suddenly hit him, and he resolved to put it into execution. This idea was nothing less than an attempt to obtain for English poetry the same liberty enjoyed by French poetry . . . to obtain the right of absolute liberty of expression in all directions, and to provoke the contest with such a bold stroke as never has been dared before.¹

This idea was executed, and as a result he produced the first series of *Poems and Ballads*, which made him more notorious than any poet subsequent to Byron.² Professor Grierson asserts that

Never since "Venus and Adnois," "Hero and Leander," and the "Songs and Sonnets" of John Donne had the passion of the senses been presented with such daring frankness; and with equal frankness, and but little dramatic disguise, the anti-theism of the other poem/Atalanta/ was chanted in the "Hymn of Proserpine" and other pieces.³

And, Professor Welby candidly states that

He broke in on that rather agreeably tedious Victorian tea-party with the effect of some

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¹Hearn, *op. cit.*, p. 128.
²Welby, *op. cit.*, p. 17.
pagan creature, at once impish and divine, leaping on to the lawn, to stamp its goat-foot in challenge, to deride with its screech of laughter the admirable decorum of the conversation.\(^1\)

The appearance of these poems caused literary England to go into paroxysms, especially after John Morley's lengthy and extremely hostile criticism which appeared in the *Saturday Review*. According to this article of August, 1866, Swinburne was labeled as

'an unclean fiery imp from the pit, the libidinous laureat of a pack of satyrs ...'.\(^2\)

The prevailing spirit of the poems was also defined as "'the feverish carnality of a schoolboy over the dirtiest passages in Lempriere.'"\(^3\)

Sir Edmund Gosse, in the official biography of Swinburne, described the reverberating sensation provoked by *Poems and Ballads* by means of an extended metaphor.

... we see the unquestioned genius of Tennyson (then poet laureate) in 1862 acting as a upas tree in English poetry, a wide-spreading and highly popular growth beneath whose branches true imagination withered away. Propriety had prevailed; and, once more to change our image, British poetry had become a beautiful guarded park, in which, over smoothly shaven lawns, where gentle herds of fallow deer were grazing, thrushes sang very discreetly from boughs of ancestral trees; and where there was not a single object to be seen or heard which could offer the very smallest discomfort to the feelings of the most refined mid-Victorian gentlewoman.\(^4\)

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\(^1\) Welby, op. cit., p. 30


\(^3\) Ibid.

The metaphorical description continues:

Into this quiet park, to the infinite alarm of the fallow deer, a young Bacchus was now preparing to burst in the company of a troop of Maenads, and to the accompaniment of cymbals and clattering kettle-drums.

When Swinburne turned from the defiance of the current moral code to defiance of prevailing political opinion, he spoke with the same belligerence. It was not until the year after *Poems and Ballads* appeared (1867) that he became the avowed bard and prophet of worldwide republicanism and/or Italian freedom.

By no means was Swinburne the first English writer to take up the cause of Italian freedom.\(^2\) Byron and Shelley were among those who made England cognizant of Italy and her problems.\(^3\) Unlike these two, Browning was interested in Italian art, letters and characters, whereas Mrs. Browning's interest was primarily political.\(^4\) Therefore, as Professor Chew points out

Enthusiasm for Italy had, then been part of the endowment of nearly all later poets: her romantic past and present desolation, her glorious aspirations, and noble struggle, her splendid literature and consummate art. . . . \(^5\)

The republicanism of Swinburne can be seen in his hatred of professed tyrants and destroyers of liberty.

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\(^1\) *Ibid.*  
\(^2\) *Chew, op. cit.*, p. 96.  
Professor Chew considered Swinburne "a flaming symbol of emancipation, the very wine of heresy. . . ."¹ The republican sentiment of his Oxford years is expressed forcibly in "A Song in Time of Order," and "A Song in Time of Revolution." Although he became noted by the exotic freedom of Poems and Ballads, his Songs before Sunrise showed an interest in "a deeper, more permanent form of liberty, political revolution."²

Swinburne's enthusiasm for Mazzini and the Italian Risorgimento dominated Songs before Sunrise.³ He opposed priests and kings, admired Hugo and Shelly (both had similar ideas concerning kings, priests, tyranny, etc.), hated Napoleon III and wanted a republic. Professor Hearn states that his views of government, about fraternity and equality, about liberty in all matters of thought and action, were heresies for the strictly scientific mind.⁴

His ideas on liberty and republicanism are clearly seen in "Hymn of Man," "On the Downs," "Prelude," to Songs before Sunrise and "Ode to Victor Hugo." Swinburne attributed "A Song in Time of Order" to three republicans living at the time when reaction had followed the revolts of 1848 in Italy. To them he says:

Push hard across the sand,
For the salt wind gathers' breath;

¹Ibid., p. 73.
²Parrot, op. cit., p. 250.
³Loc. cit.
⁴Hearn, op. cit.
Shoulder and wrist hand
Push hard as the push of death. ¹

and in the "Ode to Victor Hugo" there is an assertion of the
independence of the human spirit which points forward to

Songs before Sunrise:

Yea, one thing more than this,
We know that one thing is,
The splendor of the spirit without blame,
That not the labouring years,
Blind-born, nor any fears,
Nor men nor any gods can tire or tame;
But purer power with fury breath
Fills and exalts above gulfs of death.²

This idea is to be one of the unifying elements in Songs
before Sunrise.

Swinburne's hatred for ecclesiastical tyranny is
shown in the following lines:

The herds of kings and their hosts and the
flocks of the high priests bow
To a master whose face is a ghost's; O
thou that wast God, is it thou?

By the children that asked at thy thorn of
the priests that there were fat with thine
hire
For bread, and thou gavest a stone; for light,
and thou madest fire.³

Parrot states that this poem is moving with its hatred of
ecclesiastical tyranny and its faith in human capacities.⁴

In "Prelude" and "On the Downs" Swinburne's meta-
physical position about the soul and his declaration of the

² "Ode to Victor Hugo," ll. 31-38, pp. 90-91.
³ "Hymn of Man," ll. 7-8, p. 177, 17-18, p. 177.
⁴ Parrot, op. cit., p. 59.
divinity of man are set forth. Some writers have tended to link him with Whitman with respect to their metaphysical points of view. According to Swinburne's philosophy, man has no god. He makes his own gods; he has never had a creator of a god of any kind. He has no divine help, no one to pray to, no one to trust except himself. Swinburne states in "Prelude,"

Because man's soul is man's God still,
What wind so ever waft his will across the waves of night and day.

Whence only man hath strength to steer
Or helm to handle, without fear.
Save his own soul's light overhead,
None leads him, and none ever led,
Across birth's hidden harbour bar,
Past youth where shoreward shadows are,
Through age that drives on toward the red vast void of sunset hailed from far,
To the equal waters of the dead;
Save his own soul he hath no star,
And sinks, except his own soul guide,
Helmless in middle turn of tide.¹

The declaration of the divinity of man is "a doctrine which is well known to the students of Comte."² Swinburne expresses the idea in this way:

No light to lighten and no rod
To Chasten men? Is there no God?
So girt with anguish, iron-zoned,
Went my soul weeping as she trod
Between the men enthroned
And men that groaned.

Who knows what life and death are worth,
And how no help and no control
Can speed or stay things come to birth,
Nor all worlds' wheels that roll
Crush one born soul.

²Loc. cit.
With all her tongues of life and death,
With all her bloom and blood and breath,
In the ear of man the mother saith,
"There is no God, 0 son,
If thou be none." 1

On reading these lines, one might readily assume that
the poet is talking about individual divinity, but Professor
Hearn notes that he is speaking of

a universal divinity expressing itself in human
thought and feeling. His view of life is that the
essential thing is to live as excellently as
possible. . . . 2

Although Songs before Sunrise was not attacked as
Poems and Ballads, and no charge of indecency could be brought
by the malevolent because of its ethical loftiness, it shocked
the traditional conservatism of the time even more. According

ing to Professor Hearn

Its profession of republicanism might have
been passed over had it not been combined with
attacks—for as they were taken—on the most
cherished English beliefs and institutions. . . . 3

Taken collectively, Songs before Sunrise reflects the inspir-
ation of Victor Hugo, Landor, and Whitman, but far more that
of Shelley and Mazzini, whom, as Swinburne himself said, he
loved and revered above all men on earth. The volume glori-
fies the "Universal Republic," Italy, as the hope of the
nations, and the collective life of Humanity as a divine
being.

2Hearn, op. cit., p. 134.
3Ibid.
Since the main body of this research is to be concerned with the elements of revolt in Poems and Ballads and Songs before Sunrise, the investigator, at this point, wishes to point out some of the elements of revolt in Poems and Ballads and Songs before Sunrise that are found in the dramas, Atalanta in Calydon and Chasteland.

Atalanta in Calydon, which is based on the ancient Greek legend of the Calydonian boar hunt, is permeated with revolt against the tyranny of creeds and "against the gods with their instruments of death and decay." The spirit in which this drama is written is the modern spirit of revolt against religious acquiescence in the will of Heaven accepted by Greek tragedy. The cause which it pleads is that of "the holy spirit of man" against the tyranny of "the gods who divide and devour." Its sympathy is with the beauty and strength of life and nature, and its burden is a complaint against the "supreme evil/God/" whose weapons are death and decay.

Also, in keeping with Shelley's audacious reversal of the principles of good and evil, as typified in The Revolt of Islam by the conflict between the eagle of tyranny and the serpent of freedom, Swinburne denounced the binding spell of creeds with a free appropriation of the august language of the charms with which that spell had been woven around the heart of the nations.

1 Anderson, op. cit., 1006.
A denunciation of God is also evident in this drama, just as it is in *Poems and Ballads*. In the dialogue of Swinburne's virginal chorus the following words are heard:

Who turns the large limbs to a little flame
And binds the great sea with a little sand;
Who makes desire, and slays desire with shame;
Who makes the heaven as ashes in his hand;
Who seeing the light and shadow for the same,
Bids day waste night as fire devours a brand
Smited without sword, and scourges without rod;
The supreme evil, God. . . .
Lo, with ephemeral lips and casual breath,
At least we witness of thee ere we die
That these things are not otherwise, but thus;
That each man in his heart sigheth and saith,
That all men, even as I,
All we are against thee, against thee,
O God most high.2

In these lines there is a defiance which is very extreme, and according to Professor Chew "no Greek . . . would have dared this extremity of defiance."3 Such an arraignment of God was a direct and serious challenge to the religious ideas of the time. Nevertheless, this went unnoticed or not detected by the readers as well as most critics of the time. However, Professors Wood, Watt and Anderson point out that the shock that he gave to Victorian England would have come earlier in *Atalanta in Calydon* if it had not been that the paganism of the drama was in harmony with the remote story.4

On the other hand, in *Chastelard*, which was the beginning of a trilogy on Mary Stuart, Swinburne made "God

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1Chew, *op. cit.*, p. 61.
2Quoted in *Ibid*.
3*Ibid*.
look undoubtedly small beside lust, not to speak of love."¹ The direct and outspoken passion in this work caused low growlings of "British prudery." The treatment of love in this work shocked the admirers of Tennyson and Patmore with its code and manner of love. Professor Welby states that upon its publication

The Victorians were disappointed at the treatment of love found there after a long experience of poems of love by Tennyson in which the lover of old time had been presented as Victorians actuated by the impulses of latter-day chivalry and controlled by a nice sense of what modern society expected of ladies and gentlemen.²

Thus, it is safe to say that Chastelard is controlled by a prevailing tone of sensuality, that the theme is predominantly sensuous, and that it/the play/ contains in superabundance "soft things to feed sin's amorous mouth upon."

The ideas of the sensuality and the revolt against the tyranny of creeds in Atalanta in Calydon and Chastelard came as a foreshadowing of the ideas expressed and/or treated in Poems and Ballads and Songs before Sunrise.

Notwithstanding the ideas expressed in the two dramas, the publication of Poems and Ballads (1866), and the frenzied amourousness of the poems included shocked Victorian England to the core. In these poems, Swinburne's readers were alarmed by his "ambiguous attitude toward passion."

³Ibid.
the strong pagan, anti-Christian tone, open sexuality of a sadistic sort, the treatment of love, and Heracliteanism.
CHAPTER III

SWINBURNE'S ACHIEVEMENT AS A REVOLUTIONARY POET

Much has been written about the position which should be assigned to Swinburne among England's great poets. No poet in modern literature has provoked a greater difference of opinion among critics than in the case of Swinburne. In general, it may be said that those critics who have placed emphasis on the musical element in poetry have regarded him as one of the greatest English poets of the time, while those who searched for depth and originality of thought found him of little interest. In the light of these diverse opinions, the investigator wishes in this final chapter to assess Swinburne's achievement as a writer of revolutionary verse by means of an examination of the critical estimates by critics during and after the death of Swinburne.

No two individuals are bestowed with the same characteristics. Therefore, if one person excels in an area that is distinct from the ordinary trend, it does not necessarily mean that the person is a failure. Rather, it seems that he should be acclaimed for the thing or things which demand merit. It is this individuality which served as a catalyst for much of the unfavorable criticism against Swinburne. His varied use of meter and diction were the two main agents which served as a primary source for much of his criticism.
Therefore, the task which the writer has assigned herself in this chapter is that of pointing out those elements which contributed to his reputation as one of England's most lyrical poets.

There is no question concerning the quality of Swinburne's poetry, or of its important position in the evolution of English literary form. It may be said safely that he revolutionized the whole system of metrical expression. He found English poetry "bound in the bondage of the iambic; he left it revelling in the freedom of the choriambus, the dactyl and the anapestic."  

The service which Swinburne rendered to the English language as a vehicle for lyrical effect is simply incalculable. E. C. Stedman maintains that

Before the advent of Swinburne we did not realize the full scope of English verse. The range of his fantasies, roulades, arias, new effects of measure and sound, is incomparable with anything hitherto known.

He notes that the

... freedom and richness of his diction, the susurrus of his rhythm, his unconscious alliteration, the endless change of his syllabic harmonies—resulting in the alternate softness and strength, height and fall ... of his affluent verse was something new to English prosody.

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2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
5 Ibid., 586.
Arthur Waugh, in his assessment of Swinburne as a lyrical poet, asserts that the

... sweet singer who charmed and shocked the audiences of 1866, charms us, if he shocks us not now, by the virtue of the one new thing that he imported into English poetry, the unique and yet imperishable faculty of musical possibilities hitherto unattained. There is no such music in all the range of English verse, seek where you will, as there is in him.¹

Similarly, Saintsbury declares that

Every weapon and every sleight of the English poet—equivalence and substitution, alternation and repetition, rhymes and rhymeless suspension of sound, volley and check of verse, stanza construction, line and pause—moulding, foot conjunction and contrast—this poet knows and uses them all. ... little in the whole range of English poetry, since Chaucer ... that he did not know.²

And The Nation maintained a few days after Swinburne's death that "... there was music, a riot of rhythmical sound, which for almost two centuries had not been heard in England."³

From the foregoing criticism, it would seem that Swinburne revolutionized English poetry and surpassed all other writers of his time as far as the writing of lyrical poetry and the usage of different metrical forms were concerned. According to Robert Fletcher, he surpassed Browning and Tennyson when it came to the diversity of

¹Arthur Waugh, "Reticence in Literature," The Yellow Book, I (April, 1894), 213.
of meters used. Swinburne employed about four hundred and twenty forms, including about half a dozen irregular movements. In addition to these, his work includes fourteen forms in Latin and French. His remarkable numerical superiority has been attributed to his "irrepresible facility in the use of minor devices of variation." He has also been credited with writing thirty-eight varieties of roundels (the difference is sometimes only in the refrains) and twenty varieties of ballads, besides two of double ballades.

As an artist in verse he takes a unique position. He invented many new rhythmic forms, and used none of the old without developing "new beauties." The fact that he wrote in practically all of the English measures that had been employed and invented many of his own places him in a very distinct position.

Swinburne's miraculous gift of rhythm and his command over the unsuspected resources of language helped him to excel any poet living during his time. Professor Woods and others point out that "certainly no other Victorian poet—not even Tennyson when most musical—had Swinburne's sustained

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1 Robert Huntington Fletcher, "The Metrical Forms Used by Certain Victorian Poets," JEGP, VII (June, 1908), 87.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid., p. 90.
4 Ibid., p. 91.
power of creating melody in words."¹ Tennyson acknowledged this power when he said: "Swinburne is a reed through which all things blow into music."² Peck further states that Swinburne had the trick of tinkling syllables. He could pour them out at will whether in his Greek choral odes . . . in his songs of the sea, or in his eulogies of those whom he admired.³

Swinburne was first and last an artist; he did not aspire to be a philosopher, but was content to be a singer. And, as Professor Woods states

It was as a singer that he made his greatest contribution to English literature. . . . as a lyric poet he was a major figure. He has been criticized indeed for drawing so much attention to the siren-quality of his verse that his readers forget to look for his thought. Perhaps this thought—if it be one—is not to his discredit, for the very criticism is an admission that Swinburne was the most lyrical of Victorian poets.⁴

The lyrical quality of Swinburne's poetry is accelerated by his use of alliteration, resonance, assonance, and internal and triple rhyme. His poems represent some of the finest in lyrical poetry. The music of his verse was as new to English ears as the subject-matter.⁵ He carried

²Quoted in Ibid.
⁴Woods and others, op. cit.
poetry towards a practical recognition of its strictly musical
basis,\textsuperscript{1} and as a result his poems display rhythmic splendors
which no other English poet has surpassed and lyrics of such
exquisite music that they touch the ultimate limits of verbal
felicity.\textsuperscript{2} Language had a new sound on his lips, thereby
revealing his almost magical command of the resources of
language. Many of the poems display full command over sound
combinations and rhythmical expedients that produce "buoyant
and swelling marches." Ruth Zabriske Temple avers that "the
rapid meter and verbal abundance" of his poetry "give an
effect of ceaseless change and motion."\textsuperscript{3} The Outlook further
states that

Swinburne had marvelous facility in the use of
language; he was a linguist of extraordinary
fluency; a master not only of the potencies but
of the sorceries of words. . . . He had the di-
thyrambic power beyond all other English poets;
there were times when the god seemed to possess
him and he rioted in a kind of delirious music
like the votaries of Bacchus when the madness
seized them. When Atalanta appeared, England
heard music of a sweep and resonance that re-
called the masters of the seventeenth century;
the sense of richness and spaciousness which
had been largely lost in the lyrical rhythm of
the Victorian poets.\textsuperscript{4}

Swinburne's classical scholarship was undoubted; and
it was accompanied by acquaintance with the whole range of
French literature at least among modern and medieval tongues,
Thus he possessed, as hardly anybody "since Gray, the three

\textsuperscript{1}C. E. Russell, "Swinburne and Music," North American
Review, CLXXXVI (1907), 428.
\textsuperscript{2}"A Modern Rhhapsodist," The Outlook, XCI (April, 1909),
912.
\textsuperscript{3}Ruth Zabriske Temple, The Critic's Alchemy (New York,
\textsuperscript{4}"A Modern Rhhapsodist," op. cit., p. 910.
arms—the horse, foot and artillery—of classical, English, and foreign verse and letters generally.\textsuperscript{1}

No one did more to free English literature from the shackles of formalism; no one, among his contemporaries, pursued the poetic calling with so sincere and resplendent an allegiance to the claims of absolute and adulterated poetry. Swinburne always remained an artist absorbed in lyrical ecstasy, a singer and not a seer. Whatever may be said of his intellectual and moral limitations, as a technical master of verse, as a musician in words, he was a great poet.\textsuperscript{2} Especially in the more rapid and impetuous rhythms was he able to extend the boundaries of his craft, and to enter regions of verse-music unknown before. For a union of "splendor and speed" his poetic style is unequalled by any other poet of the Victorian period. His diffuseness and over-ornamentation result from his tendency to clothe trivial thoughts in sweeping and resounding phrase. In the whole range of English poetry, the investigator feels secure in saying that no other maker of verse has shown such freedom, originality, and invention in the handling of rhyme, such skill in consonantal harmony, such feeling for the relative values of the open and closed vowels as Swinburne. This, the investigator believes, substantiates the title of "the greatest singer England ever bore."

\textsuperscript{1}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{2}Hyder and Chase, \textit{op. cit.}, p. xxiii.
SUMMARY

In the preceding chapters the writer has attempted to establish the literary milieu of Swinburne, to show how the elements in his poetry were of a revolutionary nature, and to point out his achievement as a revolutionary poet.

By way of recapitulation it may be noted that the period in which Swinburne wrote, the Mid-Victorian period, was the most "bourgeois" of the three divisions of Victorian literature. The literature of this period either lauded and repeated the Victorian message of good cheer and optimism, or it showed doubt and disillusion with that system.

During this period essay writers were mainly concerned with how science could be applied to society and industry. As far as poetry was concerned, Browning and Tennyson had written their best work, and the younger poets felt that they had little to which they might look forward in such an industrial, humanitarian and scientific field for "aesthetic endeavor." The young writers felt that the romanticism of Wordsworth and the earlier part of the century was dead. It therefore held no purposeful aim for them. These poets, therefore, wished and longed for a revival of color and imagination.
With this idea in mind, we see mid-Victorian literature embracing two distinct tendencies: tendencies represented by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and the tendency of others (Swinburne and Fitzgerald) to depart from the spiritual, moral and ethical aspects of Victorian literature. As a whole, this period was an age of transition in poetry, although it produced some interesting facets—facets which displayed a groping doubt and disillusion. Perhaps no century was more conscious of its moral inhibitions than the nineteenth. Perhaps, too, this is the measure of its aesthetic achievement: great art is in its essence revolutionary, and in order to revolt there must be something to rebel against. The grand moralities, the consciousness of an ordered world progressing evenly towards the power and the glory of an undefined Utopia, formed a citadel of complacency which the eccentric was irresistibly impelled to breach. It is this practice which Swinburne rebelled against.

The artist tends to be maladjusted. His sensitivity alone forbids him to accept unquestioned society's rules and taboos, its standards and ethics; for him its synthesis is either too exclusive or inclusive. According to his temperament and capacity, he seeks, consciously or not, to create a synthesis of his own. In most instances it is a rival one. He becomes a revolutionary, and society reacts with the brutality engendered by fear. As a result of this intensified fear, society hits out wildly in a crisis of self-perservation. It is in this position that the investigator finds Swinburne.
Chapter II attempts to point out the revolutionary elements which were evident in *Poems and Ballads* (1866) and *Songs before Sunrise* that gained for him the reputation of being a rebel in Victorian literature. His revolutionism can be divided into two different areas: political-social and the revolt against the conventional formalism of poetry. The first area is manifested in his dislike and distaste for priests and kings. It has been observed that he attacked specifically priests and kings because in his estimation they represented the epitome of political, social and religious tyranny. The second area is manifested in the manner which he treated such subjects as lust, love, passion, and death.

In *Poems and Ballads* he deliberately and ostentatiously repudiated those ideas of character and conduct which the modern world cherishes as its hardest won heritage from centuries of Christianity. Thus Swinburne went back to paganism for his inspiration, not too often to the early periods of paganism, but to its later ones, when man was indifferent to the moral issues of life, sought to lose themselves in feverish indulgence, or in the question of paganism. More than any other poet he took his themes directly from literature. And, while Tennyson, Arnold and Clough were lamenting the passing of Christianity, he gladly welcomed paganism. Therefore, the paganism of the poems and the sensuousness of the language employed were in direct opposition to that which was acceptable during the period.
From 1867-71 Swinburne gave his ardent and devout sympathy to the cause of European freedom, exerting himself in laudation, almost in apotheosis, of the republican heroes and martyrs. He, as tired of art followed for its own sake, threw his soul and mind into the struggle of the French and Italian patriots. **Songs before Sunrise**, his masterpiece on freedom, reflects the inspiration of Hugo, Landor and Whitman, but even more that of Mazzini. This group of poems depicts clearly and succinctly Swinburne's views on government, about fraternity and equality, and about liberty in all matters of thought and action.

**Songs before Sunrise** may be considered as the crowning effort of Swinburne's literary production during the years of 1867-71. This series of lofty and imposing odes exhibited the author's varied lyrical powers and his most earnest traits of character. Although Swinburne was criticized for disturbing and disrupting the normalcy of mid-Victorian England by the unconventional manner in which he treated certain themes in **Poems and Ballads** and his vowed, ardent and adamant republicanism in **Songs before Sunrise**, his contributions to English prosody were unique.

Swinburne has been damned by critics more than any of the other English poets. Many of the critics have attempted critical psychoanalyses to attempt to formulate theories of arrested development of other psychological or physiological quirks to account for the fact that he dared to consider, in their estimate, certain forbidden sensuous
perversions material for poetry. Nevertheless, none of these critics have succeeded in denying that Swinburne had the power of creating a musicality in rhyme that no other Victorian poet could maintain in poem after poem over a long period of time. However, it is as a truly lyric poet that most critics agree that he has had very few if any equals in English poetry.

Swinburne's vehicle for lyrical effect is incalculable, and as a result he was responsible for revolutionizing the entire scheme of English prosody. He employed about four hundred and twenty different metrical forms, thereby surpassing Tennyson and Browning. His easy manipulation of alliteration, resonance, assonance, and rhyme (internal and triple) helped to enhance the sonorousness, melodic virtuosity and hypnotic effect of his verse.

His classical scholarship, which was prompted by his mother's teachings at an early age, was undoubted. He was inebriated with Italian, Greek and French, in which he had as much competency as with English. Swinburne's work, therefore represents a multiple, many-mooded offering to liberty apprehended in very many ways: in her antique revelation to Greece; in her workings in contemporary Italy; in the dimly descried future; in her candid virginal grace and strength, as of Atalanta issuing to the destruction of incarnate evil; in her maternal solicitude for her martyred sons; in the implacability of her demands for sacrifice; in wild urgings to the freedom of sensual impulses; and finally, in her natural symbols of sea and wind and fire and light.
Swinburne's revolutionary bent first caused him to be morally condemned; later the same note drew for him admiration and attention. It was this element of revolutionism, which was prompted by his desire for a world of love, equality and liberty, which served as a unifying principle throughout his work.

Other poets may have accomplished greater things during the lifetime of Swinburne; and there may be something to censure in his methods and themes, but he cannot be deprived of the honor of being one of the most prolific masters of musical words in the nineteenth century.
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