

**“SEE LOVE, AND SO REFUSE HIM”:
THE POETICS, PHILOSOPHY, AND PSYCHOLOGY OF LOVE
IN ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE’S
POEMS AND BALLADS [1866]**

by

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Abstract

This dissertation studies the concept of “love” in Algernon Charles Swinburne’s *Poems and Ballads* [1866]. As I argue in Chapter One, there has been surprisingly little critical discussion of the concept of love in *Poems and Ballads*, and what there has been is flawed in that it inadvertently reinforces the longstanding charge of Swinburne’s “meaninglessness,” obscures the ways in which the love of *Poems and Ballads* is an informed critical response to the culture of the time, and tends to render the poems and their dramatic speakers interchangeable. In Chapter Two, I attempt to redress the ahistoricism that has dominated these discussions by explaining how the love of *Poems and Ballads* arose in response to the “cult of love” of Swinburne’s contemporaries, which he, informed by ideas that he inherited from his Romantic forbearers, viewed as an impoverishment of sensual experience, and consequently of humankind’s creative capacities—as dramatized through his speakers’ “refusals” of love and its imaginative possibilities. In Chapter Three, I explore two such “refusals,” expressed through the voices of the very different speakers of the “Hymn to Proserpine” and “The Triumph of Time.” After clarifying some sources of confusion, I trace how both of these characters, by means of different philosophical and psychological pathways, come to turn away from love and (in doing so) their own poetic potential. In Chapter Four, I turn to “Dolores,” in which the speaker’s rejection of love drives him to the “perverse spiritualism” that Swinburne identifies with the Marquis de Sade. Although the speaker succumbs to creative impotence, I argue that he is capable of recognizing his own inadequacies, and to welcome a poet who can “kiss” and “sing” like Catullus once did (340-42). Finally, in Chapter Five, I argue that, in the Sappho of “Anactoria,” Swinburne provides a dramatic

model of (the development of) the kind of poet who could “see love,” in all of its volatility and violence, and still “choose him.” In concluding the chapter, I also claim that Swinburne suggests, in Sappho’s relation to her future readers, how such a poet might inspire others to “choose” love.

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¹ “‘Will he rise and recover[?]’: Catullus, Castration, and Censorship in Swinburne’s ‘Dolores.’” *Victorian Poetry*. 47 (2009): 747-58.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iv
List of Abbreviations	vii
Chapter 1 Introduction	1
Chapter 2 “For man dies, and love also dies”: Swinburne’s Neo-Romantic Attack on the Mid-Victorian “Cult of Love” in <i>Poems and Ballads</i>	12
Chapter 3 “Laurel is green for a season, and love is sweet for a day”: The End of Love and the End of Song in the “Hymn to Proserpine” and “The Triumph of Time”	43
Chapter 4 “Loves die, and we know thee immortal”: “Perverse Spiritualism” and Creative Impotence in “Dolores”	90
Chapter 5 “[...] mix their hearts with music [...]”: Modeling and Inspiring Swinburnian Love in “Anactoria”	140
Conclusion.....	181
Works Cited.....	185

List of Abbreviations

Works by Swinburne:

<i>Atalanta</i>	<i>Atalanta in Calydon</i>
“Burdens”	“A Ballad of Burdens”
<i>CW</i>	<i>The Complete Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne</i>
“Dawn”	“Before Dawn”
“Death”	“A Ballad of Death”
“Garden”	“The Garden of Proserpine”
“Hugo”	“To Victor Hugo”
“Hymn”	“Hymn to Proserpine”
“Life”	“A Ballad of Life”
<i>MP</i>	<i>Major Poems and Selected Prose</i>
<i>NW</i>	<i>New Writings by Swinburne</i>
“Order”	“A Song in Time of Order”
<i>P&B</i>	<i>Poems and Ballads</i> [the volume itself]
<i>PBH</i>	<i>Poems and Ballads and Atalanta in Calydon</i>
<i>PBP</i>	<i>Poems and Ballads and Atalanta in Calydon</i>
<i>PRC</i>	<i>The Pre-Raphaelites and Their Circle</i> (ed. Lang)
“Revolution”	“A Song in Time of Revolution”
“Satia”	“Satia Te Sanguine”
<i>SC</i>	<i>Swinburne as Critic</i>
<i>SL</i>	<i>The Swinburne Letters</i>
<i>SR</i>	<i>Swinburne Replies</i>
“Triumph”	“The Triumph of Time”
<i>UL</i>	<i>Uncollected Letters of Algernon Charles Swinburne</i>
<i>WB</i>	<i>William Blake: A Critical Study</i>

Biographical Works on Swinburne:

<i>ACS</i>	<i>A. C. Swinburne: A Poet's Life</i> (Rooksby)
<i>LAS</i>	<i>The Life of Algernon Charles Swinburne</i> (Gosse)
<i>SPP</i>	<i>Swinburne: The Portrait of a Poet</i> (Henderson)

Biographical Works on Swinburne (cont'd):

- SPW* *Swinburne: The Poet in His World* (Thomas)
VLF *Lives of Victorian Literary Figures* (Vol. 6.3; ed. Rooksby)

Critical Works on Swinburne:

- SCH* *Swinburne: The Critical Heritage* (ed. Hyder)
SEC *Swinburne: An Experiment in Criticism* (McGann)
SHG *Swinburne and His Gods* (Louis)
SLC *Swinburne's Literary Career and Fame* (Hyder)
SRM *Swinburne: A Study of Romantic Mythmaking* (Riede)
SWI *Swinburne* (Maxwell)
TSR *Tennyson and Swinburne as Romantic Naturalists* (McSweeney)

Chapter 1

Introduction

The predominant theme of *Poems and Ballads* is love [... but] not the conventional romantic love of Victorian heterosexual courtship and marriage.

— Catherine Maxwell, *Swinburne* [2006]¹

Many of the pieces [in *Poems and Ballads*] are not fit for quotation, on account of the extreme brutality of the view of love taken in them. The conception of that holy passion never seems to rise above the first animal germs of it, and it would seem as if pure devotion unsullied by a taint of low desire were a thing refusing to enter into the mind of the author.

— “Criticisms on Contemporaries: No. 1 – Mr. Algernon Charles Swinburne,”
Tinsley’s Magazine [1868]²

When one considers that the word “love” and its many variants appear over 530 times in *Poems and Ballads*,³ it is difficult to argue with Maxwell’s recent assertion that love is the “predominant theme” of the volume; and, when one considers the volume’s parade of “poetic perversities” (Dellamora 69), what an original reviewer referred to as “nameless shameless abominations” (Morley 145),⁴ it is impossible not to agree with her observation that such love was “not the conventional love of Victorian heterosexual

¹ 27.

² 33.

³ All citations from *Poems and Ballads* and *Atalanta in Calydon* are from *Poems and Ballads and Atalanta in Calydon* (ed. Haynes). All other citations from Swinburne’s poetry are from *Poems of Algernon Charles Swinburne* [1904], which is the last edition supervised by the poet himself. When I cite or quote a poem that is not from *Poems and Ballads* for the first time, I will place the publication date of the poem after the title in square brackets.

⁴ In denouncing the volume, Morley was echoing the description of lesbianism in Swinburne’s “Faustine”:
The shameless nameless love that makes
Hell’s iron gin

Shut on you like a trap that breaks
The soul, Faustine. (121-24)

courtship and marriage.” Such “perversities,” claimed the original critics, were “as strange to our time as they were always hideous” (“Mr. Swinburne,” *Spectator* 1229),⁵ and included incest, explicit sadomasochism, lesbianism, hermaphroditism, and even necrophilia. Although many critics, from the nineteenth⁶ to the mid-twentieth century,⁷ have dismissed such “poetic perversities” as “silly and boyish” attempts “to shock in the highest degree” (“Mr. Swinburne’s Defence” 483; “Mr. Swinburne’s *P&B*” 130), which, though they may have had some role in contributing to “the reasonable licence which English literature enjoys to-day [*sic*]” (Housman 278-79), “have [ultimately] served but little purpose” (Nicolson, *Swinburne* 106), more recent critics, from the 1990s forward, have sought greater significance in Swinburne’s “perverse” provocations. While some of these latter critics have explored these poems in light of the cultural significance of specific “perversions” in the mid-nineteenth century,⁸ others—most notably Maxwell, Allison Pease, and Kathy Alexis Psomiades⁹—have viewed the “questionable figures” of *Poems and Ballads* as instances of disruptive “transgression,” marking a troubling refusal to “reinforce” the dominant “hierarchies and dualisms” of Western culture (e.g. male and female, pain and pleasure, etc.) (see Sieburth 351-52).¹⁰

⁵ See also Courthorpe 33; Skelton 639.

⁶ See e.g. Buchanan, “Fleshly” 388, “Session” 45-48; “Criticisms” 34; Friswell 305; “Mr. Rossetti” 1311; “Mr. Swinburne’s Defence,” *London Review* 483; “Mr. Swinburne’s *P&B*” 130.

⁷ See e.g. Bush 340, 349; Gaunt 43; Lucas 163, 166, 171; Nicholson, *Swinburne* 106; Rutland 270, 286; Welby 88-90.

⁸ For example, see Dellamora (75-80, 83-85) and Morgan (“Male Lesbian” 49-53) on lesbianism; or, see Bashant (11-15) and Dellamora (80-85) on hermaphroditism.

⁹ See e.g. Maxwell, “Swinburne,” *SWI* 13-54; Pease, “Questionable,” *Modernism* 37-39, 64-71; Psomiades 58-83.

¹⁰ Sieburth may have been the first to explicitly claim—though he drew heavily on Buchanan’s “Fleshly School” article [1871] (see Buchanan, “Fleshly” 335)—that the “obscenity” of *Poems and Ballads* was due to Swinburne’s supposed refusal “to endorse or reinforce” the dominant “hierarchies and dualisms” of Western culture, thus “making all conceptual categories interchangeable” (351-52). Whether or not they acknowledge his influence, Maxwell, Pease, and Psomiades all build upon Sieburth’s basic argument, although they then proceed to extend it into the realm of “reader response,” claiming that Swinburne

Apart from the facts that the latter critical approach, regardless of the historical references invoked, tends to de-historicize the “perversions” of the volume as representations of “troubling contradiction itself” (Psomiades 74), and thus to render them strangely interchangeable, both approaches “put the cart before the horse” by overstepping the issue of love itself, which is common to all of the “many loves” of *Poems and Ballads*—whether or not they could be classified as “loves perverse” in the broad sense (“Félise” 161-62). It is, after all, “love” that is the key term in *Poems and Ballads*, and it is love that forms the common thread between the “love[r]s perverse” of “Fragoletta” and “Anactoria,” and the more conventional lovers of “The Triumph of Time” and “Félise.”¹¹ Although the original critics protested strongly against the “insane passion[s]” and “grievous aberration[s]” of *Poems and Ballads* (“Mr. Swinburne’s Defence” 483), it was, as one anonymous critic remarked at the time, the “extreme brutality of the view of love taken” in the volume that was the more fundamental offence, making it “not fit for quotation” (“Criticisms” 33). As several of the original critics suggest,¹² the volume was an “insult flung” at “the public” (“Our Weekly Gossip,” *Athenaeum* 2025: 211), not simply for its “carnival of ugly shapes” (“Mr. Swinburne’s *P&B*” 130), but because it contradicted the common mid-Victorian conception of love as a “holy passion” in the literal sense (“Criticisms” 33), a “‘spiritual’ love” that “refines, redeems, [and] saves” (Joseph 190; Baynes 46). Given that Swinburne’s contemporaries had elevated love to “life’s highest experience” (Mintz 103), and he made love (as he

engineers disturbing “identifications” between his readers and his speakers (see e.g. *SWI* 26), who represent “troubling contradiction itself” (Psomiades 74).

¹¹ The speakers of these poems fit the basic model of the “disappointed young man,” who has suffered a reversal in love, which results in a profound change of outlook. This type was familiar to a mid-Victorian audience from Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* [1833-34] and Tennyson’s “Locksley Hall” [1842] (Stuart 112).

¹² See e.g. Baynes 39, 46; “Criticisms” 33; Rev. of *P&B*, *National Quarterly Rev.* 156.

defined it) the thematic core of *Poems and Ballads*, it is surprising that so few recent critics of the volume have made any concerted effort to come to terms with the latter—apart from its often “perverse” manifestations.

Even more surprising than the small number of critics who have attempted, with any degree of substantial engagement, to formulate a theoretical model of the love of *Poems and Ballads* (i.e. “Swinburnian love”), is the fact that those critics who have—most notably Barbara Charlesworth, Wendell Stacy Johnson, and Antony H. Harrison¹³—have done so without taking into account its negative relation to the “cult of love”¹⁴ that was so prominent in the poetry of the period.¹⁵ These critics, although their relevant work on Swinburne was published between the mid-1960s and the late-1980s, all contributed to produce a still-influential theory of Swinburnian love that might be referred to as the “transcendent theory” of Swinburnian love. The “transcendent theory” is built upon the more general critical assumption, as expressed most influentially by Jerome J. McGann in his *Swinburne: An Experiment in Criticism* [1972], that Swinburne’s poetry is motivated by his deep-seated desire to transcend the boundaries between the self and the world, thus achieving, or striving to achieve, a quasi-spiritual “oneness” with everything, which transcends “all sets of divine contraries”¹⁶ (i.e. all the differences and divisions of life).¹⁷

¹³ See e.g. Charlesworth 19-35; Johnson, W. 90-107; Harrison, “Woman,” “Eros,” “Losses,” *Medievalism* 20-36. Although all three critics use *Poems and Ballads* as a key source of evidence for their theories of Swinburnian love, they also draw on Swinburne’s other works.

¹⁴ For the use of the phrase “cult of love” in reference to Victorian attitudes towards love, see Houghton 389. For an extended discussion of these attitudes and their expressions, see Houghton 341-93.

¹⁵ While Johnson discusses the attitudes of several Victorian poets on “sex and marriage,” he isolates Swinburne as a special case of what he calls the “ideal” attitude towards sex (90-107). Although he claims that Swinburne’s “sexual idealism” is “closely related to the responses of other artists,” he does not follow this up by making the requisite comparisons and contrasts with other poets (107). Instead, he leaves Swinburne, as if it were sufficient to simply say that “In many respects Swinburne’s treatment of love and sexuality is strikingly unique” and allow the reader to do the rest (107).

¹⁶ This phrase is pulled from Swinburne’s “Genesis” [1871]: at first there was only a “sad shapeless horror increate / That was all things and one thing,” but then it was “cloven in several shapes,” and “The *divine*

Those critics holding to the “transcendent theory” view Swinburnian love, as exemplified in *Poems and Ballads*—from which all of Charlesworth’s key examples are derived—as characterized by a desire for “oneness that transcends the sexual individuality [...] of person and person” (Johnson, W. 91), which reflects the more fundamental drive towards “total absorption within and identification with the One Variable World” (*SEC* 223). In this world of “discontinuous physical incarnation,” however, such absolute “union is conceivable but not possible” (Harrison, “Woman” 99, “Eros” 24). Thus “passion,” in the Swinburnian sense, “is a source of suffering” (Harrison, *Medievalism* 30): “desire [...] become[s] pain and frustration in the consciousness of limit[ation]” (Charlesworth 28).

According to these “transcendent critics,” the psychic “pain” resulting from “the ‘otherness’ of the beloved” is externalized in sadomasochistic activity (or fantasy), which reflects the “lover’s attempt to break through the frustrating fact of division and difference” (Charlesworth 29; Johnson, W. 102), as in Sappho’s cannibalistic fantasies about the eponymous object of her desire in “Anactoria”:

Ah that my mouth for Muses’ milk were fed
 On the sweet blood thy sweet small wounds had bled!

 That I could drink thy veins as wine, and eat
 Thy breasts like honey! that from face to feet
 Thy body were abolished and consumed,
 And in my flesh thy very flesh entombed! (107-08, 111-14)

Of course, to succeed would “destroy both the beloved and the self in the consummate unifying act of passion” (Harrison, “Eros” 24): “Oh that I / Durst crush thee out of life with love, and die [...] and be / Mixed with thy blood and molten into thee!”

contraries of life began” (9-10, 15, 32, emphasis added). Oddly, the “transcendent critics,” who argue that Swinburne is so eager to return to unity with the “One Variable World” (*SEC* 223), seem to overlook its less-than-appealing description as a “sad shapeless horror.”

¹⁷ See e.g. *SEC* 100, 182-83, 223; Rooksby, “Internal” 27-28.

(“Anactoria” 129-32). Eroticism becomes “virtual[ly] identif[ed ...] with self-immolation,” and death is longed for “as the release from, as well as the fulfilment of,” desire and the pain that accompanies it (Johnson, W. 99; Harrison, *Medievalism* 33). Thus, the disappointed speaker of “The Triumph of Time” moves from wanting to become “One splendid spirit” with his lover, to wishing they “were dead together to-day [*sic*]” (32, 113). Such suicidal fantasies of union with the beloved turn easily to eroticized fantasies of union with the world, and so the speaker shifts to seeking the mortal embrace of that “Mother and lover of men, the sea” (“Triumph” 258).¹⁸ By attaining “synthesis with the spiritual matrix,” represented by the sea, the speaker hopes to achieve “perfect freedom” from the painful “contraries of [human] life” (Harrison, “Woman” 100, “Eros” 30): “Set free my soul,” he begs, “as thy soul is free” (264). It is this arc of desire—moving from the painful bondage of passion, by way of sadomasochism (real or imagined), to the quasi-spiritual freedom promised by death¹⁹—that the “transcendent critics” argue lies beneath all of the “many loves” of *Poems and Ballads*.

Although the quasi-deconstructive presumptions of the “transgressive critics” (e.g. Maxwell, Pease, Psomiades) and the quasi-mystical presumptions of the “transcendent critics” are worlds apart, both the destabilizing “transgression” of “perversion” and the “transcendent” liberation of “love” lead to the elimination of, or escape from, the “contraries of life,” which might explain why the “transgressive critics”

¹⁸ Cf. *SEC* 223.

¹⁹ The “transcendent critics” all suggest that “union” with the world, despite its supposed “dissolution of the self” (Harrison, “Eros” 30), does not preclude some quasi-spiritual residue of selfhood. For both Charlesworth and Harrison, this supposed “dissolution” is actually an “expansion [of the self] into the world” or “infinity” (Harrison, “Eros” 30; Charlesworth 32), an identification of the spirit of the individual with “the spiritual matrix” (Harrison, “Eros” 32; cf. Johnson, W. 106). Harrison even claims that “union” with “the spiritual matrix” constitutes “an assured posthumous release into the eternal, quintessential freedom that pre-exists generation,” in which one becomes “pure malleable spirit, life in potential” (Harrison, “Woman” 100, “Losses” 703).

have not sought to propose an alternative to the “transcendent theory” of Swinburnian love.²⁰ While there is much, both positive and negative, that can (and will) be said about the latter, it will suffice for the moment to propose three general criticisms of the “transcendent theory,” which are also broadly applicable to the “transgressive” interpretations. First, the “transcendent theory,” in making escape from the “contraries of life,” and into a transcendent unity beyond all differentiation, the goal of Swinburnian love—and, therefore, the goal of the poetry of such love—inadvertently reinforces the longstanding charge, cemented by T. S. Eliot’s “Swinburne as Poet” [1920], that Swinburne’s poetry provides the mere “hallucination of meaning” (285). There is a fine line between being “beyond meaning” and being “meaningless,” and those critics inclined to such “transcendent” readings are forced to balance precariously on that line.²¹ Second, the “transcendent theory,” despite being quasi-biographical, is fundamentally ahistorical, because it suggests that the key to Swinburnian love lies in some deep-rooted drive in the poet’s psyche, rather than in his reaction to the cultural and intellectual milieu of mid-Victorian England. In its ahistoricism, the “transcendent theory” misunderstands Swinburnian love by neglecting its status as an informed and engaged cultural critique. Third, the “transcendent theory,” in making Swinburnian love tend to one transcendent

²⁰ Sometimes critics even seem to adopt a hybrid position, halfway between the “transcendent” and “transgressive” readings of Swinburne, without any sense of contradiction (see e.g. Morgan, “Dramatic”).

²¹ While Rooksby has repeatedly accused poststructuralist critics of Swinburne of embracing the “vices” of the traditional critics as poststructuralist “virtues” (“Internal” 25), and thus exchanging “the lilies and languors of Eliot [...] for the raptures and roses of Barthes or Derrida” (“Century” 16), he has overlooked the fact that the “transcendent” reading he adopts (see e.g. “Internal” 27-28) is equally susceptible, if taken to its logical conclusions, to the charge of “revaluing” the traditional criticisms of “meaninglessness.” On the other hand, McGann seems aware of this danger inherent in his “transcendent” approach—by which he is led to claim that Swinburne points to unity with “the One Variable World,” and its “supra-real order,” through a “style for confusion” that “deliberately puts meaning beyond the cognitive faculties” (*SEC* 170)—though for the most part he blithely dismisses any concerns that might be raised: “*of course* one can choose to disbelieve in that order and read the signs of confusion as reasons for dismissing the poetry” (*SEC* 170, emphasis added).

goal, has the inevitable effect of levelling important differences between the poems and their dramatic speakers, thereby reducing the volume to “a single voice” wearing different masks (Peckham, Intro. xxxi), rather than, as Swinburne himself insisted in *Notes on Poems and Reviews* [1866], a collection of “dramatic, many-faced, multifarious” utterances that must be understood as such (SC 18).²²

In Chapter Two, I attempt to redress the fundamental ahistoricism that has thus far dominated critical discussions of Swinburnian love. First I explore the philosophical and theological concerns, namely the collapse of “natural theology” and the consequent weakening of belief in a “God of love” and the immortality of the soul, which resulted in the idealized mid-Victorian “cult of love” promoted by contemporary poets, including Alfred Lord Tennyson, Robert Browning, and Coventry Patmore. Then I examine Swinburne’s inheritance, from what he called the rebel²³ “Church of [William] Blake and [Percy Bysshe] Shelley” (SL 3.14), of Romantic philosophical and poetic ideas and ideals, and their manifestation in the analogy between erotic love and the imagination. Finally, I demonstrate the ways in which, by both drawing on and modifying the ideas of his Romantic predecessors, Swinburne fashions the love of *Poems and Ballads*, in its antithetical relation to the “cult of love,” as a reflection of his neo-Romantic critique of his contemporaries’ impoverishment of sensual experience, and consequently of humankind’s creative capacities—all of which is dramatized through his speakers’ repeated “refusals” of love and its imaginative possibilities.

In Chapter Three, I explore two such “refusals” of love, as expressed through the

²² There is a long-standing critical tendency to dismiss Swinburne’s claims in *Notes on Poems and Reviews* for the dramatic nature of the pieces in *Poems and Ballads*. For critical discussions of the dramatic nature of the poems in the volume, see Morgan, “Dramatic”; Shrimpton.

²³ In *William Blake* [1868], Swinburne claims that Blake was “born and baptized into the church of rebels” (3).

voices of two very different dramatic speakers, both of whom identify themselves as poets, and whom critics—influenced by the general tendency to disregard Swinburne’s dramatic claims for the volume—have often misunderstood as simple mouthpieces, whether polemical or biographical, for the poet himself. First I examine the fourth-century Roman speaker of the “Hymn to Proserpine,” who rejects the “pale Galilean[’s]” victory over the sensual Old Gods (35), looking ahead instead to the mortal “sleep” offered by his one remaining goddess, Proserpine (6). I argue that although, from his pagan perspective, the speaker is able to appreciate the creatively-devastating effects of the new asceticism of his Christian overlords—and, thus, to anticipate Swinburne’s neo-Romantic critique of his contemporaries—his own “decadence”²⁴ leads him to accept the “end” of love (1), and thus of song as well. I then turn to the nineteenth-century speaker of “The Triumph of Time,” whose disappointment in the spiritual “cult of love,” with its promise of the transcendence of time and mortality, leads him first to miss out on the possibility of love with his beloved, and thereafter to foreclose all possibility of future love by hiding his “soul in a place out of sight” and vowing to “hate sweet music” his “whole life long” (199, 360).

In Chapter Four, I turn to “Dolores,” another dramatic poem that has too often been taken as an expression of the young Swinburne’s personal feelings and philosophy, in this case of his supposed “discipleship” to Dolores’s “prophet,” “preacher,” and “poet” (379), Donatien Alphonse François, Marquis de Sade (ACS 87)—this despite his own violent criticism, in a letter of 1862 to Richard Monckton Milnes, of Sade as “a hermit of the Thebaid turned inside out” (SL 1.57). After outlining the inadequacies of the only two

²⁴ In the “Dedicatory Epistle” to the *Poems of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, Swinburne refers to the “Hymn” as the “deathsong [*sic*] of spiritual decadence” (SR 98).

significant attempts to come to terms with Swinburne's critiques of "Stylites de Sade" (*SL* 1.58)—those of Julian Baird [1971] and David G. Riede [1978]—I propose that he viewed Sade's philosophy as a type of the "perverse spiritualism" (i.e. a spiritualism occulted by a superficial materialism) that I identified, at the end of Chapter Two, in the two "death fantasies" that punctuate the otherwise realistic drift towards disengagement in the "Triumph." The speaker of "Dolores," disappointed by the fact that "Loves die," "refuses" love to seek a more permanent ground in the "immortal" Dolores (55), who represents not only "lust" (156), but the pure materiality of Sadeian "Nature." Yet, as I argue, the speaker's apparent "materialism" is displaced spiritualism, and Dolores a quasi-spiritual, untouchable principle of evil behind the apparent "changes of [material] things" ("Hymn" 69), which only further alienates the speaker and his fellow worshippers from sensual engagement with the world, and thus from their own creative potential.

The speaker of "Dolores," however, is capable of recognizing his and his fellows' creative impotence when compared to men of the past, and he desperately calls for a poet who could both "kiss" and "sing" like Catullus once did (340-42)—one who could "see love," in all its volatility and violence, and still "choose him" (see "Dawn" 77-80). In Chapter Five, I argue that Swinburne not only provided the model for, but dramatized the development of, such a poet in the Sappho of "Anactoria." Unlike the vast majority of critics, who, under the influence of the "transcendent" readings, see the Sappho of "Anactoria" as expressing her frustration in her failure to achieve "absolute unity" with her beloved, I argue that she is actually seeking, through a dizzying array of rhetorical strategies, to prolong a romantic relationship that is predicated upon the sadomasochistic "cleaving" of each-to-each and each-from-each, and which serves as the basis for her

“music [...] of fleshly fever and amorous malady” (CW 13.243).²⁵ While most critics extend the supposed drive for “absolute unity” to the eroticized relationship between Sappho and her future readers in the second half of the poem—reading it in terms of “possession” or “ventriloquism”—I argue that it is also a relationship of “cleaving,” perpetuated through an extended chain of mutable “loves,” each of which has the potential to inspire still further love in others, in a self-perpetuating dynamic of “Sapphic eros” implicit in the Sapphic fragments themselves.

Finally, I explain that it is my hope that my reading of Swinburnian love will not only be productive of further insights into *Poems and Ballads*—although that is certainly one of my hopes—but also that it will contribute to counteract the critical presuppositions that have thus far prevented a full appreciation of Swinburne’s importance, both as a poet and as a cultural critic, and denied him his “rightful position among the top three Victorian poets with Tennyson and Robert Browning” (Riede, Afterword 168).

²⁵ This quotation is from Swinburne’s “L’Année Terrible” [1872].

Chapter 2

“For man dies, and love also dies”:

Swinburne’s Neo-Romantic Attack

on the Mid-Victorian “Cult of Love” in *Poems and Ballads*

O me, what profits it to put
An idle case? If Death were seen
At first as Death, Love had not been [...]

— Tennyson, *In Memoriam* [1850]¹

So hath it been, so be it;
For who shall live and flee it?
But look that no man see it
Or hear it unaware;
Lest all who love and choose him
See Love, and so refuse him;
For all who find him lose him,
But all have found him fair.

— Swinburne, “Before Dawn”²

While it is obvious that the love of *Poems and Ballads* is “not the conventional romantic love” of Swinburne’s mid-Victorian contemporaries (*SWI* 27), few in recent years have bothered to ask if this is true at a more fundamental level than that of the “poetic perversities” that are so amenable to the still-fashionable critical interest in “transgression.” If, however, one were, in attempting to define such Swinburnian love, to look for common traits that hold across the various “loves perverse” of the volume, one would find that its characteristics are in diametric opposition to those of the “cult of love”

¹ 35.17-19.

² 73-80. Cf. Tennyson, *Memoriam* 35.

promoted by Swinburne's fellow mid-Victorian poets, which "addressed, and attempted to answer, some of the deepest problems and needs of the time" (Mintz 104). Whereas, for most mid-Victorians, love was "essentially spiritual" (Mintz 112),³ gently domestic,⁴ and secure in the theoretically-permanent bonds of matrimony,⁵ the so-called "love" they encountered *Poems and Ballads* was one that gloated over "quivering flanks" and "splendid supple thighs" ("Love and Sleep" 12-13), that "bites, and foams, and stings" (Baynes 46), and that "has no abiding, / But dies before the kiss" ("Dawn" 71-72). In this chapter, I will argue that the Swinburnian love of *Poems and Ballads*, in its antithesis to "Victorian love," reflects the poet's neo-Romantic critique of his contemporaries' impoverishment of sensual experience, and consequently of humankind's creative capacities—as dramatized through his speakers' repeated "refusals" of love and its imaginative possibilities. Before I can do this, however, I must first explain both the significance of the "cult of love" to which Swinburne was reacting, and the Romantic notion of love that he drew upon in doing so.

I.

As I have already remarked, the violent reaction of Swinburne's contemporaries against the "brutality of the view of love" taken in *Poems and Ballads* can be traced to the fact that "the Victorian exaltation of love was designed to answer some of the deepest moral and intellectual problems of the era" (Mintz 105). In attacking the "cult of love," Swinburne threatened not just his contemporaries' understanding of the relationships

³ See also Joseph 13, 190.

⁴ See Houghton 341-53; Stevenson 209.

⁵ See Houghton 341; McSweeney, *Supreme* 8; Mintz 128-29.

between individuals, but also their most cherished beliefs about humankind's place in the universe and its ultimate destiny. For many of Swinburne's contemporaries, human love—particularly the love between married spouses—was the best weapon in their battle against doubts caused by “the subsidence of traditional foundations of Christian belief” in a “God of love” and the “immortality of the soul” (McSweeney, *Supreme* 5). For these mid-Victorians, as Tennyson expressed it in *In Memoriam*, the belief that “God was love indeed / And love Creation's final law” assured them that He, as an expression of His “immortal love” (and justice), would ultimately grant them personal immortality (56.13-14, Pro.1): “Thou madest man, he knows not why, / He thinks he was not made to die; / And thou hast made him: thou art just” (Pro. 10-12).⁶ In their opinion, as Browning asserted in “Christmas-Eve” [1850], God “would never [...] With power to work all love desires, / Bestow e'en less than man requires” (338-40),⁷ and man clearly both desired and required personal immortality. For these men, as Tennyson remarked of himself, the “cardinal point in Christianity is the Life after Death” (qtd. in Tennyson, H. 1.321n).⁸ Personal immortality was so vital, and its dependence upon God's love so obvious, that these men felt the necessity, as Browning insisted, to “place his love” “above [even] / His power” (“Christmas-Eve” 459-60),⁹ to affirm first and foremost that “God love[s]” and to “hold that truth against the world” (“Death in the Desert” 272-73).

Of course, those individuals seeking to justify their belief in God's love often referred to New Testament revelation (see e.g. 1 John 4.7-21),¹⁰ but in the early

⁶ See also Tennyson, H. 1.321. All quotations of Tennyson's poetry are from *The Poems of Tennyson* (ed. Ricks).

⁷ All quotations of Browning's poetry are from *The Poems* (ed. Pettigrew and Collins).

⁸ See also Tennyson, *Memoriam* 34.

⁹ See also Browning, “Death in the Desert” 265.

¹⁰ For Tennyson's claim that this passage inspired parts of *In Memoriam*, see Tennyson, H. 1.312n.

nineteenth century they could also appeal, without doubt or embarrassment, to the longstanding tradition of “natural theology,” which claimed that knowledge of God’s existence and His essential attributes, including his perfect benevolence, is “attainable by human reason alone without the aid of revelation” (“Natural theology” 406). The most popular form of natural theology—so popular that, in the mass consciousness, it became virtually synonymous with the entire project—were the so-called “arguments from design,” which begin from observations of order in the world, “infer that this order must be a product of design,” and conclude that the designer is (the Christian) God (Mautner, “teleological argument(s)” 557). Despite the devastating philosophical attacks of David Hume in the eighteenth century,¹¹ the argument from design reached its most popular and influential manifestation in William Paley’s *Natural Theology* [1802]. Employing the argument from design, Paley argued at length for “the goodness of the deity,” which he inferred from his general claim that “it is a happy world after all” (238): the insects flying by “testify their joy;” the fish leaping from the water “are so happy that they know not what to do with themselves;” and the land animals’ “*running about* [...] carries with it every mark of pleasure” (238). According to Paley, “the common course of things is in favor of happiness” (241), and “we cannot help,” on this basis, acknowledging “what an exertion of benevolence creation was; of a benevolence, how minute in its care, how vast in its comprehension” (237). For many Victorians, Paley’s arguments provided a much-welcomed rational “proof” of God’s love, at a time when academic criticisms of the Bible were undermining the historicity, and thereby the authority and integrity, of the “revealed” texts of the New Testament with their “loveless learning” (Browning,

¹¹ See Hume, *Dialogues; Enquiry* 90-102.

“Christmas-Eve” 1097).

Unfortunately, for those same Victorians, developments in modern science were making it increasingly difficult to accept Paley’s contention that “it is a happy world after all.” Apart from challenging the familiar biblical chronology of earth’s history, Charles Lyell’s examinations of the fossil record in his *Principles of Geology* [1830-33] led him to conclude not that “the common course of things is in favor of happiness,” but rather that “the successive destruction of species” is “part of the regular and constant order of nature” (2.141).¹² As Tennyson, who was familiar with Lyell, morosely reflected, in the light of the emerging fossil record, nature seemed to display no care for the preservation of individuals or even species, let alone for the “happiness” of individual creatures: “From scarpèd cliff and quarried stone / She cries, ‘A thousand types are gone: / I care for nothing, all shall go’” (*Memoriam* 56.2-4). In Tennyson’s memorable phrase, nature seemed “red in tooth and claw” (*Memoriam* 56.15); or, as Charles Darwin would later claim in *On the Origin of Species* [1859], it was a bloody “struggle for existence” (114), carried on in the midst of continual death and extinction.¹³ With this prospect before them, many Victorians agreed with Browning’s assertion in “Easter-Day” [1850], that it was henceforth impossible for educated men to argue, in Paley’s fashion, from the natural world to the God of love, and thereby to personal immortality: “No. The creation travails, groans— / Contrive your music from its moans” (“Easter-Day” 99-100). In fact, as

¹² For brief discussions of Paley, Lyell, and others, see Altick 219-26; Livingston 250-53; Mattes 55-63.

¹³ For more on the reasons why Darwin’s ideas made the “chronic theological problem [of evil] acute” for Victorian Christians (Holmes 78), see Altick 226-32; Holmes 75-79. For a general discussion of the immediate theological impact of Darwin’s ideas, see Livingston 253-66. Although Darwin’s ideas made it very difficult for his contemporaries to see the world as “a happy place,” he himself would later write that, despite the fact that “there is much suffering in the world,” “to my judgment happiness decidedly prevails, though this would be very difficult to prove” (*Autobiography* 90, 88). Nevertheless, unlike Paley, he did not feel that this solved the “problem of evil”: “This very old argument from the existence of suffering against the existence of an intelligent first cause seems to me a strong one” (*Autobiography* 90).

Tennyson observed, arguing from the natural world, “red in tooth and claw,” to God resulted in a God of murderous hate and cruelty, not of “immortal Love”: “look[ing] at nature alone tells us that God is disease, murder and rapine” (qtd. in Tennyson, H. 314).¹⁴ As John Stuart Mill remarked in “Nature” [c.1850-55/1874], given the methods of natural theology, and the findings of modern science, the age-old “problem of evil”¹⁵ seems insurmountable: “If the maker of the world *can* all that he will, he wills misery, and there is no escape from the conclusion” (388).

Since, from a Christian perspective, an evil God was a contradiction in terms (i.e. God is, by definition, “perfectly good”),¹⁶ many Victorians concluded—naturally, if not logically—that it was natural theology itself that was flawed. Finding, in direct contradiction to Paley, that God could not be found in “eagle’s wing, or insect’s eye” (Tennyson, *Memoriam* 124.6), they came to the conclusion that “A scientific faith’s absurd” (Browning, “Easter-Day” 124).¹⁷ But abandoning natural theology, though it helped them to “escape” the conclusion that God “wills misery,” did not bring them any closer to the conclusions that “God was love indeed,” and consequently that “life shall live for evermore” (Tennyson, *Memoriam* 34.2). In order to support these beliefs, they had to maintain that what, by their own admission, “seems / Mere misery, under human

¹⁴ In “Caliban Upon Setebos, or Natural Theology on the Island” [1864], Browning has his “natural man” come to similar conclusions about God, who “Made all we see, and us, in spite” (56): “Who made them [i.e. His creatures] weak, meant weakness He might vex” (172).

¹⁵ A classic statement of the problem of evil can be found in Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* [1779], where the character of Philo, reiterating the ancient challenge of Epicurus, says the following of God: “Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?” (100).

¹⁶ By traditional definition, the Christian God is “a personal being with every perfection (perfect power, perfect knowledge, perfect goodness, perfect justice, etc.); creator of the world, manifested in the world, interacting with the world, but nevertheless existing entirely separately from the world; a being that is the one and only proper object of worship and obedience” (Mautner, “theism” 561).

¹⁷ For discussions of Tennyson’s and Browning’s rejections of natural theology, with reference to *In Memoriam* and “Caliban Upon Setebos,” see Hough, “Natural”; Karr.

schemes” is “regarded by the light / Of love [...] as good a gift as joy before” (Browning, “Easter-Day” 217-21). Turning away from the “mere misery” apparent in the external world, many Victorians looked inward, towards the “spiritual” realm of “intense love relationships,” “for intimations of a higher supernatural love” (McSweeney, *Supreme* 5). Undoubtedly drawing on 1 John 4,¹⁸ some poets convinced themselves, and many others, that human love was somehow dependent upon the love of God, such that the existence of the former “proved” the existence of the latter.¹⁹ As Browning has St. Paul remark in “A Death in the Desert” [1864], a man “who knows himself, / That he must love and would be loved again” should know—although, in reality, he often does not—that “his own love [...] proveth Christ [i.e. God’s love]” (508-10).²⁰ Many also felt, as Patmore said in *The Angel in the House* [1854-63], that “Doubts of eternity ne’er cross / The Lover’s mind, divinely clear” (1.7.13-14),²¹ because married love prefigures the eternal “union of the soul with God,” represented by the “apocalyptic marriage” of Christ and the Church in Revelation 21.2 (Reid 164).²² “[All] delights of earthly love” could therefore be seen as “shadows of the heavens” (Patmore, *Angel* 4.W.5.33-34).

¹⁸ “Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. [...] No man hath seen God at any time. [But] If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us. / Hereby we know that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his spirit” (1 John 4.7, 12-13). See fn. 10.

¹⁹ For more on the Victorian argument from human love to divine love, see McSweeney, *Supreme* 1-20.

²⁰ See also “Saul” 266-67. For more on Browning’s use of the argument from human love to divine love, see Lawson 79-85.

²¹ All quotations of Patmore’s poetry are from *Poems* [1906]. Patmore’s *Angel in the House* was originally published in four parts: *The Betrothal* [1854], *The Espousals* [1856], *Faithful Forever* [1860], and *The Victories of Love* [1863] (see Cox 764). In Patmore’s *Poems*, parts three and four are printed as a separate two-part work, titled *The Victories of Love*. In-text citations of Patmore’s *Angel* will use the original numbering: part number, followed by section number, followed by subsection number, followed by line number(s). The last section of *Victories of Love* is unnumbered and entitled “The Wedding Sermon,” which is represented by “W” in in-text citations: e.g. Patmore, *Angel* 4.W.5.33-34.

²² In the wake of the “apocalyptic marriage” (Rev. 21.2), “there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away” (Rev. 21.4). For more on the Victorian notion that married love “shadowed” the apocalyptic marriage of Christ and the Church (Rev. 21.2), see Johnson, W. 74; Mintz 133-34. For more on Patmore’s understanding and employment of this idea in his poetry, see Reid 148-70.

II.

As Kerry McSweeney has remarked, despite the fact that Swinburne is situated firmly within the Victorian era, he, in “several fundamental ways,” “has more in common with his Romantic predecessors [...] than with his contemporaries” (*TSR* 25), and it is important to address his understanding of those predecessors—especially Blake and Shelley—to whom he turned in his effort to respond to his contemporaries’ “cult of love.” As Swinburne knew, the Romantic conception of love, which he was to adopt in modified form, is rooted in the Romantic understanding of the “imagination” as a creative force. Broadly speaking, the Romantic poets viewed the imagination as the faculty that mediates between the human mind and the external world, with the result that, as William Wordsworth famously reflected in “Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey” [1798], we half “perceive” and “half-create” (or re-create) the world in which we live (107-08), in a quasi-divine act of “meaning-making” “analogous to God’s creation of the world” (Abrams, *Mirror* 272). This analogy was strengthened by those more radical Romantics, like Blake and Shelley, who insisted not only that the “meaning” of things was “half-create[d]” by the human mind, but that nature “is meaningless [...] apart from man’s imaginative shaping of it” (Graff 66).²³ In other words, as Blake claimed in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* [1793]—which Swinburne thought “the high-water mark of his intellect” (*WB* 204)—“Where man is not nature is barren” (pl. 10, l. 68).²⁴

²³ Here Graff is not referring directly to Blake or Shelley, but summarizing the attitude he considers characteristic of the “mythopoeic criticism” of Northrop Frye, whom he remarks is “inspired chiefly by William Blake” (73). For Frye on Blake’s belief that “meaning” is not inherent in the natural world, see *Fearful* 24-25, 39-45. For more on Blake’s and Shelley’s rejections of inherent “meaning” in the natural world, see Gaull 295-96, 304-06.

²⁴ All quotations of Blake’s works are from *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (ed. Erdman). Due to the unique nature of Blake’s texts, I have chosen to include multiple pieces of information,

Similarly, in “Mont Blanc” [1817], Shelley reflected on the barrenness of “earth, and stars, and sea, / If to the human mind’s imaginings / Silence and solitude were vacancy” (142-44).²⁵ As Riede remarks, in response to those who have misunderstood Swinburne’s idiosyncratic use of the word “pantheism” in *William Blake: A Critical Essay* [1868],²⁶ this attitude towards the natural world was shared by Swinburne, who believed “not that nature is divine [i.e. that it has a soul or a “meaning” in itself] but that, as in Blake’s [and Shelley’s] thought, man is divine [i.e. his soul creates “meaning”]” (*SRM* 33).

Regardless of their attitude toward the natural world, however, most Romantics viewed the creative imagination as “a ‘sympathetic’ faculty [...] allied to love,” due to the fact that it shares the capacity “to create unity out of the disparate and divided” (Frye, *Study* 23, 104). In other words, just as love brings together the lover and the beloved, so the imagination bridges the separation between human mind and the material world. By “associating love with imagination” in this way (Baker 227-28),²⁷ Shelley, whom Swinburne consistently associated with the human heart (Meyers, “Conception” 42),²⁸ was able to claim in “On Love” [1818] that love is “the bond [...] which connects not only man with man but with everything which exists” (170). As he suggests in “Epipsychidion” [1821], the “offspring” of this “love match” between “our minds and the outer universe” (Abrams, *Natural* 27-29) is the vital human “meaning” bestowed upon

including plate number(s) for the original printings, and/or line number(s), and/or page number(s) in the edition cited: e.g. Blake, *Marriage* pl. 10, l. 68; Blake, *Marriage* pl. 11, p. 38.

²⁵ All quotations of Shelley’s poetry are from *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose* (ed. Reiman and Fraistat). All quotations of Shelley’s prose are from *Shelley’s Prose* (ed. Clark).

²⁶ Throughout *William Blake*, Swinburne uses the word “pantheism” to refer to Blake’s belief in humanity as God. Swinburne contrasts this belief to theism (see e.g. *WB* 225-26n). As Riede remarks, “Swinburne’s pantheism does *not*, as has been so often assumed, have reference to any sense of divinity in nature” *per se*, but only in human beings (*SRM* 34).

²⁷ For more on Shelley’s ideas about love, see Baker 219-28; Frye, *Study* 104-24; Ulmer 1-20.

²⁸ See e.g. Swinburne, “Cor Cordium” [1871].

the latter: “Love is [...] like thy light, / Imagination! which [...] fills / The Universe with glorious beams” (“Epipsychidion” 162-64, 166-67). Just as the imagination depends upon sensory experience, such Romantic love is “rooted in human sexual instinct” (Frye, *Study* 20). For Blake and Shelley, as Swinburne argues in *William Blake*, it followed that those “ascetic” purveyors of organized religion who fix “a great gulf [...] neither to be bridged over nor filled up” between the spirit and the body, on the ground that “the body is of its nature base and the soul of its nature noble” (*WB* 95), are not only anti-sexual, but necessarily anti-imaginative. This is why he lauds both Blake and Shelley for their “frank acceptance of [bodily] pleasure [...] without blushing or doubting,” and their “fiery animosity” against the asceticism of those who would impose “unnatural laws of [sensual] restraint” on humankind (*WB* 177, 136, 229n). To borrow from Blake, by “binding with briars” our “joys & desires,” and thus limiting the range of our sensual experience, “Priests in black gowns” also limit our creative capacities, chaining us in “mind-forg’d manacles” of dogma and doctrine (“Garden of Love” 11-12; “London” 8).

In the Romantic vision Swinburne inherited from Blake and Shelley, these ascetic enemies of sensual experience carry on their anti-imagination/anti-love agenda in the name of a God who is “a notion projected from, and thereby perverting, the creative power of the human mind” (Frye, *Study* 88), nothing more than “the embodiment of energy relinquished by mankind, hence reified and institutionalized to the extent that, although unreal now, it may exercise a tyranny over the human mind which in fact created it” (Ward 196). In other words, humankind “makes his own creation [...] a power to stop himself from creating” (Frye, *Study* 88), and forgets “that All deities reside in the

human breast” (Blake, *Marriage* pl. 11, p. 38),²⁹ that “except humanity there is no divine thing or person” (*WB* 226n).³⁰ In *The First Book of Urizen* [1794], and elsewhere, Blake refers to the God of the priests—who, as Swinburne remarks, is “the God of restraint, creator of prohibition, whose laws are forbearance and abstinence” (*WB* 246)—as Urizen, who calls for “One King, one God, one Law,” and beneath whose “Net of Religion” the senses of humankind became “wither’d, & deafen’d, & cold” (*Urizen* pl. 4, l. 40; pl. 25, l. 22; pl. 28, l. 16). Similarly, Shelley’s Jupiter in *Prometheus Unbound* [1820] is not merely a “brutal dictator,” who proclaims “henceforth I am omnipotent” (*Prometheus* 3.1.3), but “the guiding power behind evil institutions, the essence of orthodoxy and reaction, the enemy of Man’s aspirations” (King-Hele 169). After he chains the disobedient and recalcitrant Prometheus—himself representative of the mind of humankind (King-Hele 169)—Jupiter’s triumphant proclamation that “All else has been subdued to me” is undercut by his fearful reflection that “alone, / The soul of man, like unextinguished fire, / Yet burns towards Heaven with fierce reproach [...] Hurling up insurrection” against “Our antique empire” (3.1.4-6, 8-9).

In *William Blake*, Swinburne confirms his commitment to “the Church of Blake and Shelley” (*SL* 3.14),³¹ by extolling the need for such “insurrection” against “divine

²⁹ See also Blake, *Marriage* pl. 16, p. 40; pl. 22-23, p. 43.

³⁰ See also *WB* 155, 162, 166, 215.

³¹ In this letter of 1871 to E. C. Stedman, which is worth quoting here, Swinburne gives some insight into both his “antitheism [which] has been so much babbled about” and his neo-Romanticism (*SL* 3.13):

[...] a Theist I never was; I always felt by instinct and perceived by reason that no man could conceive of a *personal* God except by brute Calibanic superstition or else by true supernatural revelation; that a natural God was the absurdest of all human figments; *because* no man could by other than apocalyptic means—i.e. other means than a violation of the laws and order of nature—*conceive* of any other sort of divine person than man with a difference—man with some qualities intensified and some qualities suppressed—man with the good in him exaggerated and the evil excised. [...] But we who worship no material incarnation of any qualities, no person, may worship the divine <man> humanity, the ideal of human perfection and aspiration, without worshipping any God,

daemon[s]” like Jupiter and Urizen, for “strenuous battle” against “the God[s] of restraint,” for “a divine [i.e. humanly imaginative] revolt against divine [i.e. inhumanly ascetic] law” (*WB* 155-57). For Blake, as for Swinburne, such imaginative “revolt” must begin with “an improvement of sensual enjoyment” (*Marriage* pl. 14, p. 39), because being “Open to [sensual] joy and to delight” (*Visions* pl. 6, l. 22) is the precondition for the sort of “imaginative awakening” whereby “individual men and women” could “overcome all forms of tyranny, starting with the self-imposed tyranny, the ‘mind-forged manacles,’ by which they create and then enslave themselves to unworthy institutions and ideals” (Gaul 324-25). For Blake, as Swinburne remarks, it is “Not love [...] but error, fear, submission to custom and law”—that is, submission to the anti-imaginative “creator[s] of prohibition”—that “‘defiles’” individuals (*WB* 228n). Likewise, for Shelley, “love” occupied the “peculiarly modern position of a revolutionary and explosive force” (Frye, *Study* 123), which has the power to bring about “an awakening of the imagination” whereby “‘human kind’ might be unbound from the stifling restraints now prevalent [...] and attain the maximum of happiness and freedom” (Gaul 303; King-Hele 169). As Swinburne repeatedly remarked³²—a point to which we will return later—this laudable “fervor for liberty” and “love for humanity” (Meyers, “Conception” 36, 43) led Blake and Shelley into perfectibilian and utopian visions, in which the world was transfigured and “regenerated” by the awakened human imagination, as in *Prometheus Unbound*, where “love [...] redeems both nature and society” (Gaul 203), ushering in a

any person, any fetish at all. Therefore I might call myself if I wished a kind of Christian (of the Church of Blake and Shelley), but assuredly in no sense a Theist. (*SL* 3.13-14)

Swinburne’s mention of Caliban is less a reference to the character in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, than to the speaker of Browning’s “Caliban Upon Setebos” (see fn. 14). It is instructive to compare Swinburne’s remark that “a natural God is the absurdest of all human figments” with Browning’s assertion that “A scientific faith’s absurd” (“Easter-Day” 124).

³² See e.g. *SL* 1.115; *WB* 234.

“new world of man” suffused with the “human love [...] Which makes all it gazes on, Paradise” and “folds over the [new] world its healing wings” (*Prometheus* 4.157, 127-28, 561).

III.

Having addressed the cultural background and larger significance of the mid-Victorian “cult of love,” and the influence upon Swinburne of his Romantic predecessors and their imaginative conception of love, we are now in a position to understand the underlying significance of both the most prominent characteristics of Victorian love (i.e. its fleshlessness, permanence, and gentleness) and Swinburne’s serious critical intent, beyond the mere desire to shock and offend, in insistently inverting them in the “many loves” of *Poems and Ballads*. Given, as I have argued, its vital role in “answer[ing] some of the deepest moral and intellectual problems of the era” (Mintz 105), Victorian love was under extreme pressure to reflect the divine model that it supposedly guaranteed. First and foremost, just as many mid-Victorians, in rejecting natural theology, turned away from the evidence of the senses, so Victorian love was “explicitly identified with the realm of the spirit” and dissociated from humankind’s so-called “baser impulses,” which were those “associated with the flesh and with sex” (Mintz 110-12). Hence the imperative need, expressed by the original reviewers of *Poems and Ballads*,³³ to draw a sharp “distinction between a despicable carnal passion and a ‘love’ which was the manifestation of spirit,”³⁴ in order thereby to reassure themselves that “the ultimate

³³ See e.g. Rev. of *P&B*, *National Quarterly* 156; “Criticisms” 33.

³⁴ See also Houghton 375. While there was a longstanding Christian distinction between “a carnal love” and “a spiritualized agape” (Joseph 11), this division was greatly exacerbated in the mid-Victorian era due

reality is not material but spiritual” (Joseph 13, 16). In the light of what I have argued above, we can see Swinburne’s flagrant refusal to respect this distinction in *Poems and Ballads*, through his contrary emphasis on the “fleshliness” of what he insisted on calling “love”—reflected in his consistent privileging of the love of Aphrodite/Venus over that of Christ³⁵—as both an anti-Victorian insistence on the fundamental “reality” of the material world, and a necessary step towards the neo-Romantic revitalization of human imagination in his own “ghastly thin-faced time” (“Faustine” 139).³⁶

The latter aim can be discerned, in allegorical form, in the paired poems that open the volume, which are “thematically prefatory” to the “major poetic concerns in the volume as a whole” (Baird 56): “A Ballad of Life” and “A Ballad of Death.” As William Michael Rossetti remarked, these poems are “Italian [style] canzoni of the exactest [*sic*] type” (31), and the “lady” of the enraptured speaker is clearly identified as “the legendary Lucrezia [Borgia] of vice and crime” (*PBP* 5n)³⁷—“Borgia, thy gold hair’s colour burns in me” (“Life” 76)—about whom Swinburne also wrote his unfinished hoax *The*

to the fact that the latter was inextricably linked to belief in the immortality of the soul.

³⁵ See e.g. “Laus Veneris” 9-24, “Hymn” 75-88.

³⁶ While Riede insists upon the necessity, in Romantic terms, of bringing mind and matter, or soul and body together in order to promote human creativity (see *SRM* 1-13), he claims that virtually all of the speakers in *Poems and Ballads* represent a “nihilistic” elevation of body over soul, which is the (Sadeian) inversion of the Christian elevation of soul over body (see *SRM* 43-44, 56-59), with the result that the volume forms a “centre of indifference,” a “void” emptied of traditional values and dogmas, into which humanity must “be pushed” before it can return to true creativity in the Romantic sense (see *SRM* 64-65). Like Riede (*SRM* 39-40), Louis claims that the development of Swinburne’s “radical Romanticism” takes place largely after 1869 (*SHG* 4), and she maintains that *Poems and Ballads* reflects a nihilistic “pessimism about language and meaning” (Louis, *Persephone* 61). Yet Swinburne was writing *William Blake* during the same period that he was writing the poems that would constitute *Poems and Ballads*, and it is difficult to understand why his Romantic tendencies would remain either un- or under-developed until 1870.

³⁷ Swinburne, considering a new edition of *Poems and Ballads* in 1876, “planned to ‘subjoin in the *very smallest* capitals’ the words ‘In honorem D. Lucretiae Estensis Borgiae’ and ‘In obitum D. Lucretiae Estensis Borgiae’” (i.e. “In honour of Lucrezia of Este and Borgia” and “On the death of Lucrezia of Este and Borgia”) “under the titles of the respective poems” (*PBH* 325n; *SL* 3.200; *PBP* 5n, 9n). Swinburne’s plans for a new edition were never realized during his lifetime, though Peckham wrong-headedly attempted to realize them in his edition [1970] (see Peckham, Intro. xi-xv).

Chronicle of Tebaldeo Tebaldei [c. 1861].³⁸ For Swinburne, Lucrezia [1480-1519], to whom popular histories attributed much “wantonness” and “vice” (“Borgia” *Chambers* 196),³⁹ represented the Renaissance revaluation of and indulgence in sensual experience,⁴⁰ following upon the recovery of classical literature and art, after the long “dark ages” of Christian asceticism.⁴¹ Appropriately enough, Lucrezia was “a patron of the arts” who “established a brilliant court of artists and men of letters,” and received poetic tributes from Ariosto, Pietro Bembo, and others (“Borgia” *Oxford* 99; “Borgia” *Chambers* 196).⁴² In the “Ballad of Life,” Lucrezia appears as “an idealized lady of poetry” (McDaniel 94)⁴³: both muse and patron of the arts, she represents both the sensual experience that spurred the imaginative revival of the Renaissance and that revival itself. Playing “a little cithern,” “strung with subtle-coloured hair / Of some dead lute-player / That in dead years had done delicious things” (i.e. some pre-Christian poet), she transfigures the personifications of the asceticism of the “dark ages” (11-14): “Fear” (38), “Shame” (31), and “Lust” (30) become “Pity that was dead” (48), “Sorrow comforted” (49), and “Love” (50). Yet Swinburne lamented what he perceived to be the disastrous revival of such “medieval” anti-sensualism in his own times, which is

³⁸ The *Chronicle* was first published as *Lucretia Borgia* (ed. Hughes) in 1942.

³⁹ See also “Borgia” *Oxford* 99; King 254-55.

⁴⁰ Both Baird (see 56-63) and McDaniel remark on the fact that Lucrezia represents “sensuous experience” and “pure eroticism” (McDaniel 91; Baird 60). Baird, however, sees Lucrezia as “a Blakean symbol of the holiness of things of the flesh,” which he misinterprets due to his misguided belief that Swinburne (and Blake) believed that “the natural order [...] should be perceived as pure and good,” rather than simply inhuman (57, 52). McDaniel, on the other hand, simply sees “sensuous experience” as an “essential subject for poetry” that has been unfairly “disparaged or forbidden by many of his [Swinburne’s] contemporaries” (95, 92), without any consideration of its larger significance relative to Swinburne’s neo-Romantic poetics.

⁴¹ As Hughes remarks (9-10), Lucrezia and the sensual spirit of the Renaissance were linked in Swinburne’s mind, and his addition of the words “Renaissance Period” (in brackets) to the top of the first page of the manuscript of the *Chronicle* was due as much to this association as to his desire to establish a false provenance for his hoax (7n).

⁴² See also King 255; *PBH* 324n.

⁴³ Though she calls Lucrezia an “idealized lady of poetry” (94), McDaniel makes no link between this status and Swinburne’s neo-Romantic poetics (see fn. 40).

represented in the “Ballad of Death,” in which Lucrezia is discovered laid-out “crowned and robed and dead,” Venus—goddess of love and Lucrezia’s patroness⁴⁴—appears “drained of purple and full of death,” and “Love’s lute” has been abandoned, “Left hanged upon the trees” (72, 35, 11-12).⁴⁵

Swinburne’s neo-Romantic insistence on the creative importance of sensual experience, as implied in the “Ballad of Life” and “Ballad of Death,” goes hand-in-hand with his anti-Victorian acknowledgement of the fundamental “reality” of the material world, which is the basis of such experience. This connection is manifested in his characteristic conflation of the God of Blake and Shelley (the mental tyrant) with the God of the problem of evil (the physical sadist), which was the “inescapable” conclusion his contemporaries drew from “nature, red in tooth and claw.” Although W. M. Rossetti attempts, in *Swinburne’s Poems and Ballads: A Criticism* [1866], to link Swinburne’s expression of the “problem of evil” to the “respectable” atheism of Hume (27-30), he knew it owed more to the “unmentionable” Marquis de Sade, who concluded in his *Juliette* [1797] that “evil [...] is absolutely useful to the vicious organization of this melancholy universe,” and therefore that “the God who has articulated it is a very vindictive being, very barbarous, very wicked, very unjust, [and] very cruel” (396-97).⁴⁶ In combining this Sadeian God, “Who hath made all things to break them one by one” (“Anactoria” 149), with the Blakean-Shelleyan God—he believed, rightly or wrongly, that Sade and Blake shared similarly bleak visions of “mere nature” and “the laws ruling

⁴⁴ See e.g. Swinburne, *Lucretia* 34, 45, 50, 57.

⁴⁵ In his desire to prove that Swinburne was in “revolt against the basic tenets of romanticism” (2), Murfin reads the first ballad in terms of a naïve Romantic vision that the second ballad rightly rejects (35-41), even if Swinburne is still hovering “between” the two visions in *Poems and Ballads* (41).

⁴⁶ All quotations of Sade’s writings are from the English translations by Richard Seaver and Austryn Wainhouse. For more on the citation of Sade, see Ch. 4, fn. 8.

the outer body of life” (*WB* 158n)⁴⁷—Swinburne produced a hybrid “God of nature,” in both the primary sense of “human or physical condition” and the secondary sense of “conventional ideas and habits” (*WB* 280-81).⁴⁸ It is this composite “divine daemon” (*WB* 155-56) that is the “supreme Evil” of *Atalanta in Calydon* [1865] and *Poems and Ballads* (*Atalanta* 1151), who tries to “sunder us” from “all our lovers that love us,” punish us for the “delight” of our “lust,” and thereby make sure that the “voices of men [are] made lowly, / Made empty of song” (“A Litany” 41-42, 56, 73-74). For Swinburne, the “evil God” of *Poems and Ballads* was not only an attack on his contemporaries’ “God of love,” but on the turn from sensual experience required to maintain belief in Him, and thereby on the deadening of the imagination he perceived in his own “time” of “famished hours” and “Maimed loves” (“Faustine” 137-38).

IV.

Of course, Swinburne’s contemporaries were not literally threatened by the prospect of such an evil God—they believed in such an “absurdity” no more than did Swinburne himself⁴⁹—but they were threatened by the corresponding implication, as per

⁴⁷ Referring to Sade as “a modern pagan philosopher of more material tendencies,” Swinburne paraphrases Sade on the “evils” of nature (see Lafourcade, *Jeunesse* 2.354-56), and goes on to remark: “it is curious to observe how the mystical evangelist and the material humourist meet in the reading of mere nature and join hands in their interpretation of the laws ruling the outer body of life: a vision of ghastly glory, without pity or help possible” (*WB* 158n). For remarks on Swinburne’s linkage of Sade and Blake, see Dorfman 96; Fletcher 49-50.

⁴⁸ Swinburne distinguishes between two sense of the word “nature” as he claims they were used by Blake: both “the simple sense of human or physical condition as opposed to some artificial state of soul or belief” and the “conventional ideas and habits (of religion and morality as vulgarly conceived or practised) [...] the conventional faith” that is “opposed to inspiration” (*WB* 280-81). For more on Swinburne’s attempt to read this distinction into Blake, see Dorfman 157-58; Fletcher 49-50.

⁴⁹ Despite Swinburne’s own frequent avowals of atheism, or, as he often called it, “antitheism” (see *SL* 3.14), some critics have wrongly insisted on claiming that he was a believer in the God that he anathemized, on the dubious ground that an expressed “hostility to God obviously presumes the existence of God” (Schweizer 1, see also 83-101; Poster). The best response to such literal-minded nonsense is

the taunts of the speaker of “Rococo,” that their God of love was impossible:

Dream that the lips once breathless
Might quicken if they would;
Say that the soul is deathless;
Dream that the gods are good. (25-28)

Without a God who “Made love the basis of his plan” (Browning, “Easter-Day” 982), and thus assured them personal immortality, they were left with the universe then being revealed by the neo-Lucretian “materialism of modern science” (Dawson, “Intrinsic” 115),⁵⁰ famously expressed in John Tyndall’s controversial “Belfast Address” [1873],⁵¹ and invoked in Walter Pater’s infamous conclusion to *Studies in the History of Renaissance* [1873]: an indifferent world of universal flux and mortality, in which everything, including the human mind, is, as Tennyson framed it in “Lucretius” [1868], the transitory effect of “flaring atom-streams” making “Another and another frame of things / For ever” (38, 42-43). As Gowan Dawson remarks (*Darwin* 14-25), hostile critics were somewhat justified in linking Swinburne’s poetry to such “modern materialism,” because Swinburne was an admirer of both Tyndall and Lucretius,⁵² and the world of *Poems and Ballads* is a (quasi-)Lucretian world of material flux, in which God is (implicitly) non-existent and “the only permanent thing is change itself” (Altick 233):⁵³ “Lo, what thing have ye found endure? / Or what thing have ye found on high / Past the blind sky?” (“Félice” 238-40). For Swinburne, this flux is best represented by the “pulse

Swinburne’s own scornful and sarcastic response in *Under the Microscope* [1872] (SC 43).

⁵⁰ See also Dawson, “Intrinsic” 118-20.

⁵¹ All quotations of Tyndall are from *Fragments of Science* [5th ed., 1884].

⁵² See e.g. *SL* 1.209; 2.131-33, 334-35.

⁵³ See also Fricke 201. As Leonard M. Findlay suggests (“Swinburne” 227-36), Tennyson may have been thinking of Swinburne when he wrote “Lucretius.” Tennyson “is reputed to have exclaimed [...] in a reading of the poem, ‘What a mess little Swinburne would have made of this!’” (“Swinburne” 234).

of the tide of the sea,” which is the mortal enemy of “immortal Gods,”⁵⁴ and their earthly representatives, the king with “blood” on his “hands” and the priest with “the lie” at his “lips” (“Order” 8, 27-28).⁵⁵

It is this reality of universal flux and mortality that Swinburne’s contemporaries were trying to escape by rejecting sensual experience, and the “reality” of the material, and this flight is reflected in the theoretical permanence of Victorian love, as sanctified in the holy bonds of marriage, which was understood as “a school for heaven” (Gladstone, qtd. in Mintz 129). For the many mid-Victorians, in the words of John Ruskin in “Of Queens’ Gardens” [1865], marriage marked “the avowed transition [...] of fitful into eternal love” (121), and thereby foreshadowed (for some) the immortality promised by the “God, which ever lives and loves” (Tennyson, *Memoriam* Epi. 141). For these men and women, as Patmore never tired of reiterating, it was “in the permanence of love [where] lies the secret of its delight” (Reid 154), because love “belongs in its fullness to eternity not earthly life” (Ball 190): “Though love is all of earth that’s dear, / Its home, my Children, is not here” (Patmore, *Angel* 4.W.10.13-14). For men and women desperate to prove, in the words of Tennyson, that “No lapse of moons can canker Love, / Whatever fickle tongues may say” (*Memoriam* 26.3-4), Swinburne’s repeated insistence in *Poems and Ballads* that “no loves endure” was almost unbearable (“Garden” 80). Perhaps most relentless among these poems in spelling out the implications of the fact that love ends is “Félise,” which Swinburne claimed was “a personal favourite of mine,”

⁵⁴ See e.g. “Hymn” 47-68.

⁵⁵ See also “Revolution” 6, 9-10, 17-18. As Swinburne would have known, in the Bible the sea is often representative of “restless insubordination” and “hostility to God’s people,” and in the new post-apocalyptic order “there is to be no more sea” (Metzger 99): “And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea” (Rev. 21.2).

and acknowledged as reflective of his “personal” attitudes (*SL* 1.160, 193).⁵⁶ In “Félise,” the speaker, who has ceased to love the eponymous woman,⁵⁷ both repeatedly links and dismisses hopes in the eternity of life and of love on the principle that “All passes” with or without “God to friend” (261, 265): “this thing is and must be so; / For man dies, and love also dies” (171-72). As the speaker makes clear, love is as volatile and fluctuant as the sea—from which Aphrodite/Venus herself arose⁵⁸—“which laughs with love of the amorous hour” at the same time as it, as representative of time and change, stands “between” the almost lovers (28, 150; see also 26-28, 146-55): “No diver brings up love again, / Dropped once, my beautiful Félise, / In such cold seas” (73-75)

In thus bringing his mid-Victorian contemporaries face-to-face with the material world’s most inassimilable fact, that “what lives [including love] surely, surely dies” (“Félise” 157), Swinburne affirms its radical “otherness,” its indifference and mindless resistance not only to our physical, but also our “highest sphere and state of spiritual well-doing and well-being” (*SC* 62). In “Matthew Arnold’s New Poems” [1867], Swinburne contrasts the acknowledgement of this material reality, which he sees in Arnold’s *Empedocles on Etna* [1852],⁵⁹ with the “optimism” of his contemporaries,

⁵⁶ In his defense of *Poems and Ballads*, W. M. Rossetti remarked that the romantic scenario of “Félise” is the “thinnest of dramatic veils,” and that it is “manifestly spoken in the author’s person” (26). In a letter of 1866, Swinburne responded to Rossetti’s remarks, elicited in a discussion of the manuscript of *Notes on Poems and Reviews*, on the “antitheism” of “Félise,” by remarking that, although “you know that the verses represent a mood of mind and phase of thought not unfamiliar to me,” “I must nevertheless maintain that no reader (*as a reader*) has a right (whatever he may conjecture) to assert that this is *my* faith [...] Of course it is a more serious expression [than some of the other dramatic pieces]; and of course this is evident; but it is not less formally dramatic than the others” (*SL* 1.193).

⁵⁷ Swinburne described the dramatic scenario of the poem, in a letter to Ruskin in 1866, as follows: “A young fellow is left alone with a woman rather older, whom a year since he violently loved. Meantime he has been in town, she in the country; and in the year’s lapse they have had time, he to become tired of her memory, she to fall in love with his. [...] Last year I loved you, and you were puzzled, and didn’t love me—quite. This year (I perceive) you love me, and I feel puzzled, and don’t love you—quite” (*SL* 1.160).

⁵⁸ See e.g. “Hymn” 78-88.

⁵⁹ All quotations of Arnold’s poems are from *The Poems of Matthew Arnold* (ed. Allott).

which insists, in contrast to sensual experience, that reality is “Adapted to the needs of man” (Browning, “Easter-Day” 981). “It is sad not to believe that we are to live once more sometime, [and] see again our dead friends,” say these optimists, “Let us affirm, then, that this is true, that it has to be [...] No more reasonings of the unbeliever. The heart stands up like a man incensed and answers: I have felt!”⁶⁰ You lack faith, you say, you lack proofs, but it is enough that you have had feelings” (SC 60).⁶¹ By displacing their natural concern for their own “well-doing and well-being” onto God, they “spiritualize” away the resistance of the material world to the same, effectively collapsing “apparent” matter into “real” spirit, and “apparent” evil into “real” good, as in Swinburne’s unpublished epigram “Thus runs our wise man’s song” [c. 1858]⁶²: “Being dark, it must be light; / And most things are so wrong / That all things must be right” (2-4). To Swinburne, such optimism is little more than wilful solipsism: to choose to “dwell” “in my spirit” and “dream my dream, and hold it true” (Tennyson, *Memoriam* 123.9-10), or to allow “Love [to] shut our eyes” so “all seemed right” (Browning, “Christmas-Eve” 692). “Death, grief, oblivion, distress,” he says, “these are undoubtedly painful things that one would wish to avoid. Clearly, we would all do our best to escape them. Does that prove that these things do not exist?” (SC 60). On the contrary, as the speaker of “Félice” remarks, those who “must have gods, the friends of men, / Merciful

⁶⁰ Here Swinburne’s fake French critic (see fn. 61) is ironically echoing Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*:

A warmth within the breast would melt
The freezing reason’s colder part,
And like a man in wrath the heart
Stood up and answered ‘I have felt.’ (124.13-16)

⁶¹ Swinburne, as he later confessed to Arnold (*SL* 1.269-70), puts this speech (as translated by Hyder) into the mouth of a fake French critic (see SC 57, 94n).

⁶² “Thus runs our wise man’s song” is printed—under the appropriate, but not original, title “The High Victorian Tone”—in *Major Poems and Selected Prose* (ed. McGann and Sligh) p. 410. In the second stanza, Swinburne identifies his “wise man” with Tennyson and Browning: “This satisfies our Browning / And this delights our Tennyson: / And soothed Britannia simpers in serene applause” (8-10).

gods, compassionate” are “fools and blind,” because they refuse to acknowledge the “sure” truth that “ye shall not live, but die” (231-33, 236-37).

V.

Such wilful blindness to the recalcitrant realities of the material world, this insistence that it must conform to “the needs of man,” is reflected in the “mild and equable” face of Victorian love (Baynes 39),⁶³ the “sentimental stereotype of domestic affection” best embodied in the “scarcely mortal” figure of the “angel in the house” (Stevenson 209; Houghton 341). The personification of compliant complementarity and “self-renunciation,”⁶⁴ the angel in the house was “born to be Love visible,” an antidote to the “peril and trial” of man’s “rough work in the open world” (e.g. industry, red in gears and pistons) (Ruskin 123, 128, 122); with her “gentler virtues” (Ball 198), she made the home a “shelter” from the “terror, doubt, and division” of the “outer world” (Ruskin 122), and served for many men as “a constant reminder of the divine” (Reid 155). As Maxwell has remarked (*SWI* 27), this “angelic” vision of the ideal woman and wife as the submissive and self-abnegating reflex of man’s needs and wants—an erasure of selfhood that was literalized in the marriage laws of the time⁶⁵—was the polar opposite of the “fierce and luxurious” ladies that dominate *Poems and Ballads* (“Dolores” 135):

⁶³ “Now the main subject of domestic and pastoral poetry is love in *its milder and more equable manifestations*. And Mr. Swinburne [in his defence of *Poems and Ballads*] intimates that such a subject is unfit for the higher levels of tragic and lyrical verse. [...] As we have seen, he [thus] virtually renounces the passion of love” (Baynes 39, emphasis added).

⁶⁴ As Mintz repeatedly remarks, self-renunciation was a key element of Victorian love, especially for women (see Mintz 109, 117, 123, 128, 133; see also Ruskin 183).

⁶⁵ As Frances Power Cobbe remarked in “Criminals, Idiots, Women, and Minors” [1868], under the common law of England at the time, “a married woman has not legal existence, so far as property is concerned, independently of her husband” (111). Ironically echoing the biblical injunction that husband and wife become “one flesh” (Gen. 2.24), Cobbe quips that, under the common law of England, “The husband and wife are assumed to be one person, and that person is the husband” (111).

“Faustine, Fragoletta, Dolores, / Félice and Yolande and Juliette” among others (“Dedication” 27-28).⁶⁶ These women are as, if not more, likely to demand submission than to submit, and the nature of their relations with their lovers is literally marked by sadomasochism: their love chains, stings, burns, blinds, bites, bruises, tortures, sickens, and even kills.⁶⁷ In sharp contrast to Victorian love, the love of *Poems and Ballads* is a “compound of agony and ecstasy” (Stevenson 210), reflective of the “bittersweet” or “sweetbitter” eros of Swinburne’s beloved Greek poets (*SWI* 27)—especially Sappho (see e.g. fr. 130)⁶⁸—for whom love was “perceived as an attack” (Calame 5), an attack whose pains were inseparable from its pleasures.⁶⁹

Just as the love of *Poems and Ballads* requires a certain amount of submission and constraint on the part of the lover, so do our fraught relations, both material and spiritual, to the intractable realities of the “indifferent nature of things, cruel in the eyes of all but her lovers, and even in theirs not loving” (*SC* 41).⁷⁰ Echoing Arnold’s Empedocles, Swinburne remarks, in opposition to the optimism of Tennyson and Browning, that “the world has other work” than our “spiritual well-doing and well-being,” “and we, not it, must submit; submit, not by ceasing to attempt and achieve the best we can,⁷¹ but by ceasing to expect subservience to our own ends from all forces and

⁶⁶ Faustine, Fragoletta, Dolores, and Félice come from the poems of the same names. Juliette, in addition to being the “heroine” of Sade’s *Juliette*, is addressed in “Rococo” (62). Yolande de Sallières, as Swinburne’s invented French source (*Grandes Chroniques de France*, 1505) indicates, is the noble, but diseased and outcast lady of “The Leper” (*PBH* 100n; see also 345-46n).

⁶⁷ See e.g. “Laus Veneris” 134, 319; “Phaedra” 69; “Anactoria” 2, 115; “Dolores” 270, 79; “Aholibah” 86; “In the Orchard” 29.

⁶⁸ Unless otherwise noted, all quotations of Sappho’s fragments are from *If not, winter: Fragments of Sappho* (trans. Carson). For more on the citation of Sappho, see Ch. 5, fn. 1.

⁶⁹ For the experience of classical Eros, especially as depicted in the ancient Greek poets, as an “attack” from without, see Calame 5, 16-17, 20-23; Carson 40-41, 45, 148.

⁷⁰ This quotation is from Swinburne’s “Byron” [1866].

⁷¹ “I say: Fear not! Life still / Leaves human effort scope. [...] Because thou must not dream, thou need’st not then despair!” (Arnold, *Empedocles* 1.2.422-23, 426).

influences of existing things⁷² [...] ‘To tunes we did not call our being must keep chime’;⁷³ but this bare truth we will not accept” (*SC* 62). As Dawson remarks (*Darwin* 14-25), it was the expression of attitudes such as these, both in his prose and poetry, that aligned Swinburne, for his nervous contemporaries, with promoters of “modern materialism,” such as Tyndall and Thomas Henry Huxley,⁷⁴ who argued for “the mysterious control of Mind by Matter” (Tyndall, “Belfast” 523).⁷⁵ Likewise Swinburne, who greatly admired the “Belfast Address” (see *SL* 2.334-35), remarked in *William Blake* that “God [i.e. the human mind] appears to a Theist as the root” when it is actually “the flower of [material] things” (226n). For Swinburne, just as our minds depend upon our bodies, so, in his neo-Romantic sense, our relations to the material world make our “spiritual well-doing and well-being” possible, but they also condition and delimit it—making it impossible, for instance, to simply transmute “dark” into “light,” or “wrong” into “right”—and this is the point upon which his neo-Romanticism comes into friction with the ideas of his Romantic predecessors.

VI.

Although he lauded their theoretical commitment to sensual experience, and their “fiery animosity” against ascetic law, Swinburne felt that his Romantic predecessors often underestimated or overlooked the resistance, and consequent limitations, that the

⁷² Man errs not that he deems
His welfare his true aim,
He errs because he dreams

The world does but exist that welfare to bestow. (Arnold, *Empedocles* 1.2.173-76)

⁷³ This line is from *Empedocles* (1.2.196).

⁷⁴ This association is reflected in the fact that the Society for the Suppression of Blasphemy lumped Swinburne together with Tyndall and Thomas Henry Huxley for potential prosecutions (see Dawson, *Darwin* 24; *SL* 2.334-35).

⁷⁵ For more on the Victorian implications of the dependence of the mind on the body, see Haley 23-45.

material world could, and should, impose upon our activities – imaginative and otherwise. In other words, in their laudable desire for freedom from “natural” (i.e. conventional) constraints—which is supported by an intellectual appeal to sensual experience—Blake and Shelley often forget about the “natural” constraints of the “human or physical condition” (*WB* 280), with the result that there was little to stop them from living in a “Land of Dreams” (Blake, “Land of Dreams”), “remote from the sound of common things and days on earth,” from which they (or, at least, Blake) “never got back” (*WB* 134-35).⁷⁶ As Ross Murfin argues (1-13, 22-47)—though he wrongly believes, among other things, that Swinburne was in “revolt against the basic tenets of romanticism” (2)—Swinburne, in common with his beam-blinded⁷⁷ contemporaries,⁷⁸ was critical of the potential for solipsism inherent in Romanticism and Romantic love.⁷⁹ It is this solipsistic impulse that misleads Blake and Shelley into an optimism similar to that of Swinburne’s mid-Victorian contemporaries: not the belief that the world is inherently attuned to our “spiritual well-doing and well-being” (because of the love of a creator God), but that it will become so (because of the infinite potential of humankind’s godlike creative powers). As Terry Meyers has shown (see “Conception,” “Influence”),

⁷⁶ Throughout *William Blake*, Swinburne repeatedly distances himself from Blake’s so-called “mysticism” (see e.g. 104-07), which rendered his “illusions” immune to “reason and experience” (2): “He had a devil and its name was Faith. [...] His faith was absolute and hard, like a pure fanatic’s” (4-5). For Swinburne, Blake’s problem was that “his tone of mind was as far from being critical as from being orthodox,” such that he wanted “supremacy of freedom with intensity of faith” (*WB* 189).

⁷⁷ “And beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?” (Matt. 7.3).

⁷⁸ As Carol Christ argues, many Victorian poets feared that Romantic poetics would lead them to “realize only an eccentric and personal reality” through its “disabling focus on the self” (5).

⁷⁹ Although he correctly remarks Swinburne’s concern about Romantic solipsism, Murfin incorrectly assumes that this is related to a corresponding Romantic belief in love as a “state of immortal, transcendental, perfect union [...] which explicitly seeks [...] ‘the annihilation of time’” (9). While such impulses may be found in relevant Romantic discourses on love (see e.g. Shelley’s “Epipsychidion”), Swinburne’s objection to the notion of “immortal Love” (Tennyson, *Memoriam* Pro.1), and his corresponding emphasis on the transience of love, is primarily directed not at his Romantic forbearers, but at his mid-Victorian contemporaries and their “cult of love,” which was designed to provide them assurance in a “God of love” and the immortality of the soul.

in reference to Swinburne's conception of Shelley, Swinburne rejected such "perfectibilian" ideals, described by Mary Shelley as the notion that "mankind had only to will that there should be no evil, and there would be none" (271). Blake, Swinburne remarked critically, often "mix[ed] up the actual events of history with [...] his own mythology," and both he and Shelley "in all innocence" actually thought that an "ameliorated humanity" would rise from "the saving advent of French and American revolutions" (*WB* 56, 234).

This optimistic tendency, among the Romantic poets, towards the "elimination of [the] Otherness" of the material world has been addressed in some detail by Anne Mellor (17-29), who has linked it to the Romantic ideal of love, which was inherited and modified by Swinburne. Mellor argues that the (female) Romantic beloved—alogous to "a nature gendered as female"—is often reduced to a "narcissistic projection" of the (male) lover (20, 25), an ideal manifestation of, in Shelley's own words, the "soul within our soul," "a mirror whose surface reflects only the forms of purity and brightness" ("On Love" 170).⁸⁰ It is this optimistic, and solipsistic, tendency toward "elimination of Otherness," or anything that might prove an "obstacle" or limit to "creative power" (Mellor 27, 21), that lies behind Swinburne's own remarks, in *William Blake*, concerning how both Blake's and Shelley's sensual love tends to evanesce into "soft light aspirations of theory without body or flesh on them," paradoxically "bodiless evangel[s] of bodily liberty" that are little different in substance from the anodyne nuptial delights of his contemporaries' fleshless "cult of love" (*WB* 140).⁸¹ Likewise, although Swinburne's

⁸⁰ See also Shelley, "Epipsychidion" 238, 455.

⁸¹ "The sinless likeness of his [i.e. Blake's] seeming "sins"—mere fancies as it appears they mostly were, mere soft light aspirations of theory without body or flesh on them—has something of the innocent

Romantic forbearers share his belief in the impermanence of love—preaching a doctrine of “free-love” opposed to marriage⁸²—their focus is exclusively on the poet-lover’s freedom from “natural” (i.e. conventional, dogmatic) constraints on imagination. “Love is free,” says Shelley, “to promise for ever to love the same woman is not less absurd than to promise to believe the same creed; such a vow in both cases excludes us from all [further] inquiry” (Shelley, “Even love is sold” 116).⁸³ The volatility and violence of the love of *Poems and Ballads*, on the contrary, is not a simple reflection of our imaginative freedom, but also reflects the constraints imposed upon us by the “indifferent nature of things” (SC 41), which, like the cruel or fickle beloved, is beyond our control but nevertheless constitutes the “human or physical condition” within which we act and create (WB 280).

Such love does not simply “create unity out of the disparate and divided” (Frye, *Study* 104), but paradoxically brings together *at the same time as* it holds apart. In other words, in bringing the mind and the world, or the lover and the beloved, together, it also marks the irreducible difference(s) between them. It is a love that both “joins” and “separates,” that both liberates and restrains our creative impulses, and in doing so induces both pleasure and pain; it is a love that—in a word that, along with its variants, appears 37 times in the volume—“cleaves” each-to-each and each-from-each.⁸⁴ To fully embrace such love, however, one must have a true appreciation of not only the indifference, but also the intractability of the world to “our spiritual well-doing and well-

immodesty of a birds’ or babies’ paradise—of a fools’ paradise, too, translated into the practice and language of the untheoretic world. Shelley’s ‘Epipsychidion’ scarcely preaches a more bodiless evangel of bodily liberty” (WB 140).

⁸² See e.g. Blake, *Visions* pl. 5, ll. 17-32; Shelley, “Even love is sold” 115-17, “Epipsychidion” 169-73.

⁸³ “Even love is sold” is an excerpt from Shelley’s own notes to *Queen Mab* [1813].

⁸⁴ On the use of the word “cleave” in Swinburne, see Prins 117; Wagner-Lawlor 921-22.

being,” and this is very difficult to attain and accept, even for those, like Swinburne’s Romantic forbearers, who rebel against asceticism and the “God of nature,” let alone those, like his mid-Victorian contemporaries, who affirm that “God love[s]” and “hold that truth against the world.” As we have seen, it is far easier to “dream” one’s “dream, and hold it true,” or to “wander” in a “land of dreams,” indulging in fantasies of freedom without constraint or opposition, of possession without loss or change, of indulgence (and existence) without satiety or end. In short, it is easier to simply “shut our eyes” to the irreducible “Otherness” of the other, be it the material world or the beloved, but this is no more than to yield one’s mind to “Sick dreams” (“Triumph” 129). It is precisely such “sick dreams” that characterize most of the speakers in *Poems and Ballads*, with their curious mixtures of “spiritual” rebellion and “spiritual decadence” (SR 98)⁸⁵ in the face of the “God of nature” and the ever-present possibility of Swinburnian love, and the entire volume might best be described in the same terms that Swinburne himself used to describe Charles Baudelaire’s “The Litanies of Satan” from *The Flowers of Evil* [1857]: it contains “all failure and sorrow on earth, and all the cast-out things of the world,” making a “sound [...] between wailing and triumph, as it were the blast blown by the trumpets of a brave army in irretrievable defeat” (SC 34).⁸⁶

VII.

Of course, such “sick dreams” are precisely the stuff of the “transcendent theory” of Swinburnian love, which attributes to Swinburne the desire to escape from “strife”—i.e. from the “pain” that derives from the differences and divisions of human life and

⁸⁵ This quotation is from the “Dedicatory Epistle” to the *Poems of Algernon Charles Swinburne*.

⁸⁶ This quotation is from “Charles Baudelaire: *Les Fleurs du Mal*” [1862].

love—into some quasi-spiritual “transcendent” existence,⁸⁷ rather than examining such desires—which are far more varied and complex in their iterations than these commentators allow—critically, in light of both Swinburne’s own philosophical and aesthetic theories, as evidenced in his other writings, and the circumstances and motivations of the individual dramatic speakers of *Poems and Ballads*. As Riede—almost alone, even among those critics who acknowledge the dramatic nature of the volume—has remarked, “Swinburne is not to be understood,” despite the “sick dreams” of his speakers, “to be advocating a surrender to oblivion,” but retains a philosophical and aesthetic commitment, to borrow (if not to endorse) Blakean terms, to “never-ending strife” (*SRM* 58): “Freedom a man may have, he shall not peace” (“Hugo” 56).⁸⁸ From Swinburne’s neo-Romantic perspective, to attain such “peace” would require withdrawal from engagement with the often painful realities of the material world, and the consequent abdication of true creativity, whether in the self-imposed blindness of religious or philosophical dogmatism, or in the self-indulgence of solipsistic “babble” (*WB* 307),⁸⁹ or in the inhuman silence of death—in which there is neither love nor song,⁹⁰

⁸⁷ See Ch. 1, fn. 19.

⁸⁸ In “To Victor Hugo,” Swinburne mildly criticizes Hugo for the same sort of perfectibilian optimism he saw in Blake and Shelley:

But we, our master, we
 Whose hearts uplift to thee,
 Ache with the pulse of thy remembered song,
 We ask not nor await
 From the clenched hands of fate,
 As thou, remission of the world’s old wrong;
 Respite we ask not, nor release;
 Freedom a man may have, he shall not peace. (49-56)

⁸⁹ In the note he added to *William Blake* in 1906, Swinburne acknowledged the “vein of sound reason in Blake’s fitful and eccentric intelligence,” but he also chastised the “illimitable emptiness of mock-mystical babble [...] we find in his bad imitations of so bad a model as the Apocalypse [i.e. the later prophetic books]” (307-08).

⁹⁰ See e.g. “Hymn” 96-97.

because there is no human consciousness,⁹¹ and consequently no human “meaning”: no joy or sorrow, no hope or fear, no pleasure or pain, no good or evil (“Ilicet” 1, 8, 11, 19-21). All of which is to reiterate—and, judging from the critical record, it still needs reiterating—Swinburne’s own admonition to his critics, in *Notes on Poems and Reviews*, that the attitudes and beliefs of the speakers in *Poems and Ballads* were not (necessarily) his own, but rather that the volume was “dramatic, many-faced, multifarious” (SR 18).⁹²

Although, as I will argue in the chapters that follow, the Swinburnian love of *Poems and Ballads* holds open the possibility of creative renewal, the speakers of the volume—with the notable exception of the Sappho of “Anactoria” (see Ch. 5)—though they initially “love and choose him,” finally “See Love,” in the volatile and violent Swinburnian sense, “and so refuse him,” forgetting, if they ever knew, that “all who find him lose him, / But all have found him fair” (“Dawn” 77-80). As the “Swinburnian” poet-speaker of “Félise” claims, even while he punctures the fantasy of ideal love with the “Mutable loves, and loves perverse” of his “sweet” and “wicked [...] verse” (162, 164), love and song remain the supreme experiences of human life: “we that sing and you that love / Know that which man may, only we. / The rest live under us” (166-68). Yet most of the speakers in the volume, traumatized by contact with the painful realities of love, choose to “refuse” love—and, consequently, song as well. That is to say, that though all the speakers in the volume experience Swinburnian love, very few are “Swinburnian lovers,” in the sense that, in the final account, they “choose” love (i.e. an interactive, creative engagement with the “other”) over the comfort of their own “sick dreams,” or

⁹¹ See e.g. “Félise” 254-60; “Ilicet” 40, 55, 119-20.

⁹² Swinburne’s adoption of dramatic voices in *Poems and Ballads* suits his then clearly stated aversion to overtly didactic poetry, as it allows him to convey ideas indirectly, and often through dramatic irony. “The pure artist never asserts,” says Swinburne, “he suggests” (WB 103n).

the safety of flight from the world around them. To argue that most of the dramatic speakers in the volume should be understood in terms of their “refusal” of the Swinburnian love that I have outlined in this chapter is not to reduce them to “one voice,” but to provide a framework that is capable of accommodating the variety and complexity, both psychological and philosophical, of the various speakers’ “refusals” to love. This variety will be illustrated in the next chapter, in which I will examine the “refusals” of two very different speakers—both of whom are, oddly enough, often taken as mouthpieces, whether polemical or biographical, for the poet himself: a fourth-century Roman poet protesting against “the young compassionate Gods” of Christianity, and their promise of eternal life (“Hymn” 16); and a nineteenth-century poet struggling with his disillusionment in the “cult of love,” and the loss of his hopes for eternal life.

Chapter 3

“Laurel is green for a season, and love is sweet for a day”:

The End of Love and the End of Song

in the “Hymn to Proserpine” and “The Triumph of Time”

I have lived long enough, having seen one thing, that love hath an end [...]
I am sick of singing: the bays burn deep and chafe: I am fain
To rest a little from praise and grievous pleasure and pain.

— Swinburne, “Hymn to Proserpine”¹

I shall never be friends again with roses [...]
I shall hate sweet music my whole life long.

— Swinburne, “The Triumph of Time”²

The critical histories of the “Hymn to Proserpine” and “The Triumph of Time” provide good examples of the tendency to dismiss Swinburne’s claim, in *Notes on Poems and Reviews*, that *Poems and Ballads* is “dramatic, many-faced, multifarious,” and that “no utterance of enjoyment or despair, of belief or unbelief, can properly be assumed as the assertion of the author’s personal feeling or faith” (SR 18). Since the moment it first appeared in print, the “Hymn” has been interpreted by critics, both hostile and sympathetic, to be a “purely personal” expression of Swinburne’s own attitudes (Buchanan, Rev. of *P&B* 137).³ Recognizing that the poem was “carefully calculated to

¹ 1, 9-10.

² 353, 360.

³ See also Buchanan, Rev. of *P&B* 137; “Mr. Swinburne, his Crimes” 497-98. For nineteenth-century reviewers who granted the dramatic nature of the “Hymn,” see e.g. “Mr. Swinburne’s Poetry,” *Westminster* 218; Skelton 643; Taylor, B. 291.

offend the Victorian Christian reader” (Findlay, “Apostasy” 72),⁴ later critics have seen it as a polemical expression of Swinburne’s well-documented “antitheism” (see Rosenberg 175), or of his supposed “pessimism” (see Louis, *Persephone* 56-61), or of his highly-dubious desire to “rehabilitate classical paganism” (Findlay, “Apostasy” 73). The “Triumph,” on the other hand, was initially overlooked in the outrage caused by the more scandalous pieces, but subsequent generations of critics, accepting Edmund Gosse’s assertion that the poem was an “exact” account of Swinburne’s own disappointment in love (*LAS* 78), have chosen to treat the poem as a “[quasi-]biographical document” (*ACS* 103). In this chapter, I will argue, on the contrary, that the speakers of these poems are not merely polemical or biographical mouthpieces for the poet, but, like many of the other speakers in the volume, psychologically- and philosophically-complex dramatic representations of the “seeing” and “refusing” of love, which tragically results in the end of song—thus illustrating Swinburne’s neo-Romantic ideas about the connection between sensual experience and human creativity, and the critique of the mid-Victorian “cult of love” that is encoded in those ideas.

I.

Although it is generally agreed that the speaker of the “Hymn to Proserpine,” who identifies himself as a poet (9), is a fourth-century Roman,⁵ the subtitle and the epigraph to the poem have presented “a number of challenges” to critics seeking to “be more precise about the identity of the speaker” and his historical position (Findlay,

⁴ In fact, Swinburne was advised to omit the poem from the volume for that reason (see *SL* 1.141).

⁵ For the historical setting of the poem in the fourth century, see Cervo, “Vicisti” 34; Findlay, “Apostasy” 71; Fricke 198; *PBH* 334n; *PBP* 71n; *PRC* 515n; *SRM* 45; Shrimpton 52; *TSR* 127.

“Apostasy” 71). Insofar as the speaker is meant to be, as Swinburne himself remarks elsewhere, the proverbial “Last Pagan” (*SL* 1.141), the ambiguity surrounding him is understandable: he is, as are many of the speakers in *Poems and Ballads*, a representative rather than an actual historical figure.⁶ In this, he resembles Browning’s Cleon, who is also an imaginary pagan poet, albeit one of the first rather than the fourth century. While Browning’s post-Hellenistic Greek speaker reacts dismissively to the early promotion of Christianity by St. Paul—“a mere barbarian Jew” whose “doctrine could be held by no sane man” (343, 353)—Swinburne’s late-Roman speaker reacts despairingly to the unlikely triumph of the “pale Galilean” over the Roman world (35), and the Old Gods that had reigned over it, only three centuries later. As I have remarked, despite Swinburne’s attempt, by way of the subtitle, to identify the distinct historical setting of the poem, many critics—recognizing the obvious concurrence between the anti-Christian attitudes of the speaker of the “Hymn” and those of Swinburne himself—have convinced themselves and others that the speaker is simply the vehicle for the expression of Swinburne’s personal attitudes, and therefore not “truly dramatic” or historical (Shrimpton 66).⁷ This is unfortunate, since an appreciation of the historical and cultural context of the poem provides the proper framework within which to understand the speaker himself.

Before such a framework can be assembled, however, some common confusions and errors deriving from the subtitle and epigraph must be corrected. Most critics have

⁶ Cf. *SRM* 43-44.

⁷ While recent critics, like Morgan and Louis, have been willing to pay “lip-service” to the dramatic nature of the poem (see e.g. Morgan, “Dramatic” 175; Louis, *Persephone* 59), they have still tended to identify the speaker’s attitudes with Swinburne’s own. Louis identifies the speaker’s “worship of death” with Swinburne’s supposed “pessimism” (*Persephone* 56-61); while Morgan claims that the speaker’s desire for “sleep” reflects Swinburne’s own transcendent aspirations (“Dramatic” 194-95).

mistakenly taken the subtitle of the poem, “After the Proclamation in Rome of the Christian Faith,” to refer to the Edict of Milan, which was issued by the then joint emperors Constantine and Licinius in 313.⁸ They thus situate the poem as “a private response to [that] public edict” sometime after 313 (Findlay, “Apostasy” 71). Apart from the fact that the Edict of Milan, although “proclaimed” everywhere, was issued in Milan *not* Rome, there remains the still more inconvenient fact, as emphasized by Edward Gibbon—whose *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* [1776-88]⁹ would have been Swinburne’s source for much of the history of the era—that the Edict of Milan was merely an edict of “universal toleration” (20.729), not a “Proclamation [...] of the Christian Faith” of the Empire. Although the emperor’s favouritism assured that every “motive of authority and fashion, of interest and reason, now militated on the side of Christianity,” it took “two or three generations [...] before their victorious influence was universally felt” (Gibbon 21.828). The same objections can be brought to bear, and with as much weight, upon Nicholas Shrimpton’s clever but implausible suggestion—based upon the fact that “The Hymn of Man” [1871], the “modern companion-in-arms-and-metre” to “The Hymn to Proserpine” (*SL* 2.87), is dated “During the Session in Rome of the Oecumenical Council” (i.e. the First Vatican Council of 1870)—that Swinburne’s subtitle refers to the first Oecumenical council, otherwise known as the Council of

⁸ For the assumption that Swinburne is referring to the Edict of Milan, see Christ and Robson 1496n; Findlay, “Apostasy” 71; Fricke 198; *PBH* 334n; *PBP* 71n. Peckham, who is particularly careless with regard to his annotations (see Lang, Intro.), mistakenly refers to Constantine’s co-emperor as Lactantius (*PBP* 71n).

⁹ Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* was originally published in six volumes. Although Womersley’s edition is published in three volumes, he has subdivided each volume into two, in accordance with the original format of publication. Citations of Gibbon will include the original volume number(s), followed by the page number(s) in Womersley’s edition.

Nicaea, in 325 (67).¹⁰

Assuming, like most critics, that the subtitle of the “Hymn” refers to the Edict of Milan, Findlay has used the epigraph in an attempt to provide a *terminus post quem* of 313 and a *terminus ante quo* of 363 for the speaker (“Apostasy” 71). The epigraph, “*Vicisti, Galilae,*” “Thou has won, O Galilean” (Theodoret 20.125), are the last words falsely attributed by Theodoret, the Bishop of Cyrrhus, to the emperor Julian (*PBH* 334n), known to posterity as “Julian the Apostate.”¹¹ Julian, who wished to turn back the tide of advancing Christianity unleashed by Constantine and his sons, reigned from 361 until his death, supposedly by a Christian hand, in 363.¹² The epigraph is later paraphrased by the speaker of the poem: “Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean” (35). As Findlay remarks, however, this does not mean that the speaker is Julian himself (71). After all, as he points out (71-72), the speaker also paraphrases Epictetus later in the poem—“A little soul for a little bears up this corpse which is man” (108)¹³—as Swinburne highlights in an authorial footnote (*PBH* 61n). By paraphrasing Julian, and adopting his contemptuous use of the word “Galilean” to imply that Christianity is “a local creed, ‘the creed of fishermen,’” not of well-educated Romans (Wright 313),¹⁴ the speaker is aligning himself with a self-conscious tradition of anti-Christian polemic that includes both Epictetus and Julian before him, and will include both Shelley and

¹⁰ While the Council of Nicaea was of incalculable importance for the future of the Church (see Gaddis), it did not, as Shrimpton misleadingly claims, make Christianity “*de facto* the religion of the empire” (67).

¹¹ See also Findlay, “Apostate” 72; Rutland 274. Seeming to take only the epigraph into account, Riede claims, more specifically, that the speaker is “a pagan poet in the era of Julian the Apostate” (*SRM* 45).

¹² It should be noted that Shrimpton mistakenly dates Julian’s death to 386 (67).

¹³ The saying of Epictetus to which the speaker alludes is preserved in Marcus Aurelius’s *Meditations*: “‘A poor soul burdened with a corpse,’ Epictetus calls you” (4.41).

¹⁴ See e.g. Julian, Ep. 55: “he so to speak imbibed most deplorably the whole mistaken folly of the base and ignorant creed-making fishermen” (3.189).

Swinburne after him.¹⁵ In other words, all the paraphrase of Julian suggests is that the speaker identifies with the pagan emperor's anti-Christian cause, and his despair at failing in it, and that he himself speaks sometime *after* Julian's death in 363. Hence it is odd to find Findlay, who is aware of all the relevant dates, claiming that the speaker must be situated *between* 313 and 363.

If, as I have argued, the speaker is situated after 363, it seems unlikely that the immediate "stimulus" to his utterance, as Douglas C. Fricke puts it (198), is the Edict of Milan from at least fifty years earlier, or Council of Nicaea from at least thirty-eight years earlier. Morse Peckham makes the more promising suggestion, in which he is echoed by McGann and Charles Sligh (*MP* 478n), that the epigraph refers to "the official establishment of Christianity as the religion of the Roman Empire by Theodosius the Great" (*PBP* 71n).¹⁶ This makes considerable sense, since, as Gibbon puts it, the "ruin of Paganism" was accomplished during "the age of Theodosius" (28.71), not that of Constantine and his sons (21.825-27). Although neither Peckham nor McGann and Sligh identify any specific event with the proclamation of the subtitle, it seems likely that Swinburne is referring to Theodosius's speech to the Roman senate in 394¹⁷—four years

¹⁵ For the use of the word "Galilean" by Epictetus and Julian, see e.g. Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.363; Julian, *Against the Galileans* (passim); see also Gibbon 23.891-92. For the later use of the word "Galilean" by Shelley and Swinburne, see e.g. Shelley, *Letters* 66, "Ode to Liberty" 119-20; *SL* 1.158, 1.188, 1.194, 2.38.

¹⁶ Unfortunately, however, Peckham makes one of his frequent careless errors (see Lang, Intro.), one that is replicated by McGann and Sligh, in dating the reign of Theodosius from 379-85 when it actually spanned from 379-95. Even if, though it seems doubtful, Peckham intended to reflect the period of the "official establishment of Christianity," rather than that of Theodosius's reign, it would still be misleading, since it was not until 391 that Theodosius declared "open war on paganism" (Jones 168). Although Theodosius did dictate an edict in 380 "prescribing the religion of his subjects" as "Catholic Christians," it was directed not against the pagans, but against the "extravagant madmen" whom he "brand[ed] with the infamous name of Heretics" (qtd. in Gibbon 27.26-27). As Gibbon outlines, it was the suppression of heresy, rather than that of paganism, which exercised Theodosius in the decade following this edict (27.26-40).

¹⁷ As he outlines in his footnotes, Gibbon himself questions the ancient evidence that Theodosius's speech took place after his victory in the second civil war in 394. Rather Gibbon thinks "the time and circumstances are better suited to his first triumph" in 388 (28.76n). Modern historians, however, have

after he declared “open war on paganism” by forbidding sacrifices and closing the pagan temples (Jones 168). Rome was “the last stronghold of paganism” (Cameron 228), and Theodosius, fresh from victory in civil war over the pagan-sympathizing Eugenius, who had been supported by many in the senate, delivered an urgent “speech for conversion [...] from the very throne” (MacMullen 55). According to Gibbon, though modern historians have differed with him,¹⁸ Theodosius’s speech spurred “the hasty conversion of the senate,” which announced to the astonished world that pagan Rome, whether due to “supernatural or sordid motives,” had finally “submitted to the yoke of the Gospel” (28.76-77).

Identifying the subtitle with the “Conversion of Rome” in 394 (Gibbon 28.75), lends support to Shrimpton’s suggestion, which is unsupported by his own contention that the subtitle refers to the much earlier Council of Nicaea, that Swinburne’s “Last Pagan,” who identifies himself as a poet (9), may be associated with the man Swinburne’s educated contemporaries would have known as the “last poet of the heathen world” (Raby 96),¹⁹ Claudius Claudianus, also known as Claudian (Shrimpton 69).²⁰ All of Claudian’s extant poems, including his unfinished epic on the *Rape of Proserpine*, were written between 395 and 404 (Conte 658), in the immediate aftermath of the

followed the ancient sources in dating the speech to 394 (see MacMullen 55-56).

¹⁸ See e.g. MacMullen 55-56.

¹⁹ For similar assessments of Claudian, see e.g. Fowler 275; Mackail 267, 268, 270; Raby 88, 96.

²⁰ It would also lend support to Shrimpton’s theory, in which he has thus far been alone, that the speaker is situated *after* 395 (69). Aware, perhaps, that his dating of the epigraph to 325 does not support his association of the speaker with Claudian, Shrimpton hypothesizes another “stimulus” for the speaker’s utterance: the destruction of the Temple of Demeter at Eleusis in 395 (69). Although Swinburne includes an account of the myth of Demeter at Eleusis—drawn from the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (see *PBH* 366n)—in “At Eleusis,” he does not allude to the destruction of the temple either there or in the “Hymn.” In addition, perhaps to bolster his claims, Shrimpton speculates that Claudian’s production of the *Rape of Proserpine* may have been sparked as “a direct response to the sack of the sanctuary at Eleusis” (69). He does not, however, provide any evidence that this was the case, and, according to Cameron, it is unlikely that the poem was begun earlier than the summer of 397 (463).

“Conversion of Rome,” and within two decades of the sack of Rome by Alaric and his “barbarian” Goths in 410. None of this is to say that Claudian, the actual historical figure, is the speaker of the “Hymn,” but it does suggest that Swinburne invoked *the popular idea* of Claudian “the last pagan poet,” including his historical situation and reputation—much as he invoked the popular image of Julian, “the last pagan emperor,” in both the “Hymn” and “The Last Oracle” [1878]²¹—in order to provide his educated readers with a key to reading his poem. Swinburne would much later comment, in a point that informs my reading of the poem, that the “Hymn” is “the deathsong [*sic*] of spiritual decadence”—in contrast to the “Hymn of Man,” which is “the birthsong [*sic*] of spiritual renaissance” (*SR* 98)²²—and the echoes of Claudian’s historical and literary situation would have pointed his educated readers in the right interpretive direction.

II.

With the historical and cultural situation of the speaker in mind, we are now prepared to turn to the “Hymn” itself. As the poem opens, the speaker reveals that he, like many of the other speakers in *Poems and Ballads*, has been devastated by the end of “love” (which, in his case, is yet to be defined), for which he seeks comfort from

²¹ As Swinburne knew from Gibbon, Julian was anything but an epicurean spokesman for the pleasures of sensual experience. Gibbon remarks that the “apostate,” despite his disgust at the Christian worship of martyrs, relics, and tombs (see fn. 30), was quite ascetic himself (see Gibbon 22.850-53, 23.871-73, 24.929-30). But Swinburne is more interested in the popular idea of Julian than the facts of his life and character, which is why, as Findlay points out, he does not attack the Christian “lie about Julian’s death-bed concession” (“Apostasy” 72), but chooses to reinforce it by using it as his epigraph to the “Hymn” and repeating it in “The Last Oracle” [1878]. Similarly, Swinburne is more interested in the popular nineteenth-century image of Claudian as “a pagan propagandist, spokesman of the pagan aristocracy of Rome,” than in the facts that he was the court poet of a Christian emperor, that he therefore could not afford to offend his Christian audience, and was obviously not “the sort to die for his beliefs” (Cameron 188, 194, 190). Although his Christian contemporaries Augustine and Orosius both testify that Claudian was a pagan, Cameron points out that this “may be held to prove that Claudian was believed by his contemporaries to be a pagan, but not necessarily that he was” (191-92).

²² This quotation is from the “Dedicatory Epistle” to the *Poems of Algernon Charles Swinburne*.

Proserpine. “I have lived long enough,” he announces, “having seen one thing, that love hath an end; / Goddess and maiden and queen, be near me now and befriend” (1-2). As we might expect, the speaker not only links the end of “love” to the (projected) end of his life, but to the impending end of his song: “I am sick of singing: the bays burn deep and chafe: I am fain / To rest a little [...]” (9-10). Yet, as I have been arguing, the speaker of this poem, unlike most of the other speakers in the volume, is neither Christian nor post-Christian, and the “love” whose loss he bemoans cannot be the idealized, spiritual love promoted by Swinburne’s mid-Victorian contemporaries. It therefore follows that, for him at least, the devastation caused by the loss of “love” cannot, as it can for many of the other speakers in the volume, be due to the betrayal of any promise of immortality linked to it. As Ramsay MacMullen remarks, among most pagans of the late-Roman Empire there was a “general disbelief in immortality of any sort at all” (19).²³ This “general disbelief” is clearly reflected in the speaker’s outright attack on the “pale Galilean,” and his “maiden” mother, which he begins with the claim—running contrary to the Christian promise of resurrection to eternal life—that “no man under the sky lives twice, outliving his day” (32).

This clear assertion, in the first part of the poem, of the inescapable reality of human mortality undermines Fricke’s notion, which he promotes in order to distinguish between the “Hymn” and “The Garden of Proserpine,” that the poem tracks the speaker’s successful struggle to come to terms with the fact “that *he too* must submit to change and die” (201, emphasis added). According to Fricke, the speaker’s mind is “not at all static,” but “develops,” showing an “expanded consciousness and wisdom” about his own

²³ See also MacMullen 11, 70.

But no God will “put a hook” into this Leviathan’s “nose” (Job 41.1), any more than He shall “divide the sea by [His] strength” (Psalms 74.13). Watching in horror as “time is made bare” (64), the speaker slowly realizes that the “wave of the world” will eventually claim all Gods, as it does all men:

Will ye bridle the deep sea with reins, will ye chasten the high sea with
rods?
Will ye take her to chain her with chains, who is older than all ye Gods?
All ye as a wind shall go by, as a fire shall ye pass and be past;
Ye are Gods, and behold, ye shall die, and the waves be upon you at last.
(65-68)

The speaker has realized that, as he puts it, “the world is not sweet in the end” (39), not because he will die “as my fathers died” (106), but because “the old faiths,” as represented by the Old Gods, “loosen and fall, [as] the new years ruin and rend” (40).

McSweeney’s refusal to grant the speaker’s emphatic complaints about losing the Old Gods, a loss which is inextricably tied to the “end” of “love” (1), any special significance—opting instead to absorb the specific complaint as “simply one [more] example” of “mutability” in general—may be due to his sense, shared by other critics, that the speaker does not have “real faith” (i.e. literal belief) in the pagan Gods whose loss he bemoans so eloquently and at such length (*TSR* 127).²⁵ Certainly, the fact that the speaker is willing to suppose his Gods dead or dying, playing with full consciousness on the paradox of mortal immortals (72), suggests that he never truly viewed them as immortal beings with an independent existence—any more than he now views them as actual corpses or invalids. Although he may lament of the Old Gods that “Ye were all so fair that are broken” (90), the spectacle he conjures is of the broken idols of the despoiled pagan temples, dismantled by the triumphant Christian masses (see Gibbon 28.78-85),

²⁵ See also Findlay, “Apostasy” 73; Latham 8.

not of the actual “dead limbs of gibbeted Gods” (44), the belief in which—in the form of the cults of the martyrs and the veneration of relics—he ridicules in the Christians themselves. “The speaker [then] has no real belief in the pagan gods,” as McSweeney says: “for him they are simply metaphors” (*TSR* 127). Such a non-literal attitude towards the Gods would be consistent with many poets of the late fourth-century era, including Claudian, who often treated the Gods less as literal deities than as allegorical figures or personifications (Ware 48-53).

III.

Despite his lack of “real faith,” the speaker remains passionately attached to the Old Gods because, as his remarks on the “old faiths” suggest (39-40), they represent another kind of “faith”: a shared worldview, a way of life, and a culture that he had believed would transcend the mortality to which all individuals, like himself and his forefathers, are subject. For the speaker, the “New Gods”²⁶ are displacing not only the Old Gods (15), being “throned where another was king” and “crowned” where “another was queen” (76), but the worldview and culture that were handed-down along with their worship by his ancestors. Thus, addressing the foreign New Gods, and their Galilean leader, with proud Roman disdain, he remarks that the “feet of thine high priests tread where thy lords and our forefathers trod” (71). In contrast to the anaemic way of life promoted by the New Gods the speaker laments the end of what he sees as the “old” Roman worldview, which is characterized by what he refers to as “love”: an eroticized engagement with the material world, and an appreciation of the “joy[s]” arising from it.

²⁶ Confronted with the cults of the saints and martyrs, as well as that of the Virgin Mary, the pagan speaker concludes that early Christianity is polytheistic, and accordingly refers to “New Gods” in the plural.

“Wilt thou yet take all, Galilean?” he challenges, before launching into a “celebration of sensual images” (Stoddart 95):

[...] but these thou shalt not take,
The laurel, the palms and the paeon, the breasts of the nymphs in the
brake;
Breasts more soft than a dove’s, that tremble with tenderer breath;
And all the wings of the Loves, and all the joy before death. (23-26)

It was in this “love,” in their encouragement of sensual engagement and immersion—as expressed both in religious ritual and the facts of daily life—among their pagan worshippers, that the Old Gods, shadows of thought though they may have been, made life “joyous” and worth living.

Yet the sensual worldview associated, by the speaker, with the Old Gods also includes the clear knowledge that human life is for but a “little while and we die” (31), thus alloying the pleasure of life with its pain, the “beauty” of life with its “suffering” (Evans 72). “Yea, is not even Apollo,” the poet-speaker asks, referring to the god of music and poetry, “with hair and harpstring of gold, / A bitter God to follow, a beautiful God to behold?” (7-8). Such Old Gods were both “cruel” and “lovely” (12), both “bitter” and “beautiful” (8), precisely because, as Thaïs E. Morgan remarks, they “permitted the Romans to enjoy and express their natural passions” (“Dramatic” 192). In doing so, they also helped to make human creativity—of which they were, paradoxically, also the product—possible, thus, as the speaker suggests, making both “the breasts of the nymphs in the brake” and “the laurel, the palms and the paeon”²⁷ their gifts. Yet the “pale

²⁷ In the classical world, the laurel and the palms were both awarded to signify victory, whether poetic, athletic, or military (see Ferber, “Laurel” 108-09, “Palm” 148-50). Laurel, being sacred to Apollo, was often awarded to the victor in poetic competition (see Ferber, “Laurel” 108; *PBP* 72n). In Rome, palms were sometimes awarded to the victor in dramatic competition (see Ferber, “Palm” 149). The laurel wreath awarded to the recognized poet was known as “bays” (see *PBP* 71n; “Bay” 62). When the speaker complains that “the bays burn deep and chafe” (9), he is complaining about the burden of his position as an

Galilean,” and his multitude of ascetic worshippers, would “take all” the material and musical gifts once provided by the Old Gods.²⁸ In their “barren” rejection of “all that *is* in the world,” “the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life” (1 John 2.16), the New Gods have not merely assured that life is miserable, and that the “days are bare” (17), but they have valued that very misery, insisting that fleshly wrongs translate into heavenly rights. As Gibbon puts it, in discussing the monks and other ascetic practitioners of the early Church, many Christians of the era willingly “chastised their body, mortified their affections, and embraced a life of misery, as the price of eternal happiness” (37.411).²⁹

Against this optimistic translation of fleshly wrongs into heavenly rights, which forms the base of the “compassion” of the “young Gods” (16), the speaker finds himself tautologically insisting, in blank amazement at the necessity of doing so, that “grief *is* a grievous thing” (33, emphasis added). “Why,” he asks rhetorically, should any man, who

acknowledged poet who must write hymns of “praise” to Gods and men (10). A paean is “a song of joy or triumph,” frequently addressed to Apollo, God of poetry, though sometimes to other Gods, and sometimes used to mark the beginning of a symposium, or as “a song of hope before going into battle [...] or of joy after victory” (Race 990; see also Bowra and Krummen 1090). Thus, in the mouth of the poet-speaker, “the laurel, the palms and the paean” refers to the creative pleasures of life, while still retaining the shadow of other more material joys (e.g. athletic or military victory), which are more explicitly represented by the sensuality of “the breasts of the nymphs in the brake” (24).

²⁸ While both Findlay and Latham remark on the fact that the “move from [pagan] polytheism to [Christian] monotheism has proved especially disastrous for the poetic imagination” (Findlay, “Apostasy” 73; see also Latham 8), they seem to have drawn this conclusion through reflection upon the poems Swinburne wrote in the wake of the “Hymn,” namely “The Hymn of Man” [1871] and “The Last Oracle” [1878] (Rutland 274), rather than the “Hymn” itself. Both Findlay and Latham provide strongly Blakean readings of the “Hymn,” in which the externalization of God “as a literal phenomenon” (Latham 8)—as opposed to poetic mediations of nature (Findlay, “Apostasy” 75) or “metaphors” for human experience (Latham 8)—leads to the displacement of “vision” by “dogma” (Latham 8), and “the depletion of discourse” (Findlay, “Apostasy” 75). While, as I have already argued, the speaker does not view his “dead” Gods literally, and such sophisticated theoretical readings are applicable to the more overtly Blakean “Hymn of Man” and “Last Oracle,” there is little evidence that the dramatic speaker of the “Hymn” traces the decline of the “poetic imagination” to the “literal-mindedness” of the Christians. Rather, he suggests, through a no-less Blakean train of thought, that this decline is the indirect result of the asceticism of the “New Gods” and their worshippers, which he explicitly denounces throughout the poem.

²⁹ For more on the asceticism of early Christian monks, see Gibbon 37.411-29.

will have “enough of his tears,” purposefully “bring fresh grief to blacken his years?” (33-34). Like many of his bewildered fellow pagans,³⁰ the speaker finds this baffling attitude epitomized in the Christian desire for and reverence of martyrdom. “O ghastly glories of saints,” he exclaims in revulsion, “dead limbs of gibbeted Gods!” (44). Revisiting the paradox of dead Gods, he notes mockingly that, for the Christians, the signs of human mortality, the “leavings of racks and rods” (43), have become the perverse signs of immortality. These “that were Gods are dead,” he says with bitter sarcasm to Christ, “and thou *being dead* art a God” (72, emphasis added).³¹ The Christian obsession with personal immortality, the speaker suggests, leads them to reject the gifts of the Old Gods, as they do everything of born of the “lusts” of “this world,” thus ironically making “life like death” (Fricke 198-99). “Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean,” the speaker laments, “the world has grown grey from thy breath; / We have drunken of things Lethean, and fed on the fullness of death” (35-36).³² In a sly inversion of God’s breathing life into Adam (Gen. 2.7)³³—or the (neo-)Romantic poet’s analogous breathing of human meaning into the material world—the speaker suggests that Christ

³⁰ For an account of the pagan incomprehension of the early-Christian cult of martyrdom, see Gibbon 16.546-47. Julian himself notes with disdain the Christian fascination with death, tombs, corpses, and relics in *Against the Galileans* and in his letters: “You [Galileans] have filled the world with tombs and sepulchres” (*Against* 3.415); “[the Christians] have turned aside from the gods to corpses and relics” (Ep. 41, 3.135).

³¹ Morgan also comments on the “logical contradiction” of the “notion of a God who proves his immortality by dying for mankind” (“Dramatic” 193).

³² Here there is an obvious allusion, noted by Paglia (*Sexual* 473), to Gautier’s *Mademoiselle de Maupin* [1835]: “Christ has wrapped his winding sheet around the world. [...] The world of the senses is dead. Nothing but darkness and gloom fill the immense void” (174-75). There may also be an echo from Gautier’s “Pyres and Tombs”:

Olympus yields to Calvary;
Jupiter to the Nazarene;

A voice says: “Pan is dead!” The shade
Spreads like a pall—vast, dark, immense. (47-50)

All quotations from Gautier’s poems are from *Selected Lyrics* (trans. Norman R. Shapiro).

³³ “And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (Gen. 2.7).

has made the world a barren, inhuman, and deathly place.

The fundamental differences between the pagan and Christian worldviews, as understood by the speaker, as well as their greater implications, are made most evident, just as they are in “*Laus Veneris*” (see e.g. 13-24), in the contrast, reinforced here by the fortuitous coincidence of rhyme (“*Hymn*” 73-74), between the “pale Galilean” (with his “maiden” mother) and the sensual Cytherean—Venus, the Roman goddess of love (73-88). Although the speaker associates his sensual worldview with the entire pantheon of Old Gods, who were “all so fair that are broken” (90), his identification of the “old faith” with love itself makes Venus the most obvious choice to represent its one-time glory and its present-day collapse. “[Before] thee,” the speaker complains to the hated Galilean, “the throned Cytherean be fallen, and hidden her head” (73). By emphasizing that Venus is both “a goddess [of love], and mother of Rome” (80), the speaker reinforces that it is not any simple allowance for sensual indulgence, but an entire way of life and culture—one threatened by the foreign influence of the Galilean—that he mourns by lamenting the fall of his old “lords” (89). Hence the pointed contrast made by the speaker between “*thy* mother” (i.e. Mary) and “*our* mother” (i.e. Venus) (75, 78, emphases added): “Not as thine, not as thine was our mother, a blossom of flowering seas, / Clothed round with the world’s desire as with raiment, and fair as the foam, / And fleeter than kindled fire, and a goddess, and mother of Rome” (78-80).

Having again foregrounded the cultural stakes—which are no less than the survival of the Roman way of life, even of Rome itself—the speaker proceeds to contrast Venus and Mary, with their respective “cult[s] of coition” and “of continence” (Morgan, “*Dramatic*” 194). Ascetic Mary came “pale and a maiden,” but sensual Venus was

“heavily laden with odour and colour of flowers” (81-82). The mother of the lowly Galilean came “weeping, a slave among slaves,” but the “mother of Rome” came “flushed” and “imperial, her foot on the sea” (85-86). Most importantly, however, Venus—unlike the frigid and distant Virgin—extended her gift of sensual love to her pagan worshippers,³⁴ and through their poetic expressions of her praise to the entire world. Being herself “a flame,” an invigorating principle of love, Venus “Bent down unto us that besought her, and earth grew sweet with her name” (83-84). Inspired with the “*laus Veneris*,” the “praise of Venus” produced by poets like the speaker himself—one of whose jobs, before the fall of the “old faith,” would have been producing hymns of praise to the Old Gods—the earth seemed to be “flushed” with new life: “the roses grew rosier, and bluer the sea blue stream of the bays” (88). Of course, the speaker is implicitly contrasting the intensified colour and life that the “praise of Venus” once breathed into the material world, with the deathly “greyness” now imposed by Christ’s cadaverous breath. But, as he has already asserted, the Galilean has “conquered,” and “love hath [come to] an end,” and with it the speaker’s desire either to live or to sing.

IV.

Yet it is the speaker’s willingness, despite his violent anti-Christian rhetoric, to concede victory to the “pale Galilean,” and, in doing so, to give up life, love, and song, that should be questioned. It is ironic that the speaker laments the loss of the material and

³⁴ There is here undoubtedly an echo of d’Albert’s comparison of the Virgin and Venus in Gautier’s *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (173-74). Virginal Mary, despite her “air of humility,” is “too high and mighty”: “Her eyes [...] are always turned heavenwards or cast down. They never look straight at you. They have never served as a mirror to a human form” (174). Sensual Venus, in contrast, “emerges from the waves to face the world, as behoves a goddess who loves men, all naked and alone. She prefers earth to Olympus and has more men than gods as her lovers. [...] You can see all of her. She hides nothing” (174).

musical gifts of the Old Gods, while repeatedly expressing his own weary desire to relinquish both his life and his song. From his opening declarations that he has “lived long enough” and is “sick of singing” (1, 9), to his closing vow to “abide for a season in silence” before dying “as my fathers died” (105-06), the speaker displays the same impulses against both life and creativity that he rails against in the Christians. For the speaker these impulses are personified in the figure of Proserpine, the “daughter of earth” (93)³⁵ who is kidnapped by Pluto and made queen over the dead. As such, Proserpine, despite being part of the old pantheon, stands in contrast to the “Gods who number the days of our temporal breath” (103), represented most fully by Venus or “love.” As Margot K. Louis points out, Venus is “inextricably involved and identified with the world of the senses,” while Proserpine is “almost entirely detached from that world” (*Persephone* 60). In her opposition to Venus, Proserpine, “Goddess and maiden and queen” (2, 92), bleeds into the Virgin, “the maiden thy mother men sing as a goddess” (75).³⁶ From her “cold immortal hands” (“Garden” 52), death becomes a “gift” greater than “love” or “laurels” (37-38),³⁷ and she becomes greater than Venus or Apollo (see 5-8, 89-92); indeed, she is “more fair than ye all” (90). In her underworld garden, narcotic poppies have overgrown the blanched roses of an exhausted eroticism, and the never-broken “silence is more than all tunes” (96-97).

While it is initially difficult to understand why the speaker should reject the “pale Galilean” for feeding us “on the fullness of death” (35-36), only to turn to the “maiden” Proserpine with her gift of death (103-04), it is still more baffling to comprehend why he

³⁵ See also “Garden” 59.

³⁶ As Findlay notes (“Apostate” 72), Proserpine’s triple-epithet of “Goddess and maiden and queen” (2, 92) also shadows the Christian trinity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

³⁷ Cf. Louis, *Persephone* 58.

should so readily concede victory to the former in the first place. This is especially true given that, immediately preceding the passage in which he concedes victory to Christ (35-36), he makes the convincing claim that, insofar as the material world simply continues on, the Galilean *cannot* simply “take” the *possibility of*, though he may be able to lessen the *capacity for*, sensual experience, nor the possibilities of poetic creation that follow from it: neither “the breasts of the nymphs in the brake,” nor “the laurel, the palms and the paean” (24). His readiness to abandon the world to the Galilean, and his turn towards the anti-sensual Proserpine, make more sense, however, if we realize that the reason lies neither in the nature of the world, nor of the human race, but in the speaker himself. To return to the phrase Swinburne himself used to characterize the “Hymn,” it is the speaker’s “spiritual decadence” that determines his fate (SR 98). Although, as the speaker asserts, the possibilities of sensual experience and poetic creation will not altogether disappear, though they may diminish, with the death of the Old Gods, he does not have the “spiritual” energy to reconceive the obsolete imaginative framework of the “old faith” handed-down by his forefathers, and thereby to re-engage with and “make sense” of the material world anew. Unable to react creatively to the changing world around him, the “decadent” speaker chooses instead to withdraw from it, trading love and song for anaesthetized silence.

In turning to Proserpine, the speaker is seeking nothing less than to escape from “the changes of things,” to find “an antidote to the restlessness of time and flux” (Fricke 191).³⁸ Fricke identifies this “longing for oblivion, [as] a refuge from time” in “The Garden of Proserpine” (193)—an obvious companion to the “Hymn”—in which the

³⁸ See also Stevenson 219; *TSR* 128. Chew seems to want to have it both ways: death in these poems is the “relief ‘from too much love of living’” (85), and yet Proserpine is “the goddess of Change” (94-95).

wearily speaker praises Proserpine, who ushers “all men born” into “the sleep eternal / In an eternal night” (58, 95-96). Yet Fricke seems to think that this fantasy of escape from time entails denial of the reality of death as an end (196);³⁹ he therefore concludes that, since the speaker of the “Hymn” “accept[s] the hard facts of time and mortality” (201), that he also evades such escapism through his “stoic courage and clarity of mind” (201, 191). But the speaker of the “Garden” also accepts that “no life lives for ever; / That dead men rise up never” (85-86), and his dream of “sleep eternal” is not due to belief in posthumous existence, however attenuated and anaesthetized, but a reflection of his weary withdrawal from life into a narcotized death-in-life.⁴⁰ Similarly, although the speaker of the “Hymn” knows that “no man under the sky lives twice” (32), his view of death as an eternal “sleep” (see 4, 96, 99, 106)—as distinguished from actual “slumber” (104)—reflects his own withdrawal from the world. In his refusal to “kneel” to Christ, and his choice instead, “standing, [to] look to the end” (46), the speaker attempts to strike a stoic pose—even later paraphrasing Epictetus (108)—in imitation of his noble Roman

³⁹ Fricke quotes from Maud Bodkin that the “neurotic views death not as the end of life, but as a ‘quiescent resolution of affective excitement’” (196). Fricke suggests, without stating, that such an emotional attitude cannot accompany the intellectual acknowledgement that death is truly an “end.”

⁴⁰ Contrary to Findlay’s assertion (“Apostasy” 71), the speaker of the “Garden” is not “a soul in Hades,” and the garden itself is not the underworld, but this world viewed from the perspective of one who has withdrawn into death-in-life. This is why both “the green field growing” and his “sleepy world of streams” are identified as “Here” in the opening stanza (1-8). “Here life has death for neighbour,” and, although they are “far from eye or ear,” he knows that the “Weak ships and spirits” of others still struggle to “steer” through the “Wan waves and wet winds” of real life (17-20). Death as the real “end” will follow on this “now” of the speaker’s anaesthetized existence:

We thank with brief thanksgiving
 Whatever gods may be
 That no life lives forever;
 That dead men rise up never;
 That even the weariest river
 Winds somewhere safe to sea.

Then star nor sun shall waken [...] *Only* the sleep eternal
 In an eternal night. (81-89, 95-96, emphasis added).

forefathers (105-06), but he does not manifest their truly stoic acceptance of the conditions of life, the most basic of which is flux, and his “stoic” stand is stasis and inaction. Like the speaker of the “Garden,” he chooses not life, but death-in-life; not, as Murfin puts it, to “embrace the present,” but to “court the dead” (45).

Contrary to Fricke’s claims (203), the speaker sees no creative possibilities—such as, for instance, those glimpsed in the “Song in Time of Order,” where the sea offers freedom from land-bound tyrannies—in the terrifying “wave of the world” (54), but can only take bitter pleasure in the knowledge that it will eventually destroy the New Gods as it has destroyed his own: “Ye are Gods, and behold, ye shall die, and the waves be upon you at last” (68).⁴¹ Yet this realization does not reconcile him to the “passing” of the Old Gods or the “old faith” for which they stood. Even though he admits that Venus, “goddess, and mother of Rome” (80), has “fallen” from her throne (73), he still cannot help but picture her, immediately afterwards, in an image that recalls Christ walking on the calmed waters (Matt. 14.22-33),⁴² surmounting time and change itself: “she / Came flushed from the full-flushed wave, and imperial, her foot on the sea” (85-86). Unable to adjust to “the changes of things,” the speaker clings to the Old Gods long after he and everyone around him has declared them dead and gone. “Ye are fallen, our lords, by what token?” he laments to the very end, “we wist that ye should not fall” (89). Like his dying Gods, straining to drain “a little life from the barren breasts of love” (20), the speaker

⁴¹ Fricke seems to think that, given the speaker’s antagonism, the eventual destruction of Christianity should be interpreted as creative or constructive in itself (203).

⁴² See also John 6.16-21. Findlay also notes the biblical echo, but assumes, in accordance with his belief that Swinburne seeks to “rehabilitate classical paganism,” that it functions as a “promise” of the “resurgence” of paganism (“Apostasy” 72-73). According to Findlay, “Proserpine embodies a primordial principle of chthonic death and resurrection which antedates and will succeed its Christian facsimile” (73). As I will argue, however, the Proserpine of the speaker conspicuously *lacks* the potential for renewal and new life that is part of the traditional myth.

finds himself subsisting on the ruins of a tradition and culture that he himself is too “spiritually decadent” to reconceive anew. For him, the Christians’ “new device is barren,” but so are “the days” and the world itself (17), and all he can do is recite the old prayers, reiterate the old images, and imitate the old poets. For the “spiritually decadent” speaker, “Things long past over” and “men forgotten that were” must “suffice” (18), in the absence of an imaginative engagement that would, even in the “long, dark age” of Christian asceticism to come (McGann, “Radical” 212), be able to “make love new” (“The Leper” 119).⁴³

For Swinburne’s classically-educated readers, the “spiritual decadence” of his “Last Pagan” would have cemented the association—which, as I have already pointed out, was suggested by the historical and literary context—with Claudian, the “last poet of the heathen world” and author of the *Rape of Proserpine* (Raby 96). Known in the nineteenth century as “the belated singer of a worn-out empire and a dying civilization” (Fowler 275),⁴⁴ Claudian was thought to have been “already obsolete” in his own era (Mackail 270), because he “flatly ignores Christianity” and “writes as if the old gods yet ruled the world” (Lindsay 114),⁴⁵ adopting the tired machinery of the classical epic without its spirit,⁴⁶ all the while maintaining the eternal glory of Rome, the “unconquerable mistress of the world” (Claudian, *War Against Gildo* 2.133),⁴⁷ even when

⁴³ In the context of “The Leper,” the “new shame” that “could make love new” is that of the illicit sexual relationship between the speaker and the leprous lady (119). The “old shame,” which the speaker grudgingly helped to facilitate, was that of the lady’s relationship with her previous lover.

⁴⁴ For a brief discussion of the reception of Claudian in the nineteenth century, see Cameron 448-51.

⁴⁵ While representative of Claudian’s output, this statement is not literally true, since, though he shows little enthusiasm for the subject, he mentions Christianity in at least two different poems (see Raby 96-97).

⁴⁶ See Raby 93; Simcox 358-59.

⁴⁷ See also Claudian, *Gothic War* 2.131.

“the empire is breaking up, on the verge of the sack of Rome” in 410 (Lindsay 116).⁴⁸

For Swinburne’s contemporaries, the unfinished state of Claudian’s *Proserpine* would have served as an emblem of the ancient poet’s “spiritual exhaustion.”⁴⁹ When completed, Claudian’s poem would most likely have told of Proserpine’s return to earth for half of every year,⁵⁰ bringing with her the springtime renewal of life and love after the bitter time of “winter’s rains and ruins” (*Atalanta* 89), but the poet’s “inspiration faded” and he left her stranded among the dead (Lindsay 117). As Fricke, Louis, and Rosenberg all note,⁵¹ Swinburne’s speaker, “sick of singing” and seeking “rest” (9-10), likewise imagines a Proserpine who “Forgets the earth her mother, / The life of fruits and corn” (“Garden” 59-60), and reigns instead over an underworld void of life, void of love, and void of song.

V.

Like the speaker of the “Hymn,” the speaker of “The Triumph of Time,”⁵² who also identifies himself as a poet (213-16), has often been thought by critics to be Swinburne’s “own voice” (Fletcher 25). They have found support for this identification

⁴⁸ See also Ware 4, 7, 26. For a more nuanced discussion of Claudian’s attitudes towards Rome, see Cameron 349-89.

⁴⁹ Although in Swinburne’s time it was thought that Claudian had lived until at least 408 (see Fowler 273; Platnauer vii; Simcox 357), and had simply abandoned the poem earlier, it is now thought that he died in 404 before completing it (see Cameron 415-18, 452-66; Conte 658).

⁵⁰ According to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (5.6), Proserpine spent half of the year in the underworld. According, however, to the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* (*Homeric* 2), which Swinburne used as the basis for “At Eleusis” (*PBH* 366n), Persephone only spent one-third of the year in the underworld. Jenny March notes the discrepancy in different versions of the myth (615). Among the most popular sources for classical reference in the nineteenth-century, Lempriere records that Proserpine remains in the underworld for half of the year (642), whereas Grote records that she remains in the underworld for a third of the year (1.40).

⁵¹ See Fricke 194; Louis, *Persephone* 58; Rosenberg 183.

⁵² It must be said that it is reflective of Swinburne’s critical fortunes in the mid-twentieth century that Jerome Buckley took the title of the poem for his *The Triumph of Time: A Study of the Victorian Concepts of Time, History, Progress, and Decadence* [1966], yet only mentioned it once in passing: “Swinburne, on occasion, yearned for a life beyond time [...] but his most characteristic and perhaps best poem remains the moving, rhapsodic ‘Triumph of Time,’ which hymns the irreversible passing of love” (3).

in Swinburne's own admission, as recorded by Gosse and others,⁵³ that the poem has its roots in an incident from his personal life:

It was at this time that Swinburne entered upon the solitary romance of his life, and suffered a crushing disappointment. [...] In a very wretched frame of mind, Swinburne [...] wrote 'The Triumph of Time,' which is the most profound and the most touching of all his personal poems. Speaking to me of this incident in 1876, he assured me that the stanzas of this wonderful lyric represented with the exactest [*sic*] fidelity the emotions which passed through his mind. (*LAS* 78)

Assured by such second-hand testimony that the beloved of the "Triumph" represents "the sole real love of his life" (Mallock 76), many of Swinburne's critics, as well as his handful of biographers, have expended much energy identifying the woman in question. Such biographical efforts have fed into an explication of the "Triumph" and the two thematically-similar poems that follow it in the collection—"Les Noyades" and "A Leave-Taking"—as a sort of autobiographical "trilogy" (Fletcher 27).⁵⁴ Although earlier critics, unduly influenced by Gosse's speculations, identified Swinburne's *inamorata* as Jane Faulkner—an idea discredited by John Mayfield's revelation that, at the time, "Boo" (as she was familiarly known) would have been "all of a few months over ten years of age" (86)⁵⁵—current critical opinion has identified her as Swinburne's first-cousin, Mary Gordon, whose engagement to Colonel Disney Leith in 1864 is thought to be the event that left the poet's "young manhood," in his own words, "'a barren stock'" (*SL* 3.51).⁵⁶

⁵³ See *LAS* 78-80; Gosse, "Swinburne" [1875] 183, "Swinburne" [1924] 50-51; Mallock 76-77.

⁵⁴ See also Chew 78-79; Greenberg, "Gosse's" 99; Lang, "Lost" 126.

⁵⁵ For most critics, Mayfield's dismissal of the "Boo" hypothesis has been decisive. Thomas, though agreeing with Mayfield, has remarked, however, that "it is wise to remember the Victorian possibilities of booking a wife at a tender age" (*SPW* 77). Despite also agreeing with Mayfield, Rooksby echoes Thomas's caution that "Boo" cannot be conclusively ruled-out as Swinburne's beloved (see Rooksby, "Boo").

⁵⁶ Swinburne remarked on this unspecified event in a letter of 1875, congratulating Gosse on his upcoming marriage: "I suppose it must be the best thing that can befall a man to win and keep the woman that he loves while yet young; at any rate I can congratulate my friend on his good hap without any too jealous afterthought of the reverse experience which left my own young manhood 'a barren stock'" (*SL* 3.51).

Although they have disagreed with him on the identity of Swinburne's lost love, many more recent critics have endorsed Gosse's claim that the "Triumph" is "a revelation of the poet's innermost feelings, which he exposes with an equal frankness in no other section of his work" (*LAS* 79). Thus Cecil Y. Lang—the first to convincingly argue, though not the first to consider,⁵⁷ that Swinburne's beloved was Mary (see Lang, "Lost" 128-30)—asserts with "moral certainty" (?) that the "Triumph" is "an authentic *cri de coeur*," which means nothing "less, or more, than exactly what it says" ("Lost" 125); and Fletcher heaves a sigh of relief that here, at least, we can be sure Swinburne "speaks [openly] in his own voice" and not through a dramatic mask (25). Using what little biographical evidence exists to argue that the "Triumph" speaks of Swinburne's disappointed love for Mary, some critics have even "circled around," as Lionel Stevenson has remarked (222), to redeploy the poem as a source for biography.⁵⁸ Although this is not the place to expand upon the point in detail, it is worth noting here that the eagerness of these critics to embrace such circular reasoning seems to be rooted in their desire—itsself springing from a genuine, if misguided, concern for the poet's reputation—to identify Swinburne himself with the emotional attitude towards love expressed by the speaker of the "Triumph," which they consider the only "entirely human" attitude expressed on the subject in Swinburne's early verse (Welby 71). By associating Swinburne, in this one instance, with "what people in general understand as love" (Welby 73)—although "people in general" might wish to contest the point—it is assumed that any such "speculation," far from doing the poet any "harm," "could only improve" his

⁵⁷ As Rooksby points out, referring to a letter of 1914 from Gosse to Thomas James Wise, Gosse himself had considered the possibility that Swinburne's "lost love" was Mary Gordon ("Boo" 78-79).

⁵⁸ See Lang, "Lost" 124; *SPP* 87.

reputation (Lang, “Lost” 130).

Even though, as Lang long-since argued, it seems quite plausible—based upon what little external and internal evidence is available—that the “Triumph” was at least partly inspired by Swinburne’s disappointment in Mary, this is no reason, as McGann remarks, to assume that the poet simply “poured out his [unmediated] thoughts in poetry” (*SEC* 215).⁵⁹ While this should go without saying, the fact that a poem is acknowledged to be rooted in personal experience does not mean that the poet identifies himself in any straightforward way with the poem’s speaker. Nobody assumes, based upon the fact that his disappointment in Rosa Baring stands behind the poems,⁶⁰ that Tennyson is to be simply identified with the speakers of “Locksley Hall” or “Maud”—not least of all because the poet did not react to his lost love by enlisting in the army, or going mad, or going mad and then enlisting in the army. Similarly, Swinburne cannot be simply identified with the speaker of the “Triumph,” who most clearly marks his difference from the former by choosing, much like the speaker of the “Hymn,” to end by renouncing his poetry, along with his love and any semblance of a real life: “I shall never be friends again with roses; / I shall loathe sweet tunes [...] I shall hate sweet music my whole life long” (353-54, 360). Given this often overlooked fact alone, it should be, as Donald Stuart remarks, considered “unpardonable to identify Swinburne and his speaker” in any simplistic way (112), regardless of the poet’s purported remarks, recalled at some distance by Gosse and Mallock, about the poem’s submerged “relations to the secrets of his own experiences” (Mallock 76).

In addition, as McGann notes, if we assume that Swinburne wrote the “Triumph”

⁵⁹ See also Kribbs 114; Stevenson 222; Stuart 112.

⁶⁰ See Tennyson 2.118-119n, 517n.

following his disappointment with Mary—sometime in late 1864 or early 1865⁶¹—we are left with the “uncomfortable” realization that many of the other poems in the volume “which associate themselves with Swinburne’s love crisis [...] must have been written before it ever happened” (*SEC* 217). As I have already remarked at length, the theme of “lost love” is present in virtually every poem in the volume, many of which were written before mid-1864 (see *SEC* 215-16). Although many poems could be cited in evidence of this fact, the most notable is “Les Noyades,” which is usually considered alongside the “Triumph” and “A Leave-Taking.” While most early twentieth-century critics, influenced by Gosse assumed the composition of “Les Noyades” followed that of the “Triumph,” we now know, based upon the combined evidence of Gosse and of Milnes’s diaries, that Swinburne read “Les Noyades” to a shocked gathering at Fryston during Easter of 1863.⁶² Even though, as Robert Greenberg remarks, Swinburne, in arranging the volume, clearly associated “Les Noyades” with the “Triumph,”⁶³ “its connection [...] with the Mary Gordon episode would seem damaged,” to say the least, by the (probable) date of its composition (“Gosse’s” 99-100). Given these facts, it would be best to conclude, with McGann, that “Swinburne’s lost love was a much larger figure than Mary Gordon,” or indeed any actual woman, “just as the catastrophe dramatized in ‘The Triumph of Time’ involved [...] more serious issues than the marriage of Mary Gordon to Colonel Disney

⁶¹ While I have followed Rooksby’s dating of Swinburne’s disappointment with Mary to late 1864 (*ACS* 101), McGann follows Lang in dating it to late 1863 or early 1864 (*SEC* 214; see Lang, “Lost” 128). Mary and Colonel Disney Leith married on 14 June 1865 (Lang, “Lost Love” 129). As McGann notes, Swinburne wrote a fair copy of “The Triumph of Time” on paper watermarked 1863 (*SEC* 215). If it is assumed, based on the fact that the speaker’s beloved has not yet married (2), and on the assumption that the poem’s speaker and Swinburne are one-and-the-same, that the poem was written between Swinburne’s discovery of the engagement and the marriage itself, that would give the poem a *terminus post quem* of late 1863 and *terminus ante quem* of mid-June 1865.

⁶² See Greenberg, “Gosse’s” 97-100; *ACS* 82. As Greenberg remarks (“Gosse’s” 98), Gosse misled many biographers and critics by misdating this event to the summer of 1862 (*LAS* 90).

⁶³ As for “A Leave-Taking,” the first four stanzas of it were composed on the same manuscript sheet as three stanzas of the “Triumph” (Lang, “Lost” 126).

Leith" (*SEC* 217).

VI.

The "Triumph" is yet another example of Swinburne's exploration and explosion of love in *Poems and Ballads*, and it is concerned with problems that he had been "working through" long before the "incident" of late 1864. His own disappointment in love, though personally devastating, provided Swinburne with further "material" for this project. Here Swinburne adopted a highly-dramatized version of "his own voice," but one which was considerably less self-conscious and far more naïve than he was himself. While Swinburne, as I have argued, had rejected both Christianity and the mid-Victorian ideal of love derived from it, the speaker of the "Triumph," as his repeated references to salvation and damnation suggest (see e.g. 30-32, 37-48, 163-72, 225-32, 365-68, 391-92), is still deeply mired in Christian doctrine and the "cult of love." Although, in *Poems and Ballads*, Swinburne was self-consciously attacking the religious and cultural ideals of his era, the speaker of the "Triumph" is experiencing his disillusionment firsthand, without either the critical distance or the intellectual ironies encouraged and implied by the poet himself. Given the conformity, as I will argue, between the speaker's ideals of love—which are in the process of being destroyed—and those of Swinburne's mid-Victorian contemporaries, it is notable that, with the exception of W. S. Johnson (101), those critics who make much of the linkage between the speaker's ideal of love and the transcendence of time,⁶⁴ or the spiritual purity of the former,⁶⁵ nevertheless fail to remark upon this connection in any detail. In addition, it is ironic that those critics seeking to improve

⁶⁴ See e.g. Kribbs 116; McGhee 186; Murfin 26-27, 30-31; *SHG* 56-62.

⁶⁵ See *SRM* 62-63, 66.

Swinburne's reputation by aligning him with the speaker's ideal of love⁶⁶ should fail to recognize that the latter is the sort of attitude that the poet is criticizing throughout the volume.

In contrast to the relationship between the beloved and her future husband, the speaker views his unconsummated relationship to the beloved as "primarily spiritual," as he suggests by his echo of Genesis 2.23 (*PBH* 329n):⁶⁷ she will be "Flesh of his flesh," but she is "heart of my heart" (102). Yet, referring to "the gods above" in the broad Miltonic sense (37)—that is, in reference to the entire heavenly host,⁶⁸ with all of the angels and archangels, rather than in the polytheistic sense employed by the confused pagan speaker of the "Hymn"—the speaker of the "Triumph" tells his beloved that "had you loved but me" they would have completely transcended their flesh: "We had grown as gods, as the gods in heaven, / Souls fair to look upon, goodly to greet, / One splendid spirit, your soul and mine" (40, 30-32). As Louis remarks, even the speaker's fantasies of making love to his beloved, twice figured in terms of Eucharistic "communion" (*SHG* 25-32, 365-68), point toward "the transcendence of the sensuous world," albeit "through sensuous experience of special richness and intensity" (*SHG* 62). The speaker imagines the love that *would have been* between him and his beloved as "An armed archangel whose hands raise up / All senses mixed in the spirit's cup / *Till flesh and spirit are molten in sunder*" (365-67, emphasis added). "Filled from the heart to the lips with love," just like "the gods above" (37-38), they would transcend not only their limited bodies but time itself. Joined "Soul to soul while the years fell past" (46), they would find "in love

⁶⁶ See e.g. Lang, "Lost" 130; Welby 71, 73.

⁶⁷ "And Adam said, This *is* now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of man" (Gen. 2.23).

⁶⁸ See e.g. Milton 1.116, 3.341, 5.70-71, 77.

united the still point outside time” (McGhee 186), and, from a safe vantage point, see “Grief collapse as a thing disproved, / Death consume as a thing unclean” (43-44).

As should be evident, the speaker of the “Triumph” is disappointed in not only his loss of one particular woman, whether real or imaginary, but in his disillusionment with the mid-Victorian ideology of love, which assured its adherents that the pure, spiritual, and (ultimately) matrimonial love of man and woman could exalt both far above the material world and its relentless losses, to a “heaven” as fixed and immutable as “the sure stars” (30, 41). “Had you loved me once, as you have not loved,” complains the speaker, “I had grown pure as the dawn and the dew,” and found a place in heaven among “the souls that stand / In the sun’s sight, clothed with the light of the sun” (47, 153, 171-72).⁶⁹ Once the marriage vows were solemnized and consummated, and they were “made one” in flesh and soul (100), they would be rendered “immortal in their love” (Kribbs 116):

Yea, I know this well: were you once sealed mine,
Mine in the blood’s beat, mine in the breath,⁷⁰
Mixed into me as honey in wine,
Not time, that sayeth and gainsayeth,
Nor all strong things had severed us then;
Not wrath of gods, nor wisdom of men,
Nor all things earthly, nor all divine,
Nor joy nor sorrow, nor life nor death. (145-52)

Though the defiance of the “wrath of gods” might seem anti-theistic to us, Swinburne’s contemporaries—aware of his expansive Miltonic usage here—would have recognized it as an echo, as remarked by Louis (*SHG* 56), of Romans 8:38-39: “I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers [...] nor any other

⁶⁹ As it stands, he remarks, echoing the New Testament (see Matt. 7:13-14; Luke 13:24; *PBH* 329n), that she need not fear meeting his gaze in heaven (165-66), because the denial of her redemptive love will see him damned at best: “Content you; / The gate is strait; I shall not be there” (167-68; see also 228-32).

⁷⁰ Here, as in Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, “breath” recalls its Latin origin in *spiritus*, from which the word “spirit” (i.e. the soul) was derived (see 56.7).

creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God.” Desperate to believe in the “redemptive power of love” (*SHG* 56), Swinburne’s mid-Victorian contemporaries would have recognized their own dearest hopes in the disappointment of the speaker.

Yet, as the title suggests, the burden of the poem is not the triumph of such an ideal love over time, but “the triumph of time over love” (Rosenberg 176)—at least as it applies to the speaker. (As I will argue, the speaker, unlike the poet, struggles to retain his belief that an ideal love is possible in principle, even if it is not possible for him). The speaker’s past experiences and ideals of love become “Days that are over, dreams that are done” (50), and life becomes, to borrow a Heraclitean image also employed in the “Garden” (87-88), a “stream” that “Works [its way] downward” to the “sea” that represents time itself (57-60).⁷¹ He finds that, like all other things, loves are subject to time, alluding implicitly to Aphrodite’s birth from the sea: “The loves and hours of the life of a man, / They are swift and sad, being born of the sea” (73-74). Just as the speaker of the “Hymn” imagined time “made bare” as the all-destroying “wave of the world” (64), the speaker of the “Triumph” imagines it as the proverbial “great third wave,” the “triple wave of ruin” alluded to in Aeschylus and Plato (*PBH* 329n),⁷² which is impossible either to resist or escape:

It is not much that a man can save
On the sands of life, in the straits of time,
Who swims in sight of the great third wave
That never a swimmer shall cross or climb. (81-84)

It is not a coincidence that the speaker describes himself as one whose “whole life’s love

⁷¹ Cf. Bass 60; McGhee 186.

⁷² See Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* c.1015-16; Plato, *Republic* 472a. It is worth noting that Lerner, searching only to confirm his sense that the poem is nothing more than “a magnificent game of [empty] signifiers,” embarrassingly relies on his own ignorance to make his case: “There is no ‘great third wave’; there isn’t even much of a folk belief about one” (249).

goes down in a day” (6), like a ship sinking at sea. The speaker sees time as “the destroyer of his love” (Fletcher 25), and, as Richard D. McGhee remarks (186-87), the ever-fluctuating sea (initially) acts as an unwelcome “reality principle” against which he can measure his collapsed, or perhaps sunken, fantasies of eternal love.

VII.

The speaker’s emphasis on “the triumph of time over [his] love” is so evident that one might be forgiven for not asking precisely *how* time has destroyed his love. In fact, the speaker’s obsessive concern with the fate of his love is so overwhelming, that one might not stop to consider precisely *in what* his love consisted in the first place. Contrary to what some inattentive readers of the poem have asserted,⁷³ perhaps under the influence of Gosse (see *LAS* 78),⁷⁴ the speaker is neither left nor rejected by his beloved.⁷⁵ As several frustrated critics have been at pains to emphasize,⁷⁶ the speaker of the poem *never reveals his romantic feelings* to the woman in question⁷⁷—just as, based upon what little evidence is available, they conclude that Swinburne himself never expressed his feelings

⁷³ See e.g. Kribbs 114; Lerner 248.

⁷⁴ “[Swinburne] declared his passion, suddenly, and no doubt in a manner which seemed to her preposterous and violent. More from nervousness, probably, than from ill-will, she broke out laughing in his face. He was deeply chagrined, and [...] he showed his displeasure, and they parted on the worst of terms” (*LAS* 78).

⁷⁵ These critics are possibly also misled by the echoes of Tennyson’s “Locksley Hall,” in which the speaker berates his cousin Amy for her “shallow-hearted” capitulation to “the social wants that sin against the strength of youth” and the “social lies that warp us from the living truth” (39, 59-60). The speaker of the “Triumph” claims that his beloved, in her ignorance of his love, has “chosen and clung to the chance they sent you, / Life sweet as a perfume and pure as a prayer” (161-62), and then rants against “the lives that lie” (244): “The souls and the lips that are bought and sold, / The smiles of silver and kisses of gold” (245-46).

⁷⁶ See e.g. Evans 73; Greenberg, “Gosse’s” 107; Lang, “Lost” 125, 129-30.

⁷⁷ *Pace* Overton Fuller, it is informing the beloved of his romantic intentions, and not engaging in “a single act of sex” with her (105), that is the “deed forborne” by the speaker (12). Similarly, it is the entirety of married love, which includes its sexual consummation, which is his “dream foregone” (12).

of love to Mary Gordon⁷⁸—and repeatedly expresses his resolve to “say no word” (5), and keep his soul “in a place out of sight, / Far off, where the pulse of it is not heard” (199-200), even after death:

Come life, come death, not a word be said;
Should I lose you living, and vex you dead?
I never shall tell you on earth; and in heaven,
If I cry to you then, will you hear or know? (389-92)

His love is among those “that are lost ere they come to birth” (77), and it leaves its object utterly “Ignorant” of its existence (186). If time is an enemy to the speaker’s love, it seems to be so because the woman must—according to the social mores of her time and class—marry eventually, and he will not take advantage of the time left to him to declare himself. Though, in the speaker’s own words at the beginning of the poem, “time is [yet] with us, and hands are free,” he will “say no word” that “a[nother] man” in this situation “might say” (2, 5).

As his remarks suggest, the speaker’s choice to “say no word” of his love is the result of his conviction that there is some radical fault in him, which renders him unsuited for marriage, and to which—in stark contrast to his very Victorian fantasies of matrimonial purification and salvation (see e.g. 153-54, 169-72)—love can offer no remedy. While he would otherwise be “swift to follow” his beloved, “this could never have been” and “never [...] shall be” because “love lacks might to redeem or undo me; / As I have been, I know I shall surely be” (234, 7-8, 235-36). ““What should such fellows as I do?”” he asks, echoing Hamlet’s speech of self-condemnation to Ophelia (*PBH* 329n;

⁷⁸ See e.g. *ACS* 105; Greenberg, “Gosse” 107; Lang, “Lost” 129; *SPP* 87. This evidence consists almost entirely of Mary’s denial that she and Swinburne “enjoyed anything other than a brother and sister relationship” (*ACS* 107; see also Lang, “Lost” 128-29). As Rooksby remarks, however, “it is hard to take this statement at face value” (*ACS* 107): “Perhaps Mary did not realize the extent of Swinburne’s feelings for her, though this is difficult to believe even allowing for his reticence in such matters” (*ACS* 107).

see *Hamlet* 3.1.127-28),⁷⁹ before concluding that “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” (237-40). Some critics keen to align every element of the “Triumph” with a biographical detail have assumed that Swinburne is here alluding to his own reasons for not proposing to Mary, the most likely being that the close consanguinity would have raised the spectres of inbreeding—reinforced by the poet’s own “twitching” and “epileptiform fit[s]” (Overton Fuller 106)—and incest (Lang, “Lost” 107). They might also point to the fact that the speaker refers to a deep-seated personal fault, not a social or biological impediment to the relationship. Taking this into account, it might seem plausible to refer the remarks to either Swinburne’s supposed impotence⁸⁰ or his abnormal sexual proclivities.⁸¹ Yet, despite this potential for bio-critical speculation, it is important to keep in mind that the speaker, like Hamlet himself, seems unable to find “thoughts to put” his “offences” in (3.1.126),⁸² and that all that can be known for certain is that he believes his personal faults, whatever they are, would guarantee the (eventual) doom of his (theoretical) marriage to his beloved—and thus to his (yet unspoken) love.

The speaker chooses to “say no word” of his love because *if* he were to declare his romantic intentions, and *if* he and his beloved were consequently married, *then* his own faults would bring it to an end. Ironically, the speaker chooses to live without his love, *because* he believes that to take any action to gain his love would be to guarantee its loss.

⁷⁹ “I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me. I am proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offenses at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such fellows as I do crawling between heaven and earth?” (*Hamlet* 3.1.123-28).

⁸⁰ See e.g. Ober 60-62.

⁸¹ See e.g. *SEC* 212; *SPP* 87.

⁸² It might also be helpful for critics to remember that such faults as Hamlet can find words for are common personality traits like pride, vengefulness, and ambition (see *Hamlet* 3.1.125; fn. 79), rather than the sort of sexual “peculiarities” most often attributed to Swinburne himself.

Thus, it might seem that the speaker is caught in a Catch-22: if he does not speak he is left loveless, but if he does speak he will lose his love. Yet, despite the fact that both scenarios would result in his lacking the beloved, there are differences that, for the speaker, make the former outcome preferable. By choosing not to act on his love, he allows himself to maintain the oft-repeated fantasy of the love that could have been *if only*: if only “you [had] eaten and drunken” of my love (27); if only “you [had] loved but me” (40); if only “you [had] loved me once, as you have not loved” (47); if only “the chance [had] been with us that has not been” (48); if only “we [were] once made one for a single hour” (100); if only “I [had] reached you on earth” (143); if only “you [were] once sealed mine” (145); if only “you [had] chosen” (169); if only “you [had] stretched hand” (169); if only “you [had] seen good such a thing were done” (170); if only “you saw with your soul what a man am I” (242); if only, *if only* “we had loved each other” (381). If, however, he did speak of his love, and it resulted in the doomed marriage he projects, he would be robbing himself of his fantasy love of eternally-reiterated *if only*s, to replace it with the decisive fact of his love’s inevitable and final ruination. So great is his fear of this latter outcome that he would rather his beloved “Die as a leaf that dies in a day” than that she should, due to “a word” of his, become “awake and aware” of his love (198, 194, 188).

VIII.

So fearful is the speaker that his ideal love, once rendered real, would succumb in time that he is incapable of imagining any sort of real life with his beloved. As far as life in this world is concerned, the speaker can imagine no further than the initial moment of

love's consummation, when they would be "once made one for a single hour" (100). In his repeated returns to this *if only* moment, it is the speaker's insistence on its singularity that is most striking: "Had you loved me *once*" (47, emphasis added); "were you *once* sealed mine" (145, emphases added); "Were we *once* made one for a *single* hour" (100, emphasis added). Beyond this singular moment of consummation, the speaker either indulges, as we have seen, in the fantasy of direct translation to a "heaven" as fixed and immutable as "the sure stars" (30, 41), or he envisions his own immediate death:

Yea, hope at its highest and all her fruit,
And time at fullest and all his dower,
I had given you surely, *and life to boot*,
Were we once made one for a single hour. (97-100, emphasis added)

Although he admits to his beloved, reluctantly, that he would have "clung / To my life if you bade me," he seems far more eager to "have died if you cared I should die for you" (105-06). Having her "once sealed mine," the speaker would have "lain down" for his beloved "glad and dead" (96), or have had her cast "The heart of my heart" "under the palms of your feet" to "tread it to dust and death" (382-84). The speaker knows that, had he and his beloved once "loved each other," the only way to avoid losing his fantasy of love would have been for him to, in that very moment, have "taken [his] life up and given [away] / All that life gives and the years let go" (381, 385-86).

The speaker's inability to imagine a real life with his beloved, and the desperate commitment to his fantasy of eternal love that stands behind this failure, are again betrayed in his choice of the troubadour Jaufre Rudel, of all the lovers in history and literature, to stand as his model of a love both ideal *and* achieved.⁸³ The story of Rudel's love, as told in his thirteenth-century *vida* (*PBH* 329-30n) and reimagined by the speaker

⁸³ Cf. Stuart 113.

(321-36), is that he fell in love, sight-unseen, with the much-praised Countess of Tripoli, about whom he wrote “many good songs” (qtd. in *PBH* 329n). Finding his “life for her love’s sake fail,” and “Being fain to see her,” Rudel “set sail” from France, “Touched land” in Tripoli, “and saw her as life grew cold, / And praised God, seeing; and so died he” (325-28). The consummation of Rudel’s love, in the beloved’s reciprocation, occurred only once, at the exact moment of his death. He “Died, praising God for his gift and grace” because, “Or ever the life in his face was shed,”

she bowed down to him weeping, and said
 ‘Live;’ and her tears were shed on his face
 Or ever the life in his face was shed.
 The sharp tears fell through her hair, and stung
Once, and her close lips touched him and clung
Once, and grew one with his lips for a space;
 And so drew back, and the man was dead. (329-36, emphases added)

For the speaker, “the gods were good” to Rudel because they prevented his fantasy of love from being tainted by the vulgar realities of life (e.g. marriage or sexuality), and they provided a timely death that prevented him from seeing that fantasy succumb to the inevitable “triumph of time.”⁸⁴ Confronted with his beloved’s engagement to another, and aware of the inevitability of “the triumph of time” over his love, the speaker can only envy the prior “singer in France of old” (321): “Love will not come to me now though I die, / As love came close to you, breast to breast” (351-52).

As Greenberg has remarked (“Gosse” 106),⁸⁵ the speaker of the “Triumph” envies Rudel in much the same way as the speaker of “Les Noyades” envies the French labourer who, during the “wild fifth year” of the Revolution (5), was condemned by Jean-Baptiste Carrier to the infamous “republican marriage,” in which revolutionaries “Bound and

⁸⁴ Cf. Alkalay-Gut 60.

⁸⁵ See also Chew 78-79.

drowned, slaying two by two, / Maidens and young men, naked and wed” (11-12).⁸⁶ The labourer, by chance, is bound “Bosom to bosom, to drown and die” with a noble woman whom he has loved his “whole life long” from afar (20, 45). The labourer then reveals that he views “drown[ing] with her” as the consummation of his long-standing love (55), in which she shall finally “know me and see me all through” (57).⁸⁷ But while the labourer’s joy in his death comes in the absence of the possibility of becoming “one” with his beloved in life, the lovelorn speaker, reflecting enviously upon the labourer’s fate, makes it clear that even if “the gods gave all that a god can give” (i.e. had she reciprocated his love), he “had chosen rather the gift to die” (66-67):

Could I change you, help you to love me, sweet,
 Could I give you the love that would sweeten death,
 We should yield, go down, locked hands and feet,
 Die, drown together, and breath catch breath. (73-76)

Though Greenberg thinks that the speaker posits death “as the condition of love” simply because Swinburne wishes to “intensify the illicitness of the moment” (103),⁸⁸ death and sex are fused here because the speaker seeks a singular moment of ideal love, like that sought by the speaker of the “Triumph”: “you would have felt my soul in a kiss, / And known *that once* if I loved you well” (77-78, emphasis added).⁸⁹

⁸⁶ As Haynes remarks (*PBH* 331n), Swinburne’s main source for the history of the “republican weddings” is probably Carlyle’s brief but memorable account in *The French Revolution* [1837] (3.221-22).

⁸⁷ It is worth remembering, as Louis remarks, that the labourer, is “in effect an inadvertent if satisfied rapist” (“Rape” 59). “Love me or loathe,” he says to the terrified woman with whom he is to be “Bound and drowned,” “we are one not twain” (50, 11). Regardless of the degree of admiration the speaker of “Les Noyades” expresses for the labourer, he only indulges in his parallel fantasies on the assumption that he could “change you, help you to love me, sweet” and “give you the love that would sweeten death” (73-74).

⁸⁸ See also Alkalay-Gut 59.

⁸⁹ Although critics often act as if the speakers of the “Triumph,” “Les Noyades,” and “A Leave-Taking” are all Swinburne himself, it is worth noting that while the speaker of “Les Noyades” imagines drowning with his beloved (69-80), the speaker of the “Triumph” imagines drowning with “the great sweet mother” alone (257): “I will go down to her, I and none other” (259). Similarly, although both the speakers of the “Triumph” and “A Leave-Taking” dream of drowning alone, the former sees it as a transcendent quasi-erotic union with the sea, whereas the latter only sees it as death and oblivion without the beloved: “Though

IX.

Of course, the great irony, as we have seen, is that in order to preserve his fantasy of “deathless” love, in the face of his own undefined faults, the speaker of the “Triumph” must either renounce “love in the life upon earth”—which is the one thing that (in theory) could make his fantasy reality—or he must in welcome death itself, as in the case of Rudel or the French labourer in “Les Noyades.” In short, the failure of his fantasy is built into the fantasy itself, turning it from a fantasy of eternal love into one of eternal love eternally lost. Thus, for the speaker, the fantasy of love that promised to see “Grief collapse as a thing disproved, / [And] Death consume as a thing unclean” (43-44) comes to little more than another reminder of the fact that, at least for “such fellows as I [am]” (237), there is nothing that escapes the “triumph of time.” Although for the majority of the poem, caught in the endless repetition of *if onlys*, the speaker proceeds as if this fact is limited to his own predicament—holding on to the possibility that others, without his faults, might be able to ascend to a spiritual plane, outside of time, by virtue of their perfect love—he eventually comes to the point where he posits that the “triumph of time” is the ultimate reality, not just of his existence, but of existence *per se*. Echoing the anti-theistic sarcasm of the speaker of “Félise” (see e.g. 201-30), he mockingly asks if “the high gods know or the great gods care” about his love (252), and then turns to assert that, even were his sorrow seven times greater (253), “the iron hollow of doubtful heaven, / That knows not itself whether night-time or day be,” would not “Reverberate [with his] words” or his “foolish prayer[s]” (254-56).

all those waves went over us,” (i.e. he and his songs), “and drove / Deep down the stifling lips and drowning hair, / She would not care” (33-35). *Pace* Chew (79) and Overton Fuller (108), the speaker of “A Leave-Taking” finds no “healing and consolation” in the sea (Chew 79).

Despite some last-ditch efforts to avoid the realization by escaping into substitutionary fantasies (see below), the speaker must accept the impossibility of his ideal love. Acknowledging that he has been grievously wounded by his love, “he vows never to be wounded again” (McGhee 188), and resolves to accept “death-in-life” as his lot.⁹⁰

I have hidden my soul out of sight, and said
‘Let none take pity upon thee, none
Comfort thy crying: for lo, thou art dead,
Lie still now, safe out of sight of the sun.’ (209-12)

Much like the speaker of the “Hymn,” this speaker chooses withdrawal from the world and “total alienation from humanity” (Kribbs 120), figured in terms of “death-in-life” in a “bleak blown space” (201), much like Proserpine’s garden: “A place for slumber and sorrow to meet,” where his narcotized soul, “know[ing] not of worst or best [... or of] Sweet things or bitterness” will “vex me no more” (206, 348, 350, 222). Choosing, despite his fantasies, not to commit suicide, the speaker determines to maintain his “public existence,” but not interact with the outside world (Stuart 115):

I shall go my ways, tread my measure,
Fill the days of my daily breath
With fugitive things not good to treasure,
Do as the world doth, say as it saith [...] (377-80)

Without even the superficial defiance of the speaker of the “Hymn,” the speaker of the “Triumph” will paradoxically disengage from the world by passively “letting the world do his thinking and acting for him” (Kribbs 124).

Abandoning both love and life by withdrawing from the world and those in it, the

⁹⁰ Cf. Stevenson 222.

speaker feels that he will finally be “safe”⁹¹ from the pain of the losses imposed by time, albeit at the cost of his ability to act, to think, to speak ... and, for that matter, *to sing* for himself. Again, much like the speaker of the “Hymn,” the speaker of the “Triumph” finds that to give up on love is to give up on song:

I shall never be friends again with roses;
I shall loathe sweet tunes, where a note grown strong
Relents and recoils, and climbs and closes,
As a wave of the sea turned back by song.
There are sounds where the soul’s delight takes fire,
Face to face with its own desire;
A delight that rebels, a desire that reposes;
I shall hate sweet music my whole life long. (353-60)

On one level, the speaker “loathe[s] sweet tunes” because they remind him not only of his beloved, who has a “mouth that sings” (224),⁹² but of his exploded fantasy of a love that could transcend time, “turn[ing] back” the “wave[s] of the sea.” But the speaker also “hate[s] sweet music” because he fears it could reawaken his impulse to love: brought “face to face” with his “own desire,” he might again find his that “soul’s delight takes fire.” Knowing, as he now does, the pain resulting from “the triumph of time,” to which all such “delight” is subject, the speaker cannot allow for such desires (or such fantasies) to be reawakened: “These things are over, and no more mine” (368). Yet, he forgets that such things were never actually his, not only because his ideal of love was an illusion, but because he was so afraid of the “triumph of time” that he never spoke of it when it could have made a difference, and now he will never speak or sing of it again. The poem is an end-point to both his love and his poetry, which marks his metaphorical death: it is “a

⁹¹ For the speaker’s revealing repetitions of the words “safe” and “hidden,” see 116, 209, 212, 269, 285.

⁹² As Lang remarks (see “Lost” 126), in the manuscript there is a “false start” that suggests the speaker and the beloved had written songs together: “Songs we had written or words we had said” (qtd. in Lang, “Lost” 126).

grave” made of “grievous thought” and “soft spun verses” (213-15).

X.

But this “life-in-death” is not the death that most associate with the “Triumph.” On the contrary, when they think of the “Triumph,” most think of the speaker’s suicidal fantasy of becoming one with “the great sweet mother, / Mother and lover of men, the sea” (257-58), which has formed a focal-point for the “transcendent critics,”⁹³ and attracted much critical attention in general. But this fantasy of becoming “a vein in the heart [...] of the sea” (288), is the second of two suicidal fantasies in the poem—fantasies that act as “punctuation” in the overall drift from “ideal love” towards “life-in-death” that characterizes the poem as a whole—and it can be better understood when read in light of the former. In the first suicidal fantasy (113-28), the speaker, after acknowledging his failure to become “One splendid spirit” with his beloved in life (32), fantasizes instead about their being “dead together to-day [*sic*]” (113). “Clasped and clothed in the cloven clay” (115), they will, he imagines, achieve unity in their mutual reduction to dead matter: “Made one with death, filled full of the night” (120). Yet, although the fantasy begins as a materialistic inversion of his “spiritual” fantasies of being “made fast / Soul to soul while the years fell past” (45-46), it quickly turns into a reprise of them. Unlike the speaker of the “Hymn,” the speaker of the “Triumph” turns the “sleep” of death into a literal “slumber” (121), which quickly evolves into an eternal and highly-eroticized “spiritual” union:

... dreaming, [we should] grow to each other, and weep,
Laugh low, live softly, murmur and muse;

⁹³ See e.g. Harrison, “Eros” 26, 30-31; Johnson, W. 100-02.

Yea, and it may be, struck through by the dream,
Feel the dust quicken and quiver, and seem
Alive as of old to the lips, and leap
Spirit to spirit as lovers use. (123-28, emphasis added)

In other words, the speaker's fantasy of being "dead together to-day" is little more than a thinly-disguised displacement of his fantasy of an ideal "spiritual" love, safe not only from "the ages of worldly weather" (117), but from time itself.

What is especially notable here is the confusion between the material and the spiritual: the way in which the speaker muddles material annihilation with spiritual transcendence. Given the importance of the "Triumph" to the "transcendent critics," it should not be surprising to find that the proponents of the "transcendent theory" are liable to this same sort of confusion. For example, Harrison can remark in one place that Swinburne "[in] poem after poem insists that death is oblivion" (*Victorian* 180), but in another place speak of "an assured, posthumous release into the eternal, quintessential freedom" from "the constricting contraries of life" ("Woman" 100). *Pace* W. S. Johnson (106), this slippage should not be attributed to Swinburne, but to certain of his dramatic speakers, and viewed in light of the sort of (here displaced) "spiritualism" that he is challenging in *Poems and Ballads*. In fact, even the speaker of the "Triumph" rejects his momentary slippage between the material and the spiritual, between annihilation and transcendence, by immediately dismissing his fantasies of being "dead together" as nothing more than "Sick dreams":

Sick dreams and sad of a dull delight;
For what shall it profit when men are dead
To have dreamed, to have loved with the whole soul's might,
To have looked for day when the day was fled?
Let come what will, there is one thing worth,
To have had fair love in the life upon earth:
To have held love safe till the day grew night,

While skies had colour and lips were red. (129-36)

Although he still holds, in accordance with his belief, at this relatively early point in the poem, that transcendent love is possible, that “if only” “I [had] reached you *on earth* [i.e. in life], I should lose not again, / In death nor life” (143-44, emphasis added), he also believes, by the same token, that to “Lose life” is to “lose all” (141).

The second suicidal fantasy, of “go[ing] back” to the “great sweet mother,” comes, however, after he begins to suspect that the “triumph of time” over love is universal, not merely personal (253-56). In this light, the fantasy of becoming “A pulse” of the sea appears, at this late stage in the poem, as a “last-ditch” attempt to preserve his ideal of transcendent love, which comes with the same confusion(s) of the material and the spiritual that characterized his earlier fantasy of “being dead” with his beloved. As “the only permanent thing” (Altick 233), time itself, again represented by the sea, changes from a blind and brute material reality to a quasi-spiritual principle that takes the transcendent place vacated by “the gods in heaven” (30). As Eben Bass remarks, the speaker “resolves the issue of ‘Time’ [...] into the great timeless sea” (60). Echoing Revelation, in which the Lord identifies Himself as “Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last” (22.13),⁹⁴ the speaker apostrophizes the sea as both eternal principle and “great sweet mother” (257): “thou, thou art sure, thou art older than earth [...] From the first thou wert; in the end thou art” (301, 304). Although he initially identifies her as a “Mother of loves that are swift to fade [...] and] of mutable winds and hours” (65-66), a “barren mother [...] Cold and clean as her faint salt flowers” (67-68), he now chides those who would say that she is as “cold” as the “dead” within her salt

⁹⁴ See also Rev. 1.8, 11; 21.6.

depths (292), claiming instead that she is not only a “Mother *and lover* of men” (258, emphasis added), but a “tender-hearted” and “perfect lover” (297) precisely because, as Jayne K. Kribbs says, she “will not reject him” like his beloved (122)—whom he never informed of his love.⁹⁵ Unlike the speaker’s lost love, which has succumbed to the “triumph of time,” the sea “is constant and eternal [... and] they might pass eternities together” (Kribbs 122).

As Louis remarks, the speaker substitutes “union with the sea” (i.e. with “time itself”) “for union with the beloved,” and the sea accordingly holds for him the promise of “redemption from time, [of] a life beyond it” (*SHC* 58-59), just as the beloved once did:

This woven raiment of nights and days,
Were it once cast off and unwound from me,
Naked and glad would I walk in thy ways,
Alive and aware of thy ways and thee. (281-84, emphasis added)

Paradoxically, as in the earlier fantasy, the brute fact of material annihilation becomes the promise of spiritual transcendence, just as the material flux of the sea becomes an eternal “spiritual” principle: “O fair white mother [...] Set free *my soul as thy soul* is free” (262, 264, emphasis mine). But this is nothing more than another “sick dream,” another displacement of his now shattered ideal of transcendent love, and the speaker dismisses it immediately after conjuring it: “And grief shall endure not for ever, I know. / As things that are not shall these things be; / *We shall live* [...]” (305-07, emphasis added).⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Louis also notes many of the differences between the speaker’s first (65-80) and second (257-304) descriptions of the sea, but she tries to argue that there is *something* positive that distinguishes the latter from the former (see *SHG* 58-59).

⁹⁶ McGann thinks that the speaker believes his love will not change or fade away (*SEC* 222-24). He justifies this claim by misreading the speaker’s lines about his ineradicable faults to refer to his love, even though the speaker refers to love in the same lines: “But love lacks might to redeem or undo me; / As I have been I shall surely be” (*SEC* 235-36). He dismisses the speaker’s claims that “grief shall endure not

Strangely enough, many critics have opposed the speaker's love for his beloved and his love for the sea. Most of these have simply viewed the speaker's sea fantasy as a manifestation of "the impulse to oblivion" (*SRM* 64),⁹⁷ and thus as "the final antithesis to hopes of timeless union" (Greenberg 106). McGhee, aware of the fact that the sea initially functioned as a "reality principle" opposed to the fantasy of eternal love (186-87), comes to the startling conclusion that the speaker's mortal union with the sea represents "a new commitment to life" and renewed "residence in reality" (187-88). Finally, even Louis, who clearly acknowledges that the "sick dreams" of "union with the sea" substitute for those of "union with the beloved," nevertheless tries to argue, based on the former's "triumphant exuberance" and "memorable vigour" (*SHG* 58), that there is *something* positive that distinguishes the latter from the former—concluding that the speaker "falls away from [its] transcendentalism all too quickly" (*SHG* 59).

The problem, however, is not that the speaker gives up on his transcendent fantasies too quickly, but that, having discovered they are "sick dreams," he chooses to give up on life, love, and song rather than risk the pain of loss. As Stuart remarks, the speaker's "greatest loss," whether he realizes it or not, "is not his love [i.e. this one woman] but his art" (114), and this is a loss that he shares with the "decadent" speaker of the "Hymn." As I have already remarked, despite the origins of the "Triumph" in the poet's biography, the speaker's claim that he will "hate sweet music" his "whole life long" readily distinguishes him from Swinburne, who was at the beginning of a long and

forever [... and] As things that are not shall these things be" (305-06) by claiming (without quoting) that the speaker "shortly thereafter [...] declare[s] passionately that he will never get over his feelings of grief (345-68)" (*SEC* 224). In actuality, these lines assert that the speaker will never love again, but this does not imply that his prior love will not fade with time: "Love will not come to me now [...] I shall never again be friends with roses [...] These things are over, and no more mine" (351, 353, 368).

⁹⁷ See also Stuart 114.

productive career as a poet. One might think that this distinction alone would make critics wary of attributing to Swinburne the “sick dreams” of the speaker, which are themselves displacements of an ideal of transcendent love similar to that he challenged in his mid-Victorian contemporaries. Far from being antithetical to his dream of becoming “one splendid spirit” with his beloved, the speaker’s “sick [and suicidal] dreams” of material annihilation are their dark reflection, the expressions of what could be called a “perverse spiritualism.” Of course, given that the “sick dreams” of the speaker are short-lived and self-refuted fantasies that “punctuate” his more realistic drive towards withdrawal and isolation from the world around him, Swinburne’s exploration of such “perverse spiritualism” in the “Triumph” is limited. Yet, as I will argue in the next chapter, Swinburne explored this “perverse spiritualism,” and its deleterious effects on the creative impulse, at greater length in one of the most infamous poems in the volume, whose infamy rested in the fact that it seemed to be the most remote from his contemporaries’ ideals of love: “Dolores.”

Chapter 4

“Loves die, and we know thee immortal”:

“Perverse Spiritualism” and Creative Impotence in “Dolores”

Fruits fail and love dies and time ranges;
Thou art fed with perpetual breath,
And alive after infinite changes,
And fresh from the kisses of death;
Of languors rekindled and rallied,
Of barren delights and unclean,
Things monstrous and fruitless, a pallid
And poisonous queen.

— Swinburne, “Dolores”¹

Tenez, my friend, Arch-Professor of the Ithyphallic Science as you are, will you hear the truth once for all? You take yourself for a great pagan physiologist and philosopher—you are a Christian ascetic bent on earning the salvation of the soul through the mortification of the flesh [...] We took you for a sort of burlesque Prometheus; you are only a very serious Simeon Stylites—in an inverted posture.

— Swinburne on Sade, Letter to Milnes [1862]²

As Donald Thomas has remarked, “Dolores” “cause[d] more bother than any other piece in *Poems and Ballads*” (116) and the mid-Victorian critics quickly identified it as “a poem of extraordinary power” (“Mr. Swinburne’s Defence,” *Pall Mall* 10) and the most “significant manifestation” of Swinburne’s supposed “platform” (Hare 130), with his young admirers chanting it in the streets of Oxford and Cambridge (*SPW* 130)³ and his detractors deriding it as “depraved and morbid in the last degree” (“Mr.

¹ 57-64.

² *SL* 1.57.

³ See also *LAS* 148.

Swinburne's Defence," *London Review* 130). Clyde K. Hyder's remark in 1933 that "Dolores," for good or ill, is "doubtless the poem most associated with its author in the public mind" (*SLC* 111),⁴ remains true to this day—to the extent that Swinburne has any presence in the "public mind"—and mention of Swinburne among readers of nineteenth-century poetry will elicit murmurs, often depreciating murmurs, about "the raptures and roses of vice" and "Our Lady of Pain" (68, *passim*). Although the original reviewers were too respectable to mention the "unmentionable" Marquis de Sade,⁵ it is more than likely that many recognized him in the figure of Dolores's "prophet," "preacher," and "poet" (379),⁶ and in assuming that Swinburne himself was a "passionate votary of the goddess" (Morley 145),⁷ they were implicitly assuming that the young poet was a "disciple of Sade" (*ACS* 87)—and this attitude has carried forward to many of those modern critics who have addressed the poem. In this chapter, I will argue, on the contrary, that "Dolores" constitutes an extended dramatic exploration of the sort of "perverse spiritualism" that I have argued is displayed fleetingly in "The Triumph of Time," and of which Swinburne found a prime example in the works of Sade. Although the speaker of "Dolores" may not be able, like the speaker of the "Triumph," to dismiss his "perverse" fantasies as "sick dreams," he is ultimately able to recognize that the

⁴ See also Rutland 272. As Hyder remarks, this "is due in some measure to the fact that it is the most parodied of his works" (*SLC* 111). The best parody of "Dolores" is probably A. C. Hilton's "Octopus" (*SCH* 156-57). For an overview of some select parodies of "Dolores," see *SLC* 111-16. For the parodies, see Hamilton 5-9, 16, 18-19, 26, 31, 204-05; Jerrold 286-87, 363-64; Martin 104-07, 128-29, 229-31, 234-37, 242-44; Untermeyer 62, 96, 219-21; Wells 92.

⁵ Although W. M. Rossetti alluded obliquely to Sade (see 22-23), Buchanan was the only critic to mention him explicitly (*Fleshly* 2), and he was censured for the indecency of his criticism (see e.g. "Mr. Buchanan" 700-01; Rev. of *Fleshly* 650).

⁶ As Thomas records, Henry James once watched Tennyson react to overhearing the name Sade at a dinner party—as it turns out, the speaker was referring to Laure de Sade: "The sound roused Tennyson [...] to a prolonged denunciation of 'the scandalous, the long-ignored, the at last all but unnameable author' of the same surname. Tennyson thundered on, to the mild bewilderment of his guests, none of whom apart from James had the least idea what he was talking about" (*SPW* 90).

⁷ See also Friswell 309-09.

solution to his problems is not to “hate sweet music” (“Triumph” 360) but to find a poet, though it is not himself, capable of singing it.

I.

Before turning to “Dolores” itself, it is necessary to clarify Swinburne’s attitude toward her “prophet,” “preacher,” and “poet”: Sade.⁸ In general, those critics who have recognized the importance of Sade to “Dolores,” and to Swinburne himself, have fallen into one of two (not mutually-exclusive) categories: those who have taken the Sadeian element too seriously, and those who have not taken it seriously enough. Over the course of the last century, those critics who have taken the Sadeian element of “Dolores” too seriously—including critics as otherwise varied as Georges Lafourcade, Mario Praz, Rupert Croft-Cooke, William B. Ober, Isobel Armstrong, Rikky Rooksby, and Louis⁹—have tended, as did many of the original reviewers, to identify the speaker of the poem with Swinburne, claiming that the young poet was an enthusiastic “disciple of Sade,”¹⁰ and that the poem itself is “a complete example of Sadistic profanation” (Praz 231), “the sublimation” of all Swinburne’s “erotic fancies and practices” (Croft-Cooke 26).¹¹ On the other hand, those who have not taken the Sadeian element of “Dolores” seriously enough—including critics like Jerome Hamilton Buckley, Douglas Bush, William R.

⁸ All quotations of Sade’s writings are from the English translations by Richard Seaver and Austryn Wainhouse. I have, however, also consulted the sixteen-volume *Oeuvres complètes* for comparison with the original French, and for the second published version of *Justine, La Nouvelle Justine* [1797], which Swinburne certainly read (see *SL* 1.54n.), but which is not currently translated into English. When citing the French text of *La Nouvelle Justine*, I will use the short title *Nouvelle*.

⁹ See Lafourcade 2.427-36; Praz 231-32; Croft-Cooke 20; Ober 67; *SHG* 23-24; Armstrong 404, 411-13; Rooksby, “Century” 2, *ACS* 76.

¹⁰ See also *SHG* 23.

¹¹ See also Walder 117.

Rutland, Anne Walder, and (again!) Louis¹²—have rightly distinguished between the speaker and the author of the poem, feeling that it is “difficult to believe that Swinburne, with his keen self-awareness and lively sense of humor, could seriously have worshipped” “Our Lady of Pain” (Buckley, *Victorian* 172). For these critics, the Sadeian “Dolores” can be dismissed as an empty adolescent provocation, a “comic mixture of priapic paganism and demonic parody” (*SHG* 41), and a “disreputable scarecrow” that “was never intended as a serious work of art at all” (Rutland 293).

Of course, it should go without saying that to recognize, as only one original reviewer did, that the poet, unlike the speaker, “is no blind worshipper” of Dolores, and that “a vein of irony [...] runs through the whole of this hymn” (Skelton 640), is not (necessarily) to conclude that the poem is not a “serious work of art” on a serious topic. In this case, the serious topic—albeit one from which Swinburne, as his letters clearly indicate, derived much amusement¹³—is the “philosophy” of Sade, known in the sexual underworlds of the nineteenth century as “the divine Marquis.” By the time Swinburne, after much anticipation, read Sade’s *The New Justine* [1797],¹⁴ Sade had gained a titanic reputation—although few had actually read his works¹⁵—not only as the most perverse of pornographers, but as an anti-Christian immoralist of such extreme depravity that those poor unfortunates who read his works would be pushed beyond the brink of insanity.¹⁶ For Swinburne, beginning to compose his own sexually-scandalous challenges to the ascetic presuppositions of Christian philosophy and culture, the as-yet-unread Sade was the “martyred marquis,” “a great pagan physiologist and philosopher” who had

¹² See Buckley, *Victorian* 172-73; Bush 349; Rutland 292-94; Walder 126; *SHG* 41.

¹³ See e.g. *SL* 1.54-58, 66-68, 73-76, 186-88, 193-95.

¹⁴ There were two published versions of Sade’s *Justine*. See fn. 8.

¹⁵ See Gibson 27; *SPW* 89.

¹⁶ See Coward xxi; *SL* 1.54.

transcended Christian asceticism (*SL* 1.46, 57), and was persecuted and incarcerated for his disturbing and liberating insights into the human condition. As Sir William Hardman observed, with great disapproval, in 1861, the young Swinburne exalted Sade “as the acme and apostle of perfection, without (as he says) having read a word of his works” (78). Swinburne’s uninformed hero-worship was capped that same year, with the production (in French) of his poetic tribute, “Charenton in 1810,”¹⁷ in which Sade is depicted calmly surveying the fantastic horrors of human history with “the air of a silent, beckoning god” (110).

Yet the Sade Swinburne found, upon finally reading *Justine* in 1862, with a group of like-minded friends, including Dante Gabriel Rossetti, inspired neither horror nor reverence, but uncontrollable laughter from all involved: “At first, I quite expected to add another to the gifted author’s list of victims; I really thought I must have died or split open or choked with laughing. I never laughed so much in my life” (*SL* 1.54). After he had stopped laughing, Swinburne wrote to Milnes, from whose extensive collection of pornography he had borrowed *Justine*, to express his profound disappointment: “Is this the mighty Satyr, *is this all?* I did think—I did hope this one illusion might have turned out a reality. Weep with me over a shattered idol!” (*SL* 1.54). After several preliminary criticisms of both Sade’s style and content—he complains that Sade “takes bulk and number for greatness,” and fails to “show us how and why these things [i.e. sexual ‘perversions’] are the way they are” (*SL* 1.54-55)—Swinburne comes to his “sincere and

¹⁷ Sade was imprisoned in and died at Charenton. There are two existent versions of “Charenton en 1810,” the original 1861 version (see Pope-Hennessy 257-59) and the slightly revised 1863 version (see *NW* 7-10). Elisabeth Gitter has translated the 1863 version (quoted above).

deliberate opinion” (*SL* 1.58),¹⁸ which is that the supposedly “great pagan physiologist and philosopher” was really an inverted Christian, an “ascetic bent on earning the salvation of the soul through the mortification of the flesh,” who had simply “forgotten [his] own genealogy”: “We took you for a sort of burlesque Prometheus; you are only a very serious Simeon Stylites—in an inverted posture. [...] You worship the phallus as those first ascetics worshipped the cross; you seek your heaven by the very same road as they sought theirs. That is all” (*SL* 1.57). Although Swinburne was highly amused by Sade’s anti-Christian invective, and by his denunciations of the “supreme Being,” it is this “sincere and deliberate opinion” that he suggested Milnes append to the manuscript of “Charenton in 1810,” as if seeking to clarify his position to future readers (*SL* 1.58)—and it is this opinion that we must consider in attempting to understand the Sadeian speaker of “Dolores.”

The earliest critic to make a serious attempt at addressing Swinburne’s contention that Sade is “a hermit of the Thebaid turned inside out” (*SL* 1.57) was Baird, who, in an essay on Swinburne’s mutual relations to Sade and Blake, argued that Swinburne faults Sade for accepting, as Blake did not, “the old error of asceticism that flesh and spirit were divisible,” adopting the view that “all matters of the flesh” belong “to a separate and lower hierarchy than those of the spirit,” and for concluding that the world is truly regulated by “an external [and malign] divine law” (Baird 52, 55). Yet, while Baird is correct that Swinburne sees Sade’s lowly valuation of the body—as evidenced in the latter’s perverse “mortification[s] of the flesh”—as an inheritance from Christianity, particularly from the doctrine of “original sin,” he fails to understand that Sade’s

¹⁸ It is interesting to note that Baudelaire and Flaubert made similar comments about Sade, albeit not always in the same condemnatory spirit (see Thomas, *Sade* 191-94).

eighteenth-century materialism theoretically eliminates both God and the soul (in its Christian sense), and that his malign “supreme Being,” like Swinburne’s own, is little more than an expression of anti-Christian sentiments. Baird is also correct that Swinburne objects to Sade’s “pessimistic” characterization of the natural world as inherently “evil” rather than amoral,¹⁹ but he fails to appreciate that Swinburne values any corrective to the optimism of his contemporaries, who insist that “all things must be right” (Swinburne, “Thus runs” 4), or that of his perfectibilian Romantic forbearers, who insist that all things can be made right. It is this failure on Baird’s part that leads him to erroneously conclude that Swinburne believes “the natural order [...] should be perceived as pure and good”: there is “nothing evil,” he claims, “about the Nature which Swinburne espouses” (Baird 52-53).²⁰ Apart from these specific problems, Baird does not fully address what Swinburne means by *inverted* Christianity, and his article contains no substantial analysis of “Dolores” (see Baird 75).

Seven years after Baird, Riede produced the only other original and substantial discussion of Swinburne’s criticism of Sade’s “trick of reversing” Christian ethics (*SL* 1.57),²¹ in the light of which he provided an extended analysis of “Dolores.” Riede argues that, for Swinburne, Sade’s failure consists in reversing, rather than simply reproducing the Christian soul-body hierarchy, which leads him to the “celebration of the body to the exclusion” and even “the eliminat[ion of] the soul” (*SRM* 50, 57).²² According to Riede,

¹⁹ See e.g. Sade, *Nouvelle* 7.46-48, *Philosophy* 253-54.

²⁰ Much of Baird’s confusion seems to result from his failure to appreciate Swinburne’s idiosyncratic use of the word “pantheism” in *William Blake* (see Ch. 2, fn. 26).

²¹ While there are other lengthy discussions of Swinburne’s relation to Sade (see e.g. Armstrong; Peckham, *Revolutionaries* 235-305), they fail to reflect adequately upon his notion, as expressed in his letter to Milnes, that Sade is an inverted Christian.

²² Harrison makes a similar argument about the Sadeian emphasis on “mere carnal titillation” in “Dolores,” but he seems, despite his rejection of “Christian moral law” (“Losses” 692, 695), to simply reassert the

Dolores, whose “beautiful passionate body [...] never has ached with a heart” (“Dolores” 81-82), represents both the Sadeian “phase of consciousness,” which characterizes the speaker, and “the gradual degradation of sex” to a mechanical affair (50, 52). Given the fact that Riede also argues that Romantic creativity, in the tradition to which Swinburne belongs, requires the interaction between mind and matter,²³ it follows that the Sadeian philosophy, which denies the soul—no less than the Christian philosophy, which denies the body—is necessarily anti-imaginative. In “separat[ing] thought from life” in this way, both the Christian and the Sadeian are “nihilistic” (*SRM* 59): they both prevent the creation of “meaning,” but the latter also conceives of an inherently meaningless world. By acknowledging the Sadeian inversion of the Christian soul-body hierarchy, and connecting it to the creation of “meaning,” Riede produces a more convincing and broadly-applicable analysis of Swinburne’s anti-Sadeian position than does Baird. Unfortunately, however, the bulk of Riede’s discussion of “Dolores” makes little use of this analysis—deviating instead into self-contradictory models of “myth”²⁴—and, unlike Baird’s reading, it fails to account for the Sadeian’s negative valuation of the body, or for the fact that his belief in the fundamental evil of nature would seemingly preclude true “nihilism” (i.e. the complete denial of, and/or failure to find, “meaning” in the world).

In short, both Baird and Riede fail to account fully for Swinburne’s suggestive critique of Sade, who (as per Riede) inverts the Christian soul-body hierarchy, and yet (as

superiority of the spirit: the speaker is seeking “spiritual redemption” from “the prison of carnality,” and displays the “development through predominantly carnal to predominantly spiritual” (“Losses” 695-96). As might be expected, Harrison argues that the speaker finds this “spiritual redemption” in “Hesperia” (“Losses” 695-96).

²³ See Ch. 2, fn. 36.

²⁴ Despite his theoretical emphasis on the dynamic nature of Romantic “meaning-making,” Riede also attempts to employ a model of “myth” that allows for an unchanging “essence” lying outside of this creative dynamic: thus Dolores is the “archetypal whore,” an “eternal feminine principle,” which “is always essentially the same,” although it may change “shape” (see *SRM* 52-54).

per Baird) retains the negative Christian valuation of the body and the material world. Given that Sade's eighteenth-century materialism, descending from Julien Offray de la Mettrie's *Man a Machine* [1748] and Baron d'Holbach's *System of Nature* [1770] (Phillips 34), theoretically eliminates God and the soul (in its Christian sense), his lowly valuation of the body seems stranger still. To what, if not to an independent spiritual reality, is the body judged inferior or inconsequent? As I shall argue in the reading of "Dolores" that follows, Swinburne believes that Sade, despite his theoretical elimination of God, abstracts "Nature"²⁵ from the concrete realities of the material world, such that the former becomes an eternal, quasi-spiritual principle, to which the latter are completely subordinated, upon which they are entirely dependent, and by which they are fully determined. In other words, Sade inadvertently reproduces the Christian soul-body hierarchy within his "materialist"²⁶ system, and promotes a "perverse spiritualism" that dis- and re-replaces the "God of nature" with an inherently evil "material" world, thus effecting a "satanization of Nature" (Klossowski 86), while nevertheless promoting an apparent inversion of Christian values. As a result, in Swinburne's words, the manifold tortures of Sade are little more than "mortification[s] of the flesh" in the Christian sense (*SL* 1.57), ritual enactments of complete submission to and abasement before an external tyrant, which, though supposedly sensual and even erotic, actually result in an ascetic alienation from the body and the material world, and a corresponding degradation of our creative capacities.

²⁵ I use the term "Nature," as opposed to "nature," to indicate the Sadeian conceptualization.

²⁶ I use quotation marks around the words "materialist," "materialism," and "material" when they are used in this quasi-spiritual Sadeian sense.

II.

To understand the Sadeian speaker's "perverse" displacement of Christian "spiritualism" in "Dolores," we must begin with the short reading of the poem that Swinburne himself provided in *Notes on Poems and Reviews*, in an equal-parts "sarcastic and elucidative" response to the critics who thought it, along with certain other poems, "especially horrible" (*SL* 1.201-02; *SR* 19). The speaker of "Dolores," he claims, is expressing that "transient state of spirit through which a man may be supposed to pass, [when he has been] foiled in love and [is] wearied of loving," "seeking refuge in those 'violent delights' which 'have violent ends,' in fierce and frank sensualities which at least profess to be no more than they are" (*SR* 22). The notion that the speaker of "Dolores" has suffered disappointment in love is supported by both his own bitter comments on love (see e.g. 37-38, 55-58, 85-86, 155-60, 193-212, 397-98), and Swinburne's identification of the "Triumph" as an earlier act "in the same play," "express[ing] that state of feeling the reaction from which is expressed in 'Dolores'" (*SL* 1.197). Although I will argue that this "reaction" in the speaker of "Dolores" consists, like the "sick dreams" of the speaker of the "Triumph," in the displacement of the "spiritual" values of his ruined love, many critics have accepted Swinburne's disingenuous invitation in the *Notes*—designed to minimize critical censure—to read the poem in terms that reproduce those same "spiritual" values. The speaker of "Dolores," these critics claim, is "on vacation from the ardors of spiritual life," "seek[ing] gratification in lust to avoid the pains of love" (*SRM* 51),²⁷ leaving behind the profound and permanent spiritual "realities" of love for the superficial and transient physical gratifications of lust. "No thorns go as deep as a rose's,"

²⁷ See also Baird 75.

as the speaker says, “And love is more cruel than lust” (155-56; see also 85-86).

Such critics, if they felt they needed to bolster their case, could reasonably cite the speaker of “Dolores’s” pendent-poem “Hesperia”—which I will address at length later in this chapter—who stages a melodramatic escape from Dolores (55-76), and claims that “desire is a respite from love, and the flesh not the heart is her fuel” (57). They could also cite the speaker of “Satia Te Sanguine,” who claims that only “In the infinite spirit is [there] room / For the pulse of an infinite pain” (31-32). Yet the speaker of “Hesperia,” despite the credulous readings of some critics,²⁸ is no less dramatic and problematic than the speaker of “Dolores”—indeed, he may be that very speaker, at some later date. As for the freshly-wounded and naïve speaker of “Satia Te Sanguine,” who has realized that the woman he loves “do[es] not love me at all” (4), he may “hope” that his battered love “will someday die” (72), but most of the speakers in the volume realize that the greatest pain of love lies, not in its profound and permanent nature, but in the discovery of its impermanence. “Life treads down love in flying,” as the jaded speaker of “Rococo” remarks, “Time withers him at the root” (65-66). It is, after all, the very fact that all love “someday die[s]” that devastates the assurance of personal immortality provided by the mid-Victorian “cult of love.” Unlike the inexperienced speaker of “Satia Te Sanguine,” the “love-wearied” speaker of “Dolores” has absorbed the painful realization that “man dies, and love also dies” (“Félise” 172), and it is this belief that motivates his search for another, more secure, ground for his life, which he finds in his devotion to Sadeian “matter” rather than to Christian spirit, to Nature rather than to God, to a “cult of lust” rather than to a “cult of love,” and to an eternal “Lady of Pain” who is nevertheless less

²⁸ See e.g. *SRM* 67-83; Harrison, “Losses” 659-97.

“cruel” than a transient love.

For the speaker of “Dolores,” “love is more cruel than lust” because it always “dies” leaving us with nothing but “darkness” and “dust” (156, 57, 153-54):

Time turns the old days to derision,
Our loves into corpses or wives;
And marriage and death and division
Make barren our lives. (157-60)

The speaker of “Dolores” is one of those who, as the speaker of “Before Dawn” says, “See[s] Love, and so refuse[s] him” (78), because he is incapable of dealing with the fact that “love has no abiding, / But dies before the kiss” (71-72). (Appropriately enough, “Before Dawn” immediately precedes “Dolores” in the volume). Refusing love, he opts instead for Dolores, who, as Sadeian Nature, is an eternal principle underlying the “infinite [and seemingly random] changes” of things (61), the “material” essence of the material world. “Loves die,” says the adoring speaker, but “we know thee immortal, / Our Lady of Pain” (55-56):

Fruits fail and love dies and time ranges;
Thou art fed with perpetual breath,
And alive after infinite changes,
And fresh from the kisses of death. (57-60)

As with the speaker of the “Triumph,” the Sadeian speaker of “Dolores” abstracts an eternal, quasi-spiritual “deity” from the material world itself, but the former produces a “tender-hearted [...] perfect lover” (“Triumph” 297)—more or less consonant with the “heaven” he believes that he has lost (“Triumph” 7)—whereas the latter produces a “monstrous and fruitless,” “pallid / And poisonous queen” (“Dolores” 63-64). Not only is “material” Dolores the Sadeian inversion of the spiritual Virgin Mary (see *SR* 23), she is the result of the Sadeian’s pessimistic inversion of the optimistic Christian doctrine that

“all things must be right” (“Thus runs” 4), an inverted (im)moral principle that lies behind the appearances of material things.

As Swinburne remarks in *Notes*, the speaker of “Dolores” begins the process of abstraction and “spiritualization” that leads him to the worship “Our Lady of Pain” by reflecting upon one actual woman through “a lover’s half-shut eyes,” “decorat[ing her] with the name of goddess,” “transfigur[ing]” her into “the darker Venus, fed with burnt offering and blood sacrifice” (*SR* 23).²⁹ That this transformation occurs due to the speaker’s flight from love’s mortality is made clear in the first stanza, in which he nervously inquires what the passage of time will leave of his mortal lover, who (at this point in the poem) is perceived, as Camille Paglia remarks, solely as an atomized collection of body parts (*Sexual* 461):

Cold eyelids that hide like a jewel
Hard eyes that grow soft for an hour;
The heavy white limbs, and the cruel
Red mouth like a venomous flower;
When these are gone by with their glories,
What shall rest of thee then, what remain[?] (1-6)

In many ways, “Dolores” is the speaker’s attempt to provide a comforting answer to that question, and what begins as a parodic comparison between a probable prostitute and the Virgin Mary³⁰ quickly turns into an identification of his mortal lover with an eternal principle, to which he can subject himself body and soul. Thus, within two stanzas (41-56), he moves from addressing Dolores as a mortal woman, who was once a child and a “pure [...] maiden” (see 41-48), to hailing her as the “antique” and “immortal” daughter

²⁹ Swinburne had already imagined a similar transformation in “Faustine”—which was originally published in the *Spectator* in 1862, and served as a rehearsal for “Dolores”—in which the speaker daydreams, based upon a passing resemblance to “the elder Faustina [d. 141 CE],” that a “common and cheap” woman is an eternal principle of “evil,” reincarnated again and again in different forms (*SR* 25).

³⁰ Cf. Paglia, “Nature” 221-22.

of Libitina and Priapus (see 49-56).³¹ Unlike Swinburne's "indifferent nature of things" (SC 41), of which "the only certainty [...] is change" (Fricke 192), Dolores is an "eternal principle of evil and disorder" (Paglia, *Sexual* 462)—an inversion of the Christian God, who is an "eternal principle of goodness and order"—a "universal and atemporal constant" behind material flux (Fisch 10).³²

III.

In order to understand what follows, it is necessary to remember that both the Christian optimism of Swinburne's mid-Victorian contemporaries and the Sadeian pessimism of the speaker of "Dolores" depend upon certain hierarchical dualisms (i.e. soul/body, good/evil), at the same time as they attempt to absorb the devalued into the valued set of terms, effecting an apparent resolution of irresolvable conflict: "all things must be right" or "wrong," respectively. The same paradox animates the "dark marriages" presided over by Dolores, in her "chapels, unknown of the sun" (186), where "virtues are vices" (185) because the Sadeian *both* takes "evil" for "good" (i.e. enforces the inverted hierarchical dualism) *and* subordinates everything to, and derives it from, a purely "evil" ground (i.e. resolves apparent "good" into real "evil"). Thus, Dolores conjures the "divine contraries of life"³³—pain and pleasure (179), virtues and vices (185), even life and death (180)—and negates them through a parody of the biblically-enjoined conflation of "husband and wife" as "one flesh" (Gen. 2.24):³⁴ "To a tune that

³¹ As Haynes notes, Libitina "is the Roman goddess of burials, misidentified since antiquity with Venus," and Priapus is "the ithyphallic god of gardens," widely associated with lust (*PBH* 352n).

³² See also Praz 203.

³³ See Ch. 1, fn. 16.

³⁴ "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be

enthralls and entices, / They were wed, and the twain were as one” (187-88). Yet the apparent “peace after strife” achieved by Dolores’s matrimonial ministrations is far from neutral (178). Just as the “apocalyptic marriage” of Revelation 21.1, which serves as a model for Victorian love, consists in the “spiritual” transformation of the feminized Church in an all-consuming union with Christ the bridegroom,³⁵ becoming “one flesh” with Dolores is to become “flesh” *per se*, inverting the allegorical significance and gender roles of the Christian marriage contract, allowing the spirit(ual) to be absorbed into, and thus negated by, “one female center, primary and corrupt” (Paglia, *Sexual* 464). This subsumption of the spiritual by the “material,” and its origins in the disillusionment of the spiritual ideal of Victorian love, is strikingly illustrated by the encounter between “Our Lady of Pain” and Love himself that follows the “dark weddings.”

To appreciate the significance of Dolores’s violent encounter with Love (192-216), in which she “subdue[s] him” with her manifold tortures (207), it is necessary first to understand—although this fact has, thus far, gone unremarked by Swinburne scholars—that it draws heavily upon, while constituting an addition to, the classical literary tradition of the “punished Eros/Cupid.”³⁶ In the classical tradition, which resonates with the disillusioned speaker, Eros is often depicted as a “fickle,” “reckless,” and “heartless” boy-god (Ovid, *Art* 2.19;³⁷ Apollonius 4.109; Horace, *Odes* 2.8.14), who cares little for the physical and spiritual torment he causes human lovers, responding to

one flesh” (Gen. 2.24).

³⁵ This lopsided biblical union was reflected in Victorian matrimonial laws. See Ch. 2. fn. 65.

³⁶ This tradition is exemplified in works by Apuleius (97-98), Ausonius, Ovid (*Art* 1.19-30, *Cures* 699-702), and various poets of the *Greek Anthology* (5.179, 16.195-99; see fn. 39).

³⁷ All citations of Ovid’s *Amores*, *Art of Love*, and *Cures for Love* are from *The Erotic Poems* (trans. Green).

their pain with “mocking laughter” (Apollonius 3.72).³⁸ Despite his youthful good-looks, his voice “sweet as honey,” his “curly hair,” and his “Hands like a baby” (Moschus 9, 12-13), Eros, these writers repeatedly warn, is capable of inflicting great pain on those who fall under his irresistible power.³⁹ In “Dolores,” Love first appears, at a distance, watching the “black weddings” presided over by Dolores, with detached amusement:

Love listens, and paler than ashes,
Through his curls as the crown on them slips,
Lifts languid wet eyelids and lashes,
And laughs with insatiable lips. (193-96)

Love here displays the dewy, cherubic features that would suggest the spiritual purity that Swinburne’s contemporaries attributed to love, but he also, through his detached laughter, suggests the “fickleness” and “cruelty” of which the classical poets warned, and against which the disillusioned speaker of “Dolores” is in violent reaction.

Yet the “mocking laughter” of Love is soon silenced by Dolores, who “hush[es] him with heavy caresses” before binding and torturing him (197). In doing so, as Swinburne would have expected his educated peers to realize, Dolores is enacting the revenge fantasy of many classical poets, who imagined inflicting upon Love the pains they and others suffered at his “careless” and “cruel” hands. “Why laugh so sillily and snicker[?]” the poet Meleager asks Love, “I will soon make thee laugh to another tune. I will cut those rapid wings that show Desire the way, and chain thy feet with brazen fetters” (*Greek Anth.* 5.179). Similarly, Ausonius, in his “Crucifixion of Cupid,” imagines all of those famous women who suffered and died because of Love “hang[ing] him” on a tree, then abusing him “with torches” and “sharp needles”—before they

³⁸ See also Ovid, *Amores* 1.6.11-12.

³⁹ See e.g. Moschus; *Night Watch* 41-44.

ultimately release him, leaving him with memories that “even now [...] disturb his sleep” (60, 70, 77, 104). That most of the pain inflicted by Love results from the fact that he is “flighty” and “hard to pin down” (Ovid, *Art* 2.19-20) is reflected in the classical poets’ repeated desire to “bind him hand and foot” (Ausonius 60),⁴⁰ “subdue” him with “bridle and bit” (Ovid, *Art* 1.20), and even “clip his glimmering wings” (Ovid, *Cures* 701).⁴¹ In a similar manner, the speaker of Swinburne’s often anthologized “A Match” dreams wistfully that, if he and his lover could only become the “king of pain” and “the queen of pleasure” (41-42), they could then “hunt down love together” and enslave him, “Pluck[ing] out his flying-feather, / And teach[ing] his feet a measure, / And find[ing] his mouth a rein” (43-46).

While the speaker of “A Match,” like his classical precursors, can only dream of doing so, Dolores actually does chain, torture, and enslave Love:

Thou shalt blind his bright eyes though he wrestle,
 Thou shalt chain his light limbs though he strive;
 In his lips all thy serpents shall nestle,
 In his hands all thy cruelties thrive.
 In the daytime thy voice shall go through him,
 In his dreams he shall feel thee and ache;
 Thou shalt kindle by night and subdue him
 Asleep and awake. (201-08)

Not only does Dolores torture Love, but she makes him—or, rather, *reveals* him to be—a mere vehicle for the “tortures” that she herself inflicts upon humankind (79): “In *his* lips all *thy* serpents shall nestle, / In *his* hands all *thy* cruelties thrive” (emphases added).

Even the pain that “volatile” Love inflicts (Ovid, *Amores* 2.9B.26) derives, like everything else in the speaker’s Sadeian universe, from the eternal “evil” of Dolores.

⁴⁰ See also e.g. *Greek Anth.* 5.179, 16.195-99.

⁴¹ See also e.g. Apuleius 5.30; *Greek Anth.* 5.179.

Thus, in an echo of the preceding “dark weddings,” Dolores reduces the spiritual to the “material,” revealing “love” to be lust (in the Christian sense). It should be no surprise, though it is a jarring image, to find that when Love reappears unbound later in the poem, he is literally working for Dolores: his “Hair loosened and soiled in mid orgies / With kisses and wine,” he is busily forging “Fresh heads for his arrows and thine” (i.e. for the arrows that are yours, because he is your servant) (285-88). As his “soiling” in Dolores’s orgies—yet another reflection of the Sadeian devaluation of the flesh—suggests, the torture of Love destroys the illusion, as promoted by the “cult of love,” of his spiritual aloofness and complacency, forcefully foregrounding his true material origins. “When the sense in the spirit reposes,” enthuses the speaker, “Thou shalt quicken the soul through the blood” (209-12).

Dolores’s tortures, by “quicken[ing] the soul through the blood,” prevent the former from forgetting its dependence on and derivation from the latter, which is refused the “repose” that would nurture such spiritual illusions. While, as I have argued, Swinburne himself emphasizes precisely this relation of dependence—and, therefore, of resistance and limitation—by similar means (i.e. by emphasizing the notion and existence of pain), he also emphasizes the indifference of the material world, which is characterized by its unremitting flux, not only to our “well-doing and well-being” (*SC* 62), but to our moral distinctions *per se*. This world is reflected in the transience of Swinburnian love, and the unbearable pain resulting from it, both of which lead the speaker of “Dolores” to seek stability, and a bearable pain, in his dark goddess, who is an eternal principle of “absolute evil” that dis- and replaces the “God of nature,” while masquerading as the natural world itself. As such, it follows that Dolores’s inversion of the Christian relation

of dependence between soul and body—itsself based in the Sadeian pessimism that is little more than an inversion of Christian optimism—leads not, as in Swinburne’s neo-Romantic poetics, to the possibility of a renewed creative relationship between humankind and the material world—and, thereby, to maximal, if still delimited freedom of thought and action—but to the complete denial, via Sade’s eighteenth-century determinism, of the human “self-reliance, self-dependency, and self-respect” that Swinburne promotes elsewhere (*SC* 62).⁴²

IV.

For a Sadeian, like the speaker of “Dolores,” to “submit to” Nature (Sade, *Philosophy* 254) does not mean, as it does for Swinburne, the stoic and creatively-enabling acceptance of human limitation, but the complete determination of our thoughts and actions, the negation of all free-will.⁴³ “[All] the impulses” Nature “puts in us are the agents of her decrees,” says Bressac in *Justine*, and “man’s passions are but the means she employs to attain her ends” (Sade, *Justine* 520).⁴⁴ It is Sade’s belief that we are the “unthinking instruments of” Nature’s “caprices” (*Justine* 520) that leads Swinburne to label him a “fatalist” (*SL* 1.125), albeit, in a neat inversion of his optimistic Christian model, his irresistible fate “is evil, not good” (Phillips 97).⁴⁵ Being “wise and entirely logical in all her operations,” as Clairwil remarks in *Juliette*, Nature’s “designs regarding human beings are neither for us to fathom nor to thwart” (282). Likewise, Dolores’s devotees are “fain of [her],” in the sense of being “willing” to serve her, precisely

⁴² This quotation is from Swinburne’s “Matthew Arnold’s New Poems.”

⁴³ See Gear 175; Phillips 39.

⁴⁴ See also Sade, *Philosophy* 227, 230, 237, 260.

⁴⁵ See also Shattuck 277, 280-81.

because they are “fain of [her],” in the sense of being “compelled” into her service (102), and she chooses them in a parody of Christian baptism that turns divine providence into “material” predestination: her “chosen” are “Marked cross from the womb and perverse” (145-46), and the “sins” they “discover” are merely the “work” she has found for her “lover[s]” (73-75). In a Sadeian universe, there can be no true “crime,” since it would consist in “conflict[ing] with her [i.e. Nature’s] laws,” thwarting her “evil” intentions, which is impossible. “Crime is not in any sense real,” says Noircueil in *Juliette*, because there is “no thinkable way or means for outraging a Nature [...] eternally so superior to us” (171). Likewise, for the worshipper of Dolores, “a sin is a prayer” (130) not only because of his inversion of Christian values, but also because it is an act of ritual submission, an enthusiastic “willingness” to do what she has predetermined.

Given the disjuncture between Sade’s “daemonic mother nature” (Paglia, *Sexual* 235), who negates human free-will, and Swinburne’s “indifferent nature of things” (*SC* 41), which “still / Leaves human effort [some] scope” (Arnold, *Empedocles* 1.2.422-23), it makes sense that he constructs the speaker’s first vision of the “old world” (216-64)—in this case, Neronian Rome [c. 54-68 CE]—in which Dolores is the acknowledged ruler, in terms of an opposition between the natural world and its factitious Sadeian counterpart. Although Dolores is depicted initially rising from the sea—appearing as a parodic “re-risen” Aphrodite/Venus (223-24)—the gladiatorial arena where she receives the sacrifice of her enemies (i.e. Christians thrown to the lions) is, as Linda Dowling has observed (3), constructed in direct contrast to the natural world, which is represented, as almost always in Swinburne, by the sea. In those good old (because bad old) days, when her “will stung the world into strife,” the “blood” of her “foemen,” and innumerable gladiators, “made

fervent / A sand never moist from the main” (220, 229-30):

On sands by the storm never shaken,
Nor wet from the washing of tides;
Nor by foam of the waves overtaken,
Nor winds that the thunder bestrides [...]
.....
There the gladiator, pale for thy pleasure,
Drew bitter and perilous breath;
There torments laid hold on the treasure
Of limbs too delicious for death. (233-36, 241-44)

Its absorbent sands hauled from the beaches, but now wet only with human blood (229, 237), the gladiatorial arena’s cruelly orchestrated massacres—from which spectators, like the titular figure of “Faustine,” gain the sadistic pleasure of watching “the games men played with death, / Where death must win” (“Faustine” 65-66)⁴⁶—are a pale and hideous mockery of an indifferent “nature, red in tooth and claw.”

Of course, the frenzied Sadeian speaker is incapable of making this distinction, and he goes on to praise the man responsible for the bloody gladiatorial spectacles, for the horrific use of Christians as “live torches” to light his garden parties (see Tacitus 365)—“When thy gardens were lit with live torches” (“Dolores” 245)—and allegedly for the burning of Rome itself, while he gleefully watched and “fiddled,”⁴⁷ the infamous emperor Nero [37-68 CE]:

When, with flame all around him aspirant,
Stood flushed, as a harp-player stands,
The implacable beautiful tyrant,
Rose-crowned, having death in his hands;
And a sound as the sound of loud water

⁴⁶ According to the *Augustan History* [c. late fourth century CE], the elder Faustina [d. 141 CE] was criticized for “her excessive frankness and the levity of her way of life,” and upon her death “circus-games were voted to her” and “her statue” was set up “at all the circuses” (*Lives* 98, 100). The younger Faustina [d. 175 CE] had “a reputation for lack of chastity” (*Lives* 134). People alleged that, having “once seen gladiators pass by,” she “was inflamed by passion,” and that her son Commodus was not the child of Marcus Aurelius, but of one of the “gladiators [she chose] as paramours” (*Lives* 127).

⁴⁷ See Tacitus 362-63; Suetonius 230-31.

Smote far through the flight of the fires,
And mixed with the lightning of slaughter
A thunder of lyres. (249-56)

Yet while the speaker is enthusiastic at all of these horrors, the description of the arena's blood-soaked sand "Made smooth for the world and its lords" (238), and Dolores's overemphasized longing for the "old kingdoms of earth and the kings" (258), sit awkwardly with the "Song in Time of Order" and "Song in Time of Revolution." These poems, which appear shortly before "Dolores" in the volume, are the only overtly political pieces in *Poems and Ballads*, in which the avowedly republican poet—who was shortly to write the republican poems of *Songs Before Sunrise* [1871], which he dedicated to Joseph Mazzini—calls not only for the "priests" to be "scattered like chaff," but for "the rulers" to be "broken like reeds" ("Revolution" 6). Oddly, many critics who more-or-less identify Swinburne with the speaker of "Dolores" seem to have no trouble reconciling the gap between the speaker's lauding of "the implacable beautiful tyrant" (251) and the poet's hailing of Victor Hugo—in a poem that is only two poems before "Dolores" in the volume—for seeing "the tides of things / Close over heads of kings" ("Hugo" 25-26).

Rather than reflecting Swinburne's own perspective, the speaker's praise of Nero's tyranny derives directly from Sade's monstrous characters, who repeatedly voice their desire to imitate the deranged emperor. "O Nero, let me venerate thy memory," rhapsodizes Clairwil in *Juliette*, "Wert thou alive today, I would adore thee as a god, and to me thou wilt be an eternal model and an inspiration" (954).⁴⁸ While Dowling, who

⁴⁸ See also Sade, *Juliette* 725, 758.

does not distinguish adequately between the speaker and the poet,⁴⁹ argues that Swinburne views Nero's grotesque spectacles as a decadent triumph of art over nature (3), she fails to consider that, while the spectacles are indeed figured as unnatural, the speaker understands the tyrant himself to be a fellow devotee of Dolores, who represents Sadeian Nature itself. Thus Nero is both the people's "lord" and Dolores's "servant" (231). As "a goddess, the pulse of" Dolores's "passion / Smote kings as they revelled in Rome," and they in turn "smote" the Roman people in her name (221-22, 231). The Sadeian Nero's debaucheries and massacres, like the "sins" of the speaker, are merely examples of his submissive "willingness" to do Dolores's "work." "Who can deny," challenges Noirceuil in *Juliette*, "that Nero's gesture, when he poisoned [his mother] Agrippina, was one of the effects of the self-same laws [of Nature], as rigidly everlasting as that other law whereby the wolf devours the lamb?" (172).⁵⁰ Of course, as Swinburne remarks elsewhere, the Sadeian Nero is not the actual Nero, and his flamboyant (if reprehensible) pagan imagination, unhindered by over 1,000 years of Christian asceticism, would fall outside the "perverse spiritualism" of the Sadeian worldview: "You a Roman of the later empire?" he sneers at Sade, "Nero knows nothing of you" (*SL* 1.57).

For the Sadeian speaker, however, men like Nero are "simply the instrument[s] of" Nature's "intentions" (Sade, *Juliette* 283). Such abject slavery is incompatible with human creativity in Swinburne's neo-Romantic sense, which requires an active engagement with the material world, and the desire to "keep fast hold of" whatever

⁴⁹ Although Dowling does note that the speaker's "obsessed and savage perspective" should provide "an explanatory frame" for the portrait of Nero, she also claims that no "obvious moral judgement" is "being" passed upon the latter, and that Swinburne himself "believed Nero's gift in torture was for a stunning economy of means" (3).

⁵⁰ See also Sade, *Nouvelle* 6.339.

“liberty to think and act is left us,” even as we “agree to do without” what “we cannot have” (CW 184).⁵¹ As Swinburne undoubtedly knew, the classical sources, far from sharing the Sadeian speaker’s high estimation of Nero’s artistic brilliance, depict the emperor as a “self-deluded [...] poet” (Dowling 3) who could only dream of “singing to the lyre like a professional” (Tacitus 320). According to Tacitus, Nero’s poems “lack[ed] vigour” and “inspiration” (321), and Suetonius claims that “his [singing] voice was [...] feeble and husky,” leading tormented listeners to “sham death” and be even “carried away for burial” (218, 220). In “Dolores,” Nero’s “music,” like his bloody gladiatorial spectacles, mocks the destructive force of the indifferent natural world—represented, we must remember, by the sea—just as he mocks the true creative artist, and Swinburne’s characteristic exploitation of the simile’s dual capacity to identify *and* differentiate allows him to imply this, while still maintaining the reverent attitude of the speaker towards the “implacable beautiful tyrant”: standing “flushed, *as* a harp-player stands,” Nero responds to the great fire, which he supposedly staged, by producing “a sound *as* the sound of loud water” (i.e. one which imitates both the rushing waves of the ocean, and the rolling thunder of an approaching rainstorm), thus mixing “with the lightning of slaughter / A thunder of lyres” (253-56, emphases added).

⁵¹ These lines are uttered by Lady Midhurst in *Love’s Cross Currents*, which was originally published as *A Year’s Letters* [1877]. In a letter of 1866 to W. M. Rossetti, Swinburne remarks that the novel “stands or falls by Lady Midhurst,” and explicitly identifies himself with her: “From the Galilean or gallows-worshipping point of view, I am aware that *she and it* [i.e. the novel] *and I* must be altogether condemnable, but we do not appeal to that tribunal” (SL 1.158, emphasis added).

V.

After his ecstatic Sadeian fantasy of Neronian Rome, when “the world was a steed for” Dolores’s “rein” (246), the speaker logically turns to lamenting the present-day “world of new things” (260), in which Dolores, and the more licentious gods of the “old world,” have been overthrown in favour of the many varieties of ascetic Christianity:

What ailed us, O gods, to desert you
For creeds that refuse and restrain?
Come down and redeem us from virtue,
Our Lady of Pain. (277-80)

Yet, though the speaker bemoans that “all men [now] belie” her (163), he also claims that Dolores’s “chosen” worshippers are capable of seeing past her present-day degradation, past her “obscurity” and “namelessness” (283), to recognize her true divinity:

Thy skin changes country and colour,
And shrivels or swells to a snake’s.
Let it brighten and bloat and grow duller,
We know it, the flames and the flakes. (289-92)

Despite the “infinite changes” of her many historical incarnations (59), Dolores’s devotees can “read” her quasi-spiritual essence through the long-lingering “marks” left by her pre-Christian lovers, in their sadomasochistic communion(s) with her:

As of old when the world’s heart was lighter,
Through thy garments the grace of thee glows,
The white wealth of thy body made whiter
By the blushes of amorous blows,
And seamed with sharp lips and fierce fingers,
And branded by kisses that bruise;
When all shall be gone that now lingers,
Ah, what shall we lose? (265-72)

“[S]mitten and bitten” with “Red brands” (293), Dolores herself functions as a text that parallels the “leaves” with her “litanies written” (295). Bodying forth her own eternal

essence, Dolores assures that her “chosen” will always “know” her (292), whatever changes of fortune time brings to her.

Yet, although the speaker introduces it in order to figure the quasi-spiritual priority of Dolores to the “changes of [material] things” (“Hymn” 69)—the fact that, in the face of great historical and material changes, she retains an identifiable essence—the “sado-textual” metaphor subtly undermines his intentions, suggesting that the essence of his Sadeian goddess is dependent upon the sadomasochistic activities of her mortal and long-dead “lovers,” whose “sharp lips and fierce fingers” once imprinted her with the “blushes,” “bruises,” “brands,” and “bites” that still constitute her legible “meaning” for the present-day speaker and his fellow worshippers (268-70, 293). Although the infatuated Sadeian speaker never allows himself to fully register the fact, his introduction here of the sado-textual metaphor unintentionally opens the possibility, which will haunt the remainder of the poem, and the entire volume, of a creative interaction between humanity and the material world. Just as her essence is dependent upon her human lovers, it is also as subject to the “changes of [material] things” as those lovers. After all, real “bruises” fade and real “bites” heal, and the speaker, although he never seems fully-conscious of the fact, fears that the “meaning(s)” figured in these sado-textual terms, though they are meant to be eternal, will be equally transient: “When all shall be gone that now lingers, / Ah, what shall we lose?” (271-72). These last lines deliberately recall the speaker’s initial fears of the transience of his (still mortal) lover’s material charms—“When these are gone by with their glories, / What shall rest of thee then, what remain[?]” (5-6)—which led to his deification of Dolores in the first place, except that here they ironically undermine the quasi-spiritual security he thought he had guaranteed

in that very act.

In this haunting textual echo, the speaker of “Dolores” is confronted, in the fading traces of his goddess’s past lovers, with the deadening and loss of “meaning” consequent upon any ascetic attempt—whether the straightforward asceticism of Christianity, or the inverted asceticism of Sade—to separate the eternal “soul” from the transitory “body,” however they are denominated, thus securing the former behind the ceaseless flux of the material world. While Dolores’s “limbs are as melodies *yet*” (274, emphasis added), the “meaning(s)” creatively “imprinted” upon her by her past lovers, in their sadomasochistic acts of worship, will eventually and inevitably vanish unless her current worshippers, re-imprint and, in the process, necessarily revise them. That is to say, if they are not to “lose” her, Dolores’s present-day worshippers must become her new lovers—Swinburnian lovers. But, given his Sadeian worldview, the speaker of “Dolores” is in no position to become such a lover, and, despite his early claims of indulgence in “all the joys of the flesh” (15), will always remain alienated from true interaction with the material world, which he elevates into an essentially “evil,” unchanging, and inapproachable deity. While, from Swinburne’s neo-Romantic perspective, sexual activity generally aligns with human creativity, the “barren delights” of the Sadeian orgy are paradoxically representative of the creative impotence that characterizes Dolores’s devotees, as much as it does any Christian ascetic. Appropriately enough, in his post-*Justine* letter to Milnes, Swinburne remarks that “Stylites de Sade[’s]” works, despite his reputation as the “Arch-Professor of the Ithyphallic Science,” and the fact that they are filled with “all manner of [sexual] abominations,” are “*fade* [dull] after all—flat, flaccid, impotent, misshapen, hung awry” (*SL* 1. 57, 58, 56).

It is in light of the “impotence” of Dolores’s worshippers—from Sade’s servile Nero to the present-day speaker himself—that the speaker produces a second fantasy of the “old world” (297-368), attempting, albeit without full comprehension of his predicament, to (re-)envision a truly pre-Christian—and thus, though he himself does not know it, pre-Sadeian—time when Dolores had interactive “lovers” rather than simply passive and slavish worshippers:

On thy bosom though many a kiss be,
There are none such as knew it of old.
Was it Alciphron once or Arisbe,
Male ringlets or feminine gold,
That thy lips met with under the statue,
Whence a look shot out sharp after thieves
From the eyes of the garden-god at you
Across the fig-leaves? (297-304)

Admitting that there “are [now] none such as knew” Dolores “of old,” the speaker is then tormented with a briefly-glimpsed, and almost immediately lost, vision of the garden of Priapus (the garden-god)—a commonplace, though more literary than literal, “setting” for ancient Roman poetry of a bawdy and comic nature (see Richlin)—which forms an imagination- and life-affirming counterpoint to the crushing and anti-imaginative servitude of the Sadeian gladiatorial arena, and opposes the delusional imperial tyrant, who ludicrously fancies himself an artist, to the “last poet who flourished at Rome, before the extinction of the republic” (Landor 179),⁵² and the “only Latin poet” Swinburne “ever thoroughly loved,” Gaius Valerius Catullus (*UL* 3.72).

⁵² See also Sellar 399.

VI.⁵³

As we have seen, the speaker's second vision of the "old world" (297-368), opens with the image of Dolores kissing her lovers "of old" "under the statue" of Priapus, who is identified earlier in the poem as her father (51-52). In order to understand what follows, it is important to know, as Swinburne's classically-educated contemporaries would have known, that Priapus is called the "garden-god" due to the fact that statues of him were placed in gardens, where he functioned as both "god procreator," who ensured the fertility of plant and animal life—according to some sources, he was even used to deflower new brides, in the hopes of increased fertility⁵⁴—and "god protector," who warded off both evil spirits and thieves with the threat of penetration by his gigantic penis (Parker, "Priapea" 30). Roman poets often composed short poems dedicated to Priapus, called *priapea*, which (in theory, if not practice) were meant to be affixed to statues of the deity, and served as the garden-god's voice (Richlin 121)—thus he promoted not only biological, but creative productivity. In these scabrous little poems, which Swinburne almost certainly knew in the original Latin, and the corpus of which his friend Sir Richard Burton would much later pseudonymously translate—under the title *Priapeia, sive diversorum poetarum in Priapum lusus; or, Sportive Epigrams on Priapus by divers poets in English verse and prose* [1890]⁵⁵—the god himself repeatedly describes his functions: "If boy, or man, or woman steals I hump / (in converse order) pussy, head, and

⁵³ Much of the material in sections VI and VII was previously published in my "Will he rise and recover[?]: Catullus, Castration, and Censorship in Swinburne's 'Dolores'" [*Victorian Poetry* 47 (2009): 747-58], and is reproduced here with the kind permission of West Virginia University Press.

⁵⁴ See Knight 199-200; O'Connor 24.

⁵⁵ There is no consensus concerning either the authorship or the date of the collection known simply as the *Priapea* (see Richlin 141-43). Burton's translation has been reprinted, without the Latin text, as *Priapeia* (Ware: Wordsworth, 1995).

rump” (*Priapus* 22).⁵⁶ Although Swinburne mockingly compares the “flaccid” and “impotent” Sade to the often comically tumescent, and always eager to penetrate, figure of Priapus,⁵⁷ he remarks, in his “sincere” letter to Milnes, that, in Sade’s hands, Priapus “turns into a mere fig tree stump” (*SL* 1.57).

In his brief appearance in “Dolores,” however, the garden-god is much more than “a mere fig tree stump.” Just as Dolores, in the Sadeian’s inverted vision, has taken on the role occupied by the Virgin Mary (the intercessor), so Priapus displaces God the father, watching over his own “Garden of Eden,”⁵⁸ while wielding his considerably-different “rod.” In a letter of 1872 to George Powell, Swinburne refers impishly to “He to whom is given the rod which bears rule over the garden of Eden,” directing the reader to see “Dolores” and its sister-poem “Faustine” for clarification (*SL* 2.179). According to the speaker, the lascivious and cruel Faustine is “Not godless, for you serve one God, / The Lampsacene”—Priapus’s cult centre was located in Lampsacus, in Asia Minor, making him “the Lampsacene” (*PBH* 342n, 352n)—“Who metes the gardens with his rod; / Your lord, Faustine” (“Faustine” 145-48). While, in Catholic symbolism, Mary is conventionally a “chaste walled garden” (Paglia, *Sexual* 462), Dolores is a “garden where all men may dwell” (18), and her divine father watches over a garden that is holy but far from pure. “This is the shrine of a lecherous god,” he announces in the *Priapea*, “So enter do, and have no fear: / Straight from a brothel you can come here” (*Priapea* 14). Yet, unlike the Sadeian Dolores, who is consistently described as “barren” and “sterile” (62, 71), her pagan father—who was favoured by those seeking either fertility or restored

⁵⁶ I have employed several different translations of the *Priapea*. In order to eliminate confusion, the *Priapea* are cited by the shortened title of the translation and the number of the poem.

⁵⁷ See e.g. *SL* 1.66, 75, 312.

⁵⁸ See Gen. 1-3.

sexual potency⁵⁹—glories in the fertile bounty of his garden, piles of which lie heaped before him as an offering: “red corn,” “green olives,” “vine leaves,” etc. (313-18).⁶⁰

Given the erotic metaphor grounding Swinburne’s neo-Romantic poetics, the fertile and “obscene area” of Priapus’s garden (Richlin 9), in which the pre-Christian Dolores, with her mortal lovers of both sexes, becomes a believably pagan love-goddess, represents the lost potential for human creativity in the post-Christian (and post-Sadeian) world with its violent body-soul hierarchy. It is the fall from this pre-Christian “Eden” that is reflected in the mysterious desecration of Priapus that seems to follow upon the description of his lavish offerings:

What broke off the garlands that girt you?
What sundered you spirit and clay?
Weak sins yet alive are as virtue
To the strength of the sins of that day. (321-24)

While Priapus was ritually decked by both men and women with “crowns of his garden,”⁶¹ he is never addressed directly by the speaker, which suggests that these lines, despite their obvious applicability to Priapus, might refer to Dolores herself, who is the addressee of the poem, and earlier appears garlanded with roses that “crown and caress thee and chain” (70). The ambiguity here is likely functional, as it allows the speaker to suggest the simultaneous degradation of both father and daughter with one ascetic stroke that “sundered [...] spirit and clay,” thereby separating Dolores from her creative and interactive lovers “of old,” and turning her into a “fallen goddess”—as Swinburne, in

⁵⁹ See O’Connor 23-25; 29-30.

⁶⁰ By emphasizing Priapus’s fertility-related functions, Swinburne is following in the footsteps of Richard Payne Knight who sought to counteract the common “degradation” of the god to the level of a mere symbol of “promiscuous vice” (Knight 199). “Before the advent of Knight[’s]” *Discourse on the Worship of Priapus* [1786], “Priapus had been sterile, grotesque and comic [...] a lascivious and obscene little clown” (Rousseau 134). As Amy Richlin remarks, the *Priapea* itself contains a mixture of both the serious and the comic Priapus (see 58-59, 124-25).

⁶¹ See O’Connor 25.

Notes on Poems and Reviews, describes the tainted, guilt-inducing, and literally subterranean “medieval Venus” of “*Laus Veneris*”—“grown diabolic” and dolorous “among [later Christian] ages that would not accept her as divine” (*SR* 26).

Given that “the garlands that girt” Priapus were hung upon “the enormous phallus of the idol” (Davenport 10),⁶² Swinburne reinforces the anti-erotic, and thus anti-(pro)creative dimensions of what has happened by strongly suggesting that more than flowers have been “broke[n] off” the “honest garden-god” (*SR* 71).⁶³ Such suggestions are bolstered by the subsequent (albeit unnamed) introduction of Cybele (*PBH* 353n), the Great Mother or Mother of the Gods, whose cult was centred near Mount Dindymus, was also associated with Mount Ida in Phrygia, and is often depicted with her chariot-drawing lions:

From the midmost of Ida, from shady
Recesses that murmur at morn,
They have brought and baptized her, Our Lady,
A goddess new-born.
.....
Out of Dindymus heavily laden
Her lions draw bound and unfed
A mother, a mortal, a maiden,
A queen over death and the dead. (333-36, 345-38)

Cybele functions as an aggressively ascetic rival to Dolores, and to everything that her father—and, indeed, all of the “old gods”—stood for:

She hath wasted with fire thine high places,
She hath hidden and marred and made sad
The fair limbs of the Loves, the fair faces
Of gods that were goodly and glad. (353-56)

As Swinburne would have expected his educated readers to know, Cybele’s priests, the

⁶² See also O’Connor 25.

⁶³ This phrase is from *Under the Microscope* [1872], where Swinburne threatens Buchanan with Priapic punishment for his anonymous attack in “The Fleshly School of Poetry” [1871].

galli, carried away by “their loud ululations and wild dances,” accompanied by the ““entrancing rhythms’ [of] ‘pipe[s] and tambourine[s],” “imitated” the goddess’s consort “Attis [or Atys], performing the [ritual] emasculation” of themselves, removing both penis and testicles, “with the aid of such instruments as a sharp stone (*saxo acuto*), a potsherd (*testa samia*) or a knife” (Vermaseren 96).⁶⁴

Since the “fallen” (i.e. post-Christian, Sadeian) Dolores functions as a “satanically inverted Virgin Mary” (*SRM* 48), it is unsurprising to find her pre-fall rival, herself paradoxically both “A mother” and “a maiden,” blurring into the Virgin Mary:

She is cold, and her habit is lowly,
Her temple of branches and sods;
Most fruitful and virginal, holy,
A mother of gods. (349-52)

To those familiar with the period, and with the history of the early Church, Swinburne’s blurring of these figures would recall the “fascinating proximity between” the practices of Cybele’s devotees and the “otherwise very Christian preoccupations” of the early Church, which included strict prohibitions on sexual activity that sometimes resulted in self-castration as a preventative or self-punitive measure, as in the famous case of Origen (Borgeaud 96). Although it became standard Church teaching that such biblical passages were metaphorical, many early Christians took Jesus literally when he said that “there be eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake. He that is able to receive *it*, let him receive *it*” (Matt. 19.12).⁶⁵ Many were willing to “receive [or remove] it,” and “castration was both a potential and sometimes actually chosen solution

⁶⁴ See also Borgeaud 43. In the *Priapea*, Priapus even jokes nervously about losing his member with a punning reference to Cybele’s priests: after being castrated, “I should no longer myself think to call / A Lampsacus man, for I’d be a Gaul” (i.e. a “gallus,” an eunuch) (*Priapea* 55).

⁶⁵ For the biblical passages that early Christians used to justify the practice of self-castration, see Matt. 19.11-12, 5.27-30, 18.8-9; Mark 9.43-47.

for a penitent Christian and an operation regularly practiced by physicians of the period” (Borgeaud 96).⁶⁶ In fact, self-castration was common enough among early Christians that the Church explicitly forbid it at the Council of Nicaea in 325 (Taylor, G. 141). Augustine, who was much exercised in distinguishing between the cults of Cybele and Christ, even records that one devotee of Cybele, attempting to defend himself from hostile Christians, exclaimed “the one in the Phrygian cap [i.e. Attis] is also a Christian” (qtd. in Vermaseren 180).

For Swinburne, and as subsequent scholarship has confirmed, the introduction of Cybele into republican Rome [c. 204 BCE] foreshadowed the “dark ages” of medieval Christian worship, and her well-established presence eased the later introduction of Christianity, with its extremes of asceticism and its virgin mother, into the heart of imperial Rome. It is no coincidence that in “many places where Cybele was worshipped shrines to the Virgin Mary have arisen” (Vermaseren 182). For Swinburne, as we saw in the “Hymn,” the rise of Christianity, as foreshadowed here by the worship of Cybele, resulted in the collapse of classical civilization, with its relatively liberal attitudes toward the human body and sexuality, and its consequent promotion of creative potency:

Cry aloud; for the old world is broken:
Cry out; for the Phrygian [i.e. the worshipper of Cybele] is priest,
And rears not the bountiful token
And spreads not the fatherly feast. (329-32)

Of course the Phrygian cannot “rear the bountiful token” nor “spread the fatherly feast” because he has castrated himself in devotion to his goddess, much as the early Christians would later castrate themselves “for the kingdom of heaven’s sake.” Swinburne sees the

⁶⁶ See also Taylor, G. 69-73. For more on the similarity between early Christian practices and Cybele worship, see Taylor, G. 186, 191-92; Vermaseren 180.

continued celibacy of Catholic priests as a survival from early Christianity, and demonstrates his awareness of the buried historical links between Cybele and Mary, with their “priests that are pure” (362), in his comments on “Dolores” in *Notes*: “Our Lady of Pain” is “no Virgin, and unblessed of men; no mother of the Gods or God; no Cybele, served by sexless priests or monks, adored of Origin or of Atys; no likeness of her in Dindymus or Loreto” (*SR* 23). Yet Swinburne’s defence is also somewhat disingenuous, since both “Our Lady” Cybele-Mary and the Sadeian “Lady of Pain” are products of the soul-body hierarchy, and have similarly disastrous effects on human creativity. After all, according to Swinburne, Sade, with his works “impotent, misshapen, [and] hung awry,” is “exactly a typical monk” in “laborious service of his ‘ideal’” (*SL* 1.58).

VII.

In order to fully appreciate the implied criticism of these negative effects in “Dolores,” it is necessary first to recognize and then to grasp the complex series of allusions to Catullus woven throughout this second vision of the “old world.” Swinburne “is the Victorian poet who is most obviously devoted to Catullus” (Arkins 465),⁶⁷ and he often positions the ancient poet “as a kind of Roman Gautier, a poet of art for art’s sake” (Ridenour 57), an ally in his own battle against “the prurient prudery and virulent virtue” of the same mid-Victorian reviewers who explicitly criticized *Poems and Ballads* for its “Catullan” fleshliness (*SR* 19). “Mr. Swinburne’s last volume of poems,” remarked one anonymous reviewer, “though Catullus need not have blushed for some, will not suit our present civilization” (“Our Library Table” 236). Another irate reviewer was prompted to

⁶⁷ Swinburne frequently alludes to and imitates Catullus in his works. See e.g. “Hendecasyllabics,” “Ave Atque Vale” [1868/1878], “Ad Catullum” [1878], and “To Catullus” [1883].

ask (and answer): “Should we tolerate a Catullus now, however exquisitely he hymned his uncongenial objects of worship? No” (“Algernon” 372). And, in a premonition of the “Fleshly School” scandal to come in 1871, Robert Buchanan, in a piece entitled “Immorality in Authorship” [1866], observed that “the ‘lepidum novum libellum’ [neat new booklet]”⁶⁸ of Catullus “seems to me really an immoral work, and I wish that the dry pumice-stone had rubbed out at least half of the poems”: “If an Englishman to-day were to write like Catullus [...] we should hound him from our libraries” (292, 297).

The only explicit reference to Catullus in the text of “Dolores” equates “loving” and “singing,” thus constituting an overt link between sexual repression, resulting from the ascetic soul-body hierarchy, and the impoverishment of our creative capacities: “Old poets outsing and outlove us,” complains the speaker, “And Catullus makes mouths at our speech” (339-40). The image here is functionally ambiguous, as “making mouths” may suggest that Catullus has been silenced, or that he is mocking our feeble, “fleshless” attempts at love poetry. By simply placing this reference to Catullus immediately before Cybele’s leonine procession into the poem (345), Swinburne alludes—for those educated critics who clearly noted such allusions—to Catullus 63,⁶⁹ which tells the gruesome story of Attis (or Atys), a Greek youth who “through excessive hatred of Venus,” and goaded to “raving madness” by Cybele, “[tears] off with a sharp flint the burden of his groin” (Catullus 63.17, 4-5). “Am I to be a Maenad, half me, a male unmanned,” Attis laments after coming back to his senses, “Now what I’ve done appals me; I’m sorry for it now”

⁶⁸ Buchanan is quoting from Catullus 1: “Whom do I give a neat new booklet / Polished up lately with dry pumice?” (1-2). This is the same poem Swinburne alluded to when his original publisher (Moxon) withdrew *Poems and Ballads* due to threats of prosecution: “Of course I shall take Atalanta etc. out of his villainous hands—but then to whom (as Catullus says) shall I give them?” (SL1.171).

⁶⁹ It is worth noting that when Jack Lindsay later translated Catullus 63 in *The Poetry of Gaius Catullus* [1929], he assumed his readers’ familiarity with this allusion and chose to use the meter and stanza form of “Dolores.”

(Catullus 63.69, 73). While it is “too little, too late” for Attis, Catullus seems to fear that Cybele may drive him to similarly irreparable actions and adds a plea to the goddess in his own voice: “Far from my house be all that frenzy of yours, O Queen. / Drive others to elation, drive others raving mad!” (Catullus 63.92-93). Yet, in “Dolores,” Swinburne uses an extended sequence of Catullan allusions—to which the explicit references, both in and adjacent to the text, should alert the sensitive reader—in order to suggest unnervingly that the poet’s desperate pleas may have functioned prophetically rather than prophylactically.

Returning to the moment of Priapus’s “sunder[ing ...] spirit and clay” (321-28), which occurs shortly before the overt invocation of Catullus (339-44), we can see that the functional ambiguity noted earlier, which conflated the downfall of Priapus with the degradation of his daughter, allows the latter, metamorphic demon that she is, to haunt the figure of Ipsithilla, who suddenly appears to attend to a mysteriously injured “lover”:

For dried is the blood of thy lover,
 Ipsithilla, contracted the vein;
 Cry aloud, ‘Will he rise and recover,
 Our Lady of Pain?’ (325-28)

As Swinburne may have expected his more astute readers to remember, Ipsithilla (or Ipsitilla)⁷⁰ is the name of a girl, most likely a prostitute, addressed in Catullus 32 (*PBH* 352n), where he invites her to come over for “Nine uninterrupted functions,” since he “lie[s] back after a large lunch / Boring holes in tunic and cloak” (8, 10-11). Yet, Catullus’s promise of abundant venereal delights is “cut short,” and the stanza resolves itself into gruesome parallel tableaux. Dolores ministers to her “broken” father,

⁷⁰ In F. G. Doering’s edition [1788; 2nd ed. 1834], as in Swinburne’s poem, the name is spelled “Ipsithilla.” In Lee’s modern edition, however, the name is spelled “Ipsitilla.”

Priapus—who has lost his most significant member—and Ipsithilla ministers to her “broken” lover, Catullus—whose excessive blood-loss is more than understandable—and the speaker can only pray that they will “rise again.” Unfortunately, however, since prayers of that delicate nature are traditionally addressed to Priapus, now himself part of the ruins of the “old world,” it does not seem likely that their prayers will be answered, and the speaker resumes his mourning, albeit with a somewhat better sense of what has been lost: “Cry aloud; for the old world is broken [...]” (329).

While the “castratory” imposition of the soul-body hierarchy results in the creative enervation of future generations, the speaker’s vision of the injured Catullus lying in a pool of his own dried blood, also conjures the age-old association of castration and censorship. The association between censorship and castration was, as one might expect, a favourite with Swinburne himself, and he invokes it in a letter of 1870, in which he responds to the suggestion that he “edit” his verses prior to publication. Bringing the figure more up-to-date by substituting the then still-existent castrati of the Vatican for the *galli* of Cybele, Swinburne rages at the suggestion that he “submit a child of my begetting to the knife of castration even to enable it to sing in the Sistine Chapel” (*SL* 2.124).⁷¹ While one mid-Victorian critic thought that “an expurgated edition of” *Poems and Ballads* “would be a significantly emasculated one” (“Mr. Swinburne’s Poems” 308), most felt no such compunction about “castrating” the volume in this manner.⁷² Even Swinburne’s personal and none-too-prudish literary friends, most notably George Meredith and D. G. Rossetti (*SL* 1.192), suggested in advance that he “play savagely with

⁷¹ There may also be an echo of the paradoxically orgiastic rituals of the *galli* in Swinburne’s denunciation of present-day literary “virtue” in *Under the Microscope*: “To wipe off the froth of falsehood from the foaming lips of inebriated virtue, when fresh from the sexless orgies of morality and reeling from the delirious riot of religion, may doubtless be a charitable office” (*SR* 51).

⁷² See e.g. “Our Weekly Gossip,” 2034 (1866): 501; “Swinburne’s Folly” 10; Skelton 641.

a knife among the proofs for the sake of your fame” (Meredith, *Letters* 1.329-30). Their fears seemed justified when, in the aftermath of the volume’s publication, it was not merely Swinburne’s fame but his life that was threatened when one irate letter-writer suggested that, if the poet did not take the knife to the poems, it would be taken to the poet himself. “One anonymous letter,” wrote Swinburne in 1867, “threatened me, if I did not suppress my book within six weeks from that date, with castration. The writer, ‘when I least expected, would waylay me, slip my head in a bag, and remove the obnoxious organs; he had seen his gamekeeper do it with cats’” (*SL* 1.224).

Fully exploiting this nexus of cultural associations, Swinburne cleverly extends his intertextual commentary on censorship in “Dolores” with an easily-overlooked editorial reference to Catullus 18, which draws the exceptionally curious reader into an interactive demonstration of the “castratory” effects of the soul-body dualism. The first reference to Catullus in “Dolores” is not in the body of the text, but rather in the form of an authorial footnote, identified as two lines from Catullus 18, appended to the declaration that “love was the pearl of his [i.e. Priapus’s] oyster” (307) (as translated by Kenneth Haynes): “for in its cities the coast of the Hellespont, more oysterous [*sic*] than most, honours you [i.e. Priapus] particularly” (*PBH* 132n, 352n). The annotation is somewhat confusing since, apart from the sexualized image of the “oyster,” there is little discernable connection between the line and the footnote, and Swinburne rarely employs footnotes in the volume, except where there is an obvious debt—as in his careful translations and transpositions of Aeschylus and Epictetus into his own writing—or an amusing joke to be had, as in the case of the faux medieval French narrative he composed

for “The Leper.”⁷³ For the modern reader, the footnote in “Dolores” is made more mysterious by the fact that current editions of Catullus do not contain poems 18, 19, or 20, but skip directly from 17 to 21. With a little bit of research, however, the modern reader would discover what Swinburne, and some of his classically-educated mid-Victorian readers, undoubtedly already knew: Catullus 18 to 20 were *priapea*, poems dedicated to Priapus, and they were excised from the official corpus by Karl Lachmann in 1829, leaving “the anomalous gap between 17 and 21 that is still found in modern editions” (Gaisser 167).⁷⁴

While some mid-Victorian readers may have consulted a pre-Lachmann edition of Catullus,⁷⁵ Swinburne knew that he was sending some of the college-aged men who so eagerly consumed his verses, and all of his future readers, on an illustrative “wild goose chase.” Arousing his curious young readers with the promise of something even more scandalous, Swinburne provokes them to trace an allusion to Priapus and his magnificent member, only to leave them facing an “anomalous gap” in the Catullan corpus.⁷⁶ Yet, if

⁷³ The allusion to Aeschylus is in “Phaedra” (*PBH* 26n, 328n). The allusion to Epictetus is in the “Hymn” (61n, 335n). For the faux medieval French narrative he composed for “The Leper,” see *PBH* 100n, 345-46n. Swinburne also inserted a footnote in “A Christmas Carol,” which points out its inspiration in D. G. Rossetti’s drawing (or watercolour) of the same name (*PBH* 173n, 368n).

⁷⁴ These *priapea* were added to the Catullan corpus in 1554 by a French humanist named Marc-Antoine de Muret, who was intrigued by the assertion of Terentianus Maurus (a second century grammarian) that Catullus had written poems dedicated to the fertility god. Maurus identified the verses that became number 18 as one such poem, and Muret added numbers 19 and 20. All of these *priapea* were regularly reprinted in editions of Catullus until Lachmann clipped the garden god from his place in 1829. “After about 1829, editions of Catullus [usually] excluded at least two” of the three poems (Catullus, *Odi* 19n), with poem 18 being the most likely candidate for preservation since it is “certainly a genuine fragment” (Lee xi). The influential edition of Robinson Ellis (1867; 2nd ed., 1878), which was published the year after *Poems and Ballads* and quickly became the standard British reading-text of Catullus, follows Lachmann in excluding poems 18-20 from the corpus proper, although poem 18 is retained in an appendix.

⁷⁵ Until Ellis’s edition (see fn. 74), Doering’s edition (1788, 2nd ed. 1834) was the standard reading text of Catullus in use in Britain (Ellis vii).

⁷⁶ It should be noted, as Swinburne himself would have certainly known, that Catullus 18-20 were excised on grounds of inauthenticity, not sexual censorship. In fact, in a letter of 1892, Swinburne implicitly praises Ellis’s edition of Catullus, which does not include 18-20 in the corpus proper (*SL* 6.43; see fn. 74). Given Swinburne’s frequent playful deployment of the notion of “castration,” however, it would have been

the reader consulted a pre-Lachmann edition of Catullus—an easily-accomplished chore at the time—he or she would find that poems 19 and 20, which consist of the garden-god describing his copious offerings, sound strikingly similar to the stanza immediately following that with the footnote to Catullus 18:

In Spring I get a colored wreath
of early blooms and tender greens;
then violets and milk-white poppies,
pale gourds and sweetly fragrant apples;
then red grapes reared in tendril shade. (Catullus 19.10-14)⁷⁷

.....
I get in spring a colored wreath,
I get in summer reddened grain,
I get the sweet, the green-vined grape,
I get the frost-dried fallen olive. (Catullus 20.6-9)⁷⁸

.....
In spring he had crowns of his garden,
 Red corn in the heat of the year,
Then hoary green olives that harden
 When the grape-blossom freezes with fear;
And milk-budded myrtles with Venus
 And vine-leaves with Bacchus he trod;
And ye said, “We have seen, he hath seen us,
 A visible God.” (“Dolores” 313-20)⁷⁹

Thus Swinburne covertly restores the excised Catullan priapea (18-20)—which, like the “fruits of his garden,” were themselves “offerings” left for the god (Richlin 121)—while

a nearly impossible temptation to resist exploiting the rich metaphorical resonance in this instance.

⁷⁷ Although this poem is numbered 20 in this edition, F. G. Doering’s edition (see fn. 75) prints it as number 19 (see 80-81).

⁷⁸ Although this poem is numbered 19 in this edition, F. G. Doering’s edition (see fn. 75) prints it as number 20 (see 82-83).

⁷⁹ Given Swinburne’s reverence for Landor (see “In Memory of Walter Savage Landor”), his reworking of Catullus 19 and 20 is probably based on the latter’s version of Catullus 20, published in “The Poems of Catullus” [1842] (202-03):

In spring the many-colour’d crown,
The sheafs in summer, ruddy-brown,
The autumn’s twisting tendrils green,
With nectar-gushing grapes between,
Some pink, some purple, some bright gold,
Then shrivel’d olive, blue with cold,
Are all for me.

implicitly commenting on the current state of literary censorship, all within the speaker's nostalgic vision of Priapus's bountiful pre-Christian garden.

VIII.

Yet, filling the gap, or rather the "great gulf fixed" (*WB* 95), between the soul and body, or the mind and world, depends upon more than simply restoring the censored texts of the past, and can only be achieved by sensual engagement with the material world in the here-and-now. To do so would be to take the place of Dolores's interactive lovers "of old," "re-imprinting" the world with human "meaning," in an act of creativity figured in terms of sadomasochistic sex. As the speaker's fears about the loss of "all" of the latter "that now lingers" (271), and his mourning over the present-day absence of such poet-lovers as Catullus indicate, this is something that he knows he and his fellows are incapable of truly doing. "Who shall kiss, in thy father's own city," he asks in desperation, "With such lips as he [i.e. Catullus] sang with, again?" (341-42). Shortly thereafter, he contrasts himself and his fellow present-day worshippers of Dolores, who can only "praise thee with timorous breath," unfavourably with the long-dead "lovers [...] Who embraced thee with awful embraces" (426, 402, 407). "Inspired" by Dolores, these past "lovers whose lips would excite thee" "impressed" themselves upon her (399): her lips "took fever" "From their lips" because they were "Filled full of" her, and her body has "grown red" with "the blood of their bodies" in turn (413, 418, 414). Well might the speaker ask "Hast thou left upon earth a believer / If these men are dead?" (415-16): "They are fled, and their footprints escape us, / Who appraise thee, adore, *and abstain*" (421-22, emphasis added). The speaker and his fellows, despite their theoretical

praises of “All the joys of the flesh” (15), can only “abstain” from real interaction with Dolores because, in response to the reality that “love dies” (57), they have transformed her into an immutable goddess, whose “essence” remains unaltered in the face of the manifold “changes of things.”

To truly “embrace” Dolores, the speaker would have to embrace the fact—implicit in his second vision of the “old world”—that Dolores’s “essence” has changed in response to changes in the culture, and that she can and must be “re-inspired.” But this is precisely what he cannot even recognize, and, even if he could, would refuse to accept. This is illustrated in his response to the arrival of Cybele-Mary (229-360), who shifts from the frenzied and bloodied (though still ascetic) figure of Cybele to the “cold and bloodless virgin” (Fisch 3), at the same time as Dolores shifts from her pre- to post-Christian self, becoming the “sterile” Sadeian “Lady of Pain” worshipped by the speaker and his “chosen” fellows. This spectacle leads him to the realization that if Cybele-Mary is subject to change, then she is subject to time, and if she is subject to time then she will eventually “perish” and be completely lost; but this also means that Dolores, since she is also subject to change, will be completely lost in time:

They shall pass and their places be taken,
The gods and the priests that are pure.
They shall pass, and shalt thou not be shaken?
They shall perish, and shalt thou endure? (361-64)

But although he briefly considers the possibility of his goddess’s mortality—imagining that “Death laughs” at his presumption on her behalf (365)—he quickly rejects this thought, reasserting, in borrowed biblical metaphors (see Ex. 7.8-12), Dolores’s status as an eternal substrate underlying the apparent flux of things:

But the worm shall revive thee with kisses;

Thou shalt change and transmute as a god,
As the rod to a serpent that hisses,
As the serpent again to a rod. (369-72)

Overtly invoking, for the first time, the authority of Dolores's "prophet" (375), Sade himself, the speaker reasserts Dolores's immutability: "Thy life shall not cease though thou doff it; / Thou shalt live until evil be slain, / And the good shall die first" (373-75).

Appropriately enough, the overt entrance of Sade into the poem reinforces the proximity and motivational consistency of the Christian and Sadeian worldviews. From Swinburne's perspective, the Christian and the Sadeian are both in flight from the fact of impermanence, particularly from the impermanence of love, though the former aims at achieving eternal life for the worshipper by putting faith in the "immortal Love" of God (Tennyson, *Memoriam* Pro.1), and the latter only aims at temporary communion with its eternal "material" goddess. As the speaker remarks early in the poem, the "service" of Dolores, though it is directed towards an "immortal" goddess, is "mortal" to the worshipper: "What care though the service be mortal? / O our Lady of Torture, what care?" (131-32). This "mortal" sentiment is echoed at the end of the poem:

We shall change as the things that we cherish,
Shall fade as they faded before,
As foam upon water shall perish,
As sand upon shore. (429-32)

Yet, it is at this late point that the speaker, in full self-contradiction, also "takes the extra step," taken earlier by the speaker of the "Triumph," in turning his "perverse spiritualism" from the mere assurance of the eternity of some "material" principle (i.e. the sea, Dolores) to the suggestion that it shall guarantee some form of eternity for the worshipper, thus almost bringing the Sadeian's inverted Christianity back around to the

original, virtually standing it back “on its feet” (see *SL* 1.57).⁸⁰ Wondering if “all came in sight” for “Thy prophet, thy preacher, thy poet” upon his death, and if he even now “know[s] it” (384, 379, 377), the speaker—immediately after insisting that he shall perish “as foam upon water”—goes on to claim inconsistently that upon death he and his fellows shall know if “the grave-pit be shallow or deep” and if “our fathers of old, and our lovers [...] sleep not or sleep” (434-36).

IX.

As far as the limits of the poem itself are concerned, Swinburne leaves the speaker of “Dolores” in this revealing muddle: between the certainty of material extinction and the hope, barely articulated but still persistent, of some (quasi-)spiritual continuance. In *Notes*, however, Swinburne frames “Dolores” as part of a “lyrical monodrama [*sic*] of passion” (*SR* 23), which includes the two following poems: “The Garden of Proserpine” and “Hesperia.” Swinburne initially rejected W. M. Rossetti’s suggestion that, in responding to the critics of the volume, he frame the poems in this way, on the reasonable grounds that it would misleadingly isolate them from other related poems in the collection: “I ought (if I did) to couple with them in the front harness the ‘Triumph of Time’ etc., as they express that state of feeling the reaction from which is expressed in ‘Dolores.’ Were I to rechristen these three as [a] trilogy, I should have to rename many earlier poems as acts in the same play” (*SL* 1.197). Yet “Hesperia,” with its explicit references to Dolores (55, 60), was clearly intended to be read as the “follow-up”

⁸⁰ “If you were once cured of that trick of standing on your head for ten volumes through, and your energies turned back into the old channel they ran in some centuries since, you would revert to the chain and the top of a pillar and ascetic worship” (*SL* 1.57).

to “Dolores,” and his “rechristen[ing]” of these three poems may have more to do with the conventionally-acceptable (if ironic) reading he provides for them than in the fact of their being grouped in this manner. “I have proved ‘Dolores,’” he wrote jokingly to Rossetti, “to be little less than a second Sermon on the Mount” (*SL* 1.186). In “Hesperia,” the “next act of this lyrical monodrama [*sic*],” Swinburne writes that the wearied speaker of “Dolores” flies from “the goddess that consumes” with the help of the titular “goddess that redeems” (*SR* 23-24). Meanwhile, the “Garden” constitutes an intermission or “pause of passion” between these two acts, in which “the spirit [...] hungers and thirsts only after the perfect sleep” (*SR* 24).

As we have already seen, the speaker of the “Garden,” like the speaker of the “Hymn,” is implicitly criticized not because of his conviction that death is material annihilation—in this he is of one mind with Swinburne himself (see Rossetti, *W.* 27)—but because he prefers the “calm” and “cold” Proserpine (50-52) to the volatile Venus,⁸¹ the anaesthetic “sleep eternal” (95) to the painful, quasi-erotic pleasures of life and art. It is not hard to imagine that this is where the speaker of “Dolores,” already self-confessedly impotent in the matters of both art and life, would eventually end up, were he to shelve the faint glimmer of hope in an afterlife that haunts the end of the poem. Although this attitude, from the Swinburnian perspective, is bad enough, that of the speaker of “Hesperia,” despite the rather credulous readings of some critics,⁸² is worse. The speaker of “Hesperia” has all the bad qualities of the speaker of the “Garden,” which are reflected in the overt resemblance of Hesperia to Proserpine, in the former’s association with death (33-34; also the “west,” 1, 10, 33; “sunset,” 2, 11, 36, 73;

⁸¹ Cf. Fricke 203.

⁸² See e.g. *SRM* 67-83; Harrison, “Losses” 659-97.

“ghosts,” 31-32) and with sleep (72-73; also “dreams,” 13, 18, 23, 26). In fact, so similar are Hesperia and Proserpine that Riede even mistakes the former, “Our Lady of Sleep,” for the latter in the poem of her own name (*SRM* 67)—perhaps because of the fact that he is determined to argue for the positive nature of the former. Yet the main difference between Proserpine and Hesperia is that the former holds out “Only the sleep eternal / In an eternal night” (“Garden” 95-96), whereas Hesperia holds out the dubious promise of attaining “the stately repose and the lordly delight of the dead” (“Hesperia” 34).

This promise of posthumous “redemption” brings the speaker’s awe-struck worship of Hesperia dangerously close to Christianity, and even to the “cult of love,” that he (if indeed he is the same speaker) rejected in “Dolores,” and develops the lingering traces of hope in an afterlife that emerge as that poem closes. Except this afterlife is not an inverted Sadeian one, in which “hell” is “heaven” (“Dolores” 437), but seems closer to the original Christian vision, despite the fact that it is couched in terms of the classical “fortunate islands” or “islands of the blest” (“Hesperia” 35; *SR* 23): “a sacred and sleepless life” for “all *happy* and *holy* things” (*SR* 23, emphases added). Likewise, despite their similar anti-life associations, Hesperia seems more like a cross between the Virgin Mary and the “angel in the house” than Proserpine: she is “the tenderest type of woman *or of dream*,”⁸³ “a bride rather than a mistress, *a sister rather than a bride*,” who offers “a *stingless* love, an *innocuous* desire” (*SR* 23-24, emphases added). Whereas Proserpine is “cold” (52), Hesperia is a “warm dream” (18); whereas indifferent Proserpine puts an end to all love, Hesperia is “tender,” “loving,” and “compassion[ate]” (25, 43); whereas

⁸³ While the speaker of “Hesperia” repeatedly compares the titular character to a “dream” (13, 18), he also repeatedly denies that she is a “dream”: “Not a dream, not a dream, is the kiss of thy mouth” (23). Yet, Swinburne here suggests that she may be a “dream,” and the speaker’s immediately reiterated denial may easily be read as a case of “protesting too much.”

Proserpine “gathers all things mortal / With cold immortal hands” (51-52), Hesperia “lulls [...] with touch of forgotten caresses” (17). Considering that she comes “from the region of stories [...] with a perfume of songs and of memories beloved from a boy” (3-4), one might be forgiven for thinking that those “forgotten caresses” are of the speaker’s mother, and the “love that revives as a ghost rearisen in [him]” is a retrogression, minus the external trappings of Christianity, to the spiritual beliefs of his youth (32)—to the sort of “hope and faith” that Swinburne elsewhere remarked “we had best leave [...] to infants, adult or ungrown” (*SL* 1.159).

Needless to say, from a Swinburnian perspective, none of this, even if it were no worse, is an improvement on the attitudes expressed in “Dolores” and the “Garden.” It should hardly be surprising, therefore, to find that the speaker of “Hesperia” is as anti-imaginative as either. *Pace* Riede, who insists on reading the “stories,” “songs,” and “memories beloved from a boy” as representative of “a devotion to art” (*SRM* 69), the speaker of “Hesperia” flies from music as well as from life in his desperate attempt to escape from Dolores, which is necessitated by the fact that he cannot engage with her like her “lovers” of old, because he has “spiritualized” her into a goddess. Like the speaker of the “Hymn,” who longs for a “silence” that is “more than all tunes” (96), the speaker of “Hesperia” finds his goddess’s “silence as music” (22), and his “lifelong flight” (*SR* 24) from the “material” quickly descends from the measured cadence of “eight hoofs [that] trample and thunder” to the “shrill shriek[ing]” of the air left “deaf where we past” (87, 89-90). As the cadence of the hoofs, devolving into a “shrill shriek,” is obviously meant to recall the movement of metrical “feet,” so it is fitting that Swinburne chose to base this

poem, for which he later expressed distaste (*SL* 5.208), in a metre (dactylic hexameter)⁸⁴ that he repeatedly excoriated as “feeble and tuneless” when attempted *in English* (*SC* 151)⁸⁵—this despite the fact that many critics have praised his handling of them here. Commenting in “Matthew Arnold’s New Poems,” a mere year after the publication of *Poems and Ballads*, on the fad for English hexameters, Swinburne remarked that at best “nothing but loose rhymeless anapaests” could be made of it: “how human tongues or hands could utter or could write them except *by way of burlesque improvisation* I could never imagine, and never shall” (*SC* 81, emphasis added).

Obviously the flesh-fleeing, eternity-seeking, and silence-savouring speaker of “Hesperia” is not the poet to sing “with such lips” as Catullus “again” (“Dolores” 342), any more than the actual poet-speakers of the “Hymn” or the “Triumph,” who explicitly renounce their “sweet music” (“Triumph” 360). In fact the speaker of “Dolores,” who may be the speaker of “Hesperia” at that earlier phase, is closer to becoming that poet, because his theoretical sensualism brings him to the verge of an actual engagement with the material world, even though he ultimately recoils from it. At least he sees the problem, and recognizes his and his fellows’ inadequacy, even if he does not fully comprehend it, and therefore cannot resolve it. The “Swinburnian” poet-speaker of “Félice,” who openly rejects the “cult of love,” at the same time as he reaffirms the supreme value of “love” and “song” (166-68), and promises (or threatens) to continue

⁸⁴ “Hesperia” is written in “elegiac distichs” or “couplets” (see Murray 108n; Haynes 133-34; Saintsbury 423-24), which are units composed of “dactylic hexameter” followed by a line of “pentameter,” which consists of two units of “two and a half” dactylic feet (see Halporn 12-13, 71-72), though Swinburne has frequent recourse to “anacrustic” (or uncounted) syllables at the line beginning and almost always after the mandatory caesura in the “pentameter.” The last syllable in the hexameter is traditionally counted as stressed, even if it is unstressed, in which case it is “brevis in longo” [short in the long position] (Halporn 10).

⁸⁵ See also *PBH* 355-57n; Haynes 133-34.

producing his “sweet” and “wicked” verses (161-65) would seem to be just such a poet, but he has passed through his crisis and reached “the other side.” He speaks from the perspective of one who is *hors de combat*, and though he speaks eloquently from that perspective, he does not show us how to get “from here to there,” and it is the latter—in this volume otherwise filled with illustrative dramatic failures—that is wanted. As I will argue in the next chapter, Swinburne supplied that want in “Anactoria,” in which he dramatizes the process that Sappho—the poet he called “the very greatest poet that ever lived” (*SL* 4.123),⁸⁶ and who served as a model for Catullus himself⁸⁷—goes through in coming to terms with the loss of love and with her poetic vocation at the same time.

⁸⁶ This passage is from a letter of 1880 to Arthur Henry Bright. Much of it was reprinted posthumously in “Sappho” [1914]. Maxwell suggests that “Sappho” was written as early as 1860, which would mean that Swinburne was recalling his own unpublished literary writing in his personal correspondence (Maxwell, “Sappho” 156).

⁸⁷ Not only did Catullus employ the Sapphic stanza in poems 11 and 51, and imitate fr. 31 of Sappho in poem 51, but he also used Lesbia as the pseudonym of his mistress (Lee xxii).

Chapter 5

“[...] mix their hearts with music [...]”:

Modeling and Inspiring Swinburnian Love in “Anactoria”

... and I yearn, and I desire ...

— Sappho, fragment 36¹

[...] the love of the Aeolian girl [i.e. Sappho] still breathes,
and her hot passions, entrusted to the lyre, still live.

— Horace, *Odes* 4.9.9-12²

And they shall know me as ye who have known me here [...]

— Swinburne, “Anactoria”³

While the spectacle of the “castrated” corpus of Catullus leads the speaker of “Dolores” to lament for the modern-day absence of a poet who could “kiss [...] with such lips as he sang with again” (340-41), it is the still more thoroughly mutilated corpus of Sappho—whose fragmentary state Swinburne, in accordance with the historical

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Sappho’s fragments are from *If not, winter: Fragments of Sappho* (ed. Carson). Carson uses open square brackets to indicate “missing matter” in texts derived from papyri (Carson, Intro. xi). For the sake of clarity and consistency, I have substituted un-bracketed ellipses to indicate missing matter in texts derived from papyri and other ancient sources. Sappho’s fragments are cited by fragment number alone. For purposes of comparison, and for historical translations, I have also consulted *Sappho: Memoir, Text, Selected Renderings, and a Literal Translation* (ed. Wharton), *Lyra Graeca* (trans. Edmonds), *Greek Lyric* (trans. Campbell), *Sappho and the Greek Lyric Poets* (trans. Barnstone), *Greek Lyric Poetry* (trans. West), and *The Sappho Companion* (ed. Reynolds). As Reynolds remarks (*History* 179), Swinburne would have known all the extant fragments at the time. For lists of the fragments that Swinburne alludes to or incorporates in “Anactoria,” see *PBH* 333n; Rutland 283-86. If a fragment that I cite or quote would not have been available to Swinburne at the time, I have noted it in the footnotes. The above translation of fragment 36 is from West’s edition. Carson translates it as follows: “I long and I seek after.”

² This text is Test. 51. Unless otherwise noted, all testimonia are taken from Campbell’s edition, and will be cited as numbered in his edition: e.g. Test. 51.

³ 285.

imagination of his era, attributed to centuries of Christian censorship⁴—that provided Swinburne with an idea of what such a poet could be. “Judging,” as he said, “even from the mutilated fragments” that “the Fates and the Christians have spared us” (*SL* 4.123; *SR* 21), Swinburne found “value beyond price” in Sappho’s “Lesbian music [...] of fleshly fever and amorous malady” (*CW* 13.243),⁵ leading him unequivocally to declare her “the very greatest poet who ever was at all” (*SL* 4.123). As Rooksby remarks, Sappho, who appears (in descending order of prominence) in “Anactoria,” “Sapphics,” “The Masque of Queen Bersabe” (267-75), and “Satia Te Sanguine” (9-12), is the “presiding muse” of *Poems and Ballads* (*ACS* 34), and, as one who, according to ancient testimonia, dedicated all her poetry to love,⁶ she represents the creative possibilities lost to the many speakers in the volume who “See Love, and so refuse him” (“Dawn” 78). Of the “Sapphic” poems in the volume, it is “Anactoria,” in which Sappho speaks in the first-person, that takes pride of place, being not only, as W. M. Rossetti observed at the time, “the fullest representative” of Swinburne’s “power” (72), but, as Paglia has more recently remarked, “a supreme poem of the century” (*Sexual* 473). In this chapter, I will argue that in the Sappho of “Anactoria” Swinburne provides not only a dramatic model of the sort of poet who can “see love,” in all of its volatility and violence, and still, albeit after much struggle, “choose him,” but also suggests how such a poet—implicitly, of course, a poet like Swinburne himself—might inspire others to “choose” love.

⁴ Although some twentieth-century scholars have repeated this narrative (see e.g. Barnstone, “Sappho” 274-75), most agree that it is unsubstantiated (see e.g. Johnson, M. 30; Reynolds, *Companion* 81). Nevertheless, as Dellamora remarks, Swinburne’s interest in Sappho was related to, though not determined by, the fact that he believed her to be among “the most maligned and censored of poets” (75).

⁵ This quotation is from Swinburne’s “L’Année Terrible” [1872].

⁶ See e.g. Test. 10, 50.

I.

While some original reviewers of *Poems and Ballads* reluctantly acknowledged that the “power and poetry” of “Anactoria” are “extraordinary” (“Mr. Rossetti’s Criticism” 610), and even that it was the “high-watermark” of the volume (“Defence” 601), they nevertheless identified the poem as “especially horrible” (“Mr. Swinburne’s *P&B*” 130)⁷ and fit for suppression (Skelton 641), with one critic quoting from it to “prove” Swinburne’s own clinical “madness” (“Swinburne’s Folly” 10). What enraged these critics most about Swinburne’s “very dirty verses” (“Mr. Swinburne’s Defence,” *Pall Mall* 10) was their break with the long-standing tradition of “heterosexualizing” Sappho,⁸ which consisted in substituting male pronouns and speakers for female, and repeatedly reworking the Phaon myth,⁹ as represented in Ovid’s “Sappho to Phaon,” which was all-too-often mistaken as biography in the almost complete absence of reliable materials. In Ovid, lovesick Sappho writes to the fickle ferryman Phaon, who has abandoned her mature genius for the youthful beauties of Sicily, telling him that he has forever displaced her female lovers, and that she will fling herself from the Leucadian cliff in despair. “Anactoria is nothing to me now,” Ovid’s Sappho laments, “Yours is now the love these maids once had” (19, 24). As Marguerite Johnson notes, most English translators of Ovid’s poem “over-played Sappho’s rejection of her former female lovers,

⁷ See also “Mr. Swinburne on His Critics” 1229.

⁸ Prior to Swinburne, there were only two notable representations of a lesbian Sappho in English: John Donne’s “Sappho to Philaenis” [c. 1601] and Nicholas Rowe’s “Song” from Giles Jacob’s *Treatise of Hermaphrodites* [1718] (see Maxwell, “Sappho” 155; Reynolds, *Companion* 118-19). In both Donne and Rowe, Sappho’s female lover is named Philaenis—a name which they, in all likelihood, adopted from Martial (Reynolds, *Companion* 86, 101; see Martial 7.67, 70). For more on the “heterosexualization” (and non-“heterosexualization”) of Sappho, see Maxwell, “Sappho” 156.

⁹ It is now generally accepted that there is no textual ground for the Phaon myth (see Johnson, M. 20; Williamson 8-11). As Margaret Williamson remarks, the myth of Phaon probably arose in the fourth century BCE, although it is only known from later sources (8).

thereby reinforcing her heterosexual change of heart” (22), as in Alexander Pope’s highly-influential translation of 1707, which subsequently served as the text for those lacking Latin (Reynolds, *Companion* 73, 123): “No more the Lesbian dames my passion move, / Once the dear objects of my guilty love: / All other loves are lost in only thine” (17-19). By the latter-half of the eighteenth century, Sappho had been turned, for the majority of readers, into “an emblem for unhappy heterosexual love” (Greene, E. 5).

By the time Victorian writers—many of whom were women lacking both Greek and Latin (Reynolds, *History* 111)—took their turn re-imagining Sappho, they very easily ignored, or were simply ignorant of the “Lesbian dames,” and set about reconciling the ancient Greek poet to the Victorian model of the “poetess,” who was doomed to suffer neglect in (heterosexual) love due to her supposedly uncharacteristic female genius, which left her torn between her art and her sex (see Reynolds, *Companion* 198). “One grief and one alone / Could bow thy bright head down,” apostrophized Caroline Norton in “The Picture of Sappho” [1830], “Thou wert a WOMAN and wert left despairing!” (58-60).¹⁰ For most Victorians, this sentimental and tragic vision of Sappho as the quintessential “poetess” could be easily reconciled to, and moralized within, their accepted ideologies of both love and womanhood—although some, still more sex-phobic, were only satisfied with the even more dubious conclusion that she was “neither homosexual nor heterosexual but chaste” (Reynolds, *Companion* 229-30).¹¹ Whatever their preferred Sappho narrative, however, Swinburne’s mid-Victorian reviewers could not accept the explicitly homosexual Sappho of “Anactoria,” who not only tells her

¹⁰ For more on the Victorian image of Sappho as “poetess,” see Reynolds, *History* 109-39; Prins 174-245.

¹¹ This highly-influential theory was proposed by Friedrich Gottlieb Welcker in his *Sappho Freed from a Reigning Prejudice* [1816] (see Reynolds, *Companion* 229-30; Prins 59-61).

female lover that she is “more to me than all men,” but rhapsodizes lasciviously, with “veiled allusions to cunnilinguic orgasm” (Cook 84), on her “stinging lips wherein the hot sweet brine / That Love was born of burns and foams like wine” (85, 49-50). The love of Swinburne’s Sappho clearly “had no part in man’s” (“Masque” 268),¹² and the reviewers denounced it, in terms that ranged from delicacy to hysteria, as an “almost extinct depravity” (“Mr. Swinburne on His Critics” 1229), a “grievous aberration of moral and mental disease” (“Mr. Swinburne’s Defence” 483), and “the vilest act conceivable in human debauchery” (Buchanan, *Fleshly* 22).

So blinded were the original critics by Swinburne’s “glorification of Sapphic love” in “Anactoria” (*SPP* 124),¹³ that they were unable (or unwilling) to consider such desire from an intellectual standpoint, or indeed to see much of anything else in the poem at all. Unfortunately, this critical blindness—which also affected Baudelaire’s so-called “lesbian poems” of 1857, though it lifted much earlier¹⁴—continued to prevent all but the most discerning critics from appreciating either the poem’s “complex and extensive” intellectual framework (Paglia, *Sexual* 473), or its deep emotional resonance, until the

¹² Apparently this was not clear enough for some, as George Powell claimed, in a letter to Swinburne of 1866, that “twenty of my lady-friends have seen and read it [i.e. ‘Anactoria’], and admired its beauties (in their superficial, feeble way) without discovering that anything was amiss. They looked upon ‘Anactoria’ [...] as upon hymns to the Virgin” (*UL* 1.67). Swinburne, however, was quite clear about Sappho’s sexual preference in his letters, joking about her “strong objections” to the “preliminaries” of producing children (*SL* 2.101), and referring to her as “the immortal foundress [*sic*] of Lesbianism” (*SL* 2.141). He was also working on the unfinished novel *Lesbia Brandon*, in which the titular character, named (following Catullus) in an obvious reference to Sappho, confesses her disinterest in heterosexual love (see 98-102).

¹³ See also “Mr. Swinburne on His Critics” 1229.

¹⁴ Beginning from the common assumption that Baudelaire is a greater poet than Swinburne (see e.g. Eliot, “Baudelaire” 371, 379; Nicolson, *Swinburne and Baudelaire*), and the fact that Swinburne was an admirer of Baudelaire, many critics have been content to claim that “Anactoria” is simply Swinburne’s imitation of Baudelaire’s so-called “lesbian poems” (see e.g. Reynolds, *History* 169, 175; *SPW* 117; Walder 104-11). Yet, as Elizabeth Prettejohn rightly points out, it is “too facile” to say that Swinburne simply echoes Baudelaire, especially since it is not even clear that he read the “lesbian poems” until 1864 (106-07). As Patricia Clements has argued at length (10-76), despite the condescension of T. S. Eliot and other moderns, Swinburne was a careful reader and a far-from-uncritical admirer of Baudelaire. In addition, as Reynolds points out, unlike Baudelaire, Swinburne could read the original Greek, so it is difficult to understand why so many critics have been quick to assume the latter’s dependence on the former (Reynolds, *History* 178).

latter half of the twentieth century. Few, if any, critics shared Thomas Hardy's opinion that "Anactoria" contained "the finest *drama* of Death and Oblivion [...] in our tongue" (Hardy, *Life* 305), nor would they have identified Swinburne as the poetic heir of "the Lesbian" herself (Hardy, "A Singer Asleep" 28). As David A. Cook remarked in 1971, most critics, when they bothered to address the poem, were content to "dismiss 'Anactoria' as a pornographic *tour de force*," with "Sappho's perverted sexuality [...] considered [as] an intrusive and gratuitous manifestation of Swinburne's own,"¹⁵ and thus remained ignorant of the fact that "the poem's technical brilliance answers to its depths of thought and feeling" (Cook 77-78, 93). While most critics grudgingly continued to acknowledge the breathtaking "technical virtuosity" displayed in "Anactoria" (Cook 77), Arnold Bennett spoke for many, both those who were amused and those who were unamused, when he reflected, after Swinburne's death in 1909, that the "supreme genius" had played a "rare trick on the country of his birth" by "enshrining in the topmost heights of its literature a lovely poem that cannot be discussed" in polite society (129):¹⁶ "Swinburne has got the better of us there" (129).

Nevertheless, since Bennett's time the rules of what can be discussed in polite society have been loosened, and, for the most part during the last four decades, a body of serious criticism has accumulated around the once "un-discussable" poem, with the result that it has become the most extensively discussed individual poem in *Poems and Ballads*—if not in Swinburne's entire literary output. "Anactoria" has been read alternately as an expression, more or less straightforward, of Sadeian philosophy;¹⁷ an

¹⁵ See e.g. Rutland 286-89.

¹⁶ See also Rutland 280.

¹⁷ See e.g. Praz 223-28; Paglia, *Sexual* 472-75; Klock 103, 114, 117-19.

exploitative and voyeuristic male appropriation of lesbian desire and voice;¹⁸ an experiment in constructing alternative masculinities, and exploring male homosexual desire, through the figure of the lesbian;¹⁹ an expression of the desire to transcend the boundaries between the self and the other, which finds expression in sadomasochism;²⁰ a dramatization of the movement from sexual desire to artistic transcendence;²¹ an example of, and argument for, an art derived from the sexual body and its desires;²² an ironic deflation of artistic pretensions to transcendence;²³ and an “allegory of rhythm” that undermines notions of both identity and meaning.²⁴ While there is much, both positive and negative, that can (and will) be said about all of these readings of “Anactoria,” none of them does justice to its exploration of Swinburnian love, to which I will turn after a brief examination of the “Sapphic eros” of fragment 31.

II.

As with many of the speakers in *Poems and Ballads*, the Sappho of “Anactoria” is lamenting the loss of her titular beloved, whom she believes has turned from her to “follow lesser loves” (15). For Swinburne’s classically-educated, nineteenth-century readers, this scenario was implied by the title alone, which they would have recognized as an allusion to Sappho’s fragment 31 (then numbered 2),²⁵ which was then traditionally known as the “Ode to Anactoria,” even though the name did not appear in it or in any of

¹⁸ See Reynolds, *History* 169-93.

¹⁹ See e.g. Dellamora 69-85; Morgan, “Male Lesbian” 49-53, “Perverse Male” 66-68.

²⁰ See e.g. Charlesworth 27-29; Harrison, “Eros” 23-24, 32; Snodgrass 78-80.

²¹ See e.g. Cook; *TSR* 128-29.

²² See e.g. Psomiades 76-78; Zonana 39-45.

²³ See Wagner-Lawlor.

²⁴ See Prins 112-33. Prins derives the concept of an “allegory of rhythm” from Ammitai Aviram (see Prins 128, 128n; see also Aviram 17-28).

²⁵ See e.g. “Mr. Swinburne’s Defence” 483; “Mr. Swinburne’s Poetry” 216.

the other fragments known at the time (Wharton 25).²⁶ In ancient sources,²⁷ Anactoria is listed as one of Sappho's many beloved girls, and a tradition emerged that she had left Sappho to marry a Greek soldier.²⁸ This may explain the association of Anactoria with fragment 31, in which Sappho sees an unnamed beloved sitting next to a man, whose "close" sitting and listening, combined with the girl's "sweet-speaking" and "lovely laughing," marks him as a romantic rival for the girl's attentions. In this moment, the immediate (if imagined) threat of losing the beloved, heightens the "bitterness" of an already "sweetbitter"²⁹ eros, which she, like many other ancient poets, experiences as a violent, even "limb-loosening"³⁰ assault emanating from the beloved (see fr. 130):

[...] when I look at you, even a moment, no speaking
is left in me

no: tongue breaks and thin
fire is racing under skin
and in eyes no sight and drumming
fills ears

and cold sweat holds me and shaking
grips me all, greener than grass
I am and dead—or almost
I seem to me. (fr. 31)

Over the subsequent centuries, this striking passage, preserved as an exemplar by Longinus in his *On Great Writing* (or *On the Sublime*) (see section 10), became the "most famous" and often translated of Sappho's fragments (Reynolds, *History* 2), and was often

²⁶ The name has since appeared in fragment 16, which was discovered on a papyrus in Egypt in 1906 and published in 1914 (Prins 129n). In fragment 16, Sappho, reflecting that "the most beautiful thing" is not, as some would say, "an army of horse [...] or] on foot [...] or] of ships" but "what you love," is thereby "reminded [...] of Anactoria / who is gone." Some critics wrongly think that this fragment was available to Swinburne (see e.g. Dellamora 76-77).

²⁷ See e.g. Test. 20; Ovid, "Sappho to Phaon" 19.

²⁸ See Ovid, "Sappho" p. 141n.

²⁹ As Carson remarks, the word *glukupikron* translates literally to "sweetbitter" not "bittersweet" (3).

³⁰ As Prins remarks, "the epithet *lusimelēs* [in fragment 130 ...] describes a force so powerful it dissolves the joints and disjoins the body" (113): "Eros the melter of limbs (now again) stirs me— / sweetbitter unmanageable creature who steals in" (fr. 130).

presented as the “quintessential voice of tormented Sapphic passion” (Williamson 155).

Despite the fame of fragment 31, however, English translations, after that included in John Hall’s 1652 translation of Longinus,³¹ did not include the last line (Prins 30n), the only remaining line in the subsequent stanza (as translated here by Henry Wharton): “But I must dare all, since one so poor ...”³² This truncation left Sappho suspended in passive dissolution,³³ “dead or almost.” “My feeble pulse forgot to play,” concludes Sappho in Ambrose Philips’s 1711 translation, which was the most widely-known and reprinted in nineteenth-century England (Prins 46-47), “I fainted, sunk, and dy’d away.”³⁴ By rendering the fragment “incomplete,” these translators ironically gave fragment 31 the effect of being a complete Sapphic ode, at the same time as they made Sappho into an implicitly feminized victim of unrequited desire, one who was readily assimilated, when combined with the Phaon myth, to the Victorian model of the tragic “poetess.” Figuratively “undone” by the “sweetbitter” eros of fragment 31, most nineteenth-century Sapphos resorted to the “kill-or-cure remedy for unrequited passion” provided by the Leucadian cliff (Reynolds, *Companion* 71), thus literally undoing themselves by being “scattered” into the endless “breaking” of the waves (Prins 64).³⁵ It

³¹ For a complete version of Hall’s translation of fr. 31, see Reynolds, *Companion* 39.

³² Although Carson’s recent translation of the line is similar (if less forceful)—“But *all is to be dared*, since even a person of poverty ...” (emphasis added)—most twentieth-century translators have interpreted the line to mean: “But all can be *endured* ...” (Campbell, emphasis added; see also Barnstone; Edmonds; West). Wharton himself would have had few (if any) prior English examples apart from Hall’s translation: “Yet since I me [*sic*] wretched must I *dare* ...” (emphasis added). For my purposes, what matters is the likelihood that Swinburne would have also understood the line to mean “I must dare,” not whether “to dare” or “to endure” is the more accurate rendering of the Greek verb involved into English.

³³ Cf. Prins 29, 38.

³⁴ For a complete version of Philips’s translation, see Reynolds, *Companion* 40.

³⁵ Swinburne provides one such image of Sappho in “Satia Te Sanguine”:

As the lost white feverish limbs
Of the Lesbian Sappho, adrift
In foam where the sea-wind swims,
Swam loose for the streams to lift [...] (9-12)

is interesting, that in reading such “Victorian Sapphos,” Yopie Prins intentionally reproduces the gesture of suppressing the last line of fragment 31 (30n),³⁶ suspending Sappho “in the moment of dying” (29), so that Prins—in contrast to the “tendency to invoke Sappho as [...] an original lyric voice” (5)—can (re)read the “limb-loosened” Sappho as a figure for, and “Sapphic eros” as a force of, the “undoing” of the lyric subject, a dissolution she sees reflected in the fragmentary state of the Sapphic corpus.³⁷

Of course, however, the fragmentation of the Sapphic corpus was not, despite the tempting metaphorical parallel, the result of the Sapphic eros of fragment 31; rather, it was—as far as Swinburne and his mid-Victorian contemporaries knew—the result of deliberate suppression of the latter by zealous Christian censors. Likewise, the notion that the effect of the Sapphic eros of fragment 31 is the irredeemable dissolution of the subject is the result of the general suppression, for aesthetic and/or ideological reasons, of the fragment’s last preserved line. Contrary to the notion that Sappho passively “fainted, sunk, and dy’d away” in the face of “limb-loosening” eros, this line suggests that the experience, though destabilizing, will provoke her to action, to “dare all” in an attempt to attain (or regain) her beloved. That is to say, she will attempt to (re-)inspire the experience of “sweetbitter” eros in the beloved herself, to subject her to the sort of “limb-loosening” assault that she herself suffers. This dynamic is suggested more clearly in

³⁶ Prins justifies this due to the fact that, although the last line “suggests a longer narrative from near death back into a life that must be endured,” the reception and translation history of fragment 31 has most often “left Sappho suspended in the moment of dying” (30n; see fn. 37). While this may be justifiable in the case of those readers who only had access to the shortened English translations, Swinburne read Greek.

³⁷ Although it is too complex and wide-ranging to enter into here, Prins’s “deconstructive critique of lyric” in *Victorian Sappho* appears to rest upon the seeming paradox that “in fragment 31 of Sappho the birth of a lyric subject seems to coincide with the moment of dying” (Prins 20, 29). As Louis remarks, in her review of the book, “every text, every reading and revision of Sappho, every work of art analyzed—in short, virtually every phenomenon which falls within the purview of this wide-ranging work—is always interpreted in the same way: it illuminates a fragmentation, a collapse, a decline. Repeatedly Prins tortures a text to force it to generate this predetermined meaning” (444-45).

fragment 1, known as the “Ode to Aphrodite,” from a corrupt nineteenth-century text of which Swinburne chooses the epigraph to “Anactoria”: “whose love have you netted again / in vain by means of persuasion?”³⁸ In this fragment, Sappho pleads with the goddess of love to “be my ally” in the matter of a girl who has left her. In a passage that Swinburne transposes into “Anactoria” (81-84), Aphrodite responds to Sappho’s pleas by promising to “persuade [the girl] (now again) to lead you back into her love”:

[...] if she flees, soon she will pursue.
 If she refuses gifts, rather will she give them.
 If she does not love, soon she will love
 even unwilling. (fr. 1)

In other words, the Sapphic fragments can be read to suggest that, in ideal circumstances, the experience of “sweetbitter” eros might be both disabling and enabling, a painful-pleasure that is both passively endured by the lover and actively inflicted upon the beloved—and vice versa, as their roles are perpetually exchanged and reversed.

To return to fragment 31, Sappho does not, as Margaret Reynolds remarks (*History* 2), suggest that her present experience of “sweetbitter” eros, however destabilizing, is singular, but claims that it occurs “when I look at you, even for a moment,” which is to say: “when[ever] I look at you.” The “almost death” of fragment 31 is an experience that Sappho has survived before,³⁹ and will survive this time. Similarly, in fragment 1, Aphrodite seems to be at pains to stress that Sappho has felt this

³⁸ Translation by Dr. R. Drew Griffith (Queen’s University). In Carson’s translation of the uncorrupted passage, it reads: “Whom should I persuade (now again) / to lead you back into her love?” Unfortunately, the translations provided in most modern editions of *Poems and Ballads* are inadequate or misleading, due to the ambiguity of the word “caught” (i.e. to trap or ensnare; to contract, as in an illness): “Whose love have you caught in vain by persuasion?” (*PBH* 333n); “From whom by persuasion have you vainly caught love?” which McGann and Sligh erroneously interpret to mean “who has *seduced you* to the hopelessness of loving?” (*MP* 477n, emphasis added); “Of whom by persuasion hast thou vainly caught love?” (*PBP* 61n). Some critics, apparently unaware of the corruption in the nineteenth-century Greek text used by Swinburne, mistakenly cite the uncorrupted modern version of the lines (see e.g. Reynolds, *History* 183).

³⁹ See Reynolds, *History* 2; Wilson 63.

lovesickness before, and with other beloved girls:

[... you] asked what (now again) I have suffered and why
(now again) I am calling out

and what I want to happen most of all
in my crazy heart. Whom should I persuade (now again)
to lead you back into her love? Who, O
Sappho, is wronging you?

Taken in this light, Sappho's declaration in fragment 31 that she "must dare" suggests not only that she will survive the assault of *eros*, but that the repeated experience of "losing herself," though it leaves her "poorer" in one sense (i.e. lacking her prior sense of self, and possibly the beloved girl), also issues in another, less secure, perhaps significantly changed, but for that very reason, more "daring" self. It is implied that this "daring" self, far from seeking to escape from passion, will attempt to enter back into romantic relations with the beloved girl (i.e. to subject her, in turn, to *eros*)—or, if the latter is truly lost, to enter into romantic relations with yet another girl—the very sight of whom will (again) bring on the destabilizing experience of *eros*, which she will (again) survive, shaken and changed, but willing to "dare" (again) to enter into romantic relations, in a self-perpetuating dynamic of Sapphic *eros*.

III.

In *Notes on Poems and Reviews*, Swinburne claims that "Anactoria" was his attempt at "writing some paraphrase" of fragment 31—by which he meant not to literally paraphrase the poem's words, but "to work into words of my own some expression of their effect" (*SR* 21)—so it is unsurprising to find, as Prins notes (116), that the opening lines echo the "limb-loosening" experience of the fragment itself:

My life is bitter with thy love; thine eyes
Blind me, thy tresses burn me, thy sharp sighs
Divide my flesh and spirit with soft sound,
And my blood strengthens, and my veins abound. (1-4)

Here Swinburne's Sappho records the destabilizing effects of the "sweetbitter" eros of fragment 31: she suffers blindness ("in eyes no sight"), feels the sensation of burning ("thin fire races under skin"), and has an increased heart-rate ("drumming fills ears"). Yet, although most readers would expect these symptoms to culminate—as they do in the truncated versions of fragment 31—in her feeling of being "dead—or almost" (i.e. in the feeling of "flesh and spirit" being "divided"), here the latter comes *before* her increased heart-rate, which is described in terms that incongruously connote personal (re-)invigoration: "my blood *strengthens*, and my veins *abound*" (emphases added). In this subtle reversal of priority, Swinburne suggests that the initially disabling effects of Sapphic eros might be enabling in the long view. In other words, they might "strengthen" Sappho to attempt further romantic engagement with Anactoria. Just as the last preserved line of fragment 31 suggests that Sappho will "dare" to relight the passion of her beloved, so the unexpected vitality of the last of these opening lines leads into her attempt—an attempt that makes up roughly the first half of the poem (1-144)—to do just that, in the words of the corrupt epigraph, "by means of persuasion."

The first of many attempts at such "persuasion" occurs a few lines into the poem, where Sappho tries to seduce Anactoria into renewing their previous sexual exploits, by metaphorically recalling them in the vivid present and imperative:

I feel thy blood against my blood: my pain
Pains thee, and lips bruise lips, and vein stings vein.
Let fruit be crushed on fruit, let flower on flower,
Breast kindle breast, and either burn one hour. (11-14)

As Richard Dellamora remarks, the “mirroring” of Sappho and Anactoria in this passage—of their bloods, pains, lips, veins, fruits, flowers, and breasts—makes it “unclear who is doing what to whom” (71). The “identities” of the sexual partners, as Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor points out, “are now ‘indiscrete’” (920). This “indiscretion” might be readily assimilated to the “yearning for unity” that the “transcendent critics” attribute to all of Swinburne’s lovers (Harrison, “Eros” 24), which here, in the exchange of “pains,” displays the sadism that arises from the desire to “break through the frustrating fact of division and difference” (Johnson, W. 102). Wagner-Lawlor also sees in this “indiscretion,” and the “violence of her willed identification with her lover,” the desire of Sappho to conflate “self and other,” but, like Chris Snodgrass (73-80, 75n), she sees this desire in terms of a “narcissistic” Romanticism that, under the guise of “love,” would reduce the entire world to a solipsistic “self-reflection” (see Wagner-Lawlor 919-23).⁴⁰ Either way, all of these critics see the “psychic violence” (Snodgrass 80) of Sappho’s desire leading to the “death fantasies” that punctuate the first half of the poem: e.g. I wish “the fire [... had] Severed the bones that bleach, the flesh that cleaves, / And let our sifted ashes drop like leaves” (7, 9-10).

Setting aside the “death fantasies” for the moment, though the intensity of Sappho and Anactoria’s lovemaking makes it difficult to determine “who is doing what to whom” (Dellamora 71), it should remain clear—in spite of the fact that many critics seem to be incapable of seeing much more than a narcissistic denial of difference in lesbianism⁴¹—

⁴⁰ See also Maxwell, *Female* 39.

⁴¹ See e.g. Cook 78-79; Snodgrass 75, 79. The critics may be misled to expect this due to Swinburne’s few predecessors, who often depict lesbianism in terms of the narcissistic denial of difference, and the search for comfortable sameness. Donne’s Sappho, for instance, rejects “the tillage of a harsh rough man” (38), in preference for the “likeness” of Philaenis:

Likeness begets such strange self flattery [*sic*],

that there are two partners here, involved in a mutual sadomasochistic exchange. Though Dellamora suggests that this sexual encounter is “marked not by dominance and submission but by reciprocity” (71), it would be more accurate to say that it is marked by reciprocal dominance and submission. In the words of Morgan, the lovers enjoy “the precarious balance between pain and pleasure in lovemaking,” and they “take turns at the roles of agent and object” (178).⁴² By turning the “sweet-bitterness” of Sapphic eros into overt sadomasochistic activity in “Anactoria,” Swinburne reflects and amplifies the reciprocal dynamic of mutual eros suggested in the Sapphic fragments themselves.⁴³ Although her heavily-theoretical reading would deny to “Sappho” any real subjectivity or agency, Prins is correct to remark that Sappho and Anactoria “suffer equally in a mutual subjection that divides subject from object, rending them apart, yet also rendering them interestingly interchangeable”: “separate but also together, different but also the same, Sappho and Anactoria embody the paradox of ‘flesh that cleaves’” (116-17). For Wagner-Lawlor, and (implicitly) for those critics who see the sexual drive in Swinburne

That touching myself, all seems done to thee.
 Myself I embrace, and mine own hand I kiss,
 And amorously thank myself for this. (51-54)

Similarly, Baudelaire’s Delphine tells Hippolyta that she does “not need to give / The sacred offering of the roses of your youth / To one who’d wither them with his tempestuous breath”:

My kisses are as light as mayflies on the wing
 Caressing in the dusk the great transparent lakes.
 But those your lover gives dig out their cruel ruts
 Like chariots, or like the farmer’s biting plough. (“Condemned Women” 26-32)

Rowe (see fn. 8), however, depicts a mutual interaction between the lovers:

Alternately the happy pair
 All grant, and all receive.

 With happier fate, and kinder care,
 These nymphs by turns do reign [...]

 Successive each, to each does prove,
 Fierce youth and yielding maid. (7-8, 13-14, 19-20)

⁴² See also Johnson, M. 137; Prettejohn 118.

⁴³ See Dover 177; Johnson, M. 48.

as oriented towards “absolute union,” however, the double-nature of “cleaving,” “meaning both ‘to join’ and ‘to separate’” (Prins 117), can only be a mark of failure or of self-betrayal: “it is at once the ideal Sappho seeks” and a painful “reminder of the divided condition to which she is [unwillingly] subject” (Wagner-Lawlor 922).⁴⁴

Yet, as I have argued, this “cleaving,” in all its paradoxical duality, characterizes the sexual scenario that Sappho imagines—not just, as Wagner-Lawlor suggests (921), the ending of it—and it is this “ideal [of love that] Sappho seeks” to prolong through her “persuasion” of Anactoria. The danger is not, as Wagner-Lawlor insists (921), that their “cleaving” will “threaten the poet” with the fall from unity into division, but that the former of its oscillating poles will be eliminated—thus changing it from a dynamic of unity-division, and of activity-passivity, to one of complete and permanent division. In other words, Sappho’s fear is that Anactoria will leave her to “follow lesser loves,” thus putting an end to the reciprocal interchange of dominance and submission that has characterized their affair. As in fragment 31, the end of mutual eros, leaving Sappho alone in her subordination to desire, intensifies the “bitterness” of “sweetbitter” eros, which turns its violence inward—leaving her “almost dead.” Of course, as the other poems in the volume suggest, the end of all love, whether mutual or not, is inevitable in time, and it is in part the fact that fragment 31 faces this inevitability squarely—remarking repeatedly that the loss is happening “now again” (see e.g. fr. 1, 16, 94, 129a, 129b, 131)⁴⁵—that makes it the “quintessential voice of tormented Sapphic eros” (Williamson 155), and Sappho the ideal figure to serve as the “presiding muse” of *Poems*

⁴⁴ Here Wagner-Lawlor is talking about the word “mix,” following her discussion of the word “cleave,” but she is making the same point (921-22).

⁴⁵ Fragments 16 and 94 would not have been available to Swinburne.

and Ballads (ACS 34), in which so many figures “refuse” love due to their inability to negotiate the realities of loss and time. As the corrupt epigraph from fragment 1 suggests, despite her poetic powers of “persuasion,” which “netted” her the girl in the first place, Sappho has (yet again) lost her, and it is the “bitterness” of this loss, not the “sweet-bitterness” of their love itself that she finds unbearable.

IV.

This returns us to the “death fantasies” (5-10, 23-34, 106-14, 129-44)⁴⁶ that absorb so much of the critical commentary on “Anactoria.” Understandably, these “death fantasies” might be thought to undermine the notion that Sappho’s primary goal is the extension of her love affair with Anactoria, since literal death would spell the end of any romantic engagement, or the very possibility of such engagements. Indeed, Sappho herself suggests the latter in the lines that bracket her first extended fantasy of “killing” Anactoria (25-34):

I would my love could kill thee; I am satiated
With seeing thee live, and fain would have thee dead.
.....
I am weary of all thy words and soft strange ways,
Of all love’s fiery nights and all his days. (23-24, 35-36)

Yet, if these words, and the “death fantasy” they frame, are set in context—rather than wrenched from it and viewed as a “set piece” that can be interchanged with the other “death fantasies” in the poem or in the volume—they appear as the ironic culmination of an increasingly desperate succession of Sappho’s ill-assorted rhetorical attempts, adopted and abandoned with dizzying rapidity, to “persuade” Anactoria to continue their erotic

⁴⁶ The last two passages might be considered as one passage bridged by other material.

relationship. After her bold and direct attempt to seduce Anactoria back to their “breast kindling” embraces fails (11-14), she turns to begging her, “for my life’s sake,” not to “follow lesser loves” (15-20); she then attempts to turn the tables by threatening that she too will find another, perhaps “Eroton or Erinna,” to “lure [...] to my love” (21-22); and she finally claims, in an unconvincing about-face, that *she* is the one who has tired of their passion, and that she would rather “kill” than keep the lover whom she has just begged and pleaded to remain with her: “I would my love could kill thee; I am satiated / With seeing thee live, and fain would have thee dead” (23-24).

Yet Sappho’s poorly-feigned indifference, and with it her desperate attempt at negative psychology, is betrayed by both her emotional intensity and the violence of her rhetoric. The fantasy of “infinite ill[s]” that follows her declaration of intended homicide plays-out like an indefinite extension of their sadomasochistic passion rather than the description of its definitive end:

I would find grievous ways to have thee slain,
Intense device, and superflux of pain;
Vex thee with amorous agonies, and shake
Life at thy lips, and leave it there to ache;
Strain out thy soul with pangs too soft to kill,
Intolerable interludes, and infinite ill;
Relapse and reluctance of the breath,
Dumb tunes and shuddering semitones of death. (27-34)

Here the “grievous ways” Sappho would “find” to have Anactoria “slain” are transformed almost immediately into “amorous agonies” (27-29), “pangs too soft to kill” that would still leave “Life at thy lips [...] to ache” (30-31). In fact, the “ways to have” Anactoria “slain” seem more like ways to bring her to panting orgasm, to an “almost death” that is a

series of “little deaths”:⁴⁷ “Relapse and reluctance of the breath, / Dumb tunes and shuddering semitones of death” (33-34). By deferring the “death blow” to linger lasciviously on Anactoria’s “death throes,” Sappho betrays her real desire to prolong, rather than to end, their sadomasochistic pleasures. Similarly, although she follows this passage by reasserting her “weariness” of both Anactoria and their love (35-36), she betrays this “weariness” by yearningly describing, in great (if heavily metaphorical) detail, both Anactoria’s body and their violent lovemaking in the lengthy parallel passages that immediately follow (35-46, 47-58).

While overlooking the fact that this early “death fantasy” involves *only* the death of Anactoria, many critics have argued that all such fantasies in “Anactoria” are evidence of Sappho’s supposed desire for “absolute union,” which, whether she appreciates it or not, can only be (imaginatively) achieved by “destroy[ing] both the beloved and the self in the consummate unifying act of passion” (Harrison, “Eros” 24). Although its significance can be debated, Swinburne’s Sappho repeatedly imagines such an all-annihilating “act of passion,” in the early image of her and Anactoria’s “sifted ashes” on the funeral pyre (7-10), in the cannibalistic “entombment” of Anactoria within her own presumably lifeless “flesh” (111-14), and in her extended dream of dying by “crush[ing]” Anactoria “out of life with love [...] and be[ing] / Mixed with thy blood and molten into thee!” (130-32). For the critics mentioned above, these mutual death scenes mark Sappho’s “transcendence,” whether real or delusional, into some non-differentiated state of quasi-spiritual union⁴⁸ or of solipsistic ecstasy.⁴⁹ Yet these readings are undermined by

⁴⁷ The pun here is on *la petite mort* [the little death], which is a French euphemism for orgasm.

⁴⁸ See e.g. Harrison “Eros”; Charlesworth; see also Ch 1, fn. 19.

⁴⁹ See e.g. Wagner-Lawlor; Snodgrass.

the fact that, as Cook remarks, Sappho, like Swinburne himself, expresses “no [transcendent] illusions about the utter finality of death” (81),⁵⁰ and the utter extinction of consciousness *per se* that it entails. Unlike the Christian/post-Christian speakers of the “Triumph” and “Dolores,” and like the late-Roman speaker of the “Hymn,” Sappho has no notions of spiritual transcendence to displace, and her fantasies of death are gruesome, “finite and [...] physiological” (Cook 81), leaving little more of her and Anactoria than “sifted ashes” (10) or a “molten” mass of bloody flesh (129-32).

While Sappho’s early fantasy of killing *only* Anactoria (23-34) is an extension, as per the epigraph to the poem, of her attempt to maintain their romantic relationship “by means of persuasion,” her fantasy of “mutual death” reflects her despair of succeeding in this attempt—that is, her fear that their love has irrevocably ended, a fear which is always present (if suppressed) as the motive-force of her utterance. Facing the unbearable “bitterness” of their ended love, with its dynamic of “cleaving” each-to-each and each-from-each, Swinburne’s Sappho imagines herself and Anactoria collapsing instead into the purely physical, non-transcendent, insensate “unity” of “sifted ashes.” Yet, even though her fantasy of “be[ing] / Mixed with thy blood and molten into thee” (131-32) comes of her despair of prolonging their erotic relationship, it still betrays her underlying desire to do precisely that:

Would I not hurt thee perfectly? not touch
 Thy pores of sense with torture, and make bright
 Thine eyes with bloodlike tears and grievous light?

 Feed thee with fever and famine and fine drouth [*sic*],
 With perfect pangs convulse thy perfect mouth,
 Make thy life shudder in thee and burn afresh,
 And wring thy very spirit through the flesh? (134-36, 141-44)

⁵⁰ See also Morgan, “Dramatic” 178.

Not only does Sappho's description of Anactoria's "death throes" again play-out like an orgasmic extension of their sadomasochistic passion,⁵¹ but it also echoes the sense, present in the opening lines (1-4) and the attempted seduction (11-14), that such Sapphic eros is not only destabilizing but potentially revitalizing, not only "crushing" but "kindling" life and desire (13-14). Sappho's "torture" would "make bright" Anactoria's "eyes" (135-36); "fever and famine and [...] drouth [*sic*]" would "feed" her (141); and her apparent "death" would make her "life shudder [...] *and* burn afresh" (144, emphasis added).

V.

While this latter fantasy of mutual death betrays Sappho's desire to extend her love affair with Anactoria, it encodes this desire—in four lines that I purposefully omitted from the excerpt above—in terms of musical-poetic composition and performance. (Sappho's poems were composed to be sung to the accompaniment of a lyre). As many critics have pointed out, in this fantasy Swinburne's Sappho "turns the body of her beloved into a 'lyre,'" upon which she plays "the sounds of sadomasochistic ecstasy" (Dellamora 75):⁵²

[I would] Strike pang from pang as note is struck from note,
 Catch the sob's middle music in thy throat,
 Take thy limbs living, and new-mould with these
 A lyre of many faultless agonies [...] (137-40)

⁵¹ Cf. Cook 88.

⁵² See also Cook 88; Paglia, *Sexual* 475; Prins 126-27; Zonana 43. In a letter of 1870 to D. G. Rossetti, Swinburne repeats the analogy between the lesbian body and the lyre: "I don't imagine the Tenth Muse of Lesbos would have tried her quite-otherwise-employed hand at inditing songs and stories to soothe the cradles of infants to the necessary preliminaries of whose production she held such strong objections [...] that she] might have sung and played to children with the same mouth and the same hand which made music on the Lesbian lyre, and on another feminine organ not necessary to specify" (*SL* 2.101).

As Prins remarks (126),⁵³ this passage makes explicit the musical-poetic subtext present in Sappho's earlier fantasy of killing Anactoria (27-34), with its metaphorical use of "tunes" and "semitones" (34), and its submerged puns on "interludes" (as in a musical intermission) (32) and "strain[ing]" (as in "tightening strings for raising pitch") (31) (see *PRC* 523-24n). While this explicit fantasy of turning Anactoria's "limbs living" into a "lyre of many faultless agonies" reflects the fact that Sappho's poetry is rooted in her "own embodied experience" of desire (Psomiades 78),⁵⁴ it also makes that same sadomasochistic interchange "into an analogue for the creative process" (Psomiades 76). "Bitten," "stung," and "smitten" by Anactoria's "beauty" (115-16), love-struck Sappho is spurred, unlike the "abstaining" speaker of "Dolores," to "hit back," thereby making "music" from her beloved's "sobs and poetry from her pain" (Paglia, *Sexual* 475), turning "each painful pang" into a "melodious note or rhythmic tone" (Prins 127).

Yet, despite the evident intertwining of passion and poetry in passages like these, some critics have argued that "Anactoria" posits "the opposition between the erotic life and the [...] gift of poetry" (*TSR* 128). In the first half of the poem, they maintain, Sappho's artistic "intellect" is in danger of "subversion by [her] lust" (Cook 86), although the latter will be displaced by her "poetic powers" in the end (*TSR* 128-29).⁵⁵ Such readings seem to be supported by Sappho's repeated elevation, in the first half of the poem, of Anactoria's body over her song: "but thou," she says to Anactoria, "thy body is the song, / Thy mouth the music; thou art more than I" (74-75). This statement is elaborated shortly thereafter, when she explicitly offers to trade her song for the

⁵³ See also Morgan, "Dramatic" 178.

⁵⁴ See also Zonana 43.

⁵⁵ See also Cook 86; Welby 87.

prolongation of her love affair with Anactoria:

Ah that my lips were tuneless lips, but pressed
To the bruised blossom of thy scourged white breast!
Ah that my mouth for Muses' milk were fed
On the sweet blood thy sweet small wounds had bled! (105-08)

Rightly seeking to defend the connection between Sappho's passion and her poetry, both Morgan and Joyce Zonana strain to read these passages as if they do not "imply that sexuality replaces creativity, but rather that consideration of one necessarily leads to consideration of the other" (Zonana 42; see Morgan, "Dramatic" 182-83). Although their point is valid in light of the entire poem, such explanations will not do in this instance, since the other critics—though they may be wrong in their general assertions about the antagonism of sex and art—are correct in claiming that the logic of these passages is one of displacement rather than of complementarity. Sappho is claiming that she would accept "tuneless lips" as the price of being able to kiss Anactoria's "scourged white breast," and she would trade "Muses' milk" in exchange for the taste of the latter's "sweet blood."

While Cook is correct that Sappho's rhetoric in these passages reduces "art" to "a mere bauble in the presence of sex" (86)—even going so far as to suggest that she would repudiate the former for the opportunity to (re)engage in the latter—he, and like-minded critics, including McSweeney and T. Earle Welby, make the common mistake of ignoring the dramatic context within which these utterances arise. Taken within their dramatic context, Sappho's seeming repudiations of her poetry and her poetic skill are highly ironic, since they arise as part of her larger attempt—which, again, spans the entire first half of the poem (1-144)—to renew her passionate relations with Anactoria "by means of persuasion" (i.e. by the exercise of her own poetic skill). In other words, her

depreciations of her poetry and poetic skill are insincere attempts at flattering Anactoria, which gain their force only insofar as she emphasizes her own greatness as poet: “you are greater,” she effectively says, “than even my great poetry.” Thus, after telling Anactoria that, by mere virtue of her “body,” she is “more than I” as poet (74-75), Sappho goes on to expound at length upon her own poetic greatness, and its power over her listeners and readers, in terms that will echo throughout the second half of the poem:

[...] thou art more than I,
Though my voice die not till the whole world die;
Though men that hear it madden; though love weep,
Though nature change, though shame be charmed to sleep. (75-78)

Similarly, the more ostentatious and self-assured her display of poetic skill in lingering longingly upon her memories of Anactoria’s body and their sexual encounters—as, for example, in the self-conscious *tour de force* of the “mirror passages” (35-46, 47-58), in which two complete sets of twelve end-rhymes are recycled⁵⁶—the more effective, and less sincere, will be her flattery of the latter.

Just as Sappho is not sincere in her earlier claims that she has “wearied” of her love affair with Anactoria (23-24, 35-36), so she is not sincere in these claims that she would trade her song to extend it (105-08). Although it is true that Sappho’s poetry is rooted in, and its production is modeled upon, her experience of eros, the former also acts as the “means of persuasion” whereby the latter is both initiated and perpetuated (or renewed) in others. Yet, while Sappho’s passion and poetry are interrelated in this self-perpetuating way—as is suggested in fragment 31—the latter is not, as Maxwell would claim, “vitaly dependent upon” Anactoria herself (*Female* 39). As the corrupt epigraph from fragment 1 suggests, Sappho has been here, facing the end of a romantic

⁵⁶ For discussion of the “mirror passages,” see McGann, “Radical” 214, “Wagner” 627-29.

relationship, many times before, and (by implication) she will be here again. “Last year,” as Sappho says near the end of “Anactoria,” “I loved Atthis, and this year [...] I love thee” (286-87).⁵⁷ In other words, she will not attempt in the present, as she clearly has not attempted in the past, to translate her fantasies of mutual death into reality. For Swinburne’s Sappho, as for the speaker of the “Triumph” (305-08), life will continue after the end of (this) love. Instead of choosing to put an end to all love, and thus to all poetry, by withdrawing from the world—like the speakers of the “Hymn,” the “Triumph,” “Dolores,” “Hesperia,” and many other poems in the volume—she will choose, in the last third of the poem (189-304), to enter into passionate relations, of a yet-to-be-defined kind, with many others. As we shall soon see, it is through this extension and multiplication of her passion(s) that Swinburne’s Sappho secures her “godlike” status as supreme poet, albeit at the expense of those non-human (and non-existent) gods who would limit our experience, and thereby stifle our creativity.

VI.

As I have already remarked, despite the fact that the historical Sappho was a pre-Christian Greek, Swinburne’s Sappho, as the “presiding muse” of *Poems and Ballads* (ACS 34), is meant to figure the sort of poet called for by the speaker of “Dolores,” and thus to function as both a contrast to and potential corrective of the Christian asceticism that, as far as Swinburne knew, had resulted in the censored and fragmented state of the Sapphic corpus itself. On the surface, Swinburne’s retrospective alignment of Sappho against the forces of Christian asceticism would seem justified by the ancient poet’s

⁵⁷ Attis is one of Sappho’s beloved girls, and she appears in fragments 8, 49, 96, and 131. Fragments 8 and 96 would not have been available to Swinburne.

association with Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, who functions as a counterpoint to “the pale Galilean” throughout the volume (“Hymn” 35). As both Lyn Hatherly Wilson (19) and Margaret Williamson (114) remark, Aphrodite is “the god who appears, and is appealed to, most often in Sappho’s songs” (see e.g. fr. 1, 2, 15, 22, 33, 134)⁵⁸ (Wilson 19), and one ancient commentator even claimed that, “when it came to the rites of Aphrodite,” other poets, knowing that they could not equal her, “left the song [...] to Sappho” (qtd. in Edmonds 175).⁵⁹ Sappho herself emphasizes her special relationship to Aphrodite in fragment 1, in which, desperate to regain the girl who has “slipped her net,” she begs the goddess to “be my ally” as she has so often in the past. In the lines preceding his free adaptation of this fragment into “Anactoria” (63-84), Swinburne has his Sappho, in her ongoing attempt to “persuade” the still-reluctant Anactoria, place even more stress upon the favouritism that she receives from the goddess: “Ah, take no thought for Love’s sake; shall this be, / And she who loves thy lover not love thee? [...] Mine is she, very mine; and she forgives” (59-60, 62).

Yet it is important to remember that, although the Greek gods might seem “goodly and glad” in comparison to “the pale Galilean” (“Dolores” 356; “Hymn” 35), from Swinburne’s neo-Romantic perspective, any god that is alienated from “the human breast” will, through the development of dogma and ritual, become an impediment to human experience, and thereby to human creativity (see Blake, *Marriage* p.11, p. 38).⁶⁰ Examined more closely, it seems that the pre-Christian Aphrodite of “Anactoria,” outside of any post-Christian context within which she might be viewed as providing “the better

⁵⁸ Fragments 15 and 22 would not have been available to Swinburne.

⁵⁹ The rites of Aphrodite are wedding rights, and the songs wedding songs.

⁶⁰ As Louis argues, in discussing what she calls the “anti-Olympian topos” in Victorian poetry (see *Proserpine* 14-17), for Swinburne even the Greek gods can take on the oppressive character that he more readily associates with “dogmatic Christianity” (*Proserpine* 16).

alternative,” is no exception to this anti-theistic rule. In the above quoted passage from “Anactoria,” for instance, Aphrodite is not merely depicted as granting favours to Sappho, but as “forgiving” both her and Anactoria because they have (implicitly) transgressed some rule of her pagan cult of love (69). In all likelihood, as both Cook (84-86) and Morgan (“Dramatic” 179-80) suggest, Sappho must reassure Anactoria to “take no thought for Love’s sake” because Aphrodite is conventionally understood as the “goddess of heterosexual coitus” (Cook 84),⁶¹ and Anactoria assumes—like the later Greek epigrammatist Asclepiades—that those who “will not go to the house of Cypris by the road the goddess ordains” must be “look[ed on] with hate” by the goddess herself (*Greek Anth.* 5.207).⁶² By thus resetting his seemingly straightforward adaptation of fragment 1 within the dramatic context of Sappho’s attempt to assuage Anactoria’s fears of Aphrodite’s retaliation for their illicit sexual activities, Swinburne complicates his Sappho’s relation to the goddess, whose characteristic laughter (66, 72, 80),⁶³ “stinging through the eyes and ears” (66), takes on an unnerving aura of menace that belies her supposedly “sweet heart” (80).

This is one case where it is particularly useful, in attempting to understand “Anactoria,” to turn to the other poem in the volume that is explicitly dedicated to Sappho: “Sapphics.” Unlike “Anactoria,” in which the suggestion of antagonism between Sappho and Aphrodite is introduced by resetting, rather than greatly modifying, fragment 1, “Sapphics” is “a studied reversal” of fragment 1 (Zonana 41), in which Sappho has

⁶¹ As Williamson remarks, neither Aphrodite nor any other Greek goddess has lesbian lovers (115). In “Fragoletta,” the speaker, in justifying his love for the eponymous hermaphrodite, specifies that “Venus hath no girl, / No front of female curl, / Among her loves” (28-30).

⁶² This reflects the general distaste in the ancient world for lesbianism (see Dover 182; Johnson, M. 78; Williamson 115).

⁶³ As the Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite (*Homeric* 5) repeatedly states, Aphrodite is the “lover of smiles” (15, 50, 56, 66, 155, 290).

“turned her face from” (42), rather than called upon, Aphrodite, who is “in flight not to, but from, Lesbos” (*SEC* 112), even as she begs Sappho to “Turn [back] to me” (41). As McGann observes, “It is as if [...] Sappho’s ode [were] composed and read ‘before a mirror’” (*SEC* 115). Just as the antagonism between Sappho and Aphrodite is, at least initially, more evident in “Sapphics” than in “Anactoria,” so is the fundamental motivation behind, if not the significance of, this antagonism. Turning “her face from” the goddess, and her train of (implicitly) sanctioned Loves (41-48), Sappho

Saw the Lesbians kissing across their smitten
Lutes with lips more sweet than the sound of lute-strings,
Mouth to mouth and hand upon hand, her chosen,
Fairer than all men. (49-52)

Sappho’s rejection of Aphrodite is not, as McGann remarks (see *SEC* 114), simply about her rejection of heterosexuality.⁶⁴ Rather, Sappho’s rebellion here is about repudiating the artificial restrictions imposed by the cult of the goddess on our sensual experience, and (by extension) any such restrictions imposed by any such god or gods. Embracing her unfettered desire for her fellow Lesbians, who are “Full of songs and kisses [...] Full of music” (54-55), Sappho becomes an alternative “human Muse” (*Zonana* 41), whose example, her passionate song, causes all of the gods to “wax pale” (66).

Although she is not as direct as the Sappho of “Sapphics,” the Sappho of “Anactoria,” after she fails to convince her beloved of the goddess’s favour, similarly argues that their sensual lesbian (and Lesbian) experience, both of the material world and of each other’s bodies, should outweigh fear of Aphrodite’s supposed “wrath” (88):

Have we not lips to love with, eyes for tears,
And summer and flower of women and of years?

⁶⁴ McGann thinks that it is an assertion that the world “must change its attitude about what love really is,” and that is an “infinite longing” of which the gods know nothing (*SEC* 114).

.....
Waters that answer waters, fields that wear
Lilies, and languor of the Lesbian air? (95-96, 99-100)

Yet the ease and rapidity with which Swinburne's Sappho moves from claiming Aphrodite's favour (59-86) to dismissing the seriousness of her "wrath" (87-104) suggests that, unlike the "fearful" Anactoria (88), and like the speaker of the "Hymn," she never truly conceived of Aphrodite as an external reality that might oppose her desires. In fact, (re-)set in the context of Sappho's repeated attempts to retain Anactoria, Aphrodite seems more like the product of Sappho's passion and poetry than their origin, which lends her claim that Aphrodite is "Mine [...] very mine" another level of meaning (62). Confronted with the loss of Anactoria, Sappho recreates the goddess of love in her own image, to lend weight to her own desires, with which she repeatedly interrupts the goddess's supposed speech (adapted from fragment 1): she "Shall kiss that would not kiss thee' (yea, kiss me) / 'When thou wouldst not'—when I would not kiss thee!" (83-84, see also 73-74).⁶⁵ Arguing later, in response to Anactoria's refusal to believe her claims of the goddess's favour, that Aphrodite is not "God alone" (89), Sappho conjures up the possibility of "other gods for other loves" (102), yet it is the "persuasive" poet who will displace the "goddess of wiles" (see Wilson 28), and all "other gods," in her ongoing attempts to see "shame [...] charmed to sleep" and desire reignited (78).⁶⁶

⁶⁵ It is notable that in Swinburne's corrupt epigraph from fragment 1 (see fn. 38) it is Sappho who is exercising "persuasion," not Aphrodite.

⁶⁶ In "The Poems of Dante Gabriel Rossetti" [1870], Swinburne refers to Sappho as "the unapproachable poetess [...] whose glory has outlived her goddess, and whose name has been set above hers" (CW 15.33-34). It may be worth noting that, in "Lesbos" [1857], Baudelaire says that Sappho was "fairer than Venus" (57, 61, 65) and envied by Venus (14).

VII.

While Sappho's commitment to sensual experience may be sufficient to surmount all attempts imposing artificial restrictions upon it, even when they (supposedly) come from the goddess of love herself, she cannot overcome the inherent limitation of love by time. In other words, even if she could find a way, by virtue of her poetic skill, to "charm" Anactoria's shame "to sleep," their love would end with the death of one or the other. It is following her failed invocation of Aphrodite, which forms her last explicit attempt to convince Anactoria not to leave, that Sappho shifts from lamenting the end of her affair with Anactoria to angrily bewailing what Swinburne elsewhere calls "the end of every man's desire" ("Burdens" 8). Although Swinburne's Sappho implicitly dismisses the idea of a "creator God" responsible for the conditions of human existence, including the mortality of ourselves and our "desires," in her denial that Aphrodite is "God alone" (89),⁶⁷ she shortly after revisits the notion in her attempt to come to terms with what she calls "the mystery of the cruelty of things" (154).⁶⁸ As per the problem of evil, such a hypothetical "high God" would (249, 267), being "above all gods and years" (155), and thus immune from the mortality He imposes upon His creation, be necessarily sadistic,⁶⁹ making "all things [only] to break them one by one" (149):

⁶⁷ In this passage, Sappho clearly asks Anactoria if Aphrodite is "God alone," and has "Made earth and all the centuries of the sea" (89-90), because she believes the idea of a single, omnipotent creator God to be self-evidently preposterous—hence her subsequent appeal to "other gods for other loves" (102).

⁶⁸ In contrast to what most critics have asserted (see e.g. Gosse, "First" 95; Rutland 287-88; *TSR* 129; Paglia, *Sexual*; McGann, "Radical" 214), Sappho's speculation about the "high God" is not anachronistic, but arises naturally, as an extension of her attempts to assuage Anactoria's fears about Aphrodite's wrath. As Cook has remarked, contra Gosse and others, "these lines are perfectly consistent with the rest of 'Anactoria,' providing as they do an appropriate counterpoint to the passage (lines 89-102) ending 'Are not there other gods for other loves?'" (89). That being said, the lines do appear to have been added after the rest of the poem had been composed, even if they were not a mere "after-thought" that "leave[s] the individual passion of Sappho entirely out of sight" (Gosse, "First" 95; see also Rutland 287-88).

⁶⁹ As Sappho remarks, the sadism of the "high God" would seem to a necessary consequence of his

Is not his incense bitterness, his meat
Murder? his hidden face and iron feet
Hath not man known, and felt them on their way
Threaten and trample all things and every day? (171-74)

Just as she conjured a “sweet heart[ed]” Aphrodite to be her “ally” in love, Sappho here conjures-up the “high God,” who makes us “wax paler” as we “feel time grow through our veins” (187-88), to function as an ultimate (if non-existent) enemy against whom she can vent her frustration at “the end of every man’s desire.”

As we have already seen, Swinburne’s Sappho, despite her grief and anger over the fact of human mortality, accepts the simple fact of material annihilation, and here she allows that the “high God” may “slay me, hating me [...] and ease / This soul of mine” (259, 261-62), hiding and extinguishing her “in the deep dear sea” of time itself (260). Although, as I will return to shortly, she claims that “the high God hath not all his will” of her because her song will grant her some degree of what she calls “immortality” (267, 203), it is important to remember that her poetry springs from her intense sensual experience of the world—particularly of her sexual relations with others—which include her experiences of loss, change, and mortality. “Having made” her, the “high God” “shall not slay [...] nor satiate” her, precisely because she lives with an intensity lacking in “those herds of his” (252-53):

Who laugh and live a little, and their kiss

immortality and omnipotence:

were I made as he
Who hath made all things to break them one by one
If my feet trod upon the stars and sun
And souls of men as his have always trod,
God knows I might be crueller than God. (148-52)

Swinburne may have felt justified in including this meditation on the linkage between divine immortality and cruelty by a line in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* (1398b): “Sappho says that death is an evil: the gods have so decided, otherwise they would die.” This is fragment 201 in Campbell’s edition. Carson does not include it in her edition, as it does not contain any words purported to be by Sappho.

Contents them, and their loves are swift and sweet,
And sure death grasps and gains them with slow feet,
Love they or hate they, strive or bow their knees—
And all these end; he hath his will of these. (254-58)

Given her readiness to abandon her relationship with Sappho—whether because she is “Too weak to bear these hands and lips of mine” (16), or because she fears the disapproval of the gods—Anactoria implicitly marks herself as one “of these” (258); however, it is Sappho’s whole-hearted experience of their relationship *and* its failure, and of all the pleasure *and* pain that has come with that experience, that lies at the core of her poetic production, thus paradoxically rooting her “immortality” in her distinctively mortal experience.

Both McGann (*SEC* 112-15) and Zonana (40-42), in their differing ways, argue that this connection is implied in Sappho’s outright rejection of Aphrodite for her fellow Lesbians, “kissing across their smitten / Lutes with lips more sweet than the sound of lute-strings” (49-50), in “Sapphics”—a rejection which, as I have argued, is also implied in “Anactoria” (95-100). In Zonana’s words, the Sappho of “Sapphics” “has [paradoxically] achieved divinity” (i.e. realized her full creative potential) “through her full experience of humanity,” and her “immortality” by singing “as only mortal can” (40, 42). It is this “Sapphic” song, “Made of perfect sound and exceeding passion” that made the Olympian gods and the muses flee “from before her” (58, 68): “Then the Muses, stricken at heart, were silent; / Yea, the gods waxed pale; such a song was that song” (65-66). In “humanizing the gods” and muses by introducing them to “the tragic sense of life” (i.e. the human, mortal sense of life) (*SEC* 114-15)—making “Tears for [her usual] laughter darken” Aphrodite’s “immortal eyelids” (43)—Sappho not only disposes of them, she replaces them, both in herself and those “Sapphic” poets, themselves

“Sapphics” of a sort,⁷⁰ that will follow her:

All [the gods and muses] withdrew long since, and the land was barren,
Full of fruitless women and music only.

.....
[...] singing
Songs that move the heart of the shaken heaven,
Songs that break the heart of the earth with pity,
Hearing, to hear them. (69-70, 77-80)

In other words, Sappho essentially kills the gods, in the process “divinizing” herself, and setting those who come after her a model of unrestricted human experience and creativity, thus becoming what Zonana calls a “human Muse” (41).

Likewise, in a passage that outraged the mid-Victorian reviewers of *Poems and Ballads*, the Sappho of “Anactoria” fantasizes about using her humanity itself as a weapon against the sadistic “high God,” who “wields and wrecks” all mortal things (251), in more direct fashion: “Him would I reach, him smite, him desecrate, / Pierce the cold lips of God *with human breath*, / And mix his immortality with death” (182-84, emphasis added). In “mixing” the “high God’s” “immortality with death,” Sappho anachronistically inverts the creative act of (the Hebrew) God breathing life into Adam (Gen. 2.7),⁷¹ but she also mirrors and displaces the “high God” by using her “divided breath”—divided, like all mortal things, between “birth” and “death” (233-36)—to mix “death” (i.e. the human condition) with “immortality” in the verses that derive from and record her experience, as in her affair with Anactoria: “thou shalt be forgotten like spilt wine, / Except these kisses of my lips on thine / *Brand them with immortality*” (201-03, emphasis added). As in “Sapphics,” it is through these verses that Sappho “mortalizes”

⁷⁰ As Prins remarks (141), the word “Sapphics,” as used in the title of the poem, could both signify the distinctive meter of Sappho, in which “Sapphics” is written, or those poets who follow in Sappho’s footsteps, and who are the subject of “Sapphics.”

⁷¹ Cf. Klock 118. See Ch. 3, fn. 33.

the gods, while rendering herself—and thus making it possible for her future readers to render themselves—“immortal.”⁷² Violently impacted by her sensual experience in the material world, Sappho seems (in turn) to leave her “creative” imprint on the material world through the production of her song, both “reanimating and eroticizing” it with her own “divided breath” (Morgan, “Dramatic” 183):⁷³ “Violently singing till the whole world sings— / I Sappho shall be one with all these things, / With all high things forever [...]” (275-77).

VIII.

Moving away from the issue of the mortality of Sappho’s love with Anactoria, it is her own “immortality” and its nature that forms the primary focus of the last section of the poem (189-304), beginning with her reflection, partially quoted above, on the unpoetic Anactoria’s mortality, which echoes fragments 55 and 147 (*PBH* 333n):

Thee too the years shall cover; thou shalt be
 As the rose born of one same blood with thee,
 As a song sung, as a word said, and fall
 Flower-wise, and be not any more at all,
Nor any memory of thee anywhere;
 For never Muse has bound above thine hair
 The high Pierian flower [...]

 Yea, *thou shalt be forgotten* like spilt wine,
 Except these kisses of my lips on thine
 Brand them with immortality. (189-95, 201-03, emphases added)

While her poetic “immortality” is a common theme in Sappho’s surviving verses (see e.g. fr. 55, 65, 147, 193), it is also reiterated by a tradition of subsequent poets and epigrammatists, to which Swinburne adds himself in writing “Anactoria.” “[Do] not say

⁷² Cf. Charlesworth 29.

⁷³ See also McGhee 95.

that I, the Mytilenaeen poetess, am dead,” ventriloquizes Tullius Laurea, because “no day will ever dawn that does not speak the name of Sappho” (Test. 28). “The tomb may hold the bones [...] of Sappho,” says Pintyus, “but her skilled words are immortal” (*Greek Anth.* 7.16).⁷⁴ For the epigrammatists and poets following her, it was the “skilled words” and revered “name” of Sappho that had survived her; likewise, in “Anactoria,” it is not Sappho herself that will remain—as we have seen, she views death as material annihilation—but the “memory” of her in the minds of future generations of readers, thus redefining “life” and “death,” in this latter part of the poem, as metaphors for being either “remembered” or “forgotten.”

Considering this attitude towards mortality, however, the passage from which I quoted at the end of the previous section might seem confusing, as it has often been thought to reflect some sort of transcendent (or “pantheistic”) unity with the universe itself,⁷⁵ and hence of literal, quasi-spiritual survival:

Blossom of branches, and on each high hill
 Clean air and wind, and under in clamorous vales
 Fierce noises of the fiery nightingales,
 Buds burning in the sudden spring like fire,
 The wan washed sand and the waves’ vain desire,
 Sails seen like blown white flowers at sea, and words
 That bring tears swiftest, and long notes of birds
 Violently singing till the whole world sings—
 I Sappho shall be one with all these things,
 With all high things for ever [...] (268-77)

Yet viewed in the light of a preceding passage (see below), and combined with Sappho’s belief in the finality of death, “these things” appear not to be material things themselves, but the perceptions of material things in the minds of her future readers. “Men,” she

⁷⁴ For more ancient writers on Sappho’s “immortality,” see Test. 15; *Greek Anth.* 7.407.

⁷⁵ See e.g. Harrison, “Eros” 32; *TSR* 130.

says,” in her earlier elaboration on her “immortality,”

shall not see bright fire nor hear the sea,
Nor mix their hearts with music, nor behold
Cast forth of heaven, with feet of awful gold
And plumeless wings that make the bright air blind,
Lightning, with thunder for a hound behind
Hunting through fields unfurrowed and unsown,
But in the light and laughter, in the moan
And music, and in grasp of lip and hand
And shudder of water that makes felt on land
The immeasurable tremor of all the sea,
Memories shall mix and metaphors of me. (204-14)

Sappho’s tragic vision of a world with “pain like mine in her divided breath” (236) inspires the world even after her death because it will become part of the minds, and therefore the lived-experience, of each of her future readers. It is these “meaningful” human experiences of the world, and not material things themselves, that are the “high things” she holds in defiance of the “high God;”⁷⁶ and these “high things” are further heightened by “mixing” with the “memories [...] and metaphors” of her once-lived experience, as recorded in her verses: “my songs once heard in a strange place, / Cleave to men’s lives, and waste the days thereof / With gladness and much sadness and long love” (278-80).⁷⁷

This “heightening” of the lived-experience—both “glad” and “sad,” pleasurable and painful⁷⁸—of her future readers echoes the paradoxical effect of Sappho’s erotic

⁷⁶ As Morgan remarks, “Sappho wills herself into immortality, appealing not to God or to Nature, but to the poem and to the reader as her witnesses” (“Dramatic” 183).

⁷⁷ In “John Ford” [1871], Swinburne makes similar remarks about the power of the dramatist to become part of his readers’ lived experiences:

No poet is less forgettable than Ford; none fastens (as it were) the fangs of his genius and will more deeply in your memory. You cannot shake hands with him and pass by; you cannot fall in with him and out again at pleasure; if he touch you once he takes you, and what he takes he keeps hold of; his work becomes part of your thought and parcel of your spiritual furniture forever; he signs himself upon you as with a seal of deliberate and decisive power. (CW 12.405)

⁷⁸ Cf. Zonana 45.

fantasies about Anactoria, in which she would “touch / Thy pores of sense with torture, and make bright / Thine eyes with bloodlike tears and grievous light,” simultaneously making “thy life shudder in thee *and* burn afresh” (134-36, 143, emphasis added). This parallel is underlined by Sappho’s explicit assertion that her readers will stand in the same “knowing” relation to her as Anactoria, and her heretofore unmentioned prior lovers, once did:⁷⁹

And they shall know me as ye who have known me here,
Last year when I loved Atthis, and this year
When I love thee; and they shall praise me, and say
“She hath all time as all we have our day,
Shall she not live and have her will”—even I?
Yea, though thou diest, I say I shall not die.
For these shall give me of their souls, shall give
Life, and the days and loves wherewith I live,
Shall quicken me with loving, fill with breath,
Save me and serve me, strive for me with death. (285-94)

As in her relations with Anactoria, the most noticeable thing about Sappho’s relations with her future readers is its dynamic of mutual domination and submission: although she clearly exercises power over the “souls” of those readers who “serve” her—“pervading,” as Swinburne says of her elsewhere, “the spirit with ‘a sweet, possessive pang’” (*CW* 15.33)⁸⁰—they also “save” her by “quicken[ing]” her “with loving” and “fill[ing]” her “with breath.” Yet, unlike her shattered fantasy of endless love with Anactoria, Sappho’s relationships with her many readers are construed as mutable links in an extended chain of lovers, which reaches back to include those lovers that came before Anactoria. As in fragment 1, with its reiterated “yet agains,” Swinburne’s Sappho here acknowledges that

⁷⁹ Perhaps feeling the need to exonerate Swinburne from commonplace charges of voyeurism or exploitation (see fn. 84), Zonana claims, in the face of such lines as this, that “Swinburne does not [...] define his relationship to the Muse [i.e. Sappho] as sexual” (47).

⁸⁰ The phrase quoted by Swinburne is from D. G. Rossetti’s “For an Allegorical Dance of Women by Andrea Mantegna (In the Louvre)” [1850/1870]: “this music rang / Clear through his frame, a sweet possessive pang” (2-3).

love has come and gone before, and that it will come and go again, with the effect—explicit in “Anactoria,” implicit in many of the fragments themselves—that “sweetbitter moments of love” are extended “into a poetic eternity” (Wilson 128).⁸¹ As in the last surviving line of fragment 31, Sappho’s painful experience of eros does not prove fatal—nor lead, as in the “Triumph,” to withdrawal from the world—but acts as the spur to “reignite desire” in the other, whether the “beloved or [the future] reader” who stands in her place (Reynolds, *History* 1).

Of course, all of this runs counter to the standard nineteenth-century reading of both fragment 31 and Sappho herself, not just in the sex of the beloved—which so disturbed the original critics of “Anactoria”—but in the refusal to re-inscribe the “undoing” of the self that was cemented in the tradition of Sappho’s leap from the Leucadian cliff for the fictional Phaon. So complete is the latter myth’s penetration into the nineteenth-century image of Sappho that some critics still insist on reading it into the end of “Anactoria,”⁸² although Swinburne’s Sappho merely speaks of the inevitability of such complete extinction, excluding even literary “immortality,” in the far-distant extinction of the human race, and therefore of the “memories of me” that will survive her. According to Sappho, nothing will

Assuage me nor allay me nor appease,
Till supreme sleep shall bring me bloodless ease;
Till time wax faint in all his periods;
Till fate undo the bondage of the gods,
And lay, to slake and satiate me all through,
Lotus and Lethe on my lips like dew,
And shed around and over and under me
Thick darkness and the insuperable sea. (295-304)

⁸¹ See also Reynolds, *History* 4.

⁸² See e.g. Fletcher 27; Morgan, “Male Lesbian” 52.

While, until “the whole world die” (77), there will be no complete loss, there will also be no complete survival, because “Sappho” will “mix” with each of her future readers, in a quasi-erotic dialogue of mutual submission and dominance, through which each of them will “save” her by becoming part of her (memory), as she becomes part of them. There will be as many “Sapphos” as there will be reader-lovers, because she will become “one with all these [many] things,” which means that she will attain complete identity with none of them. In other, by now familiar, words, she will “cleave to men’s lives” in the characteristically-Swinburnian double sense of that verb.

As I have already noted, Wagner-Lawlor remarks the usage of the word “cleave” in “Anactoria,” and she links it to the simultaneous encoding of sameness and difference in the “likeness” of (the experience of) Sappho’s readers to (that of) the poet herself:

Like me shall be the shuddering calm of night [...]

Like me [shall be] the one star swooning with desire [...]

 [...] *like me* [shall be] the waste white noon,
 Burnt through with barren sunlight; and *like me*
 The land-stream and the tide-stream in the sea. (215, 220, 222-24)

She, however, sees this “likeness” as a self-conscious betrayal, on the part of the author, of the failure of Sappho’s drive for absolute identity with the reader, which has, by the end of the poem, displaced her drive for absolute identity with Anactoria. In fact, most commentators, undoubtedly influenced by the “transcendent critics,” have read “Anactoria” in terms of the desire for the utter elimination of difference and multiplicity, and of the mutual interplay of dominance and submission that sustains them: either Sappho “spiritually and sexually invades” the reader (Paglia, *Sexual* 477), in a “form of possession” that renders them (and Swinburne himself) her “passive instruments”

(Maxwell, *Female* 40);⁸³ or, she is “possessed” by the (implicitly male) reader, who “ventriloquizes” through her.⁸⁴ Yet, in *Notes on Poems and Reviews*, Swinburne makes it clear that, though he adopts her dramatic voice in “Anactoria,” he speaks neither *for* nor *as* Sappho (i.e. he neither displaces nor channels her), but rather that he merely comes “as near as I can” to her, though he adds that “no man can come close to her” (*SC* 21).⁸⁵

In other words, in “Anactoria,” Swinburne displays the “likeness”—and, therefore, he also displays the “unlikeness”—that has resulted from his intimate exposure to the record “of fleshly fever and amorous malady” left by “the very greatest poet who

⁸³ See also e.g. Klock 121; Prins 122-25, 155-56. While it might seem that Maxwell suggests there is some mutuality in the relationship between Sappho and her readers (see e.g. *Female* 179), she actually limits the contribution of the reader to the merely notional provision of “voice”: “Swinburne’s respectful submission to Sappho’s mould isn’t a matter of mere impersonation in the sense of miming, taking on a role, or brazen histrionics. It is more a ritual submission, like a form of possession in which he believes himself to be consumed by her. In the monologue he sees himself as her medium” (*Female* 40). Prins’s interpretation of Sappho’s “possession” of Swinburne (and others) is more unique, in that she sees it not as an occupation of the reader by an alien consciousness, or as a “mixing” with the reader’s lived experience, but as the subjection of the reader to a “purely [...] recurring rhythm,” which is all that remains of “Sappho” (140; see 117-119, 155-56; see also fn. 37). Of course, Swinburne himself would have balked at the idea that all that survived of Sappho was “Sapphic rhythm” (119), and he would have become apoplectic at the idea that his writing “repeats by rote the words of which the meaning is forgotten” (140). It is almost certainly too matter-of-fact to remark that “Anactoria” is not written in Sapphic meter. Prins is convinced that, since the name “Anactoria” scans as a perfect adonic line (i.e. the last line in a Sapphic stanza), the poem, despite the fact that it is written in heroic couplets, is marked as an allegory of “Sapphic rhythm” (see 127-28). It might just be worth noting, however, that Swinburne’s manuscript title for the poem, despite its basis in fragment 31, was not “Anactoria,” but the less metrically-convenient “Philocris” (Burnett 149).

⁸⁴ See e.g. Reynolds, *History* 183, 193; Morgan, “Male Lesbian” 50-52; Wilson 169. It is notable, in reviewing the critics, how Sappho seems only to be exploited (or ventriloquized) by male writers, or rather how the critics seem to assume that this is the only way male writers can relate to Sappho: “any championing of sexual freedom, particularly that of woman-woman erotics, by poets such as Baudelaire and Swinburne, should be viewed with caution because of their tendency not only to objectify the image of the lesbian but also to relegate her to the position of the ‘other’” (Johnson, M. 137; see also DeJean 6-8). Thus Morgan and Reynolds make the assumption—in the case of Morgan on the bewildering grounds that Swinburne’s Sappho speaks about “male interests” like God and poetry (see “Male Lesbian” 52)—that Swinburne’s Sappho is simply a man in drag (see Morgan, “Male Lesbian” 52; Reynolds, *History* 175). For the dangers of confusing Baudelaire with Swinburne, see fn. 14.

⁸⁵ It should be noted that Swinburne later remarked that “I have never ventured on any attempt at making a version of any of her [i.e. Sappho’s] fragments”: “In two of my poems—‘Anactoria’ and ‘On the Cliffs’ [1880]—I have given here & there a rendering of some single line or a paraphrase of some particular passage” (*UL* 2.320). Commenting on “Anactoria,” in *Notes on Poems and Reviews*, he remarked that the translations of fragment 31 by Ambrose Phillips (see fn. 34) and Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux, the then most popular versions in English and French (respectively), were “‘done into’ bad French and bad English”: “Feeling that although I might do it better I could not do it well, I abandoned the idea of translation” (*SR* 20).

ever was at all” (CW 13.243; SL 4.123). Thus he does not simply depict her as a model for the type of “fleshly” poet called for, and found wanting, at the end of “Dolores”—as she once served for Catullus, and now serves for Swinburne himself—but also, in the poem itself, provides an example of how her “fleshly” poetry may inspire others to produce such poetry themselves. Just as Sappho’s poetry is inspired by her own intense and often painful life-experience—which, figured in terms of her “loves,” distinguishes her from those comfortable “herds” whose “kiss / Contents them” (253-55)—so her intensification of her readers’ lived-experiences, both “glad” and “sad,” may inspire them to a lifetime of “creative” engagement with the material world, that is (in Swinburnian terms) to “long love.” If this engagement leads, as it has in the case of Swinburne and the innumerable other “Sapphics” that have preceded and will follow him, beyond the finding of private “meaning” for the material world, and to the production of poetry, then they may intensify their readers’ lived-experiences, leading to a self-perpetuating chain of poet-lovers, of each of whom “Sappho” will forever be a part. In short, “Anactoria” dramatizes the fulfilment of the perpetually-renewed, yet perpetually-transformative, Sapphic eros suggested by the (now) terminal—though most-often terminated—line of fragment 31, in the process providing the model for, and perhaps even inspiring, the difficult but rewarding creative love that so many of the impotent figures in *Poems and Ballads* “see,” but tragically “refuse.”

Conclusion

Is there hearing for songs that recede[?]

— Swinburne, “Dedication, [to *Poems and Ballads*] 1865”¹

I would like to return to the three main problems, which I outlined briefly in my Introduction, with the “transcendent” and “transgressive” critical approaches to Swinburne, because it is my hope that my reading of Swinburnian love will not only be productive of further insights into *Poems and Ballads*—although that is certainly one of my hopes—but also that it will contribute to counteract the critical presuppositions that have thus far prevented a full appreciation of Swinburne’s importance, both as a poet and as a cultural critic, even amongst his “select band” of academic admirers (Riede, Afterword 175). First is the longstanding and damning charge of “meaninglessness,” which, as I have remarked, the “transcendent” and “transgressive critics” inadvertently do much to reinforce. In contrast to these approaches, which (implicitly) depend upon the notion, whether interpreted in terms of “transcendence” or “transgression,” that Swinburne’s main poetic and philosophical concern—whether in *Poems and Ballads* or elsewhere—is to undermine the structures of “meaning,” my understanding of Swinburnian love roots it in Swinburne’s neo-Romantic concerns about the creation, maintenance, and revision (or re-envisioning) of “meaning.” Although it thus links Swinburne to his Romantic forbearers, my theory also challenges the notion, which is reflected by several critics (e.g. Riede, McSweeney), that he is simply a belated Romantic, because it is based upon a partial-critique of Romanticism, which locates him

¹ 50.

firmly in the company of the acknowledged Victorian poetic trinity of Tennyson, Browning, and Arnold, who, as Carol Christ has influentially argued, grounded their poetry in the fear that Romanticism might lead to the realization of “only an eccentric and personal reality” (5).

The second problem with the “transcendent” and “transgressive” approaches to Swinburne is their essential ahistoricism. Despite the fact that these critics may refer to specific historical contexts for Swinburne’s poems—Pease, to take one example, makes references to historical attitudes about class, disease, prostitution, pornography, and androgyny (“Questionable”)—their central assertion about Swinburne’s poetry is profoundly ahistorical: Swinburne’s poetry undermines the essential structures of “meaning,” whether in service of some deep-seated drive towards quasi-mystical “transcendence,” or as a proto-deconstructive strategy of radical “transgression.” In contrast, my reading of Swinburnian love is historically rooted in Swinburne’s mid-Victorian context, not only due to its participation in a contemporary poetic critique of the potential for solipsism inherent in Romanticism, but because of the fact that it is a direct response to the “cult of love” promoted by Swinburne’s poetic contemporaries. From his neo-Romantic perspective, he sees in the latter not only the same dangerous tendency towards solipsism—albeit one ironically occulted from them, through their appeal to a supposedly objective external divinity—but also an imaginatively-crippling rejection of sensual experience, rooted in the theological doubts consequent upon the collapse of natural theology in light of the scientific advances of the first half of the nineteenth century. In other words, my reading shows that, at least in *Poems and Ballads*, Swinburne was engaged in an informed and wide-ranging cultural critique, rather than an

isolated and quasi-mystical quest for personal transcendence, or an indiscriminate and implicitly anarchic transgression of all “hierarchies and dualisms” (see e.g. Sieburth 351-52).

The third problem with the “transcendent” and “transgressive” approaches to Swinburne is the way in which they tend to render all of the poems—and, in the case of the dramatic pieces, the speakers of those poems—essentially interchangeable. Ignoring Swinburne’s insistence, in *Notes on Poems and Reviews*, that the pieces in *Poems and Ballads* are “dramatic, many-faced, multifarious” (SR 18), these approaches reduce the various speakers of the volume to a “single voice,” implicitly the poet himself, who wears different masks (Peckham, Intro. xxxi), but always expresses either the same “transcendent” aspirations, or reflects the same “transgressive” tendencies. An unfortunate result of this has been that critics have often eschewed detailed, close-readings of the individual poems, and opted instead for the indiscriminate “patchwork” citation of many different poems, all of which are taken to support the argument being offered, since they are all taken to be “spoken” from the same basic perspective. On the contrary, my reading of Swinburnian love, while showing how the poems originate in a coherent cultural critique, is flexible enough to allow for the real differences between the speakers, and thus to encourage and support close readings of the individual poems. As Riede has recently remarked, if Swinburne is ever to regain his “rightful position” from Arnold “among the top three Victorian poets,” along with Tennyson and Browning—a position acknowledged, incidentally, by his even his hostile contemporaries²—it must be not only on “the grounds that he rivaled Tennyson and Browning in both ‘poetical

² See e.g. Austin 81; Friswell 299.

sentiment' and 'intellectual abundance,'" but that his poetry "rewards close readings as well as anyone's" (Riede, Afterword 168, 171).³ It is my hope that this project has contributed to establishing these grounds.

³ See also Boulet, Rev. of *A. C. Swinburne* 89-90.

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