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Picturing the Catastrophic Space of Imagination: The Aesthetic of Algernon Charles Swinburne

Lauren Todd Taylor

University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Recommended Citation

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I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Lauren Todd Taylor entitled "Picturing the Catastrophic Space of Imagination: The Aesthetic of Algernon Charles Swinburne." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

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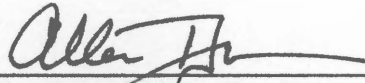
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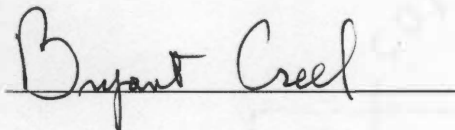
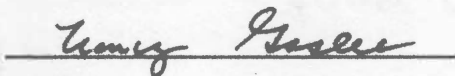
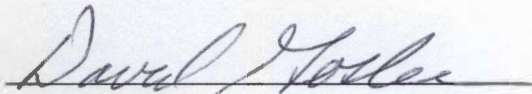
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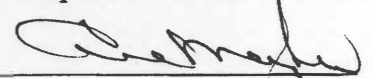


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**PICTURING THE CATASTROPHIC SPACE OF IMAGINATION:
THE AESTHETIC OF ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE.**

**A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville**

**Lauren Todd Taylor
August 2004**

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DEDICATIONS

To my mother, Christine Todd, because she is an incredibly strong, capable, and talented woman, and to my father, Dennis Todd, because he has always recognized and encouraged the strong, capable, and talented women in our family. Because I consistently followed the example they set for me, I had the tenacity required to complete my graduate studies. Furthermore, if both my parents had not fostered my love of books and encouraged me to pursue the academic path, this dissertation would not have been possible. I want to thank them for always reminding me of what is important and what is worth fighting for, and for showing me how to make the seemingly impossible enter the realms of possibility.

To my longtime mentors and role models, Dr. Clint Hirst and Dr. Richard Kowalczyk, who guided me through my crucial, formative years as an undergraduate at the University of Detroit Mercy. In their classes, they brought the nineteenth century to life; their teaching still inspires me to bring the nineteenth century to life for others. I can only hope they are able to find the traces of their influence within these pages.

To my kindred spirit, Kris Kovarovic, whose unwavering friendship, patience, understanding, and compassion have spanned several years, continents, triumphs, failures, and milestones. Whatever our souls are made of, hers and mine are the same. When we were ten years old, we planned to be astronomers “when we grew up”; though I traded in my telescope for dusty tomes long ago, she has never let me stop searching the sky for the exhilarating promises of new worlds and the traces of the august brilliance of ancient stars. The universe would be a desolate, dim place for me if she were not in it.

To William Glenn, who knows all the reasons why, and why all the words I know cannot begin to express those reasons.

And, last but not least, to Algernon himself, for very graciously dancing the ghost with me for the last three years.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to the terrific mentors and friends who provided advice, guidance, support, and the occasional much-needed interjections of laughter while I wrote this dissertation.

I cannot imagine what it would have been like to do this dissertation without the direction of Dr. Allen Dunn. He encouraged me to pursue what ended up being the perfect project for me, even when, at times, I found this project a bit overwhelming. His patience with my constant barrage of questions as well as my tendency to push the critical limits and to entertain (somewhat stubbornly) the implausible argument now and again went beyond the call of duty, as did his efforts to help me secure funding for the final year of my studies. By following his lead, I hope I have become a much better scholar, teacher, thinker, and human being. I consider it a privilege to have had him as my advisor; I am even more privileged to continue to have him as my mentor and my friend.

I am also grateful to the other members of my committee. I would like to thank Dr. Nancy Goslee for sharing her Blake expertise as well as for her very perceptive and constructive responses to my work. She has a gift for helping the wandering scholar find the proper path to take on her academic journey, and my chapters—especially the two chapters on Swinburne's Blake essay—benefited from that gift. I would also like to thank Dr. David Goslee for sharing his considerable knowledge and insight into Victorian culture and for making sure I didn't lose the Victorians amid all the theory. He inspires one to write about poetry with the clarity and grace that poetry both demands and

deserves. And I must thank Dr. Bryant Creel for his enthusiasm for my work and his thoughtful engagements with this text, as well as his friendship and encouragement. His efforts to ensure that I remained dedicated to and enthusiastic about my project became just as important to me as his helpful analytical and editorial suggestions.

There are other members of the English department that deserve to be acknowledged, as well. I would like to thank Dr. Richard Finneran for his continued encouragement and advice. My experience working with him on *Yeats: An Annual of Critical and Textual Studies* has proved invaluable. I must also thank Dr. Mary Papke for offering wise and useful counsel when I needed it. As graduate director, she also helped ensure that I was sufficiently funded throughout my tenure as a graduate student. I would also like to thank Dr. Don Cox for helping me find a graduate assistantship in my final year of studies. Additionally, I must thank the members of the Critical Theory Reading Group, whose spirited discussions of texts and relentless engagements with theory inspire my own work more than they may realize.

My family deserves recognition for all the support they have provided throughout the years. My parents have been incredible sources of inspiration for me, of course, but so have many other members of my family. I always find comfort in knowing that my brother and my sister-in-law, Douglas Todd and Stacy White Todd, are always been there for me when I needed them. Doug, especially, has taught me more about strength and courage than he probably realizes. I must also say a special thanks to my grandparents—Marjorie Todd, Robert and Jean Tank—as well as my uncle and aunt, Carl and Sue Tank, for the constant barrage of cards and mementos which always remind me that, no matter where in the world I am, there is always an empty place back in Michigan for me to fill. I

must also express my thanks to (and love for) my uncle, Timothy Todd, not only because the albums he introduced me to when I was a child lately re-emerged to become the soundtrack to many of my late-night writing sessions, but also because the pleasant memories associated with those old rock songs lifted my spirits when they sagged.

I wouldn't have made it through the dissertation process without the fortitude, empathy, encouragement, and support of my friends, who have become my extended family. Mercy Cannon has always been there to bolster my spirits; whether I needed cheerleading or chocolate, to share a good laugh or a good rant, her door, her telephone line, and her heart have always been open. Alicia Mischa Renfroe's friendship has been just as significant; she not only walked the world of Swinburne with me and helped me think through a considerable amount of the theory component of my dissertation, but also made sure to provide much-needed respites from long weeks of hard work when I needed it. Similarly, Paul Kucera has been a cherished friend to me throughout the years, as his uncanny knack for knowing exactly what needs to be said—and the kindest, most effective way to say it—has helped me tremendously. If I ever begin to doubt the lasting beauty and power of words, Paul never fails to remind me why we both love words and what words can do.

Along the same lines, I must thank Casey Cothran, for her kindness and enthusiasm; the members of the Victorian Reading Group—Deborah Scaperoth, Sara Melton-Sumner, Elaine Oswald, Sally Corran Harris, Beth Tollers—for their comraderie and for including me in a continual conversation which renews my love for literature just as continually; Steve Harthorn, for cheering me on as well as lending his empathetic ear; Shaun Morgan, for his friendship, which includes listening and laughing, always at the

appropriate moments; Brian Gempp, for the intellectual and comedic *faux pas de deux*; Johnnie Creel, for her concern and compassion; Autumn Settlemire, for our lively discussions about literature and philosophy; and, last but certainly not least, Lou Ruprecht, for his always thought-provoking missives about the different levels of existential company.

Finally, I must thank those who provided me such supportive working environments throughout the past year. The dean, associate deans, directors, and administrative staff of the College of Arts and Sciences made it a pleasure to be their graduate assistant. Moreover, I am grateful to Jim Wallace and the agents and staff at Coldwell Banker Wallace and Wallace.

ABSTRACT

In this study, I demonstrate how Swinburne develops an aesthetic that involves re-examining the contradictions and ambiguities arising in the tension between the celebration of the creative power of the imagination and the consideration of the material limitations that constrict the applications of the imagination's power. He finds artistic integrity and productivity in the failure of the imagination to allow one to transcend the material world, because he determines that such failure allows one to discover many previously undetected possibilities for imaginative expression still inherent in the material world. Swinburne accomplishes this by privileging the fantasy component of art while recognizing fantasy *as artifice*, artifice in which failure is always already immanent. By emphasizing the artificiality, the fantastic quality, of art, he modifies conventional perceptions of art as well as conventional modes of conveying and interpreting "meaning" in art. In this way, Swinburne presages the explorations of the negative dialectic as well as the reconfigurations of material limitations that Theodor Adorno undertakes in the *Aesthetic Theory*.

In my first three chapters, I establish how Swinburne's creative reconsideration of the biography and works of William Blake allows him to explore the qualities of aesthetic particularity and individualized perspective made possible by the revaluation of artifice. Swinburne "misreads" or transforms Blake into an idealized artist who pioneers an aesthetic that depends on the very failures of actual, complete representation to occur within ideological conventions in order to modify radically, if not exceed, those conventions. In chapters four and five, I demonstrate how this aesthetic of failure is manifest in the process of serial identifications Swinburne uses in his depictions of the

various “Ladies of Pain” in his *Poems and Ballads, First Series*. Swinburne applies this process of recasting failure as an aesthetically productive process of serial identifications to his explorations of Italian revolutionary politics and the carefully crafted images of Giuseppe Mazzini in *Songs before Sunrise*, as I demonstrate in chapter six. Finally, in chapter seven, I investigate Swinburne’s use of the *polis* as a trope exemplifying constructive struggle within failure through a comparison of his two major Greek tragedies, *Atalanta in Calydon* and *Erechtheus*.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE	
Re-Examining Imagination, Reason, Subjectivity: Introducing Swinburne between Blake and Adorno	1
CHAPTER TWO	
Obscuring the Romantic Vision: Swinburne's <i>William Blake</i>	24
CHAPTER THREE	
Swinburne Remediating Blake: Imagination, Perception, and Transforming Ego-Weakness	74
CHAPTER FOUR	
The Influences on Swinburne's <i>Poems and Ballads</i> : Rossetti, Baroque Mirrors, and the Semblance of Truth	107
CHAPTER FIVE	
Serial Identifications and Constellations: <i>Poems and Ballads</i> ' Imaginary Portraits	169
CHAPTER SIX	
In the Space between Decadence and Democracy: Swinburne, Republicanism, and <i>Songs before Sunrise</i>	218
CHAPTER SEVEN	
"What strange height of saddest speech": Revis(ion)ing the Catastrophe of Meaning in <i>Atalanta in Calydon</i> and <i>Erechtheus</i>	276
BIBLIOGRAPHY	319
VITA	339

CHAPTER ONE
Re-Examining Imagination, Reason, Subjectivity:
Introducing Swinburne between Blake and Adorno

“An enjoyment which wants special language to describe it, being so unlike all others ... crams and crowds me with old and new verses, half-remembered and half-made, which new ones will hardly come straight afterwards....” –Algernon Charles Swinburne

This study situates Swinburne, as an artist articulating a complex but critically important aesthetic theory, as representing a kind of aesthetic median between Blake’s visionary celebration of the Romantic imagination and Adorno’s exploration of the ambiguities and contradictions the imagination simultaneously discovers and constructs within art. Like Blake before him and Adorno after him, Swinburne realized that the study of the power as well as the limitations of the imagination necessitates re-evaluation not only of the problems post-enlightenment reason poses to the creation and contemplation of art, but also to the constructions of selfhood—the ego, or the subject position—within an individual artwork, or a body of work by an individual artist.

Swinburne looked to Blake’s poetry to find a theory of the imagination that could overcome the dualisms between the material world and immaterial “spirit,” reason and nature, the human and the divine. However, Swinburne “misread” Blake¹ as defending the spiritual against the material rather than erasing the divide between the two, “reserving always the absolute assurance and certain faith that things do exist of which the flesh”—and all things material—“can take no account, but only the spirit” (*Blake* 96). Thus Swinburne reads into Blake’s poetry a perpetuation of the kind of dualism Blake

¹ The standard claim in modern Swinburne criticism is that he “creatively misread” Blake’s works. See particularly David Riede, *Swinburne: A Study of Romantic Mythmaking*; Ian Fletcher, *Swinburne*; and Jerome McGann, *Swinburne: An Experiment in Criticism*. Also, Harold Bloom discusses Swinburne’s misreading of “Blake’s contraries” in *Blake’s Apocalypse: A Study in Poetic Argument* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1963).

purported to transcend. Because he misreads Blake as perpetuating such dualism, Swinburne questions and, in some instances, rejects altogether the idea of there being a transcendent immaterial or “spiritual” realm which one could aspire to reach.

Consequently, Swinburne abandons the quest to find an alternative to a materialist world view and instead dedicates himself to finding new ways to portray and aestheticize the materialist view. In the prefatory note to his essay on William Blake, Swinburne praises the Enlightenment philosopher Denis Diderot, a “hard-headed materialist,” for being a fierce and fervent “antagonist of all religions built on creeds and propped by sacraments” (*Blake* viii). What Swinburne calls Diderot’s “opposition to the God of man’s making and man’s worshipping” (*Blake* vii) informs Swinburne’s approach to the aesthetic.

Swinburne begins to consider the transcendent spiritual realm—a mythopoeic place in which “the whole soul of man [meets] with the whole soul of the cosmos,” overcoming “the utter disjunction between nature and man” (Riede, *Study* 5-6)—as being of artists’ own making; and he becomes skeptical of those who claim that aesthetic experience can allow one to validate his/her belief in the objective existence of that “transcendent” realm. If overcoming or transcending the disjunction between nature and man, material and “spirit,” is no longer an option, then, one is left to explore the creative possibilities of the unsurpassable disjunction. In this kind of exploration, Swinburne revises the conventional dualisms of disjunction, presenting them as more dialectical structures in which the conventions of opposition are challenged to expose how those conventions contain elements of the unconventional, the exceptional—that which exceeds the very convention.

Similar to Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory*, Swinburne sees in art the necessity of experimentation which “takes shape as the testing of possibilities,” understanding that such experimentation takes place at the boundaries of convention and must unearth a “conscious[ness] of something that was always present in it” (Adorno, *Theory* 37-38). Furthermore, Swinburne’s dialectical structures seem to contain a strain of what we can now identify as Adornian negativity, in that Swinburne “highlights unavoidable tensions” between conventional oppositions instead of attempting to resolve such tensions, as well as “refuses to affirm any underlying identity” between or “final synthesis of” disparate elements to fit an established convention (Zuidervaart 48). Swinburne’s dialectical structures, like Adorno’s, are enacted as “ensemble[s] of analyses of models” or conventions themselves (Adorno, *Negative* 29). When Swinburne transforms a dichotomy into dialectic, he provides various fantasies of synthesizing the two opposing ideas, ostensibly giving hope for such reconciliation, but always with the awareness that the reconciliation never happens.

Swinburne is actually more interested in creating multiple fantasies to use as mediating terms between opposites, knowing that the mediation always fails. The ensemble of the various analyses of the equally various failures at mediation then allows Swinburne to interrogate, via the negative dialectic, the conventional limitations of the material world. He creates a plenitude of artifices set up to fail with the distinct intent to analyze all the reasons that the failure was always already immanent within the artifice itself. The artifice is consciously concocted to (re)produce the failure of fantasy to implement synthesis, reconciliation, or satisfaction; because fantasy does not have the kind of “experiential authority” that conventions, with their limitations, produce, it allows

Swinburne a “radically decentered and mobile experience” of reading, in which conventional “experiential authority must become shifting, mobile, and decentered” (Nicholsen 131). By shifting and decentering conventional limitations, then, Swinburne aims to produce “inexhaustible aesthetic meaning” (Menke 66) without giving into what Adorno would call the “transcendental delusion.”²

Imaginative Vision: More than Meets the Eye

In the August 7, 1808 issue of *The Examiner*, a reviewer identified simply as “R.H.” accused Blake of creating “insipid” and “absurd” art which merely reinforced the “utter impossibility of representing *Spirit* to the eye,” rather than surmounting it.³ Reading this particular review invoked considerable ire in Swinburne, who believed that “R.H.” overlooked the key to surmounting this “impossibility”: the human imagination. This is not to suggest that Swinburne, like the Blake critics preceding him, thought that the material could be transcended in order to reach the spiritual. Rather, Swinburne was frustrated at their apparent inability to rework or modify the traditional dualism. Through his reading of Blake, Swinburne became convinced that the imagination did have the power to transform the material world by reworking the traditionally imposed division between the material and the immaterial, or the body and the spirit. Yet, despite his scorn for most of Blake’s contemporaneous critics, Swinburne remains just as obstinately limited by the customary dualisms that Blake wished to traverse. Unlike those critics, though, Swinburne was able to refocus his perception of the dichotomy between material

² See *Negative Dialectics* 180-83.

³ Quoted by Swinburne, *Blake* 58-59, italics in original. Swinburne does not identify “R.H.,” but the review was written by Robert Hunt, brother of Leigh Hunt. Leigh Hunt was primary editor and publisher of *The Examiner* from 1808-1822.

and “spirit.” Rather than agree with claims that Blake futilely endeavored “by bad drawings to represent immateriality” in material forms,⁴ Swinburne re-reads “immateriality” as indicating that which exceeds the common comprehension of materiality. He felt that Blake’s peers neglected to imagine themselves able to see that which is not ordinarily seen, or to look beyond what is immediately, appreciably obvious. Especially in the case of the *Examiner* reviewers Swinburne cites, there lacks the necessary acknowledgment of one of the foremost principles of Blake’s aesthetic. To “see” the world aesthetically is not the same as “seeing” the world through one’s two eyes. As Blake says in *Milton*, “The Eye of Man [is] a little narrow orb closd up & dark” (Plate 5: 21); thus one must use his/her imagination to “see.”

Blake equates the imagination—the creative impulse—with the divine, albeit not quite the same version of God or divinity upheld by Judeo-Christian tradition. As Blake declares in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, “men forgot that All deities reside in the human breast” (38), insinuating that “God” is a figurative incarnation of the multiple, seemingly limitless possibilities of what the individual has yet to realize in the material world. God also signifies mythic “Poetic Genius,” or the ability to perceive what the ideological screen eclipses and/or distorts. Such “poetic genius” grants an inexhaustible vision from which all human perception “merely deriv[es]” (Blake, *Marriage* 39). Perhaps the most telling statement about the power and importance of the human imagination, though, and the one that arguably best figures Blake’s influence on Swinburne, comes from Blake’s “Laocoön”:

The Eternal Body of Man is The IMAGINATION

⁴ “Mr. Blake’s Exhibition,” *The Examiner* 90 (17 Sep. 1809). Quoted by Swinburne, *Blake* 60.

God himself
that is
The Divine Body

It manifests itself in his Works of Art (In Eternity All is Vision)
All that we See is VISION from Generated Organs gone as soon as come
Permanent in The Imagination; considered as Nothing by the NATURAL
MAN

Here Blake separates artistic vision from the ordinary vision while also devising an interesting pair of paradoxes. The first paradox—imagination as the “eternal body of man”—explores the imagination’s boundaries. The imagination, as a human faculty, is embodied in the (hu)man who uses it; yet the imagination is simultaneously “eternal,” as it exceeds the boundaries of material shape, thus able to take one beyond the limits of his or her “generated organs.” Moreover, by its very excessive character, the imagination is never really limited to being expressed only in specific conventions and tropes. Rather, the imagination is the means by which old conventions can be dismantled and new tropes can be devised.

The second, and perhaps more critically important, paradox involves the relationship of “Natural Man” to the imagination. Swinburne seems to read the “Natural Man” as the opposite of socially constructed man, discounting (considering as “nothing”) that which he perceives with his eyes—though, typically, in Blake, the “Natural Man” is read as negatively antithetical to the eternal “imaginative” man, as “Natural Man” is fully enclosed in “the medium of the fallen physical world,” thus so “inundated by the ‘flood of the five senses’” (Dimock 163) that he lacks an opportunity to contemplate the limits of those senses. As Ian Fletcher has noted, though, “failure to grasp that, for Blake, nature and imagination were antithetical, lies at the heart of Swinburne’s fruitful

misunderstanding of Blake” (*Swinburne* 49). Swinburne “misunderstands” Blake’s “Natural Man” as a man who recognizes that his eyes can deceive him, as human vision comes with inexorable physical limitations. Swinburne’s “Natural Man” also recognizes that he employs a different mode of seeing than socially constructed man, because his imagination, synaesthetically fusing man and nature,⁵ has no physical restrictions. He is able to see imaginatively past material “thingishness,” instead perceiving the *nothingness* of what any given “thing” represents. In a typical reading of Blake, this “nothingness” would be “Natural Man’s” failure to recognize imagination. In the Swinburnian reading, however, this is the *nothingness* of Desire: Blake’s “Natural Man,” for Swinburne, uses the imagination to distinguish how a material thing is really like what Žižek would call “‘the place-holder of the lack,’ the point of the signifier’s non-sense” (*Lacan* 53). The imagination gives one insight into “non-sense”— meaning, not only that which cannot be comprehended via empirical sense perception, but also that which exceeds the normal means of representation. Moreover, with insight into “non-sense,” one can apprehend how material things only temporarily provide the fantasy of satisfying human desire, rather than providing any actual, definite satisfaction. The imagination does what Žižek labels “dream-work”: it retranslates “things” into “words” (*Lacan* 51) and finds new ways to describe common things, in an attempt to reveal an aspect of a thing that has not yet been revealed. Yet the final “retranslated” product—the work of art, the product of the imagination—still “contains *at least one* ingredient that functions as a stopgap, as a filler holding the place of what is necessarily *lacking* in it” (*Lacan* 52). The lack cannot be filled, nor can it be transcended.

⁵ See Riede, *Study* 35.

Swinburne was fascinated by this particular problematic element of the Blakean imagination. On one hand, Swinburne notes that “Blake himself regarded [his] works ... as containing the sum of his achieved ambitions and *fulfilled desires*: as in effect inspired matter, of imaginative truth and eternal import” (*Blake* 184, italics mine); on the other, he was troubled by “the strange diversities and discords which intervene” (*Blake* 194). Swinburne persistently noticed that the discord of dissatisfaction is always there, as desire is never really fulfilled, not even imaginatively. Rather than giving into frustration caused by what he perceived as an apparent failure of the Blakean imagination to act as a productive aesthetic force, though, Swinburne chose to explore this failure, to generate an aesthetic that uses such failure as an integral part of aesthetic productivity. Like the later Romantics who also inspired him, Swinburne chose to create “a re-enactment of ... devastating experience, [as] a means of criticising, [or] of containing” it (Butler 12),⁶ as well as a means of manipulating the devastating frustration of unfulfilled desire. In this way, Swinburne strives to uncover “the aesthetic desirability of an explosion of meaning” brought about through manipulating one’s own frustration, with the intent to process imaginatively not only human perception and its failures, but also the very modes of perceiving failure (Buckler 235). He realizes that desire cannot be satisfied with material things and that the imagination cannot really transcend the material world. However, he also realizes that, by acknowledging and then stretching the limitations and shortcomings of the role of imaginative art in the material world, he can reassess the role the

⁶ The “devastating experience” Marilyn Butler actually refers to is the French Revolution, an event Swinburne himself finds very fascinating. However, I feel it applies here as well.

imagination plays in what Adorno would later describe as the “unsolved antagonism[s]” between “art” and “reality” (*Theory* 6).

Thus Swinburne’s complicated study of the imagination and its paradoxical quality can be read as a significant precursor to the ideas Theodor Adorno presents in his *Aesthetic Theory*. Like Swinburne before him, Adorno recognizes the limitations of the imagination, stating, “[I]magination is escape, but not exclusively so,” acknowledging that what appears or professes to transcend material “reality” is actually always still grounded in it (*Theory* 9). The antagonism, in part, results from the imagination not recognizing its dependence on reality. In this antagonism, there is an aspect of “violence done to the material” (*Theory* 50), since the material aspect of imaginative art is the ground from which the imagination can proceed. In other words, the material world is always the basis for the art which pretends to transcend or refute it; an artwork may be, as Adorno indicates, “labor on a reality resisting the artist” (*Theory* 9), but resistance should not be read as *total separation from* reality. In the separation fantasy, “[s]omething is excised from the living, from the body of language, from tones, from visual experience” (*Theory* 50), instead of transcending it. This can be deciphered as an imagined violation of the principles constituting material reality, but, like all fantasies, it is subject to revealing its own “radical falsity.”⁷ As Adorno indicates, the art which advocates such a fantasy merely reinforces the social, material reality it claims to oppose; it becomes another “vehicle of ideology” (*Theory* 225-26), defining the material world by what it is *not*, re-establishing the conventional limits of comprehension. Therefore, the artist must employ the imagination to enact another kind of violence on the material, one that allows

⁷ This is Žižek’s term. See *Plague of Fantasies* 20.

for an exploration of ideology from within. S/he must fracture the margins of reality that s/he cannot escape. As Žižek says, art is fragmentary “since it always relies on the distance towards fantasy” (*Plague* 19). One retains the fantasy of transcending the material world, but there is a great (figurative) distance between the artist and the realization of his/her fantasy, considering that one’s fantasy is quite separate from one’s lived experience. Art can try to approximate the ostensible experience of living one’s fantasy, but the approximation can never be complete; thus it is always fragmented.

I believe that Swinburne’s texts indicate that he, too, viewed the world as a fragmented arena. He seemed to have become disillusioned by Blake’s “almost overriding attention to and desire for wholeness and unity” (Labbe 35) as figured in Blake’s hope for human reconciliation with the natural world. Swinburne admired Blake’s attempt “to readjust all questions [of faith or principle] by the light of art and law of imagination” (*Blake* 94) that would allow the “Natural Man” to re-emerge; yet he was troubled by how Blake’s portrayal of nature, often acting as “an obscure material force” (*Blake* 118) mimicking the activity of human domination and subjugation, did not always lend itself so easily to his (Swinburne’s) rereading of it. At one point, Swinburne laments that Blake “never found or felt out any way to the debateable [*sic*] land where simple and tender pleasures become complex and cruel” (*Blake* 145); meaning, he feels that Blake never found an imaginative way for the “pleasures” associated with an undifferentiated, enchanted nature to transcend the socially conventional concept of nature in which they are repressed. “Nature” always remains disenchanting despite any fantasies of recouping it. The concept of nature cannot be reformed to exclude the complexities and cruelties of the violence of human domination. Swinburne, like Adorno, recognizes that art both

works with and oppresses the fantasy of nature before its disenchantment: as Adorno would put it, “[t]his is the ritual of domination that lives on in play” (*Theory* 50). As part of this aesthetic “play,” Swinburne, influenced by the works of the Marquis de Sade, presents a version of nature reduced simply to the rituals and patterns of domination and violence. However, Swinburne cannot fully accept Sade’s view of debased nature any more than he can fully accept what he sees as Blake’s affirmative mystification of it. The Sadean view of nature, with its emphases on destruction and degradation, and its reliance on violent dynamism that in the end proves monotonous rather than invigorating—becoming in itself a static universal concept that subsumes any kind of particularity—imparts only “a dreary beauty, inhuman if not unearthly in its desolation” that leaves one in a state of “splendid oppression.”⁸ Again, this becomes the oppression of the “ritual of domination.” However, Swinburne’s manipulation of this “play” through performing constant, kaleidoscopic, constellative rearrangements of the various fragments or fractured elements of the ideological constructs of nature and the material world allow him, as well as his reader, to “see” art—and “see through” art—in diverse and unanticipated ways. Swinburne comes quite close to achieving an Adornian “expression in which what is menacing in the domination of nature is wed with a longing for the vanquished, a longing stirred by domination” but never satisfied by it (*Theory* 52). And, because the expression fails to satisfy, Swinburne’s portrayal of nature oscillates between the Blakean and Sadean versions, demonstrating an uneasy ambivalence that he revisits again and again in his poetry, as the failure of his own ambivalent impasse intrigues him.

⁸ This is taken from the “Dedicatory Epistle” that prefaces Swinburne’s *Collected Poems*. These statements appear in Swinburne’s self-critical analysis of his presentation of nature throughout his body of poetry. (See vol. 1, xxii-xxiii.)

Despite all of this, Swinburne is always brought back to Blake's exhortation in *A Vision of the Last Judgment*: "I question not my Corporeal or Vegetative Eye anymore than I would Question a Window Concerning a Sight I look thro [sic] it & not with it" (566). The imagination, for Swinburne, allows one to adopt a kaleidoscopic view of the material world, yet he must be careful to see *through* the view and not just *with* it. To see *with* this view is to not see beyond the artificiality of this position; it is important to recognize this perspective as artifice that cannot be transcended (that is, one cannot see *through* it to see a "transcendent reality"). Like Adorno, Swinburne believes that art "is not obliged to erase the traces of ... its artificiality" (Adorno, *Theory* 189); but, more akin to the spirit of Blake, Swinburne wants to implement this in an aesthetic that serves as "a positive program" that privileges artifice, "not a negative prescription" for quelling it (McGann, *Swinburne* 50).

The Importance of the Irrational: No Good Reason

Swinburne's assiduous play with the concept of domination suggests that he held an attitude toward Enlightenment reason and its detrimental effect on the imagination similar to that later espoused by Horkheimer and Adorno: "Enlightenment has always taken the basic principle of myth to be ... the projection onto nature of the subjective" (6). In his poetry, Swinburne submits his own treatment of mythology, both Judeo-Christian and pagan, as a critique of reason. One of the best examples of Swinburne voicing his misgivings about reason in his work can be found in "At Eleusis." The

speaker of this poem, Demeter cast as a version of “Mother Nature,”⁹ sarcastically and accusatorily dismisses the bourgeois men who “sit in the market-houses” and explain the world in their own “words / Made sweet with wisdom as the rare wine is / Thickened with honey” (2-5), constructing a view of nature that reflects their own image(s) rather than hers. Yet this is obviously meant to be ironic, in that Demeter’s credibility as a speaker is always already undermined. Despite her protestations of transcendent divinity, Demeter later admits she is “woman-muffled in wan flesh” (line 141); she reveals that she is more social (wo)man than natural (wo)man or nature it/her self. In the end, Swinburne’s Demeter is a product of the material world, snared in the iron cage of reason: she is what Horkheimer and Adorno might identify as a “consciously contrived adaptation to nature [which] brings nature under ... control,” a signifier of society’s “nagging consciousness of its own impotence against physical nature” and the attempt to gain power over nature through rationalization (57). Like nearly all of Swinburne’s “natural” poetic personae, Demeter is a myth reconstructed, cast in the Enlightened scene, only to be deconstructed. Meanwhile, though, the process of re/deconstructing myth becomes the process of imagining a variant version of Enlightenment reason.

Swinburne suggests that Blake’s texts demonstrate how one can use reason, in spite of its intent to regard “[t]he world as a gigantic analytic judgment” (Horkheimer and Adorno 27), to appraise itself critically, including appraising its limitations and failings. He remarks that Blake purposely created works that one can only “apprehend and enjoy” by “*irrational* perception” (*Blake* 35, emphasis mine), a perception that one adopts when one realizes s/he perceives the world according to a false absolute. The kind of

⁹ In the poem, Demeter calls herself “the mother and the mate of [all] things” (line 27).

“irrational” perception that is self-aware of the falsity of absolute judgment or knowledge opposes the “Reason [which] is the bound or outward circumference of Energy” (Blake, *Marriage* 34). Still, it depends on reason to give it credence; one must be fully entrenched in reason before one can imagine him/herself perceiving *irrationally*, or perceiving reason negatively. This strange relationship between the rational and the irrational is well represented in aesthetic experience, in which the ambiguity of the “nonrational” is “immediately complemented by the rationality contained” in art’s mimetic function; “for without rationality,” art “would degenerate into a bearing ... comparable to mimicry,” an empty and unperceptive form “which would not be adequate to genuine aesthetic experience” (Gebauer and Wulf 290). As Adorno points out, art represents the dualism of truth: it aims to liberate itself “from the mythic, cultic, ritualized context”—or “magic”—“out of which it emerged” (Jay, *Adorno* 157) while also convicting current social reality “of its [own] irrationality and absurdity” (Adorno, *Theory* 54). Art, by questioning and obscuring the boundaries that separate it from reason, can provide an irrational perception which destroys the totalizing fantasy of the existence of inherent, summative principles upon which conventional aesthetic theory is founded. Aesthetics may imitate society’s adoption of absolute positions or rules, but it also must accept its own failure to fulfill any such absolutes. In other words, one must first employ the false claim of “foundations-grounding” reason before one can question and ultimately refuse to accept “the presumption of satisfying absolute claims to meaning and grounding” (Menke 236-37). To perceive irrationally is to perceive the instability of the position one assumes when s/he is in the act of perceiving at the same time s/he perceives the world around her/him.

I believe Swinburne gleaned this idea in part from *The Book of Los*. Though Swinburne's account of *Los* is a mere three pages, consisting mostly paraphrases of the poem mixed with sparse commentary, the little bit of commentary Swinburne does offer is quite informative, as it is indicative of how he reads Blake's poetry as a whole.

Swinburne begins his discussion of the poem by commenting, somewhat wearily, that in *Los* the "old themes of delusion and perversion are once again rehandled" (*Blake* 256).

However, it is Swinburne's specific use of the word *perversion* that I find remarkable, as Swinburne is very interested in perversions—as in any kind of diversions from intention or convention—of all kinds. In Swinburne's usage, "perversion" is reason without motivation; in this case, we have the blindly, thoughtlessly compulsive repetition, rather than the inspired or evocative (re)application, of the "gigantic analytic judgment."

Swinburne claims that the poem "celebrates ... the advent of the iron laws and ages" of Reason, but only to bring about "the final fruit of reason debased" (*Blake* 157-58).

Swinburne admired Blake's attempt to invalidate the methods that supposedly validate the world by vitiating those very methods.

Blake's poem imagines the moment in which "contemplative thoughts first arose" and the "Mind labour'd / Organizing itself" (*Los* II: 40, 49-50): the moment in which the subjective is projected onto nature. The creation myth becomes the myth of Enlightenment; here the "natural" or pre-Enlightenment energy is bound, the "Eternal" is substantiated only as material form—a kind of material form like that Horkheimer and Adorno would say is "secularized as the space whose measure the self must take" (46). At the poem's end, "a Form / Was completed, a Human Illusion / In darkness and deep clouds involvd" (*Los* IV: 56-58). All Blake's Prophetic Books treat the project of

Enlightenment as “human illusion”—repeated attempts to shed light into darkness, unravel mysteries by the power of the mind. But, as the poetry indicates, the light is synthetic; moreover, it tries to synthesize disparate elements by offering repetitively the same explanations for—shedding the same “light” on—everything in the world. Reason might be every man’s “spectrous power,”¹⁰ but it is a peculiarly singular power, in that the mind monotonously labors to organize itself in the same patterns. As Swinburne astutely discerns, Blake’s Prophetic Books are various retellings of the same mythology of the implementation of the iron cage of reason. Swinburne diverges from Blake, though, in that Swinburne underscores the inevitable failure of fully escaping that cage.

Subjective Differentiation: E(r)go Imagination

As illustrated above, the relationship between nature and reason that Swinburne reads into Blake’s poetry is mediated by the self. In Swinburne’s Blakean aesthetic, the individual ego is prolific, portrayed as an expansive internal force that shapes the external world. Swinburne employs a process of reading backwards, or reading the Prophetic Books back into the *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, as part of his exploration of the Blakean ego. Though he claims to find “relief” in reading the *Songs* in that they lack “all the Titanic apparatus” of Blake’s individualized and individualizing “prophecy,” Swinburne concurrently praises the *Songs* as the most lucid presentation of Blake’s personal “mysticism,” articulated in “the ‘voice of the bard’” invoking “earth and man [to] obtain deliverance” (*Blake* 114, 116). In this call for the return to innocence, the individual must (re)construct his/her own innocence at the beckoning of the voice of

¹⁰ This is from Blake’s description of his “Everyman,” Albion; see the Preface to *Jerusalem* (line 5).

experience. Concluding that subjective “experience must do the work of innocence” (*Blake* 124) and thus concluding that a pure, objective state of innocence cannot exist, Swinburne achieves a reading of Blake that seems more aligned with modern interpretations than nineteenth-century ones. Swinburne acknowledges that Blake intends the reader to believe that “the strong simplicity of eye and hand proper to the pure and single of heart” in which childlike “inspiration shall do the work of innocence” is possible (*Blake* 117), but Swinburne doubts this very possibility. Instead, Swinburne adopts what modern critics like David Wagenknecht recognize as “a peculiarly controlled and distanced identification” with the concept of innocence, in which the innocence available to the subject is “almost a parody of the real (platonic)” idea(l) of innocence Blake attempts to convey (318). The *Songs*, read as discourse of and about the “split subject” revealed as “a ‘rem[a]inder’ of the organic wholeness” innocence represents (Wagenknecht 337, brackets in original), become emblems of creative transformations of notions of nature and selfhood which diverge from Blakean intentions of reclaiming wholeness. In the Swinburnian and modern readings of Blake, the self becomes a dynamic principle which, paradoxically, accepts that it is “composed of irreconcilable bits and pieces” (Punter, “Blake” 228) which statically remain in arrangements of disunion. These readings identify the kind of passive acceptance of disharmony that Blake found problematic, yet they also identify the problematic procedures of the subject willing the irreconcilable into arguably artificial states of harmony.

Swinburne repeatedly compares the *Songs*’ discourse of split subjectivity to Urizen’s attempt to (re)construct the tacitly innocent pre-Urizenic world by the power of his own will—all the while knowing that not only did Urizen will the pre-Urizenic world

away irrevocably, but also that the idea of the pre-Urizenic world exists only in the context of Urizenic will. The idea of a pre-Urizenic world, akin to the *Songs*' idea of innocence, "allows him to protect the image of a consciousness not psychologically divided against itself because [it is] not constrained by those material divisions" (Guest and Barrell 257). Blake's *Book of Urizen* attests to the performative fiat of the individual (Urizen) which makes a world out of summative nothingness: Urizen "self-balanc'd stretch'd o'er the void," and a "wide world of solid obstruction" appears (*Urizen* III: 18, 23). Blake describes this newly formed Nature, Urizen's "vast world" or "dark globe,"—as like "a human heart struggling [*sic*] and beating" (*Urizen* III: 36-38). Blake's use of a simile here is particularly significant, as the simile compares the material world to something that is already separated from nature as well as the divine or eternal: man. The human "heart" struggles to establish its identity in difference to all that surrounds it, expanding to encompass otherness yet always contracting back when the difference or "contrariety" cannot be overcome. Similarly, Urizen's identity establishes itself in difference to the eternal void, or Desire. He is recurrently identified as a contrasting constituent in the material world of "solid obstruction" to Desire he has created; yet, he cannot surpass that obstruction to his desire, even though "the universe of the poem is totally mental" (Mitchell, "Poetic" 93). The world is his own expanded projection, but he concurrently withdraws from it, leaving his world and his "self" in disunity with each other. As W.J.T. Mitchell has noted, this "paradoxical process of contraction and expansion, unification and fragmentation" is a constant in the Blakean/Urizenic universe, and "[e]ach re-enactment of this central pattern involves the same impulse to retreat into the self, or confine the other" ("Poetic" 93).

However, Blake held fast to the idea that this dualistic process must inevitably end in a mode of unification, never intending unity to be understood as a fantasy which is the very “cause of desire and the focus of resistance” to the desired synthesis itself (Wagenknecht 323). In his preface to *Milton*, Blake suggests that “if we are but just & true to our own Imaginations,” then we will succeed in building “Jerusalem / In Englands [*sic*] green & pleasant Land.”¹¹ Blake’s promised land represents a resolution via imagination of man and nature, self and other, which never takes place. Imagining unification is not the same as bringing it to evident fruition. Every process of unification, even imaginary, leads only to more fragmentation; as Swinburne notes in his reading of *Milton*, the individual always remains like “the Satan of Blake ... divided, inconsistent, a mystery and error to himself” (*Blake* 266). Swinburne recognizes the imaginative pretense of unity such as Blake’s celebrated unified contraries, the “Twofold form Hermaphroditic” of *Milton* (I: Plate 19, line 32), as an artificial solution which only speaks to the impossibility of unifying self and other. Consequently, Swinburne reads the unification figured in the hermaphroditic form as a “fruitful feud” between contraries forced to become “the waste wedlock of a sterile kiss.”¹² Swinburne embraces the “fruitful” feud of the compelling differentiation of the self from all kinds of otherness in ways that Blake could not, especially as Swinburne found Blake’s fantasies of dispelling otherness frustrating. Therefore, rather than anticipating an impossible unity of self and other, Swinburne looks at the possible roles the imagination can take in the violence of disunity—again, the imagination’s cruelty—rather than its capabilities for producing

¹¹ See Blake, *Collected Works* 95-96.

¹² “Hermaphroditus,” lines 18-19.

assimilation fantasies. Swinburne creates visual images of the anticipated unity like his hermaphrodite as “a means for that aesthetic distancing that traditional fantasy no longer achieves” (Adorno, *Theory* 22), to demonstrate the actual distance between illusory fulfillment and actual fulfillment. These images are abstract, existing only in the imaginative play within language, and are “not offered as an interpretation of experience, but as a pure state” (Altieri 39) in which that very distance between the illusory and the actual is signified as itself aesthetically important.

As Swinburne’s work illustrates, the modes by which an individual artist can portray and negotiate this distance are numerous and ever-changing. The kind of “play” Swinburne advocates requires him to rethink constantly the frustration (or “devastating experience”) of illusory fulfillment, and through this “play” he establishes various fluid, serialized subject-positions within his poems. As Swinburne notes in the preface to his *Collected Works*, “[I]t is unnecessary to emphasize or obtrude the personal note, ... but it is necessary to make it felt and keep it perceptible if the poem is to have life in it or even a right to live” (xx). He wants to create a subject-position while oscillating between the assertion of an expansive Urizenic ego and the need to negate it as the “selfhood which must be put off” (*Milton* II, Plate 40: 36). In Swinburne’s works, the subject emerges repeatedly in/against the “otherness” of the poem itself. The work of art is set up as the “‘absolute non-subject’ whose very presence involves *aphanisis*, the erasure of the subject”; yet the subject is very much established in this dynamic inasmuch as the “object which is the subject’s absolute otherness ... is closer to the subject than anything the subject can set against itself” (Zizek, *Metastases* 33). This is especially complicated in Swinburne’s dramatic monologues, since Swinburne-as-subject is abstracted not only by

the otherness of the poem itself but also the otherness of the narrator—especially as he often chooses a female narrator, further demonstrating the “otherness” of subjectivity. However, Swinburne walks a fine line between positing the subject/ego as the crucial catalyst for “progressive subjective differentiation” or “the heightening and expansion of the sphere of aesthetic stimuli” and as a weak entity allowing “the reification of these [individualized] reactions” (Adorno, *Theory* 239).

Adorno points out that in such “ego-weakness,” the ego resigns itself to the false conclusion that it is the same as the object; thus the countermeasure of ego-strength must be used to confront the subject/object, or self/other, division that the false conclusion represses.¹³ Furthermore, the false conclusion also represses desire: the self’s desire to have his/her desire recognized by/in the other as well as the reality of that wish never really being fulfilled.¹⁴ Though he finds aesthetics which sidestep issues of desire and thus amount to little more than “castrated hedonism, desire without desire” to be faulty, Adorno also finds fault with Freud’s supposition that artworks are “indeed, even though sublimated, little more than plenipotentiaries of sensual impulses, which they at best make unrecognizable through a sort of dreamwork” (*Theory* 11) because he wants to recoup that longing for a sensual or libidinal plenitude. Adorno winds up proposing the idea of “aesthetic sublimation” in which the subject creates the artwork as an *other* from which s/he receives a limit to that plenitude (*Theory* 17). Rather than the subject projecting his/her ego to create an artwork, *au* Urizen, the subject creates a work to which his/her ego conforms. Ultimately, the ego remains repressed, wounded by the false

¹³ See *Negative Dialectics* 150 and *Aesthetic Theory* 9.

¹⁴ Adorno remarks that Freud’s theory of art is merely the fantasy of “wish fulfillment.” See *Aesthetic Theory* 8-10.

conclusion of dualism, unable to negate fully the false pleasure of illusory wish fulfillment.

The treatment of the ego in art reveals where Swinburne's aesthetic and Adorno's do not always so easily converge. The Swinburnian ego rails against its own repression. Swinburne and Adorno both present the ego in a constant dialectical state, but Swinburne's vested interest in the overtly sexual dimensions of perversity, the "failures of the symbolic" to incorporate desire more fully (Borch-Jacobsen 151), is not shared by Adorno. Adorno states in the *Aesthetic Theory* that art is irrevocably separated from pornography (12); however, Swinburne recognized that pornographic discourse was an important aesthetic tool allowing the subject to "lay claim to a pleasure that was never meant" (Ferguson, "Justine" 121) to be claimed through fantasy, and yet use that fantasy to see him/herself as object, consequently revaluating (yet again) the subject/object, self/other dualism.¹⁵ Here, then, Swinburne seems more aligned with the thought of Herbert Marcuse, particularly Marcuse's attempt in *Eros and Civilization* to explain the ego's role in the libidinal circuit in ways Adorno could not, or refused to do. Like Marcuse, Swinburne, while maintaining acute awareness of fantasy's fundamental inability to fulfill desire, finds fantasy an integral part of the "artistic imagination" which links "perversions with the images of integral freedom" rather than repression and "gratification" (Marcuse 50). Marcuse believes that fantasy "is 'protected from cultural alterations'" because ideology never completely limits the pleasure principle (14-15).

¹⁵ See Zizek, *Lacan* 109-11.

Fantasy brings with it the trace memory¹⁶ of the libidinal plenitude that exceeds repressive limitation; as a result, with every fantasy, the boundaries or limits separating self and otherness are shifted. Individual subjects must continually reset and renegotiate the limits ideology places on them. Swinburne takes advantage of these moments of eruption of fantasy into reality to create a virtual position—a figurative site representing the gap or lack left by the eruption—in which he creates a moment in which to untie the “imaginary structure” of fantasy from the “‘repressed’ process of its structuration” (Zizek, *Lacan* 52) in the material world. Still, as Swinburne so famously and enigmatically states in “Anactoria,” a poem specifically situated in the netherspace of fantasy erupting into reality, even when the trace memories of gratification surface, the subject is left only with a series of “metaphors of me,” indicating that the self or ego is always mediated, even in fantasies of pleasurable immediacy, and even in discourses which allow the subject to reassess the very processes of mediation.

¹⁶ “The memory of gratification is at the origin of all thinking, and the impulse to recapture past gratification is the hidden driving power behind the process of thought” (Marcuse 31).

CHAPTER TWO
Obscuring the Romantic Vision: Swinburne's *William Blake*

"A fundamental problem attendant upon Romanticism ... is how to weave the spells of language without becoming helplessly enchanted by them, how to work competently with the sad incompetence of human speech." –L.J. Swingle

"Blake would track the human soul back into chaos, and beyond." –Arthur Symons

Swinburne's essay on William Blake has been called "the greatest manifesto for aestheticism in English" (McGann, *Swinburne* 50), as it details Swinburne's struggle with the emphases placed on materialism and objectivity in mid-Victorian culture which, he believed, stifled the creation and practice of specifically aesthetic principles. Swinburne understands the overarching theme of Blake's work to be the individual's "oppress[ion] by the mystery of material existence" (*Blake* 19). He read Blake's work to find evidence that another literary mind shared his belief that the conventional understanding of material world deems it oppressive, as it upholds the very limited and ossifying conceptual frameworks upon which comprehension of and interaction with the material world depends. Because Swinburne is so interested in reviewing and redefining the processes of conceptualization, he seems to prefigure some of the work Theodor Adorno presents in the *Negative Dialectic*; specifically, Adorno's contention that an individual subject interprets the material world via ideological concepts which act as lenses determining how those moments should be seen and thus comprehended. Yet all concepts also "refer to non-conceptualities," the promise that, within materiality, one can still find a way to look at the world without those ossifying lenses; that one may find the

tools to pry those lenses away and “unseal the nonconceptual” (*Negative* 10-12), or what Swinburne calls the “mystery of material existence.”

The mystery, though, is rendered dormant by a “desperate” ideological need for “objectivity and conceptuality”; like the individual subject subordinated to society-at-large, the possibilities for rethinking materiality become “unknowable and incapacitated” (*Negative* 10). These mysterious possibilities resist complete suppression. They always manage to exceed the ideological limits, and these possibilities, which can never completely be expunged, haunt conventional methods of comprehending the world. The nonconceptual becomes a liberating influence because, as it haunts ideological concepts, it suggests “that there always remains something outside” (*Negative* 27)—yet that “something,” exasperatingly enough, cannot be “seen” through conventional means. Thus Swinburne, positioning himself as Blake’s rightful successor, expresses within the essay an aesthetic that aims to explore the mysterious possibilities obscured by the conventional means of comprehending material existence. As his readings of Blake’s *Prophetic Books* indicate, Swinburne admires the “overflow of lyrical invention” that he finds in Blake’s texts, which he calls “the divine babble which sometimes takes the place of earthly speech or sense,” conveying emotion which is “vague” because it has a quality not “reducible” to ordinary language (*Blake* 195). Swinburne aspires to employ an aesthetic language that will display a particularly performative quality, evoking sensations seemingly irreducible to words as a way of gesturing toward the “mysterious possibilities” that cannot otherwise be represented. Roger Lewis calls this Swinburne’s decadent move to “transform the material world into *what it is not*, into *language*” (111, *emphases mine*). But I would amend this, offering that this is Swinburne’s aesthetic

move to transform the representation of the material world to demonstrate *what it is not yet, but could be*, via a careful linguistic performance which attempts to posit the supposed antithesis between the material world and language as a relationship actually “beyond contradiction” (Adorno, *Negative* 146). The mysteries of the material world might be, as Adorno points out, “congealed in ... the words we use [which] remain concepts” (*Negative* 52); but, in Blake, Swinburne finds a way, if not to retrieve them fully, at least to detect them. While reading Blake, he tells us, we may find “mere music, chains of ringing names, scattered jewels of sound without a thread, torturous networks of harmonies without a clue,” simultaneously presented with “words that are strained wellnigh in sunder by strong significance and earnest passion ... deal[ing] greatly with great things, that strike deep and hold fast” (Swinburne, *Blake* 194). Moreover, Swinburne instructs us to read Blake in the same way he perceives Blake to compose: to “fall with renewed might of will to [one’s] purpose” to exceed ordinary linguistic boundaries, so that the “grand lyrical gift becomes an instrument” for expression that is “not sonorous merely,” but, more importantly, becomes “vocal and articulate” in its very sonorous boom of multiplicity (194). If the reader holds fast to this vociferous, cacophonous process of reading, then s/he will be rewarded with a glimpse into “the main gist of the whole fitful and high-strung tune,” the momentary articulation of the otherwise inarticulable connection between “the strange diversities and discords which intervene” (194).

Swinburne declares that this approach requires a “degree of symbolism” that is “excessive”; but, that very excess is essential “to the strength of expression and directness of dramatic vision, peculiar to Blake” (*Blake* 195)—and now revised to become a

dramatic aesthetic vision peculiar to Swinburne. At one point, Swinburne seems to worry that, as the ready acceptance of excess is found in “[t]he confusion, the clamour, the jar of words that half suffice and thoughts that half exist,” which can induce “obscure play of licence and torturous growth of fancy” (*Blake* 185), the linguistic sign may not seem to represent anything associated with conventional material reality at all (Borch-Jacobsen 135). But the individual, a “fleshly and mutable house of life” (Swinburne, *Blake* 19), constantly produces his or her own, ever-changing association with material reality through words. The individual forms a supposedly immaterial “medium or state of existence” which seems separate from the material world; but, it is actually “inevitable” in and “inexplicable, insuperable” from the material world (Swinburne, *Blake* 40), as this “state” is formed through the individual expressing his/her feeling of being “other” than the world, and then constantly repositioning his/her “otherness.” Swinburne capitalizes on this sense of individual “otherness” which plays on and fashions an aesthetic to express it. His approach to the aesthetic suggests it is perhaps only in an individually-created and individually-interpreted relationship to reality that the linguistic sign can still “express the inexpressible.”¹ In his “greatest manifesto,” then, Swinburne articulates his aesthetic theory by critiquing, and thus re-inventing, the works of Blake to develop and employ this kind of purposefully aestheticized critical language.

Many critics, in both Swinburne’s time and our own, have disparaged his essay on Blake as sheer egotism or even critical naïveté on Swinburne’s part, specifically condemning its numerous lengthy paragraphs of minutely-detailed description and the extensive footnotes in which Swinburne speciously attributes his excurses (digressions

¹ This is based on Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* 108-10.

into purely private interests which relate mostly to Swinburne's artistry and merely tangentially to Blake's) to unnamed critics and philosophers. A more careful consideration of the essay, though, reveals that even in his most superfluous moments Swinburne executes a distinctive linguistic quality like that which Adorno found and admired in Brecht: "a linguistic quality that ... is itself a form of expression that is eloquent only as determinate negation of that expression" (*Theory* 32). Adorno felt that conventional expressions only distort their own meaning; however, when that very limited mode of expression carries within it the implied possibility that a future mode of expression will convey the meaning without distortion, it is negated. More simply, it is cryptographic expression which simultaneously gestures at what it means, what it does not "mean," and what it could possibly "mean." Swinburne's cryptographic treatment of the conventions of the literary criticism of his era, oscillating between deference and disregard, demonstrate his earliest experiments in aesthetic negativity. This quality gives his essay what Christoph Menke notes is the crucial attribute of aesthetic negativity: a "paradoxical character [which] gives expression to the opposing tendencies involved at the effort at—and the subversion of—understanding" (73). These recurrent oscillations produce an aesthetically negative hesitation between "the two poles of superabundant meaning" in the essay (Menke 73). These moments of hesitation create gaps between what Swinburne conjectures that Blake's poetry may "mean" and what he claims it may not "mean," and, in turn, these gaps are the spaces which allow moments of hesitation in the reader's own process of deciphering what Swinburne's essay "means." In these hesitant moments, the reader can move from reading with the perspective Swinburne provides to reading with a perspective they can invent themselves.

In this way, Swinburne's excessive descriptions subvert the reader's expectations about the modes one should employ when reading and critiquing Blake's work. Swinburne discusses his predecessors' work, incorporating their readings in his claims to further their conventional modes of critique; but Swinburne employs previous critics' works and methods only superficially, and only to stage his reversal of their respective approaches. The personal and digressive footnotes are purposefully placed to oppose the more traditional, "objective" interpretations of Blake's poetry and thus subvert those conventional modes of understanding. Furthermore, the sections in the essay which seem to indicate Swinburne getting overly caught up in the rapture of his own descriptive abilities should instead be recognized as sections in which Swinburne again purposefully produces moments of hesitation in his text. Moments in which Swinburne seems flagrantly to express his sense of "self," his pervasive textual ego, can be read as negative—especially considering that the expression of textual identity here, as with all other expressions, is decisively cryptographic. Because Swinburne, stating an aesthetic theory, wants to present the voice of *the artist* (encompassing past, present, and future artists), the textual expression of "Swinburne" can be read as a determinate negation of Swinburne-enunciating-Swinburne, and thus enunciating a conceptual artist signified as "Blake." Swinburne's excessive display of his own talents is one "pole of superabundant meaning" and Blake's poetical excess is the other; Swinburne purposefully places us, the readers, between the two poles to continually explore the flux of this "between space." It is not by coincidence that it is often difficult to tell where "Blake" ends and "Swinburne" begins in the essay.

Moreover, when reading the Blake essay, one must be aware that Swinburne uses his predecessors' critical endeavors only to counteract them. For example, when comparing Blake's early lyrics to the later Prophetic Books, Swinburne remarks, "So beautiful indeed is [Blake's] structure and choice of language that its author's ... later vagaries and erratic indulgences in the most lax or bombastic habits of speech become hopelessly inexplicable" (*Blake* 10). Yet this remark, an obligatory echo of previous Blake criticism, functions in a manner which negates its original critical purpose; for Swinburne spends 125 pages explicating the "inexplicable" Prophetic Books, and a significant portion of the other 183 pages explicating the Prophetic Books amid the discussions of the "Lyrical Poems" he initially presents as the Prophetic Books' conceptual opposites. The same goes for Swinburne's ostensible deference to the work of Alexander Gilchrist, Blake's critical biographer. In one of the personal digressions Swinburne appends to his essay,² Swinburne claims,

What has been written in the text is of course based upon the *assumption* that Mr. Gilchrist has given an account of the matter as full and as fair as it was assuredly his desire to make it. As junior counsel (so to speak) *on behalf of Blake*, I have followed the lead of his biographer; for me *in fact*

² Swinburne appends this note when he mentions two business associates of Blake's, Cromek and Stothard, whose dealings with Blake are generally described as dishonest. It seems that Gilchrist's presentation of these men's troubled relationship to Blake was considered inflammatory and erroneous by some readers, who claimed that there was no substantial proof of many biographical details Gilchrist imparts as fact. It is particularly interesting that Swinburne discusses this relatively minor event in a footnote that spans the bottoms of *three* pages, right after stating in the body of his essay, "[O]f this we need not wish to speak at much length" (*Blake* 47). Again, one could argue that Swinburne meant the footnote to serve to express solidarity (identification) with Gilchrist's work on Blake only to negate that solidarity. Several times in the footnote Swinburne attests to Gilchrist's excellent treatment of such details, to the point that it becomes obvious that Swinburne attests too much.

nothing remained but to revise and restate with such clearness and brevity the case as laid down by him. (47-48n1, emphases mine)

This footnote is remarkable because Swinburne's particular word choices indicate the "negative" way his statement is intended to be read. Swinburne states that he merely *assumes* for the sake of argument that Gilchrist's account is correct, all the while calling that correctness into question by aligning Gilchrist's account with Gilchrist's "desire" to make it so, thus making the reader question Gilchrist's objectivity in the matter.

Furthermore, Swinburne names himself counsel to Blake, not Gilchrist, thus intimating that in no way should this statement be read as anything but a reversal of Gilchrist's presentation; for Swinburne employs a distinctively negative mode to "revise and restate ... the case" for Blake—and for a revolutionary aesthetic on the margins of dominant ideology—made too ideologically palatable by Gilchrist.

Consequently, instead of presenting a critical reassessment of the historical, biographical Blake, as he initially claimed was his intent, Swinburne conjures an impression of an idealized artist who projects the epitome of aesthetic negativity and calls him "Blake." Swinburne's rediscovered Blake is a paradoxical figure of Romantic and post-Romantic artistry who becomes a curious, if not somewhat unstable, compound of nearly every artist Swinburne made into his idols and named as his influences in the 1850s and 1860s: Charles Baudelaire, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Theophile Gautier, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the Marquis de Sade. In this way, "Blake" is like Swinburne's version of Blake's Albion, the Eternal Man, made Eternal Artist: a form larger than life, imaginatively refashioned to illustrate how his revaluated Romanticism could be the key to generating and advancing an internally produced aesthetic theory. It is important to

note that every individual artist Swinburne names as part of, or a Blakean *emanation* of, the Eternal Artist, produced work that self-consciously employed, if only affectively to distort and even collapse, the power of visuality and imagery in regards to the aesthetic. As Arthur Symons later declared, the “fundamental truth” of Blake’s art is that it was intended as “a record of vision which has not been thoroughly mastered as vision” (*William* 139). Swinburne’s essay, then, exhibits the continuum of work toward that mastery. The biographical William Blake, in Swinburne’s essay, is not the master craftsman but the relevant journeyman apprenticed to the greater aesthetic visionary (The Eternal Artist). It is Swinburne, able to ascertain that greater Artist and Artistry, who aims to emerge at the end of the essay as the master craftsman.

The official date of publication for Swinburne’s *William Blake: A Critical Essay* is 1868, but the majority of the manuscript was written well before then. Most Swinburne scholars agree that Swinburne began writing the first version of the manuscript in 1862,³ finishing it the following year while visiting Paris with Whistler. Alexander Gilchrist died in 1862, leaving the manuscript of his study, the *Life of Blake*, unfinished. Swinburne had been asked by his friend William Michael Rossetti, who along with his brother Dante Gabriel had been corresponding with Gilchrist’s widow, to write a sort of epilogue about Blake’s Prophetic Books to “complete” Gilchrist’s book for publication. Swinburne declined, stating in a letter to William Michael that he meant to make “a distinct small commentary of a running kind” on Blake’s work himself, “as full

³ Swinburne’s correspondence indicates that the project was at least in the planning stages then (Lafourcade 193-94). Henderson is a bit more specific, citing “October 1862” particularly (58).

and satisfactory as it could well be made,”⁴ thus implying that he found Gilchrist’s study lacking. Furthermore, as Gilchrist had been just as frequent a visitor to Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s home in 1860-1861 as Swinburne, it is entirely likely that Swinburne had heard Gilchrist and Rossetti discussing Gilchrist’s project in great detail.⁵ Perhaps Swinburne’s recollection of those discussions convinced him that he wanted no part of the Gilchrist project himself. In Swinburne’s *Blake*, deviating from his usual double-speak, Swinburne does specifically declare that he believes Gilchrist “passed perhaps too lightly” over some biographical details (14) and that Gilchrist’s discussion of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is “insufficient” (186).⁶ However, especially in his explications of Blake’s Prophetic Books, it becomes implicitly clear that Swinburne felt compelled to pen a “full and satisfactory” treatise on Blake himself because Swinburne was not able to see his “Blake” in Gilchrist’s text. In other words, Swinburne had to rewrite the Blake biography in order to make the historical Blake more like the figure of “Blake” that he saw in his mind’s eye.

⁴ Letter from Swinburne to W.M. Rossetti, 6 Oct. 1862 (*Letters* 1: 60). This letter is quoted in nearly every major critical assessment of Swinburne’s Blake essay appearing to date.

⁵ According to Oswald Doughty, Gilchrist and Rossetti had cemented a close friendship, in part based on their mutual interest in Blake, the year before Gilchrist’s death. As a result, Gilchrist asked Rossetti to edit his manuscript, and Rossetti’s involvement with the project was so intense that he became more like a collaborating author than an editor (Doughty 273, 281).

⁶ Swinburne’s correspondence with W.M. Rossetti suggests that the comments Swinburne makes here are meant to be read straight-forwardly. A reading of Doughty’s biography as well as Gilchrist’s *Life* suggests that the many criticisms Swinburne heaped on Gilchrist perhaps should have been given to Rossetti. Doughty relates that Rossetti commenced his work on Gilchrist’s book “in a shockingly unscholarly way, omitting, transposing, altering and inserting at his own sweet will ...” (281). Perhaps Swinburne was not fully aware of Rossetti’s extended hand in the parts of the book attributed to Gilchrist alone; or, as Swinburne was very much Rossetti’s devotee at this time, perhaps he either willfully chose to ignore Rossetti’s handiwork or was afraid to criticize his idol. According to Swinburne’s most recent biographer, however, Swinburne actually told William Rossetti that the Gilchrist book “would be a waste of time” for him to try to fix (qtd. by Rooksby, *Life* 79).

Blake, Nature, and Reason

Swinburne's Blake is the forefather of aesthetic dissonance. By introducing his essay lamenting that Blake lived and died in relative obscurity, unappreciated and undervalued in a society in which he was "beautifully unfit" to live (*Blake* 1), Swinburne carefully emphasizes the importance of Blake's obscurity from the beginning in order to set up the continuing theme of social "unfit"-ness as correlative to aesthetic beauty. William Blake's art makes apparent his disdain for conventional social rules and obligations. This appealed to a growing sense of discontent in the young Swinburne who, according to Thomas Connolly, already imagined himself very much like the Shelley of the notorious *Essay on Christianity*,⁷ rejecting the epistemological assumptions and "orthodox belief" that merely obscured his artistic vision "by outworn and derived principles and dogmas" (34). The subversive possibilities for Blake's aesthetic, though, were more applicable than Shelley's; Swinburne points out, "Shelley in his time gave enough of perplexity and offence ... [but] was less made up of mist and fire than Blake" (*Blake* 3). Swinburne indicates here that the tension of the dialectic between two opposite poles, here represented by "mist" and "fire," is better represented in Blake's work. Swinburne thus works with a definition of "beauty" much like that established by Adorno: "[B]eauty is the result not of a simple equilibrium *per se*, but rather of the tension that results" from the dissonance between the two poles that dialectic always

⁷ Biographer Jean Overton Fuller agrees, stating that the adolescent Swinburne "was fond of comparing himself with Shelley, his predecessor at Eton," especially as Shelley had been known as "Mad Shelley" and Swinburne was thus christened "Mad Swinburne" by his schoolmates (26). Swinburne perpetuated the comparison throughout most of his adulthood, especially in correspondence with his friends. Swinburne's vast attachment to Shelley might have in part resulted from his mother specifically forbidding Swinburne from reading many of the works of the Romantic poets "until he was grown up." See Henderson, especially p.8.

generates (*Theory* 46). Blake embodies such beautiful tension because “[i]n a time of critical reason and definite division, he was possessed by a fervour and fury of belief” (Swinburne, *Blake* 4);⁸ in other words, because Blake opposed rational epistemology with his “innate and irrational perception” (*Blake* 35), his artworks, to borrow one of Swinburne’s best phrases, demarcate his “intervals of revolt.”

Swinburne also identifies in Blake the supposition that any kind of moment of harmonious resolution achieved in an artwork always already contains the catalyst for the inevitable rebellious interval in which the tension will be renewed. As Adorno reminds us, denying tension under the guise of harmony will inevitably become “something disturbing, false, and effectively dissonant” (*Theory* 46). Previous criticism of Swinburne’s essay on Blake interrogates its supposed claims for the aesthetic possibilities of achieving harmony, averring that Swinburne aspires to present either the achievement of “spiritual harmony with the universal essence” or the other-worldly divine achieved through an inclusive transcendence of the material world (Connolly 37), or a “harmonious fusion” of man and nature which recreates the prelapsarian condition (Riede, *Study* 34). But these approaches ultimately fail to comprehend that Swinburne discusses harmony while drawing on the implicit assumption that “harmony” is really effective dissonance.

One must consider Swinburne’s embrace of dissidence-which-precludes-dissonance, then, when elaborating his version of the Blakean aesthetic creed:⁹

⁸ This actually marks the second time in four pages that Swinburne comments on Blake’s opposition to conventional reason. Two pages earlier, Swinburne remarks that “all the medicines of reason and experience must have been spent in pure waste” on Blake (2).

⁹ It is important to note here that Swinburne specifically refers to it as a “creed.”

[A]s long as a man believes in all things he may do any thing; scepticism (not sin) is alone damnable, being the one thing purely barren and negative; do what you will with your body, as long as you refuse it leave to disprove or deny the life eternally inherent in your soul.... The body shall not deny, and the spirit shall not restrain; the one shall not prescribe doubt through reasoning; the other shall not preach salvation through abstinence. (*Blake* 96)

Swinburne recalls his earlier descriptions of Blake's opposition to "critical reason" to reinforce his main point that the ideology promoted by a rational, methodological culture that values materialism and empirical objectivity over all else leaves no room for the "spirit" to satisfy immanent human needs and desires. He uses the terminology of enlightened reason against itself to demonstrate its insufficiency. Skepticism is a product of the iron cage of reason; rational skepticism causes us to disbelieve in that which we cannot materially (re)produce or factually prove. Yet Swinburne redefines skepticism to mean the refusal to believe in the very "innate and irrational perception" that allows us to "apprehend and enjoy" that which does not easily subject itself to rationalization or uphold the tenets of reason, such as art (*Blake* 35). Swinburne, like Blake before him, recognized that "unreflective enlightened thinking ... always tends to convert into skepticism, in order to make enough room for the existing order" (Horkheimer and Adorno 93). So Swinburne, drawing upon though revising the Romantics' previous expositions on reflection, implies that his brand of aesthetic reflection will oppose such skepticism. This resembles the kind of self-reflection Coleridge prescribes for "men of commanding genius" in chapter two of the *Biographia Literaria*: those who interpret the

world around them as a series of self-impressions that they analyze as such, “with a satisfying degree of clearness, distinctness, and individuality” (449). However, this does not mean one simply materializes one’s own perceptions to perpetuate illusions of typically rational (empirical) clarity or distinction. Rather, Swinburne’s adaptation of the Coleridgean formula is used to explain a process of aesthetic signification enacted to defer conventional determinations of “meaning,” which are “barren and negative”—and not negative in the sense of aesthetic negativity. The aesthetically negative requires “truth [to take] the shape of folly”—what Swinburne would define as the innate, irrational perception that man can do anything—“when, amid untruth”—meaning the “damnable skepticism” of empirical reason—“human beings refuse to surrender” (Zuidervaart 211) what they hold as the truth eternally inherent in the soul. Swinburne carefully differentiates between the empirically negative and the aesthetically negative here not only to reclaim the word *negative* for his own purposes, but also, more importantly, to enforce the aesthetic creed meant to reclaim the truth, in its actual dissonant form, that can only be achieved through an art that counteracts all rational paradigms. These paradigms “prescribe doubt” in what reason tells us does not and cannot exist, what is not and cannot be possible.

Swinburne sees Blake acknowledging something quite close to the Adornian precept that “what is true in art is something nonexistent,” that “[w]hat does not exist becomes incumbent on art in that other for which ... reason, which reduced it to material, uses the word *nature*” (*Theory* 131, italics in original). Art, when it attempts to reproduce the image of nature, really produces an image of what nature is *not*. Actual “nature” itself is the shadow, or penumbra, haunting the artwork’s boundaries or margins.

The aesthetic production of “nature,” then, actually displays and maximizes the dissonance in “nature,” specifically the division between the impulses housed in the “natural” body and the social imperative preventing the body from engaging in any “unnatural” impulses. Initially, Swinburne invokes Blake to embody a Romanticized need to recognize “nature in disunion with itself” (Horkheimer and Adorno 39) and consequently meet that need by reliving a trace memory of organic nature apart from the bourgeois appropriation of it. As Horkheimer and Adorno have pointed out, “[t]he bourgeois ideal of naturalness intends not amorphous nature, but the virtuous mean” (31), whereas the Romantic ideal of the natural, though also serving as a “touchstone of stability and order,” asserts the possibility of an ecological integrity which the “inner, spiritual” self can emulate (McGann, *Romantic* 67-68). However, Swinburne seems to work through his initial idealization of Blake enough to indicate tacitly that his romanticized notion of a fully organic, prelapsarian nature is a convenient, retrospective trope used to denote dissatisfaction with the present, invoking nostalgia for a utopian past that never really existed.¹⁰ Swinburne is particularly affected by the “historically transformed” concept of nature Adorno attributes to the nineteenth century, in which the “artifactitious domain” of “cultural landscape” regulates and eventually displaces “natural beauty” (*Theory* 64). Yet this displaced nature is Swinburne’s object of nostalgia, fragmented “from its historical context, from its continuity” and conceptualized as a “mythic, eternal, timeless” entity (Zizek, *Lacan* 112), thus removed from any historical dilemma.

¹⁰ I have based my observation, in part, on Orrin Wang’s *Fantastic Modernity* (10).

This marks a point at which Swinburne and Adorno do not closely correlate. If Swinburne was working here in a distinctly Adornian mode, then he would have to acknowledge more clearly the “historical forces that [shift] the relationship between the whole and the parts” (Nicholsen 49-50); meaning, he would have to articulate—via his prevailing treatment of the trope of nature—his own subjective mediation between the historical transformation and ever-changing reception of the trope and the particular qualities of the trope that seem ahistorically immanent. For Adorno, meditation on any “mythic, eternal, timeless,” ahistorically-immanent qualities of a trope always requires continual reference to historical change. The dissonance experienced in the subject’s process of making, discerning, and critiquing meaning is always historically contingent. Conversely, in a Lacanian/Zizekian position, the subject must become “decentered” from historical contingencies in order to embrace the “eternal, timeless, mythic” dissonance of the aesthetic. The trope of nature becomes an ahistorically subjective fetish. As Zizek explains, by means of the nostalgic trope of a nature “other” than the dominated one, “we encounter this ‘bizarre category of the objectively subjective’: what the fetish objectifies” as the subject’s “true belief” (*Plague* 120). Through such a trope, the subject creates his/her own “social reality” only tangentially relative to his/her “participation in social exchange” (*Plague* 120) or historical transformation. In this way, Swinburne’s treatment of the trope of nature seems more akin to a Zizekian rather than an Adornian rendering. Nonetheless, Swinburne ascribes a peculiarly “double character” (Adorno, *Theory* 71) to nature, in that the nostalgic, mystified version is anxiously held in suspension within the culturally dominated version. And because Swinburne’s work does exhibit the socio-historical components of the “natural” landscape, often implicitly portraying how

“natural and historical elements interact in a ... kaleidoscopically changing fashion” (*Theory* 71), the correlation between Swinburne and Adorno here, though perhaps uncomfortable and far from perfect, can still plausibly be made.

Swinburne finds the tension between nostalgically-organic and bourgeois nature best exemplified in Blake’s “To Tirzah,” which Swinburne considers the clearest and most earnest illustration of Blake’s aesthetic creed:

‘Tirzah’ ... represents the mere separate and human nature, mother of the perishing body and daughter of the ‘religion’ which occupies itself with laying down laws of the flesh; which, while pretending (and that in all good faith) to despise the body and bring it into subjection as with control of bit and bridle, does implicitly overrate its power upon the soul ... and thus falls foul of fact on all sides by assuming that spirit and flesh are twain.... (*Blake* 121)

In the third stanza of “To Tirzah,” Blake portrays the Earth, “Thou Mother of my Mortal part,” in its materiality as the oppressor, “mould[ing] my Heart” with “cruelty,” “And with false self-deceiving [*sic*] tears, / Didst bind my Nostrils Eyes & Ears” (Blake, “Tirzah” 9-12). Here Earth (nature)—read by Swinburne as a separate, human, perishing body—is always already disenchanted, already subjected to the domination of rational man. “What men want to learn from nature is how to use it in order wholly to dominate it and other men,” Horkheimer and Adorno observe (4); likewise, Swinburne’s Blake presents us with “nature” that reflects the lesson of domination already learned.

Swinburne regards “Tirzah” as asserting that man is already bound, not by nature “itself,” but by dominant social conventions of what has been deemed “natural.” Very aware of

the problem of domination, Swinburne seems to use the obvious appeal of Romantic claims for organicism and a return to a pure, unadulterated natural state only to negate them. To believe in a return to an unsubjected nature, says Swinburne, is to be misled by “the sweet poison of false faith”; such false faith creates the fantasy that art can transform or even rejuvenate the “barren branch and deadly leaf” that dominated nature has become (*Blake* 120). In fact, Swinburne applauds Blake for making a “direct ... appeal against any rule ... based on reference to the mere sexual and external nature of man” or the world (*Blake* 122). This should not be read as an outright rejection of Romanticism on Swinburne’s part, but a way for Swinburne to use Romanticism as a way to free himself from its very limitations.¹¹

It is particularly relevant that the portrayal of domination is put in bodily terms—and especially in terms of the female body—since one of the most exigent elements of this essay is Swinburne’s conflation of *body* and *nature*. The physical body is a complicated symbol for Swinburne, predominantly signifying sexual activity and gratification. Sexual gratification in the Swinburnian canon signifies the fulfillment of immanent human desires, though a fulfillment that the material world has yet to offer: i.e., Swinburne’s statement that one cannot achieve the “salvation” of fulfilled desire by abstaining from physical pleasure. Yet the very concretized *materiality* of the gratifying/gratified body poses a significant problem for Swinburne, so much so that he needed to re-imagine the concept of the body as his friend Stéphane Mallarmé re-imagined his concept of literature itself, as “an unlocatable—perhaps even unheard and

¹¹ My reading here is based on Stephen Bronner’s reading of Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics*. Bronner explains, “It is not a matter of rejecting concepts in the manner of irrationalism, but of using them to comprehend a freedom beyond concepts” (online).

unseen—performance devoid of any semiotic or epistemological authority,” a “nonpresentness constitutive of human attention and expression” (Bersani 25-26). Swinburne is especially fascinated by Blake’s “mythologic figures,” which are not concretely physical but are instead “savage abstractions” “created of fire and cloud” (Blake 189). They “slowly ... grow into something of shape, [and] assume some foggy feature and indefinite colour,” but, in this emergent indistinction, “the fluctuating noise condenses into music,” so that the material itself signifies—performs the making of meaning—differently (Blake 190).

“[C]onstraining the abstract to do [the] service” of representing the traditionally more concrete (Blake 190), Swinburne not only deconstructs the materiality of the gratified/gratifying body, but also makes the site of that deconstruction function as a place-holder representing what, to borrow from Žižek, could be called the “ecstatic dimension [which] is thus properly unrepresentable” (Plague 176). The body of “nature,” almost always feminized by Swinburne as well as Blake, is already dominated by the very human, very socially-mandated “bit and bridle” of abstinence so that it signifies what it *is no longer*: “the enigmatic image of irresistibility and powerlessness. In this way, she reflects for domination the pure lie that posits the subjection instead of the redemption of nature” (Horkheimer and Adorno 72); or, for that matter, the redemption of the immanent yet obscured possibilities still to be found in the material world. One cannot resist the trace memory of nature as it was before its subjection to ascetic limitations¹² that still underlie the bourgeois concept of nature, because that trace

¹² This statement is very loosely based on Horkheimer and Adorno’s assertion that “eloquent discourse,” such as literary discourse, is intertwined with trace memories (78).

memory suggests that the “properly unrepresentable” gratification is still somehow possible. Yet the powerlessness of a fully subjected nature reinforces the illusion of stability of the “abstract power of the [individual] subject” (Horkheimer and Adorno 90) who wants to believe that s/he is the locus and agent of all possible fulfillment. By admitting that the potential for fulfillment is only immanent in “nature” as it was before/outside of the iron cage of reason and only as it exists outside its current conception(s), one also admits that rational man can only fail to fulfill his own desires. Therefore, Swinburne had to make sense of an aesthetic dependency on depictions of the physical body and its many desirous acts by treating both human bodies and the conceptualized “body” of nature as “virtual bodies” that represent little more than the vagaries of otherwise unrepresentable Desire.¹³

One of the best examples of the virtual character of the Swinburnian body can be found in the extensive footnote Swinburne appends to his explication of Blake’s “The Everlasting Gospel,” which turns into an occasion to discuss *Jerusalem* at length. Swinburne begins by quoting in its entirety the section of Blake’s poem in which the speaker questions Jesus Christ’s chastity. By doing so, Swinburne plays with the notion of the body of Christ as the ultimate virtual body, a notion he will revisit in many of his *Poems and Ballads* as well as *Songs before Sunrise*’s notorious “Before a Crucifix.” Jesus, simultaneously human and divine, serves as the lone example of spirit and flesh that are not assumed twain, even by the status quo. Yet even Jesus fails to elucidate fully

¹³ Here I am spinning on Martin Danahay’s revaluation of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s “fleshly” aesthetic. See Danahay, “Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s Virtual Bodies,” especially pp. 380-81, 386-87.

the *virtual* synthesis of His own body as well as other bodies. Swinburne points out that Jesus/God is

[t]he creator by division ...; literally in the deepest sense 'the God of this world,' who 'does not know the garment from the man'; cannot see beyond the two halves which he has made by violence of separation; would have the body perishable, yet the qualities of the bodily life permanent: thus inverting order and reversing fact. (*Blake* 155n1)

By "inverting order and reversing fact," the figure of Jesus merely reinforces the epistemology of reason: the privileged way of knowing the world is through repression and denial of the body and the sexuality it represents. Swinburne demonstrates his understanding that any human desire in connection with fleshliness or physicality is rationalized away, made to disappear through the social regulations (or what Žižek calls the "public Law") which repress desire only by effectively sustaining it. In Jesus, "God is man, and man God," says Swinburne, but even when made flesh, God cannot "partak[e] of the 'generative nature,' cannot partake of qualities which exist only by right of that nature" (*Blake* 154). In short, God is thus never really represented through man.

The representation of God in/as man is incomplete, unfulfilling; it is a fantasy of fulfilled desire, of unity between man and God that would preclude any dissonance. However, Swinburne then says, "God must needs be (*not more* than man, but assuredly *more than the qualities* of man" (*Blake* 154, emphases mine). He reads Blake's "Everlasting Gospel" to mean that God-as-Jesus should not be more than his physical body; in other words, God in material form should be read as actively exploring that materiality rather than actively pursuing ways to transcend it. And Jesus's active

exploration of the possibilities of the material world—and, specifically in Blake’s “Gospel,” desire and its physical manifestations—reveals more qualities of and possibilities in the material world than are typically evident. Consequently, Swinburne realizes a kind of Zizekian “dialectical reversal also always involves a kind of anamorphic shift of perspective: what we (mis)perceived as the obstacle (the Prohibition), the condition of impossibility, is actually a positive condition of possibility (of our desiring)”; moreover, that the tension between the failure to achieve fulfillment and the elusive yet ever-looming conditions of its possibility is “the inherent condition” of the individual subject’s position (Zizek, *Plague* 77). Thus Swinburne reads Blake’s Jesus as the symbol of bodily prohibitions that implicitly represents the positive, virtual possibilities of moving *beyond* those prohibitions only by failing to expose explicitly its virtual quality. Inasmuch as “what is true in art is something nonexistent” (Adorno, *Theory* 131), the aestheticized body of Blake’s Jesus demonstrates to Swinburne how the failure to exist within social, rational paradigms attests to the body’s “true” virtual quality. Consequently, Swinburne suggests that only through the kind of “holy insurrection” Blake creates in *Jerusalem*, a heretical “divine revolt against divine law” which Swinburne calls “the radical significance of Christianity” (Blake 156), can the rationalized, concretized body be negated and the virtual, dynamic quality of the body be recuperated.

Moreover, Swinburne considers *Jerusalem* Blake’s tale of “perverted humanity” (Blake 289). Perversion in this case, though, is not the wanton disavowal of existing laws or even the misapplication of them. Rather, it is the post-Enlightenment condition, occurring as “reason supplants faith, and law, moral or religious, grows out of reason”

(*Blake* 289). Jerusalem becomes “the symbol of imaginative liberty” (*Blake* 289) that reason leads one to obfuscate; or, to borrow the phrase Horkheimer and Adorno use to describe the works of the Marquis de Sade, Blake’s *Jerusalem* portrays the possibility of “the bourgeois individual freed from [reason’s] tutelage” (86). This is the freedom won by the “holy insurrection,” which is “strenuous battle against the God of nature” (Swinburne, *Blake* 157), very much like the Promethean battle of Blake’s Los, the “Eternal Prophet,” who bound “the vast Spine of Urizen,”¹⁴ the creator god, so he (Los) could wield the powers of creation himself. The power must be forcefully taken from the God “who must have the organ of destruction and division, by which alone he lives and has ability to beget, cut off from him” (Swinburne, *Blake* 157). In perhaps one of the most shocking passages of his essay, then, Swinburne advocates the castration of God.¹⁵

Bearing in mind, though, that Swinburne probably considered, at least in this context, the phallus “an imaginary form of the body” as well as “the signifier of power” (Borch-Jacobsen 216), I believe that Swinburne uses this statement emphatically to pronounce his alignment with the Sadean practice of “attacking civilization with its own weapons” (Horkheimer and Adorno 94)—in this case, religion and rationality. Swinburne wants to dismantle the concept of “God” as prohibition as well as the concept of a concrete (rather than a virtual) body, and here Sade provides an expedient means of

¹⁴ See William Blake, “The Book of Los,” especially Chap. I: 27-32 and Chap. IV: 41-47. Oddly, Swinburne has very little to say about Los, though Los is perhaps the best exemplar of “holy insurrection” Blake’s poetry offers. In the *Blake* essay, Swinburne devotes a mere four and a half pages to the “Song of Los,” in which he fails to discuss the character of Los at all. He does say, though, that in Los “[t]he old themes of delusion and perversion are once again rehandled” (*Blake* 256). Furthermore, in his discussion of *Jerusalem*, Swinburne declares that “no man [should] attempt to define the post or expound the office” of Urizen’s “terrible sons and daughters”: “These ... let us leave to the discretion of Los, who has enough on his hands among them all” (*Blake* 286).

¹⁵ Swinburne does not link this pronouncement with any particular Blake text, but it seems he is thinking of the episode in the first chapter of *The Book of Ahania*, in which Fuzon throws the “howling” “Globe of wrath” at Urizen, a globe that divides Urizen’s “cold loins” (see lines 1-34).

doing so. Affixed to this shocking pronouncement is a footnote in which Swinburne asks his reader to compare his excursus on *Jerusalem* to “a lay sermon by a modern pagan philosopher of more material tendencies,” which he provides (*Blake* 157n1). Swinburne, of course, does not name his favored “modern pagan philosopher,” but the “lay sermon” is a patchwork of paraphrased passages from *Justine* and *Juliette* as well as *Philosophy in the Bedroom*.¹⁶

Swinburne’s initial aesthetic interest in Sade concerns Sade’s portrayal of nature as “ceaseless flux and action” (*Juliette* 171).¹⁷ The Sadean version of nature at first seemed a quick and fitting resolution to Swinburne’s quest to construct a version of nature “as something besides a completely mystified retroactive construction or a completely transparent, originary form of knowledge” (Wang 10). Swinburne wanted to apply a Sadean version of nature as a never-ending libidinous circuit as a means to circumvent the “signifier of power,” or the law which grows out of reason, altogether; if the “natural law” of relentlessly pursuing individual pleasure is introduced into the dominant ideology, then in its relentlessly continual circuit the intrusion of perverse pleasure interrupts and displaces the dominant ideology just as continually. Moreover, Sadean nature, modeled as a continuous circuit or cycle, suggests that all these pleasures are momentary, fragmentary, and incomplete. One is never permanently or concretely

¹⁶ Georges Lafourcade has specifically traced the Sadean material in this particular footnote to particular passages in these works. See *Swinburne: A Literary Biography*, pp. 103-04, as well as the second volume of Lafourcade’s French-language study, *La Jeunesse de Swinburne* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1928) 355-56.

¹⁷ It is absolutely crucial to note here that I am specifically referring to his *aesthetic*, and not his *prurient*, interest in Sade. Swinburne’s numerous non-critical responses to Sade’s work, mostly explicit letters to close friends containing pornographic tales loosely copying and often parodying Sade’s “wooden” writing style, demonstrates a decided—and one could even argue practiced—sexual, emotional, and intellectual immaturity vastly different from the critical adroitness, poise, and mental dexterity displayed in Swinburne’s poetry and critical prose.

satisfied; for, after the last stage in which one experiences pleasure, one must return to the initial stage of seeking pleasure, or seeking to satisfy a decisively unsatisfiable desire. The process ends where it begins, since it depends on the individual failing to satisfy desire with any finality. And Swinburne found the inevitable failure built into this model very appealing.

The “sermon” begins with Swinburne-as-Sade proclaiming that “Nature” is synonymous with “crime.” As she “lives and breathes by” crime, she is the fount of desirous possibility, the ultimate antithesis to the obstacle that is Prohibition:

Nature forbid that thing or this? Nay, ... no criminal will come up to the measure of her crimes, no destruction seem to her destructive enough. We, when we would do evil, can disorganise a little matter, shed a little blood, quench a little breath at the door, *of a perishable body*; this we can do, and call it crime. Unnatural is it? Good friend, it is by criminal things and deeds unnatural that nature works and moves and has her being; what subsides through inert virtue, she quickens through active crime; ... she uses the dust of man to strike her light upon; she feeds with fresh blood the innumerable insatiable mouths suckled at her milkless breast; ... she stabs and poisons, crushes and corrodes, yet cannot live and sin fast enough for the cruelty of her great desire.... [H]er *desire* is continually toward evil, that she may see the end of things which she hath made ... and with all her forces she labours in *desire of death*. (Blake 157-58n1, emphases mine)

Swinburne carefully distinguishes between the “perishable body” we usually acknowledge and the usually unacknowledged virtual body signified here by nature. Nature, though personified, is not a limited being; like the libido itself, nature “has no extraneous temporal and spatial limitations” (Marcuse 49). “[S]he takes the pain of the whole world to sharpen the sense of vital pleasure in her limitless veins” (Swinburne, *Blake* 157n1): her “limitless” desire, her pleasure, is encompasses the whole world, and thus her “veins”—normally suggesting a supposed physical presence—are metaphorical, virtual. Swinburne represents Nature in a virtual body which functions only as a placeholder for the otherwise unrepresentable “polymorphous perversity” associated with expressing that desire (Marcuse 49).

By appending this discussion specifically to the sentence in which he calls for the castration of God, Swinburne implicitly asks us to associate this criminally desirous virtual body of nature with the body of the Blakean Christ who did not come to “save ‘the world’” from evil, but to liberate what religion and rationality have mistakenly deemed evil: “that imperishable body or complement of the soul which if a man ‘keep under and bring into [material] subjection’ he transgresses against himself” (*Blake* 159). Swinburne intends his reader to recall that Jesus was crucified as a criminal alongside other criminals and thus equivocate Christlike criminality with the criminal desire of nature. If we read this passage as suggesting nature’s criminal disposition is the same as Jesus’s—the consequence of a life of “divine rebellion and ‘spiritual war’” raged against “barren physical qualities and temporal virtues” (Swinburne, *Blake* 169)—then we can also read this passage as exhibiting a negative dialectic of criminality. By this I mean to suggest that Swinburne uses the concept of “criminality” only to move beyond it. The pursuit of

pleasure, nature's "desire," here becomes a transgressive activity, as it transgresses reason, or more specifically the way reason has dominated and conceptualized nature. This transgression is fashioned by a desire that is not universalizable.¹⁸ The criminality or evil here, then, is Nature's refusal to be universalized. Arguably Sade creates a universalized principle of "natural law" in his works (i.e., when the "natural law" of perpetually seeking pleasure becomes the ecstasy of monotony, the monotony becomes its universalizing concept); that is not to say, though, that Swinburne uses it in the same way. Swinburne, sensing dissonance in the obligation to adhere to Sade's unifying, monotonous natural law, chooses to explore the constellation of particulars in this "natural law" to reveal its plenitude.¹⁹

Swinburne renovates Sade's "natural law" via the persistent convention of a personified "Mother Nature" specifically, if paradoxically, to demonstrate its transgressive unpredictability. He appears to treat such conventions as always containing "an external and heterogenous element" serving to "remind [conventions] of their own boundaries" (Adorno, *Theory* 204). Swinburne's Sadean Mother Nature has "eyes ... sick of seeing and her ears are heavy with hearing" the same sights and sounds over and over; she is "burnt up" by the monotonous "lust of creation ... and rent in twain with travail until she [can] bring forth change" in her environment (*Blake* 157n1). In other words, she is bound by the limitations of the physicality she explores; but, as there are always elements within universalizing physical conventions themselves that tend toward

¹⁸ This is a loose paraphrase borrowed from Žižek's chapter, "Superego by Default," in *Metastases of Enjoyment* 68-69.

¹⁹ My observation is based on Adorno's section subtitled "Dialectics not a Standpoint" in *Negative Dialectics*, particularly the following statement: "What we differentiate will appear divergent, dissonant, negative for just as long as the structure of our consciousness obliges it to strive for unity" (5).

particularity and dissonance, she can exploit those elements to “bring forth change.” This change is predicated upon the tension between conventional boundaries and that which does not fit, or exceeds, those boundaries—which I would re-identify as the tension between nature’s concretized, feminized “body” and its virtual quality here. This, in turn, produces a kind of “fissure” within a universalized concept, or the monotony of the Sadean natural law, in which the convention collapses (Adorno, *Theory* 204).

The criminal “evil” of this version of “divine rebellion” against a “barren” concept of physicality (Swinburne, *Blake* 169) is staged at the point of this fissure. This fissure also represents tension between the “vital pleasure” in nature’s “limitless veins” (*Blake* 157n1) and the conceptualized or conventional body which is supposed to signify the *jouissance*—though the body itself is foreign to the *jouissance*, or ultimate enjoyment, it cannot fully contain or represent.²⁰ *Jouissance* exceeds the boundaries of the universalizing convention that is foreign to the particularities comprising that enjoyment. Swinburne did not quite find the *jouissance* he sought in Sade’s works themselves, resignedly admitting that Sade “worship[ped] the phallus as those first ascetics worshipped the cross” (Swinburne, *Letters* I: 57); Sade, by attributing a quality of absolutism to nature and its overarching “law,” reestablishes the very signifier of unifying power he claims to transgress. I think Swinburne was critically and aesthetically disappointed by finding Sade’s texts reluctant to divulge and to explore particularity with any adequacy. Swinburne finds that he must imagine the possibility of “thwart[ing] nature,” or the conventions of natural law—meaning, imagine the sites of fissure between

²⁰ See Žižek, *Metastases* 71.

what the “natural law” contains and what exceeds it in order to collapse or transgress the conventions altogether:

Could but a man do this; could he cross the courses of the stars, and put
back the times of the sea; could he change the ways of the world and find
out the house of life only to destroy it; ... could he draw down the sun to
consume the earth, and bid the moon shed poison or fire upon the air;
could he kill the fruit in the seed and corrode the child’s mouth with the
mother’s milk... (*Blake* 157n1)

Swinburne realizes that ultimately one could not fully commit these acts, but the emergence of the imaginative possibilities of such acts in discourse is itself transgressive. This transgression is the kernel of truth anchoring the use of all such conventions and tropes: the particular element buried within, negative in that it defies recognition or identification, requiring a special “gift of spiritual sight” to recognize and to set into motion (Swinburne, *Blake* 116).

In another negative play on conventional troping, Swinburne metaphorically represents the transgressive attributes of the domination of nature in his descriptions of the sexual relationship between man and woman. The previously quoted “sermon” features variations of assertions functioning merely to emphasize the female attributes of “nature” opposed to civilized society, always referred to as “man,” the general-which-is-male. Swinburne-as-Sade pointedly reverses the courtly notion of “Nature” as a “fair lady” deserving one’s admiration and worship. This paradigm provides Nature “with all the features that constitute so-called ‘femininity’” defined only “in regard to her (potential) relationship to man, as an object of his desire” (Zizek, *Metastases* 108) but

fails to acknowledge the limitations inherent in that paradigm. Swinburne's "sermon" may suggest a certain admiration for nature's cruelty, but it also focuses primarily on nature's own desire, rather than man's desire for nature; pointing out that there really is nothing innocent about the traditional portrayals of the relationship of man to nature, as this relationship is little more than a stand-in for the "contractual exchange" of bourgeois marriage, man commanding woman to serve as the object of his desire (Horkheimer and Adorno 72). Moreover, Swinburne goes further and indicates that this symbolic exchange should not be misunderstood as a *relationship* proper, since relationship implies reciprocation that is not present here. "Behold, the ages of men are dead at her feet" (Swinburne, *Blake* 157n1), and the men themselves do not actively engage with her; they are figuratively "dead" to her as well. As previously mentioned, she "brings forth change" in the "lust of creation"; but, this is self-lust, and, using this lust, she needs only "the dust of man to strike her light upon" (Swinburne, *Blake* 157n1). Anticipating the famous Lacanian proposition that sexual rapport (or intercourse) is impossible,²¹ Swinburne proposes that the "criminal" power or "evil" of nature is really her ability to (re)create herself despite the impossibility of (without) sexual generation; "she quickens through active crime" of self-generation—again, she subverts or transgresses convention. Nature's body is more than "the mere 'sexual' shell which only exists" to represent the "division" of sexual and creative labor (*Blake* 159-60).

This is quite unlike Sade's nature or, for that matter, any of Sade's female characters, who cannot transgress the "mere sexual shells" of their existence. Though

²¹ Lacan makes this pronouncement in *Le Seminaire XX: Encore* (trans. Bruce Fink, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller [New York: Norton, 1999]).

Sade's women are divorced from the biological imperative to propagate the species—divorced from the “repressive organization of sexuality” which subjugates pleasure “under the function of procreation” (Marcuse 40)—they are still delimited by their physiology. The Sadean woman is the gaping hole of lack that can never be permanently or actually sated. She is (the symptom of) man's pathological pleasure, the object of fantasies which prevent the disclosure of desire as a “lack of being” (Zizek, *Lacan* 65-66; Borch-Jacobsen 200). Repeatedly in Sade's texts, women are told by men, and thus they internalize themselves, that they exist merely to fulfill sexual pleasure.²² Moreover, Sade cannot avoid encasing nature in a feminized sexual shell because his version of nature remains very much like the woman in the bourgeois marriage contract: Sade embodies nature in the same kind of female or feminized tropes his masculine characters command to embody their own motives and opportunities for the relentless pursuit of pleasure and perversity. Sadean nature is perhaps best figured in the character of *Juliette's* sorceress Madame Durand, the embodiment of the commanding law of nature, whose power and authority proves to be illusory, imaginary, artificial. Even Durand's individuality is called into question, for she disappears as soon as she is introduced, leaving almost no trace that she had ever existed.

Swinburne conceptually moves his version of nature beyond the trope of the Sadean woman, because Swinburne's feminine nature is the ultimate display of the

²² For example, in *Juliette*, Madame de Clairwil tells Juliette, “Woman has one innate virtue, it is whorishness; to fuck, that and that alone is what we were created for” (492). Likewise, as Frances Ferguson points out, Justine is primarily a female body to be repeatedly used by others for their own pleasure (“Justine” 110). Arguably *Juliette* details women pleasuring themselves as well as others. That being said, since the overriding plot of the novel begins with Noirceuil tutoring Juliette how to pleasure him and ends with Juliette returning to Noirceuil to give him pleasure, it seems that the text remains entrenched in sexual essentialism.

individuality—the particularity—that bourgeois man denies to woman. In Sade’s texts, as Horkheimer and Adorno notice, a female character is always a universal signifier, “a representative of her sex,” and thus “male logic sees her wholly as standing for nature, as the substrate of never-ending subsumption notionally, and of never-ending subjection in reality” (111). Swinburne’s revision of the Sadean woman demonstrates his aspirations to create a literary art superior to Sade’s, in that Swinburne’s women, not only “Nature” as depicted here but also the many “ladies of pain” peopling the *Poems and Ballads*, are only universalized as an aesthetic *principium individuationis*: the Swinburnian woman is a universal trope only “in terms of its own meaning not [being] lodged beyond the particular individuals who bear it” (Adorno, *Theory* 200).

By the time he completed the Blake manuscript, Swinburne recanted his initial idolatrous worship of Sade and his work,²³ but he still managed to use the faults he saw in Sade’s approach to his own benefit. Swinburne lambasted Sade as “a Christian ascetic bent on earning the salvation of the soul through the mortification of the flesh,”²⁴ but still found Sade useful as an example of how to transform such Christian dualism into a negative dialectic useful for his aesthetic purposes. Julian Baird proposes that Swinburne regarded Sade as a symbol for “emancipation from [the] crippling moral laws” and the Christian concept of the physical body and its limitations (51), though I would qualify this by adding that this statement only pertains if one perceives that Sade provided the

²³ Swinburne is quite famous for pronouncing himself a fervent disciple of the “divine Marquis” as a young man—before he actually read any of Sade’s work. In fact, Swinburne did not read any of Sade until he was halfway through his work on *William Blake*; and after reading *Justine*, a bitterly disappointed Swinburne wrote to his friend Richard Monckton Milnes (later Lord Houghton) that he “wep[t] ... over a shattered idol” (qtd. by Rooksby, *Life* 76). Despite that fact, Sade continued to permeate Swinburne’s thought and speech over the next several years, but Swinburne presented himself less as Sade’s disciple and more as Sade’s critic.

²⁴ Letter from Swinburne to Richard Monckton Milnes (*Letters* 1:57).

means for Swinburne to investigate methods of Christian asceticism in order to move beyond those conventional ascetic concepts. Furthermore, Baird declares that, for Swinburne, Sade “is part of the natural order” (51), the very concept Swinburne proves is always already invalid. Consequently, it is tempting to hypothesize that Swinburne associated Sade with the universalized trope of the Sadean woman he found inadequate. Horkheimer and Adorno assert that the “emotion which corresponds to the practice of oppression” of the revered fair lady “is contempt, not reverence” (111); and, as his vast disappointment at Sade’s boorish and maladroit artistry led Swinburne finally to pronounce to his friends, “I drop my apostrophe to M. de Sade” (qtd. by Rooksby, *Life* 76), it seems Swinburne came to resent Sade for creating an aestheticized subject-position for himself in which he (Sade) failed to develop his own particularity and, consequently, was not able truly to divorce himself from rational, bourgeois, and religious concretizing universals.²⁵

Because he felt that Sade failed to rebel enough against the traditions and conventions of Christianity, Swinburne uses Sade only in a footnote to the “holy insurrection” which is the “radical significance” of an unconventional faith. Thus Swinburne turns back to Blake. “Divine rebellion,” or “radical Christianity,” must be comprised of a set of particulars that present the universal only in constellation which “illuminates a specific side” or aspect of a given concept (Adorno, *Negative* 162); meaning, what one refers to as “divine rebellion” has many individual, particular qualities—all of which will not be evident or available simultaneously, and some of

²⁵ Interestingly, Horkheimer and Adorno come to the same conclusion about Sade, saying, “[T]he individualism which Sade proclaimed in combating the laws ends in the absolute rule of the generality, the republic” (117). Swinburne himself had conflicting ideas about the efficacy and idealism of republicanism, which I will discuss further in my explication of the *Songs before Sunrise* in Chapter 5.

which will not seem synchronous with other qualities. Moreover, each individual will comprehend the relationships between the particular qualities differently, identifying constellative patterns unique to his/her individual perspective. In this way, no particular quality gets subsumed by an overarching universal whole, although particularities typically get subsumed by the universal because specificity is “a matter of indifference or a burden” to universalizing practices (*Negative* 162). Sade merely refurbished the conventional, universalized, and universalizing Christian classifications (i.e., spirit/flesh, good/evil, asceticism/eroticism). Swinburne claims that Blake, though, creates

a faith of his own, made out of *art for art's sake*, and worked by means of art.... In a rough and rapid way he chose to mass and sum up under some one or two types, comprehensible at first sight to few besides himself, the main elements of opposition which he conceived to exist. (*Blake* 101)

Even though Blake uses “some one or two types” as universal throughout his canon, they all contain the “elements of opposition” to universality, the particulars, which direct one to understand any sort of universal only as it is figured in particular, individual instances—in this case, the particular, individual works of art. And artistic particularities should be understood as exceeding any and all social, and thus universal, use.²⁶

Swinburne says, once art becomes “useful to men in general (say, by furthering their moral work or improving their moral nature), she is no longer of *any* human use or value” (*Blake* 92, italics his). Blake’s unconventional faith in particularity, then, extends to art

²⁶ This is not exactly a typical dialectic of synthesizing praxes between antitheses, though; rather, this kind of dialectic works only “on the level of analysis” (Skjerdal online), constantly seeking to re-analyze and disrupt—rather than transcend—the formation of universalizing concepts.

an aesthetic value that opposes conventional use-value which, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, makes an artwork into a fetish (158).

Swinburne recognizes that when art is forced to prescribe and uphold the status quo it also becomes the “site of a special power that must either be contained or exploited” (Mitchell, *Iconology* 151), and thus presages the Adornian dictum to recognize the “fetish character” of an artwork only to “critically dissolve it” (*Theory* 183). He wants to reach the point of what Žižek calls “*tropo fesso*,” or “the very moment of ‘non-dialectical excess,’ of ‘exaggeration,’ when ‘one particular moment stands for all’” (*Plague* 91) and yet the excess still stains the very moment. Swinburne finds this moment in the fifth chapter of Blake’s *Ahania*, in which Ahania, separated from the “status quo” as figured in the creator god Urizen, exceeds the limits of the Urizenic world. In the “[o]ne final glimpse ... of Ahania” offered before she dissolves, she at first seems “impotent therefore and a shadow”; but, as Ahania, intimates “great suggestions of something more than our analytic ingenuities can well unravel” (Swinburne, *Blake* 254)—something that can only be expressed in a fissure between Ahania and Urizen.

The lamenting voice of Ahania,
 Weeping upon the Void!
 ... Distant in solitary night,
 Her voice was heard, but no form
 Had she; but her tears from clouds
 Eternal fell round the Tree.

And the voice cried: 'Ah, Urizen! Love!
 Flower of morning! I weep on the verge
 Of Nonentity—how wide the Abyss
 Between Ahania and thee!['] (Blake, *Ahania* V: 1-11)

Just as all discourse exceeds itself, suggesting absence in its attempt to satiate absence, Ahania's discourse, forged on the "verge of the abyss," gestures at the abyssal excess that escapes all kinds of discourse. In similar vein, Swinburne's own aesthetic discourse gestures toward the inaccessible excess of particularity in the same moment it tries, and significantly fails, to render it accessible.

This "special power" of particularity must be neither contained nor exploited—neither unfairly universalized nor incorporated into an ideological gesture that imposes the power of false (social) consciousness upon the artwork—but explored in its own right. Swinburne claims that Blake's work is able to circumvent the long-armed, usurping grasp of dominant ideology because Blake's "impulsive instinct of form" represents "the exquisite desire of just and perfect work" (*Blake* 109), a quality that must be *sensed*, not *deduced*, by the reader. Consequently, Blake's aesthetic, requiring what the early Marx might have called a sensuous consciousness,²⁷ "deconstructs the opposition between the practical and the aesthetic" by refusing to "purge the specificity

²⁷ In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx distinguishes between the "sensuous consciousness" of the bourgeois, capitalist "fetish-worshipper" and "that of the [ancient] Greek," who was able to apprehend "the human feeling for nature, the human sense of nature, and therefore also the *natural* sense of *man*" in a way that rational, modern man cannot. The ancient Greek, then, would not conceptualize a vast divide between *thought* and *sensuous reality* the way the rational, modern man does (Tucker 98, 120). This is comparable to Swinburne's assertion that Blake promoted "an equal reverence for spirit and flesh," or the immaterial and the material, "as the two sides or halves of a completed creature" (*Blake* 96).

of things,” and thus refusing to “stri[p] their sensuous content to a pure ideality of form” (Eagleton 204-05). In short, one might say that the Blakean aesthetic faith is faith in the representative “truth” of the specific.

Furthermore, by invoking the catch-phrase of the aestheticist movement that Swinburne was pioneering (*l’art pour l’art*) and its ensuing proposition *that art itself*, rather than any moral, ideological or political commitment, is the foremost concern of aesthetics, Swinburne again invokes his Romantic predecessors. For many Victorian readers, the “basic doctrine which Romantic poets continually present for reader consumption”—or, at least, what particular Victorian readers of the Romantics continually present—“is that they are innocent of moral or doctrinal commitments” while speaking their “universal truths” (McGann, *Romantic* 66). Swinburne seems suspicious of his contemporaries’ suggestions of Romantic non-commitment, though, in a rather puzzling footnote affixed to this section on art and use-value. In this footnote, Swinburne remarks that he is “not ... aware that the written work of ... Shelley did ever tend to alter the material face of things,” although he “may have desired that it should” and his “unwritten work may have done so” (*Blake* 93n1).²⁸ But the key term here is the “unwritten work”: not Shelley’s specific political intentions manifest in his written words, *per se*, but the “unwritten work” of Shelley’s ideas as they become manifest in every individual reader with an equally individualized, particularized, and particularizing perspective. Each reader will approach one of Shelley’s texts to derive meaning from it by forming a constellative pattern between the textual elements, and that pattern in

²⁸ To be fair, Swinburne pairs Shelley with Dante in this particular quote; however, for purposes of discussion here, I have chosen only to focus on Shelley here, considering Swinburne’s great interest in and identification with him.

unique to each individual reader. Consequently, the written text itself may not alter the material world, but the written text can affect the ways in which a reader understands, organizes, and thus reacts to, the material world.

In other words, the written work leads the reader to shape or affect “the before unapprehended relations of things” (Shelley 482). And, in turn, Shelley

says that poetry “strips the veil of familiarity from the world,” “lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar” [505, 487]. Furthermore, all this is deemed “revolutionary.” Poetry’s work of defamiliarization ... lead[s] to “social renovation....” (Kaufman, “Legislators” 723)

The “commitment” Swinburne reads in Shelley and Blake is a commitment to a kind of aesthetic “play impulse” intervening between sensuousness (affect, emotion, pleasure) and reason (the conventions in which one organizes and understands the world), in which the very interaction between the sensual and the rational becomes a “vehicle of liberation” from social constraint (Marcuse 186-87). This play impulse is interpreted within dominant ideology as “an ‘irresponsible’ aestheticism ... of ornament, luxury, holiday”—an uncanny and unwelcome intrusion “in[to] an otherwise repressive world” that the aesthetic dimension cannot infiltrate (Marcuse 188). It does not externally seem to revolutionize morality or politics across the board; but, affecting how the individual perceives the world around him/her, the play impulse enacts a shift in perspective which initiates an imaginative reconsideration of that which exceeds ideological conventions.

Thus a commitment to exploring excess can potentially “alter the material face of things,” or at least one’s consideration of the materiality of artistic “things.”²⁹

Swinburne saw the problematic relationship of Romantic particularity to the conventions and expectations of the status quo echoed in the works of Gautier and Baudelaire, which he read rather intensely during this period. Gautier and Baudelaire, progenitors of French decadence, define the individual artist as embodying the ultimate paradox: “a hatred for modern civilization and a love of the refinements modern civilization made possible” (Carter 6). This is similar to Shelley portraying the poet, in the “Defence,” as both legislator and a prophet (Shelley 482)—meaning one who ushers in a *new* order as the public Law that allows for the necessary “refinements,” yet has enough vision to recognize the “hateful” social limitations that must be broken. Swinburne envisages all these qualities in what he calls Blake’s “lust of paradox” (*Blake* 37), which I believe is the utmost characteristic of Swinburne’s ideal ultimate artist, a figure representing a constellation of particular, desirable aesthetic tendencies. Viewed from one angle, the artist is Blake; from another angle, it is Gautier; from yet another perspective, the artist is Baudelaire. And Swinburne, I think, aspires to present himself as another figuration of this constellative ideal.

²⁹ Many critics would disagree with me here, at least in part. For example, in his careful study of *Shelleyan Ideas in Victorian Poetry*, Roland Duerksen observes that Swinburne was among the Victorians interested “almost exclusively by [Shelley’s] aesthetics, symbolism, and poetic technique,” thus failing to produce “any work appreciably informed by Shelley’s sociological ideas.” Duerksen also notes, though, that Swinburne’s letters reveal that Swinburne was in fact in “general agreement with Shelley’s social views” (150). This suggests to me that it is feasible that Swinburne’s essay on Blake is also “informed by” Shelley’s ideas, though Swinburne does not necessarily always agree with them wholeheartedly. As with his treatment of all his favorite authors and artists, Swinburne’s appropriations of Shelleyan ideas are revaluative and imaginative in nature.

Particularity is the key to emancipating art (and the artist) from its “commodity character,” meaning its supposed cultural and social use-value—i.e., to propose and reinforce certain modes of conduct or uphold prevailing religious and moral principles. Swinburne believes that, by avoiding universalization in his art, he heeds Baudelaire’s warning that “the aim of a work of art [should] never be utility or morality” because “what is useful is ugly.”³⁰ He also seems to recognize the potential danger of avoiding all universality and utility by emphasizing only the particular, though. Adorno specifically notes that the process of “[p]rogressive subjective differentiation, the heightening and expansion of the sphere of aesthetic stimuli, [makes] these stimuli manipulable” by the very status quo the differentiation is supposed to subvert (*Theory* 239); similarly, Swinburne notes that Blake’s readers tend to approach his work to force the comprehension of “identity ... [between] things which never can become identical,” or fully harmonized, universalized (*Blake* 99). Swinburne also claims that Blake stands apart from other poets because, “where others dealt by inductive rule and law, Blake dealt by assumptive preaching and intuition” by finding “form *of his own* for the body of [his] thought” (*Blake* 149, italics mine). As discussed earlier, the body of Blakean thought here is virtual rather than material, thus apparently eliding the conventional reliance on empiricist materiality. Yet the prerequisite dependence on subjectivity—the subject-position—problematizes this. The question of dominant ideology remains, as the status quo always “offers [the] position for the subject” (Eagleton 2). This seems to suggest that “Blake,” and successively Swinburne, falls into the Romantic trap McGann terms

³⁰ This is Anne Walder’s translation of Baudelaire’s statement “*Il n’y a de vraiment beau que ce qui ne peut servir à rien.... Tout ce qui est utile est laid*” (10).

“The Consciousness Industry,” in which the individual creates a self-revelatory aesthetic ostensibly “free of cultural contamination,” all the while refusing to see that such freedom from “the ruins of history and culture” is all a “grand illusion” (*Romantic* 91). However, I choose to read this as indicative of how Swinburne portends the decadent dilemma as specified by Adorno, who points out that even

the most fleeting individual reactions [are] bound up with the reification of these reactions.... [T]o this extent the watchword *l'art pour l'art* was the mask of its opposite. What is true in the uproar over decadence is that subjective differentiation has an aspect of ego-weakness, an aspect shared with the mentality of the culture industry's customers and something the culture industry knew how to exploit. (*Theory* 239)

“Ego-weakness” refers to how the individual, in all her/his rebellion against the status quo, actually identifies with that which s/he tries to differ her/himself from. In the decadent's denunciative reaction to the status quo, s/he actually makes the status quo her/his own, thus producing an illusion of autonomy and autodetermination.³¹ Therefore, I contend that Swinburne reevaluates Romanticism, as well as the “decadence” of such poets as Gautier and Baudelaire, to develop an aesthetic theory based on particularity and subjectivity that will not be felled by, but instead productively contend with, the “ego-weakness” that threatens the very subjectivity on which the aesthetic depends.

I believe Swinburne finds the inspiration for this revaluation in Blake's *Book of Thel*, although, like all his discussions of the Prophetic Books, Swinburne's reading of *Thel* relies heavily on his earlier readings of Blake's other works. Swinburne interprets

³¹ See Borch-Jacobsen 31.

Thel, via the lens of “The Everlasting Gospel,” as a metaphor for how British Romanticism formulated a response to the underlying dominant ideology which anchors the Romantic subject-position by exploiting the anxiety that ideology creates and then conceals. Blake scholar Heather Glen describes this as an anxiety that can only be “marked” by a prophet or artist: the potential for “disclosing the hidden logic of a whole society in a way which transcends rational analysis, creating something which becomes independent of—and capable of questioning ... anything its creator may consciously have intended” (95). Glen’s definition of the artist recalls Shelley’s definition of the poet and his/her function as well as corresponds to Swinburne’s reticence to admit full awareness of the effects art may have on “the material face of things.” More importantly, though, this is the “secret” of aesthetic creation revealed: that the individual’s role, even in an aesthetic that relies on subjective particularity, must be understood as limited. The artist must acknowledge that the artwork, because it must surpass the artist’s intentions and assume an autonomous existence beyond the artist’s reach, contains an element that “remains alien” to him/her; that art maintains the penumbra of otherness “that the subject can never fully participate in ... and still retain the sense of self” (Nicholsen 175). Likewise, in the “confusion, clamour, the jar of words that half suffice and thoughts that half exist” presented and evoked in art (Swinburne, *Blake* 185), there will always be something that “remains alien” to the reader, even in the process of reading constellatively. A limited creator—a limited *subject*—could ensure that “ego-weakness” does not become as important a factor when the artwork achieves autonomy from the creator’s conscious intentions.

This is part and parcel to Swinburne's shocking suggestion, mentioned earlier, that the ultimate creator should be castrated. "Playing Prometheus," says Swinburne, the poet "bring[s] from extreme heaven the immediate fire in the hollow of his reed or pen" (*Blake* 149)—in other words, stealing the phallic symbol of creative power. Moreover, the gods created fire for their pleasure; Prometheus separated the gods from their creation. Thus Swinburne applies the image of castrating God to suggest the separation of artist/subject from the artwork that Swinburne claims is essential. Interestingly, Swinburne correlates the castration of God with the crucifixion, as he claims such "death or sacrifice" represents "not merely ... the redemption of man," but "the union of divine crucified man with the creative governing power" that paradoxically only transpires in the loss of power, control, and stability (*Blake* 156). The crucifixion, the sacrifice, itself is a symbolic gesture or symbolic creation, like a work of art itself. One is not redeemed by any kind of *actual* transcendence or achievement of unity. Rather, this is the confrontation of the subject with that which remains "alien" to her/him, the subject realizing what s/he is capable of creating and what the creative power cannot attain, simultaneously. In this case, the confrontation is realized by the subject's encounter with the crucified body, which is ostensibly available to the subject through the ritual Christian sacrifice but never *actually, practically* attainable or tangible. Art is capable of this paradox because, as Adorno would say, "as the negation of practical life, it is itself praxis" (*Theory* 241). Swinburne presents us with an anxious praxis between the "rational society" that initiates the irrational when it sanctions redemption of "the bodily man" by sacrificing the body itself—exposing the material, rational body as virtual and thus irrational.

Swinburne sees the character of Thel as a site of such praxis. Whereas “To Tirzah” demonstrates a “vision of the creator divided against his own creation” (Swinburne, *Blake* 150), *Thel* utilizes that vision to generate praxis between creator and autonomous creation. In Blake’s poem, Thel discovers that

[t]he secret of creation is sacrifice; the very act of growth is a sacrament: and through this eternal generation in which one life is given for another and shed into new veins of existence, each thing is redeemed from perpetual death by perpetual change. This secret once made evident to Thel, her fear is in a measure removed.... (*Blake* 201)

Thel’s contradictory relationship to “Mother Nature” is central to the poem. In sum, Thel moves from fearing death as an end to accepting death as a new beginning. Thel fears death because it represents a return to the nature she is estranged from: “... therefore did I weep, / And I complained in the mild air, because I fade away, / And lay me down in thy cold bed, and leave my shining lot” (*Thel* III: 11-13). However, when “the matron Clay” bids Thel to “enter [her] house” (*Thel* III: 14-16), Thel seems to go willingly. This, says Swinburne, represents how “[t]he forces of material nature,” even under the yoke of human domination, can “give way” to the immaterial (*Blake* 201). Swinburne does not specifically discuss the problems inherent this rather drastic turn of events (Thel’s fear of death and nature giving way to acceptance) coming too quickly; nor does he discuss the reversal of this acceptance which occurs in the following chapter of the poem, in which Thel flees “Mother Nature”—except to say that Thel experiences “affright” at “the sudden nakedness of natural life,” the “great questions of physical life” (*Blake* 201-02).

Thus, at first, Swinburne seems to provide a resolution for Blake's poem and the character of Thel that Blake's poem itself does not provide. What Swinburne calls Thel's "affright" is actually Thel's inability to resolve the conflict between fear and acceptance, dominated versus unadulterated nature. The poem may be "an inspired exposition of material things" demonstrating how "the strong imagination ... wrestles with the great questions of physical life in hopes that "perchance it will yield up the heart of its mystery" (Swinburne, *Blake* 202), but also how the "perchance" fulfillment of that hope never really occurs. Despite the many words offered by both Blake and Swinburne, still "no word spoken upon earth or under could explain the marvel of the flesh," or offer fulfillment in "the infinite beauty and delight of it, the infinite subtlety and danger; its prodigalities and powers" (*Blake* 201). This is the foundation of the all-important proviso of *artifice* central to Swinburne's aesthetic. True to the Swinburnian "lust of paradox," artifice here is the means by which, in order to preserve the self and/or the subject-position so aesthetically crucial, one goes to great lengths to lose it.³² Thel demonstrates how human "estrangement from nature ... is realized in the process of the abandonment to nature" (Horkheimer and Adorno 48) that she accomplishes in her inability to surrender herself to "the matron Clay." Since she not only makes herself an artificial sacrifice to the "matron Clay" but also runs back to the vales of Har, Thel does not really sacrifice herself to nature; consequently, "the secret of creation" is artificial sacrifice.

That being said, we cannot accept the aesthetic rapport between sacrifice and artifice without considering its deceitful quality more fully. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, sacrifice is "the magical pattern of rational exchange, a device of men by

³² See Horkheimer and Adorno 48-49.

which the gods”—or, in our specific case here, nature—“may be mastered: the gods are overthrown by the very system by which they are honored” (49). By this token, one could read Thel’s sacrifice as yet another event in which reason has dominated nature. Swinburne conspicuously fails to comment on the poem’s ending, in which Thel seems overwhelmed by the “forces of material nature,” and her senses are still constrained by reason. Thel encounters several small but significant barriers preventing her from fully embracing the sensuous consciousness that would allow her to perceive the “exquisite desire of just and perfect work.” Rather than sensing “the secrets of the land unknown” (*Thel* IV:2) that Mother Nature offers her in death, Thel deductively tries to rationalize what the symbolic landscape surrounding her “means.” She thinks she hears warnings of her own demise, interprets the glances of others towards her as murderous, and finally assumes herself as the victim in an impending rape scene (*Thel* IV:11-20).³³ At the poem’s end, “The Virgin started from her seat, & with a shriek / Fled back unhindered [*sic*] till she came into the vales of Har,” the place she was before she accepted Mother Nature’s invitation (*Thel* IV:21-22). Thel, Swinburne’s proclaimed aesthetic exemplar, is thus left in a “no-progress” state in which fulfillment cannot take place, in which her sacrifice “implies recollection of something that was not a primal component of the individual but originated instead in the history of domination” itself (Horkheimer and Adorno 51). In her attempt to circumvent domination, Thel becomes complicit in it.

³³ Specifically, in Chapter IV, line 20, Thel asks, “Why a little curtain of flesh on the bed of our desire?”, intimating that her long-protected virginity is in jeopardy. Thel, though in nature’s realm, still clings to the manmade dictums prohibiting sexual activity and sexual pleasure, especially for women; consequently, Thel interprets all sexual contact between man and woman as the dominating man forcing the act upon the dominated woman (i.e., rape). This, again, reinforces the “always already dominated” status of nature.

If Swinburne *had* discussed Thel's breakdown thoroughly, he would have had to contend more explicitly with the "decadent" ego-weakness it insinuates. Swinburne is relatively dismissive of *Thel's* final chapter because in this chapter Blake disappoints him, as Blake arguably fails here to deal effectively and aesthetically with the "trickery which elevates the frail individual to the status of vehicle of divine substance, [which] has always been apparent in the ego" (Horkheimer and Adorno 51). In other words, Blake reveals the trickery but does not use the trickery to any aesthetic advantage. The closest Swinburne comes to admitting *Thel's* basic problem is in the conclusion to his discussion of the poem:

Throughout this book his extreme and *feminine* tenderness of faith speaks more softly and shows a simpler face than elsewhere. One might almost say that *Thel* had overmuch of this gracious and delicate beauty; that the intense faith and compassion which thus animate all matter gives a touch of *almost dubious and effeminate sweetness* to the thought and style. (202, emphases mine)

Swinburne's repeated emphasis on the "femininity" of Blake's poem presents an implicit recognition that not only did Blake fail to live up to his own agenda of transgressing "mere 'sexual' shells," but also that Thel's particularity is inevitably elided by the ideological universals of "femininity" Blake himself found problematic. Swinburne's use of sexist language here is problematic, too—but I believe it is purposefully problematic, suggesting that the poem leads one to read it in divisive ways to indicate more deeply the

failure to transgress the status quo.³⁴ Furthermore, any autonomy or auto-determination that Thel achieves here is also artificial. On the surface, it may look like her decision to return to Har is made autonomously, but does she really have a choice? The “land unknown,” that which is *other* than the status quo, is not accessible to her. Her return to Har further establishes her assumption into the status quo, rendering the substantiality of Thel’s subject-position outside of dominant ideology, in a virtual space that is neither Har nor other-than-Har, “but a semblance and an illusion” (Horkheimer and Adorno 51).

Considering the problems presented in the final chapter of *Thel*, then, it almost seems incongruous that Swinburne duly claims Thel as the emblem of the artist clued into the “secret of creation.” It is important to note that Swinburne tempers his criticism of Blake, quoted above, by recanting that such criticism perhaps is not “justly” proffered, since “there is a *firm body* of significance in the poem” (202, italics mine). I believe that this, too, is just as much a play on the subtext of the given language as the previously-quoted sentences, especially considering that Blake’s poem, for all its celebration of nature’s “material forces,” is not populated with “firm bodies” at all, but the semblances of material bodies. Thel herself is described an apparition without substance; introduced in the second stanza of the poem’s first chapter,

... Thel is like a watry [*sic*] bow. and like a parting cloud.

Like a reflection in a glass. like shadows in the water.

³⁴ Notably, Swinburne does not utilize the same sexist language when discussing the other female characters in Blake’s texts. For instance, he derides Bromion, from *The Daughters of Albion*, for subjugating Oothoon, “born for rebellion and freedom” (Blake 229). Furthermore, he compares Bromion’s defiling of Oothoon to the way women generally are defiled by men in society: “That is, woman has become subject to oppression of customs; suffers violence at the hands of marriage laws and other such condemnable things.... [E]rror, fear, submission to custom in law, is that which ‘defiles’ a woman” (Blake 230n1).

Like dreams of infants. like a smile upon an infants face.

Like the doves voice, like transient day, like music in the air.

(Blake, *Thel* I: 8-11)

Thel is always “like” something that cannot be substantively represented. Thus, twice removed from the material world, Thel is a *mise en abyme* of abstraction, a reflection of already-reflected concepts which, to begin with, do not even have physical or concrete qualities that could easily cast a reflection.

Moreover, even the exquisitely detailed descriptions of the physicality of the “body” of nature throughout the poem give way to the ephemera Thel discovers nature really is. As a result, the “firm body of significance in the poem” is significant because it is an artifice offering “firm” representation of what is actually abstract. “The secret of artistic creation” Thel offers is that art is illusion *qua* illusion, virtuality at its utmost. Thel represents aesthetic artifice, or “[t]he transformation of sacrifice into subjectivity [that] occurs under the sign of the artifice that was already a feature of sacrifice” (Horkheimer and Adorno 56). The sacrifice, as we have seen, was always artificial. Thel did not give her life for another or “shed [herself] into new veins of existence”; Thel went through the motions of death without really surrendering herself to it (Swinburne, *Blake* 201). Rather, Thel’s sacrificial ritual was an assertion of her own selfhood, position herself as other than the “beauty of the vales of Har” in which “we live not for ourselves” (Blake, *Thel* III: 10). And deceit is always already part of the position of subjectivity in the aesthetic (Horkheimer and Adorno 56).

Ideology always offers the position for the subject; however, in Swinburne’s Blakean aesthetic, the subject illusorily positions herself outside of ideology—all the

while knowing the position is artificial: Swinburne even notes that conventional ideology is still “constraining the mute rebellious flesh” (Blake 202). But, despite that constraint, the artist/subject manages to create a virtual, anomalous aesthetic space within an actual, normative space, and it is the artist-subject’s very consciousness of the virtuality, the artifice, of that space that prevents his/her act of separation from being completely subsumed into the fold of the norm. Thel must be understood as knowing her sacrifice is as artificial as the dominated nature to whom she “sacrifices” herself; as already understanding herself, on some level, as a virtual body making a virtual sacrifice which is deceitfully presented as an actual exchange. Consequently, I feel Swinburne glosses over the final chapter of Blake’s *Thel* because it does not fit this paradigm. Swinburne suggests that Blake should never have presented Thel’s return to Har because *she never really left it*. Thel’s death—her sacrifice—is virtual; it is symbolic, not actual. Nature, always already dominated, cannot allow for an escape from the status quo because nature has been made into a pawn of the status quo. Blake’s “matron Clay” is the norm, not the exception, but Thel makes her serve as the virtual, anomalous space that locates the conscious illusion of exception. Because Swinburne recognizes Blake’s poem is “an inspired exposition of material things” in tension with the abstractions of “spirit” (Blake 202), his analysis of *The Book of Thel* reveals his supposition that the poem’s aesthetic “truth” is finalized in Chapter III with the deliberately artificial resolution that refuses to resolve the poem’s tension, making Chapter IV an unnecessary and undesirable ending to the poem.

CHAPTER THREE
Swinburne Remediating Blake:
Imagination, Perception, and Transforming Ego-Weakness

“*[C]onsciousness of limits drives Swinburne to haunt boundary lines. His verse was remarkably rich in boundaries—in images, poetic forms, and prosodic devices which can suggest a point of limits.*” —Jerome McGann

“*The speaking gesture of almost every line ... is not so much the gesture of a person speaking but rather, in its intention, the epiphany of language.*” —Theodor Adorno

“*[I am] the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Blake....*”
 —Algernon Charles Swinburne

As Swinburne establishes in his reading of *TheL*, the artist aware of the secret of creation is also aware of his/her own virtuality, the artifice that serves as one’s subject-position, and accordingly, the limitations of the aesthetic subject and his/her subject position. Swinburne, for all his great admiration of and respect for the poetry of Shelley, does not exactly share Shelley’s belief that the imaginative production of poetry is “the creation of actions according to the unchanging forms of human nature, as existing in the mind of the Creator”—an expansive, unlimited mind responsible for “the act of primal creation” which all other mind share in and thus repeat (qtd. in Abrams 282). For that reason, Swinburne wants to refigure Romanticism through his reading of Blake, and present Blake as achieving an ironic distance from the Romanticized *ego contemplatus*,¹

¹ In chapter four of the *Biographia*, Coleridge refers to the *ego contemplatus* as the “personal identity under the form in which [the mind] imagined itself previously to have existed,” signified with the use of personal pronouns such as “I” and “me” (468-69n1). In many Romantic poems, the contemplative “I” establishes its identity imaginatively in symbiotic relationship to a kind of immanent “trace memory” of prelapsarian nature. Perceiving Blake’s Romanticism as much more subversive, Swinburne believes that the speaking subjects in Blake’s poem—anxiously and virtually situated “I”s—wants to demonstrate the impossibility of that relationship.

though this irony, as Anne Mellor points out, this irony is itself a Romantic gesture.

Blake,

[h]aving ironically acknowledged the fictiveness of his own patternings of human experience, ... engages in the creative process of life by eagerly constructing new forms, new myths. And these new fictions and self-concepts bear with them the seeds of their own destruction.... The resultant artistic mode that alone can properly be called romantic irony must therefore be a form or structure that simultaneously creates and de-creates itself. (Mellor 5)

This irony allows Blake, and consequently Swinburne, to “deconstruct the mystifications of self” (Mellor 5), or the ego-weakness which threatens any aesthetic highly dependent on subjective particularity. Rather than projecting an ego with the mythic, omnipotent creative power of God—in which a particular subjective differentiation, a “fleeting individual reaction” accompanying the formation of aesthetic constellatives (Adorno, *Theory* 239), masquerades as a universal, touchstone aesthetic principle—Swinburne wants to demonstrate more accurately how the artist, “contriv[ing] to divert and infuse this overflowing fervour of mind,” often destabilizes the very work, the very process of creation, into which s/he funnels her/his “fervour” (Swinburne, *Blake* 85). Myth, like “[f]antastic art, ... presents something nonexistent as existing,” and produces the illusory “presentation of the nonempirical as if it were empirical” (Adorno, *Theory* 19), but myth does not acknowledge its fictive properties. Swinburne finds in Blake’s Prophetic Books a new mythology which represents the fictive properties of myth itself. Consequently, he embarks on a mission of exploiting the instabilities of myth to explicate the critical

tension incarnate in the artifice that paradoxically determines and threatens the Romantic subject position.

To do this, Swinburne reevaluates what he calls the “old” aesthetic “war ... not between facts and fancies, reason and romance, poetry and good sense, but simply between the imagination which apprehends the spirit of a thing and the understanding which dissects the body of a fact—this strife which can never be decided or ended” (*Blake* 97). This is more than a dismissal of fact and reason from the equation in favor of spirit and imagination, though. Swinburne also takes on the Coleridgean opposition between imagination and fancy. He does rely on Coleridge’s dismissal of the “fixities and definites” of fancy, since such “fixities and definites” too much resemble the end results of dissective reason, as well as the recognition that the esemplastic power of the imagination “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates in order to re-create” (Coleridge 516). However, unlike the Coleridgean version, the Swinburnian imagination does not “struggl[e] to idealize and to unify” (Coleridge 516). Swinburne’s work shows how that idealization and unification merely obfuscates the tension, or effective dissonance, fundamental to this aesthetic dedicated to enacting the necessary encounter with the “clamorous kingdoms of speech and dream” where the “ruling forces of supreme discord preside” (Swinburne, *Blake* 191).

In these clamorous, dissonant myths, there are no fixed or definite principles, nor are there struggles for idealization and unification that are not already acknowledged as artifice. The old aesthetic war, says Swinburne, pits imagination against reason, all the while misrecognizing the parties in conflict. The aesthetic conflict is really between imagination and *understanding*, as the very heart of the aesthetic is the contentious

traversal of conventional understanding (mimesis, even)—the identification of a given object or concept with another, socially established object or concept. As Swinburne himself acknowledges, one must, like Blake, have “the sense to see that the one thing utterly futile to attempt [is] a reconciliation between the two sides of life and thought which have no community of work or aim imaginable” (*Blake* 97). In other words, one cannot and should not attempt to forge a relationship between conventional (or ideologically-driven) understanding and aesthetic imagination, since the “[a]esthetic ... does not consist in establishing relationships between signifying elements, but in the reenactment of the process” by which they are momentarily, constellatively “interconnected in such a way as to gain meaning” (Menke 49); but this is “meaning” is an “immediate expression,” a “nonidentifying cognition” in which the imagination does not process information by relating it to already-established concepts (Gebauer and Wulf 285-86). The momentary, constellative process of the aesthetic imagination creates a myth of ego strength and stability, a myth in which the phenomenal representation of the belief in the noumenal appears possible. This myth functions only to reveal its own transience and subsequently its own failure to explicate truly the “patterns of human experience.”

Swinburne gestures back to Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience* to establish the function of the myths of aesthetic understanding in the Prophetic Books. These poems evidence the aesthetic issue at hand: “Experience must do the work of innocence as soon as conscience begins to take the place of instinct, reflection of perception; but the moment experience begins upon this work, men raise against her the conventional clamour of envy and stupidity” (Swinburne, *Blake* 124). “Experience” here,

or ideology, is the mimetic catalyst forcing the individual subject to become “an expression of difference in relation to nature” (Gebauer and Wulf 282). The subject, who experiences his/her surroundings reflected via experience instead of via unmediated perception, thus becomes subject to a profound loss of immediacy. The *Songs of Innocence* are best sung by the “Infant Joy,” who is “but two days old” and thus unaware of his inevitable transformation into “The School Boy” of the *Songs of Experience* whose indoctrination into experience “drives all joy away.”² In *Innocence*, Blake presents personas “who have or who deserve the gift of spiritual sight,” whereas the personas in *Experience* find only “what things there are for them to see” (Swinburne, *Blake* 116, italics mine). The *Songs of Experience* thus serve as bleak illustrations of the predominantly material existence one has when that “spiritual” immediacy is lost. Blake himself even remarks that the “Dress” of the individual who has lost that immediacy “is forged Iron.”³ It is as if the power of the imagination dissipates in experience, leaving the subject to resort to mere fancy with which to contemplate the fixed and definite properties of the things s/he sees.

Nonetheless, considering Swinburne was aware that Coleridge himself declared that such fancy “is indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space” (Coleridge 516), or dominant ideology, Swinburne seems to read the *Songs of Experience* to find the trace memory of spiritual innocence in the fixities of materialism. Such a trace memory, what Horkheimer and Adorno call the “remembrance of nature,” meaning an unadulterated, unsubjected nature, “in whose fulfillment the

² See William Blake, “Infant Joy,” lines 1-6 and “The School Boy,” lines 6-10.

³ This is from line 5 of “A Divine Image.” See *Complete Poetry and Prose* 800.

unacknowledged truth of culture lies hidden” (40), is also mythic in that it is artifice. It is an idea of a pre-mimetic perception in which imagination exists in its purest form, before it was differentiated into dichotomies, i.e., imagination vs. fancy, spirit vs. form.⁴ This goes “[a]gainst all articulate authority” (Swinburne, *Blake* 115). Speaking metaphorically of this purest imagination, Swinburne says, “If the ‘Songs of Innocence’ have the shape and smell of leaves or buds,” then the *Songs of Experience* “have in them the light and sound of fire or the sea” (*Blake* 116). And “a fresher savour and a larger breath strikes one” who “enters” the *Songs of Experience*, having intuited “the gift of spiritual sight,” or innocence, to see “what things there are ... to see when that gift [of innocence] has been given” (*Blake* 116). This virtual trace memory of “[i]nnocence, the quality of beasts and children, has the keenest eyes; and such eyes alone can discern and interpret the actual mysteries of experience” (*Blake* 116). The myth of innocence becomes the site where the individual positions her/himself to enact the illusion of revaluating experience as if s/he has regained her/his lost sense of immediacy. In other words, what s/he recalls in her/his reversion to myth is itself a mythic gesture (Horkheimer and Adorno 70), and thus another model of the use of aesthetic artifice.

Swinburne tests this model in his reading of “The Crystal Cabinet,” calling the poem “an example of the somewhat jarring and confused mixture” of artificial, mythic perception and “actual ‘vision’” (175).

The ‘cabinet’ is either passionate or poetic vision—a spiritual gift, which may soon and easily become a spiritual bondage.... [H]is prison built by his love or his art, with a view open beyond of exquisite limited

⁴ My reading here is based on Horkheimer and Adorno’s discussion of *mana* (39–42).

loveliness, soft quiet and light of dew and moon, and a whole fresh world to rest in or look into, but intangible and simply reflective; until you try at too much and attempt to turn spiritual to physical reality—‘to seize the inmost form’ with ‘hands of flame’... to translate eternal existence into temporal ...; when at once the whole framework ... breaks up and leaves you stranded or cast out, feeble and sightless.... (Swinburne, *Blake* 175-76)

Swinburne seems to read this poem as a reinforcement of the particularly artificial quality of aesthetic vision. The subtext here could be paraphrased accordingly: “If you do not recognize your aesthetic subject position as artifice, you will become imprisoned in an art that is nothing but a solipsistic prison.” Particularly notable is Swinburne’s emphasis on the limited nature of Blake’s “poetic vision.” This sight is guided—illuminated—only by light that is always already reflected: the moon reflects second-hand light from the sun, and the dew is a reflective surface that reflects the already doubly-reflected light from the moon. This is the same *mise en abyme* signified by *Thel*, with the same result: the significance of art is that it is illusion *qua* illusion. To accept the illusory vision as real is dramatically to increase one’s compulsory obligation to the “iron dress” of human experience, or the mimetic “bondage” purportedly eluded via art. If one does not fully acknowledge that the artifice of perceptual immediacy must always fail to actually (materially) be realized, then one is perpetually imprisoned in the same kind of “deep romantic chasm”⁵ of ego-weakness as Coleridge’s *Kubla Khan*.

⁵ “Kubla Khan,” lines 13-14.

The intrusion of “actual ‘vision’” into the “deep romantic chasm” is best illustrated in the third stanza of Blake’s poem, in which the speaker looks into the cabinet of art and reports,

Another England there I saw

Another London with its Tower

Another Thames & other Hills

And another pleasant Surrey Bower.... (“Cabinet” 5-8)

Blake very carefully uses the pronoun “I” to signify the very subjectivity of the speaker’s perception (as it would be quite a different poem if the contents of the cabinet were reported in a more objective manner, i.e., “*There was* another England there ...”) and Swinburne was very aware of this. Swinburne’s reading of “The Crystal Cabinet” seems informed, to some extent, by nineteenth-century theories concerning the relationship between vision and subjectivity as explored by such major thinkers as Goethe and Schopenhauer.⁶ As Jonathan Crary explains in *Techniques of the Observer*, Schopenhauer “repeatedly demonstrated how ‘what occurs within the brain,’ within the subject, is wrongly apprehended as occurring outside the brain in the world” (75). Schopenhauer’s discoveries were related to Goethe’s experiments concerning the visualization of color; Goethe was particularly interested that one can still “see” color even when one’s eyes are closed. This observed “stain” of color left on the retina, even when the retina no longer directly reflects the images of the outside world, suggests that

⁶ Swinburne’s letters indicate he had an interest in the works of Schopenhauer; see especially volume 2, p. 300 and volume 3, p. 166, of the collected *Letters*. References to Goethe are not as common; however, in a letter Swinburne wrote to Lady Trevelyan, dated 15 Mar. 1865, he mentions having read George Henry Lewes’s *Life of Goethe* (London: Routledge, 1864) and subsequently attempting to apply Goethe’s ideas to his reading of poetry (*Letters* 1: 115-17).

vision has some particularly subjective conditions. In turn, Swinburne's treatment of vision in his aesthetic shares some similarities to these nineteenth-century studies of the subjectivity of vision. Swinburne establishes an aesthetic vision that dispenses with and/or radically overtakes the mimetic element of art, only in the very end to reinforce the inescapability of mimesis. Even if one refuses to recognize (or closes one's eyes to) the reflection as such, the reflective element still stains one's attempt at refusal. After all, the alternate England that the speaking poet of Blake's "Crystal Cabinet" sees is actually the reflected image of reality, or the status quo, that still haunts or "stains" any and all efforts to evade imaginatively that reality altogether.

The "threefold" nature of the cabinet's contents⁷ further suggests tension between aesthetic and "actual" vision. The Romantic artist of Blake's poem assumes a given object exists independently of one's perception (that is, even when one is not looking at it, it is still there), but he ascertains its supposedly objective, independent existence only subjectively when its image is reflected upon the retina. Arguably, then, perception is always "second-hand" because it depends on reflection. Then the artist uses his imagination to reflect further upon the already-reflected image; in the "Preface to 1815," Wordsworth describes this as the "operations of the mind upon objects" that serve to re-create and re-compose them (483). The Blakean-Swinburnian Romantic ironist, though, breaks through this "conceptual enclosure, where [artistic] vision is still theorized from the standpoint of a subject placed at the center of the world" (Bryson, "Gaze" 87). Again, "Kubla Khan" is a good example of the poet whose mind is "naturally the mirror

⁷ "O what a smile a threefold Smile / Filled me that like a flame I burnd / I bent to kiss the lovely Maid / And found a Threefold Kiss returnd" (lines 17-20).

of the fairest and most interesting properties of nature” (Wordsworth 455): a mirror which turns on itself in Swinburne’s revaluation of Romanticism. Kubla Khan never escapes his solipsistic “pleasure-dome.”

Furthermore, although Coleridge portrays the artist-speaker of “Kubla Khan” as able to perceive the inmost, eternal “form” that underlies externality and gives it meaning,⁸ it is important that Coleridge presents that moment of pure, unadulterated perception as a dream. Kubla Khan’s supposed aesthetic prowess cannot be given in a first-hand account. It is doubly reflected, as the speaker of Coleridge’s poem recalls his dream “vision” of Kubla Khan’s “vision,” thus casting doubt on the neo-Platonic belief “that there exists a deeper, timeless order” or absolute *form* “behind the surface confusion and randomness” of the temporal, material world (Tarnas 11). Blake’s speaker “... strove to sieze [*sic*] the inmost Form / With ardor fierce & hands of flame / But burst the Crystal Cabinet” (lines 21-23). He realizes the inmost, absolute form ostensibly held in the cabinet is a delusion. His cabinet must burst because artworks cannot completely seal themselves off from the external world. The “inmost Form” is really an imaginative reworking of the external, material form. Even though the work of art places any elements borrowed from external, material reality into a “fully changed context” (Adorno, *Theory* 5), the “stain” of reality that persists in the aesthetic realm presents the poet with a *limit experience*.⁹

As Swinburne himself notices, the speaker in Blake’s poem “having had the larger vision, ... lost [his] hold of it by too great pressure of impatience or *desire*” (Blake

⁸ As suggested by the last two lines of the poem, in which the speaker imagines that he “on honey-dew hath fed, / And drunk the milk of Paradise,” and thus holds the key to higher, immanent aesthetic perception.

⁹ Adorno even relates these “immanent problems of form” with a limit experience in which “[t]he moment a limit is posited, it is overstepped and that against which the limit was established is absorbed” (*Theory* 6).

176, emphasis mine). The poet cannot sustain the “larger vision” of immanence since not only is it artifice, but it is also unable to satisfy his desire for immanence. The cabinet, the work of art, does not really, nor even adequately, signify any achievement of immanence, as a desire for such “cannot really have any object at all, if [such] desire is to remain what it is: the pure negativity of a *subject* who desires himself in his objects” (Borch-Jacobsen 199, italics in original). The aesthetic vision cannot represent anything but the eventual failure to visualize what lies beyond the horizons of reality.

In this compelling account of “The Crystal Cabinet,” Swinburne establishes the outline of the mythos of the limit experience and aesthetic failure, then, that he sees more overtly established in the Prophetic Books, specifically *The First Book of Urizen*, *The Book of Ahania*, and *Jerusalem*. In the mythic “clamorous kingdoms of speech and dream” (Swinburne, *Blake* 191) of the prophecies, more than in the lyrical poems, Swinburne relishes finding “more overflow of lyrical invention, [and] more of the divine babble which sometimes takes the place of earthly speech or sense” (*Blake* 195). For in his study of the Prophetic Books, unlike his study of Blake’s other poems, Swinburne finds clearer examples of how the practice of aesthetic artifice becomes a conscious play of and with the particularities of *language* itself. David Riede has already established that Swinburne reads the Blakean canon as “the inevitable result of a radical division in society between two perpetually conflicting cultures: the analytic, scientific culture of Urizenic ... repression and the imaginative, artistic culture of creative freedom” (*Study* 16). However, I want to push Riede’s thesis further to suggest that Swinburne reads the Blakean canon as radical division within language, not only a division between language as it is used socially and as it is used aesthetically, but also as language is used in

aesthetic practice: a division between language that builds mythic forms and practices and language that is “in contradistinction to mythic song,” stained with “the possibility of retaining in the memory the disaster that has occurred” (Horkheimer and Adorno 78)—in sum, what Adorno, in *Aesthetic Theory*, calls the “catastrophe of meaning” (22).

Swinburne had learned from reading Baudelaire that the displacement of established Romantic conventions in favor of abstraction and indeterminateness allows a given symbol or image in an artwork to function as a “cipher” signifying the “aesthetic distancing” from reality that the “traditional fantasy” of the Romantic *ego contemplatus* “no longer achieves” (Adorno, *Theory* 20-21). Swinburne compares the power of Baudelaire’s art, a “murmur of revelation” in which the poet subtly suggests imaginings which cannot be overtly stated, thus knowing “at once the limit and the licence of his art” (*Blake* 91n1), to Blake’s, noticing that both poets use an ideogrammatic kind of visual imagery in their verbal works. For Swinburne, this ideogram or cipher functions “not as a pictorial likeness or impression, but as a synchronic structure in some metaphorical” or aesthetic “space—‘that which’ (in Pound’s words) ‘presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time’” (Mitchell, *Iconology* 25). Swinburne’s Blakean ideogram is a synchronic structure in which one presumes to connect “earthly speech or sense” with “divine babble.” Swinburne seems to perceive “earthly speech or sense” similarly to how Lacan, in “The Agency of the Letter,” describes the effect of the great divide between signifier and signified: because the signifier always lacks veracity, the given signifier “carr[ies] a purely *animal* Dissension, destined for the usual oblivion of natural mists, to the unbridled power of ideological warfare, ... a torment to the Gods” (*Écrits* 152, emphasis mine). What makes “sense,” rationally, only does so in its distance and

dissent from the immediacy of sensation; in other words, the “natural mists” of a distinctly sensuous (“animal”) consciousness are obliterated by a rationalist ideology in the formation of conventional meaning. “Earthly speech” is always metaphorical, as it is a substitution of sense for sensuality; it reduces sensuality and emotion to “a reducible and amenable quality” (Swinburne, *Blake* 195). Thus it always contains the tension between signifier and signified—the reducing signifier and the reduced signified—subjugated though this tension might be.

Swinburne portrays Blake as waging a crucial “ideological warfare” within language by implementing intricate yet dense symbolic images that focus on this underlying tension, introducing a dissonance that intentionally problematizes the conventional methods of signification. The crucial element to this problematic is “divine babble,” the “non-sense” from which the “sense” made via metaphorical earthly speech emerges (Lacan, *Écrits* 158), embodied in Blake’s tormented creator-god, Urizen. This “non-sense,” signifiable only by its very failure really to be acknowledged in earthly speech, is like a primordial soup of significance. It is a condition of “meaning-full” (im)possibility, a trace memory of complete, immediate “meaning” as it might have existed prior to reason’s dominance. The “catastrophe of meaning” mentioned earlier is an important component of this trace memory. It is the imaginary event in which the signifier’s immediate access to an “undiminished plenitude” of available signified “meanings” was irretrievably lost, in which literal speech gives way to mediating metaphorical speech, and in which “appearance becomes abstract” (Adorno, *Theory* 22). However, with any kind of disastrous, cataclysmic event such as this loss of immediacy comes deluge, overflow, excess—in this case, that for which metaphorical “earthly

speech” cannot account. The abstractions of metaphorical speech contain nonfigurative, non-representational facets that subtly suggest that which exceeds the metaphor, that which the metaphor elides: “the floating final impression of power” of possibilities that will always remain “formless” (Swinburne, *Blake* 252). Through the ideogrammic visual image, Swinburne hopes to recover the abstractions so that art can communicate the possibilities of that unfigurable excess, and he hopes Blake’s works provide an adequate prototype for that recovery.

Even Swinburne is at first skeptical about the feasibility of this plan. Upon an initial reading of *The Book of Urizen*, Swinburne remarks the poem is “more shapeless and chaotic ... than any other of these prose poems,” as it is full of “[c]louds of blood, shadows of horror, worlds without form and void, [that] rise and mingle and wane in indefinite ways, with no special purpose or appreciable result” (*Blake* 248). However, I think this is a statement more of praise than criticism. The very indefiniteness suggested is the means of showing *constellation*: *Urizen*’s world(s) is/are without unity, consisting only as a multiplex of individualized moments in which patterns of temporary “meaning-making” are established in order to facilitate engagement with those world(s), as there is no definitive framework underlying the poem. They lack definite form because their appearance is abstract, with no concrete, objective referents to give them a framework of stability and support.

Swinburne describes *Urizen* as “warring with” the abstracted, amorphous “shapes of the wilderness” he forms around him, attempting but failing to establish such a framework because he is always “at variance” with those shapes (*Blake* 248-49). Furthermore, Swinburne notes that *Urizen*’s “unprolific” failure is mirrored in the painful

formation of Urizen's physical form: the "twisted forms" of his bones, covered by flesh more like "flames" which are themselves "tortured elemental shapes that plunge and writhe and moan" (*Blake* 249-50). We, the readers, "recoil in fear" from the horrific sight of "the dawn of human creation and division" (*Blake* 250). The "shadows of horror" which haunt the poem are "phantasm[s] of a lost remote antiquity" (Horkheimer and Adorno 78), or the trace memory of the immediacy of perception—what Swinburne, borrowing from Blake's poem, calls the "all-flexible senses" (*Blake* 249)—supposedly existing before the catastrophe of meaning. Adorno tells us, "In the image of catastrophe, an image that is not a copy of the event but a cipher of its potential, the magical trace of art's most distant pre-history reappears under a total spell, as if art wanted to prevent the catastrophe by conjuring up its image" (*Theory* 33). The potential is limitless, although the language in which it can be expressed is quite limited. So, an ideogrammatic aesthetic trope or device allowing for multiple constellative perceptions is the closest Blake/Swinburne can come to approximating the "eternal form" of potential. The end result is always the same, though; the trace memory of the catastrophe of meaning is always conjured. It serves as a reminder that no constellation will reveal the "ungraspable, fugitive moment" in which "the Apocalypse of desire has already taken place" (Borch-Jacobsen 116). The imaginary event of "meaning-full" immediacy that would satisfy our desire is such a "distant pre-history" that, even in aesthetic space, "it is we who, catastrophically, always come too late to receive it" (Borch-Jacobsen 116). Swinburne himself remarks that Urizen is "at war with Time" (*Blake* 249), although

Urizen himself invents the time (history)¹⁰ that serves as the principle that mediates perception.

At first, though, Blake presents Urizen as a dynamic, amorphous immediacy carrying the promise of apocalypse in the first two chapters of the poem. But even this presentation is problematized since the catastrophe of meaning has always already taken place, as evidenced in the poem's first stanza:

Lo, a shadow of horror is risen
 In Eternity! Unknown, unprolific!
 Self-closd, all-repelling: what Demon
 Hath form'd this abominable void
 This soul-shuddering vacuum?—Some said
 “It is Urizen,” But unknown, abstracted.... (Blake, *Urizen* I: 1-6)

Even in his primordial state, Urizen is already “abstracted.” Furthermore, he is “self-closd,” indicating that the immediacy of Eternity is an illusion, already mediated through Urizen's perception, that threatens to collapse on itself. Urizen, even before assuming a bodily shape, is already subject to the “demand for manifestation”¹¹ of metaphoric, earthly speech. This suggests two things: first, that Blake pointedly demonstrates that aesthetic language is metaphoric language that conveys the idea of a pre-abstracted “Eternity” (or eternal form) only by demonstrating the impossibility of conveying the idea; secondly, that aesthetic language is metaphoric language interpreted negatively. Aesthetic negativity “cannot be understood as the severing of all connections between

¹⁰ In Chapter IV[b], Urizen is “forging chains new & new / Numb’ring with links. hours, days & years” (17-18).

¹¹ See Borch-Jacobsen 131.

letter and [conventional] meaning”; consequently, aesthetic language can only be interpreted negatively “vis-à-vis the meaning ascribed to it” by conventional modes of interpretation “in its connection with this meaning” (Menke 23) as well as how this meaning fails to “ring true.” The negative interpretation requires “render[ing] visible the ‘ex-timate,’ [*extimité*] inherent decentrement of the field of signification” (Zizek, *Metastases* 29). Swinburne realized that Urizen must be presented as a subject squarely positioned in the field of conventional signification before the conventions can be challenged and he can “manifes[t] himself in language” by negating that conventionally comprehended “reality” (Borch-Jacobsen 191). He also realized that Urizen’s subjectification, described by Blake as Urizen becoming (realizing himself as) an “abominable void,” reveals the vacuum of his solipsism in which he must “confront the nullity of [his] narcissistic pretensions” (Zizek, *Lacan* 64).

To arrive at this moment of revelation, though, one must first understand Urizenic narcissism as resembling that which Marcuse designates “primary narcissism,” which “engulfs the ‘environment,’ integrating the narcissistic ego with the objective world” (168). This is more than the kind of “autoeroticism” Swinburne conjures in his earlier descriptions of the Sadean self-generative Nature. The cruelly creative impulses of Sadean nature do not “denot[e] a fundamental relatedness to reality” the way Urizen’s do. Still, Urizen assumes a material body that fails to function as “the source and reservoir for a new libidinal cathexis of the objective world—transforming this [material] world into a new mode of being” (Marcuse 169). This is definitely a “new mode of being,” compared to Urizen’s prior state of complete immanence and immediacy; however, this is a negative, divisive transformation of “being.”

The significance of the Urizenic problem, says Swinburne, lies in the bifurcation of “the material body of nature” (*Blake* 250)—an important observation that Swinburne makes and yet does not fully elaborate. I believe Swinburne’s text suggests we should read this bifurcated material body of nature as not only the body Urizen fashions for himself but also the body of a “mother nature,” Enitharmon, who both is and is not Urizen’s own creation.¹² Urizen creates the world “from his sorrows” (Swinburne, *Blake* 250), as a sacrificial gift of himself to himself, or the nature that must be, like Marcuse would suggest, “‘given’ to the ego as something that had to be fought, conquered and even violated” as part and parcel to “the precondition for self-preservation and self-development” in and of the material world (110). Interestingly, feminized nature in the world of *Urizen* does not carry the trace memory of a pre-dominated state. Unlike Urizen, whose “pre-history” makes up the greater part of the poem, Enitharmon is presented as born of domination, in the aftermath of Urizenic mediation, divided from that “pre-history,” since she functions as “the material body of nature,” the already-dominated space which allows for positioning of the subject, or assertion of ego—in Blake’s words, “Man begetting his likeness / On his own divided image” (*Urizen* VI: 15-16).

This is also a “new mode of being” according to the Adornian definition of the “new,” in which “the knot is tied aesthetically” between the subject and the world around him/her; “its concept ... labors under its own abstractness” (*Theory* 21). The libidinal cathexis—meaning the channeling of creative energy into a material object, or trying to

¹² Enitharmon’s physical form was not created by Urizen; she is a cipher of the Urizenic world actually given physical form by Los, another of the “Eternals.”

embody the quality of an immanent, immaterial *nothingness* in a *thing*—is attempted in the Urizenic world, though it fails to recognize or to harness human desire and its potential fulfillment. The titanic figures of *Urizen*, says Swinburne, are “[s]trange semi-human figures,” with as yet unrealized qualities “clad in somber or in fiery flesh” (*Blake* 251) that disallows any attainment of the fulfillment of desire. Rather than allowing for such cathexis, such flesh will “allure and confuse the fancy” of the reader; as “[e]very page vibrates with light and color” (*Blake* 251), the spectator/reader might mistake the frenzied imagery as evidence of realized transcendence and fulfillment. As Swinburne’s treatment of *The Book of Urizen* illustrates, though, the end result must always be the stalemating abstraction of metaphor. Therefore, Swinburne is more interested in the creation and exploration of imagery in which the attempt to recognize and to harness that desire, and ultimately, inevitably failing to do so, is meaningful in and of itself. In other words, Swinburne wants to transform the very way we read the image(s) of the catastrophe of meaning. Urizen exemplifies this transformation in *The Book of Ahania*, which Swinburne considers “The Second Book of Urizen” (*Blake* 252).¹³

The character of Fuzon in *Ahania*, the son of Urizen “born of the fiery part of the God of nature” (Swinburne, *Blake* 252), captures Swinburne’s particular interest, as Fuzon accomplishes the astonishing task of separating Urizen from his desire. Fuzon,

¹³ Swinburne justifies his comment: “It is worth observing that while some copies [of *Urizen*] are carefully numbered throughout ‘First Book,’ in others the word ‘First’ is erased from every leaf: as in effect the Second Book never was put forth under that title. Next year however the *Book of Ahania* came out” (*Blake* 251-52). However, I feel it is worth noting that, in his commentary appended to the *Complete Poetry and Prose*, Harold Bloom points out that although *Ahania* generally “is treated as a mere continuation of *The Book of Urizen*” because its “action carries on from *Urizen*, it is an altogether different kind of work” (907). Swinburne obviously would disagree; and, if he could respond, Swinburne’s answer would probably suggest that *Ahania* provides a constellatively different perspective on the same issues of materiality, myth, and aesthetic metaphor introduced in *Urizen*, and even earlier in the *Songs*.

one of the “children begotten on the material body of nature” (*Blake* 250), is presented as a Moses figure at the end of *The Book of Urizen*, calling together “The remaining children of Urizen” and leading them away from “the pendulous earth” of their father-god’s making (*Blake, Urizen IX[2]: 20-21*). The Fuzon-led exodus is an artificial attempt to reclaim the immediacy Urizen forfeited on their behalf. The last line of *Urizen* indicates that the children of Urizen, dismayed by their awareness of being “bound down / To earth by their narrowing perceptions” (*Urizen IX: 46-47*), are heading to “the salt ocean rolled englob’d,” a kind of pre-repressive (pre-Urizenic) narcissistic fluidity that does not rely on ego-projection;¹⁴ meaning, whereas the Urizenic world is one impelled by the individual ego, this pre-Urizenic world would be compelled by an immanent, collective ego. However, just as the Biblical Moses never emerges from his exodus into the Promised Land, Fuzon never accesses the pre-Urizenic world. Urizen has already made the differentiated and differentiating ego both the product of and condition for Fuzon’s (material) existence. Fuzon’s very awareness of being born into, and as a result of, the lack of immediacy depends on Fuzon’s own ego functioning as “the synthetic unit of apperception” (*Horkheimer and Adorno 87*) which apprehends and understands the very concept of *difference*. In other words, Fuzon apperceives the material world in terms of Otherness, and blames Urizen for the discomfort and feeling of “decenteredness” Otherness brings.

In his distress, Fuzon seems to realize that the projecting ego “encounters in itself something ‘more than itself,’ a strange body in its very center,” or *extimité* (*Zizek, Lacan*

¹⁴ I think it may be of interest here to add that Marcuse refers to this pre-repressive narcissism as an “oceanic feeling” of connection “with oneness with the universe,” or a “limitless narcissism” of undivisible, unmediated and unmediating selfhood (168-69, italics mine).

169), and like the casting of “light to ‘Egypt,’” Fuzon attempts to reveal that which exceeds “the house of bondage and place of captivity” formed by Urizen (Swinburne, *Blake* 253). Thus Fuzon separates Urizen from his desire, that excessive part of the Urizenic ego which is “more than itself,” to try to make sense of *difference*. Swinburne’s Fuzon seems to manipulate his awareness of an ego-weakness in Urizen caused by subjective differentiation. To Swinburne, *The Book of Ahania* demonstrates how the constant differentiation involved in the making of the Urizenic world, complicates the “creative myth” of *Urizen*—how “it grows, if not wilder in words, still mistier in build of limb and shape of feature” (Swinburne, *Blake* 253). Moreover, Fuzon’s death at the hands of Urizen, demonstrating the “barren pain of unprofitable fruit and timeless burden of desire” one can neither transcend nor fulfill (*Blake* 254), suggests a resignation to differentiated desire.

Fuzon, then, is another image invoking the Urizenic catastrophe of meaning as well as the resultant problems of aesthetic abstraction. He is “in revolt against his father” as creator (Swinburne, *Blake* 252), seeking an autonomous existence in difference to the Urizenic ego as well as to limit the creator’s power. “Typify[ing] dimly the ... Promethean sacrifice” (*Blake* 253), Fuzon steals what the creator god has created for his own pleasure: Desire. When Urizen’s desire, Ahania, is separated from him, “Dire shriek’d his invisible Lust / ... He groand anguishd [*sic*] & called her Sin” and “Then hid her in darkness in silence” (Blake, *Ahania* I: 30-35, 38) where any perception of materiality is impossible. There, Ahania/Desire becomes “Unseen, unbodied, unknown” (line 42): she is abstracted. As noted earlier, desire “cannot really have any object at all, if [such] desire is to remain what it is: the pure negativity of a *subject* who desires

himself in his objects”; this subject can only desire himself in objects “by perpetually negating himself in them, by negating them as what he is not—a ‘given object’ ..., a thing ‘in-itself’” (Borch-Jacobsen 199, italics in original). Urizen knows Ahania is his “ex-timated” self, the “strange body” that is a projection of his own ego yet differentiated from that ego. As Swinburne describes her, Ahania represents “the divine”—meaning Urizen’s—“desire ..., translated on earth into sexual expression; the female side of the creative power—mother of all things made” (*Blake* 255). As Urizen’s desire-as-object given to him, she resembles Enitharmon, the female embodiment of “nature” given to the masculinized ego. Ahania does seem to serve as the “natural” woman “arous[ing] the primitive anger of the ... man who is required to revere her” (Horkheimer and Adorno 111) as well as a “precondition for self-preservation” (Marcuse 110) on Urizen’s part, for his reverence and sorrow for the separated Ahania¹⁵ seemingly exhort him to kill Fuzon. But, tellingly, the words Urizen utters when making the kill reveal the murderous act as a performative fiat intended to affect ego-strength to counter the ego-weakness the separation caused: Urizen declares, “I am God. said he, eldest of things!” (Blake, *Ahania* II: 38). Declaring himself “God,” Urizen projects an image of complete *being-in-himself*—an evocation of that comprehensive narcissistic fluidity mentioned above.¹⁶ This declaration is of course a conscious artifice since Urizen, divided from Ahania, knows he is not a complete being.

¹⁵ Following the agonizing separation, Urizen apprehends Ahania by “Kissing her and weeping over her” (*Ahania* I: 35).

¹⁶ In a more Hegelian sense, this comprehensive fluidity could be described as *being* which is beyond “abstract *being*,” or “precisely that simple fluid substance of pure movement within [the] self” (Hegel 106-07).

Urizen is distressed by his own ego-weakness, and he seeks to achieve an illusory unity of selfhood by eradicating Fuzon, the visible and thus opportune emblem of his subjective differentiation. However, the differentiation very evidently lingers. Ahania remains invisible throughout the poem, signifying Urizen's inability to reconcile himself to the concept of *being-for-an-other*.¹⁷ Swinburne observes that Ahania represents how "the love of God, as it were, parted from God, [is] impotent therefore and a shadow" (*Blake* 254). Urizen's love is very egocentric; he must see his love as a projection of his *self* meant only to further the egocentricity of his contemplation of "his" material world. Ahania is too much an estranged other, a "not-I" representing "the 'self' (the 'subject') of desire [who] is not identical to himself," who is now "something other" (Borch-Jacobsen 90). Urizen can only conceive his relationship to his own desire in an "I/Other" format.¹⁸ Concomitantly, Ahania is pure *being-for-an-other*. As suggested by her lamentations at being unable to traverse the wide abyss separating her from Urizen and thus being unable to physically consummate her (his) desire (*Ahania* V: 54-71), Ahania has none of the aspirations of *being-in-itself*.

All of this suggests that the radical decentering of subjectivity initiated by Fuzon creates a rapturous disunity in which the "dim and great suggestions of something more than our analytic ingenuities can well unravel" can be detected (Swinburne, *Blake* 254). In the disharmony between Urizen and his desire, or what Žižek calls "the absolute negativity of I = I" (*Metastases* 43), when the "I" is exactly the sacrifice, loss, expenditure of that which constitutes the "I." Those "suggestions of something more"—

¹⁷ A note on the psychoanalytic purpose for Ahania's invisibility: "Desire cannot even pose itself in front of itself in order to (re)cognize itself in another itself (another 'self-consciousness')" (Borch-Jacobsen 91-92).

¹⁸ As evidenced by chapter five of the poem, in which the speaking "I" is Urizen's Otherness, Ahania, very much differentiated from the speaking "I" of Urizen who issues the performative fiat in chapter two.

in other words, the images in Blake's poems that attempt to iconize that which cannot really be seen or comprehended—are the key to aesthetic negativity. The importance of Swinburne's reading of the *Book of Ahania*, then, is that, more than in his reading of *Urizen*, Swinburne distinguishes the possibilities for synaesthetic subjectivity, a "pouring out [of] a succession of images as analogues or facets of a single subject or perception" (McGann, *Swinburne* 73).

The very excess of this "pouring-out" process which stains the "murmurs of revelation" (or "divine babble") rumbling at the boundaries of art's use of "earthly speech" points us right back to the issue of the ideogrammatic representations of the catastrophe of meaning and the limit experience. Swinburne felt he had to extend the aesthetic praxis evidenced in *Thel*, between the exploration of the illimitable possibilities of the virtual subject and necessity of limiting the pre-eminence of the creating subject to avoid "ego-weakness," to include the necessity of subjectively exceeding the conventional boundaries of making and discerning meaning,¹⁹ as evidenced in his readings of *Urizen* and *Ahania*. That brought him to settle on Blake's *Jerusalem* as the site for furthering such praxis. In the process, Swinburne again echoes his predecessors' unenthusiastic criticism of the Prophetic Books, only to use their disparagement in a negative way to imply high praise, saying,

Of that terrible 'emanation,' hitherto the main cornerstone of offence to all students of Blake, what can be said within any decent *limit?* or where shall any traveller find a rest for feet or eyes in that noisy, misty land? It

¹⁹ This, too, can be understood as a facet of the Adornian principle, initially presaged in Swinburne's reading of *Thel*, of art establishing praxis because it is "the negation of practical life" (*Theory* 241).

were a mere frenzy of discipleship that would undertake by *force of words* to make straight these crooked ways or compel things incoherent to cohere. (*Blake* 280, emphases mine)

What Swinburne finds most exciting about *Jerusalem* is that it exceeds all the “decent limits” of empirical experience as well as meaning-making a reader may typically bring to a text.

Jerusalem affects the kind of limit experience instigated but not fully examined in *Ahania*: what Pierre Blanchot describes as “the desire of a man who is without desire, ... pure absence wherein there is nevertheless fulfillment of being” (qtd. by Borch-Jacobsen, 7). Whereas in *Ahania* we see the frustrated dissatisfaction of the subject separated from (and thus without) his desire, we do not see pure absence or fulfillment of being. *Ahania* is invisible but very much present in the poem, not an absence or a void, and the problematics of *being* prevent the realization of any kind of fulfillment of needs and desires in the Urizenic world. The problematics of being are also the problematics of the poetic language. Swinburne suggests that the very “force of words” that could render the “divine babble” of Blake’s *Jerusalem* into the “earthly speech” that would compel a rational “understanding” of the poem’s meaning would ultimately fail, as it would require “frenzy”—exceeding the limits of scholarship, interpretation, study. The “force of words” here, then, is the linguistic enforcement of the limit experience of frustrated *being*, frustrated desire.

The frustrated desire represented by Urizen/*Ahania* is amplified in *Jerusalem*’s “great qualities”:

[Its] certain real if rough and lax power of dramatic insight and invention shown even in the singular divisions of adverse symbol against symbol; in such allegories as that which opposes the ‘human imagination in which all things exist’—do actually exist to all eternity—and the reflex fancy or belief which men ... prefer to dwell in and ask comfort from. (Swinburne, *Blake* 290)

The barrier between Urizen and Ahania, “adverse symbol against symbol,” is the barrier of metaphoric language, or the mediating barrier(s) separating creation, perception, and interpretation.²⁰ It is particularly significant that Swinburne again evokes the Romantic distinction between imagination and fancy here. Fancy’s fixed, limited character provides one with modes of interpretation (via an always-already mediated perception) that offer conclusive order and definite “meaning,” that always appear to compel the incoherent to cohere. Furthermore, one may find comfort in the limits of “fixities and definites” that fancy offers. The imagination can provide a virtual (rather than “real”) way to surmount those limitations, but the surmounting has a very virtual quality to it, as it is all a conscious pretense; an open acknowledgment that any transcendence of limitation the imagination offers is really an artificial transcendence is required here. And the recognition of transcendence-as-artifice might cause even more discomfort and dissatisfaction than the actual limits one feigns to transcend.

The recognition of artifice *qua* artifice might also bring one too uncomfortably close to the catastrophe of meaning, and thus recognize all appearance as abstract. However, as Swinburne’s/Blake’s dueling, divisive symbols propose, fancy cannot

²⁰ See Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* 35-36.

remain a safe haven from instability and abstraction. Fancy still functions as a cipher of that catastrophe. Even Coleridge noticed that fancy served as “a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space” (516), or that trace-memory of “pre-history” of immediacy existing prior to the mediated material (or, in Blake’s case, the Urizenic) world. Fancy and imagination, though differentiated, are both crucial to aesthetic insight and invention; in terms of *Jerusalem*, the tension between the utility of fancy and the initiative of the imagination is necessary in the construction of the “myth of this building of ‘Golgonooza’ (that is, we know, inspired art by which salvation must come)” (Swinburne, *Blake* 287).

Golgonooza is described in the last two plates²¹ of the fourth chapter of *Jerusalem* as a “great City” in “the Shadowy Generation” (Blake, *Jerusalem* IV: 55); as Swinburne says, it is a “spiritual”—or immaterial—dream city “which is redemption and freedom for all” (*Blake* 287), “shadowy” as the trace memory of the pre-Urizenic existence is shadowy. In Blake’s poem, this city harbors “Visionary forms” in “new Expanses, creating exemplars of Memory and of Intellect / Creating Space, Creating Time according to the wonders Divine / Of Human Imagination ...” (*Jerusalem* IV: 28-33). Swinburne compares this to “the latter chapters of Ezekiel, with their interminable inexplicable structures and plans” (*Blake* 288). Amid the inexplicable plans for “the new Jerusalem” given in the Old Testament Book of Ezekiel remains the promise of the restoration of Israel to unity with the glory of God.²² Swinburne reads *Jerusalem*, though, not as an achievement of unity with the subjectively differentiated creator god,

²¹ Plates 98 and 99

²² See especially Ezekiel 28.24-26.

Urizen, but as the figurative site of “imaginative liberty” established on the margins of Urizen’s creation; it is an emanation of the trace “of [the] unfallen days” of an undifferentiated world that haunts the Urizenic world, the revelation of “Tirzah” exceeding “the perverted incarnation” she takes when reason has been substituted for imaginative intuition (*Blake* 289-90). Furthermore, “the variation of Time & Space” vary “according as the Organs of Perception vary,” and Golgonoozan subjectivity is described as “One Man reflecting each in each” (*Jerusalem* IV: 38-40). Here, finally, Swinburne reaches the zenith of aesthetic synaesthesia and its counterpart, synaesthetic subjectivity. This is what lies beyond “that ‘mild heaven’ of dreams and shadows where only the reflected image of [men’s] own hopes and errors can abide” and the “duplicity and division, perplexity and restraint” (Swinburne, *Blake* 290, 282) of differentiated subjectivity.

One of the most pressing question Swinburne must answer, though, is how these “Visionary forms” can actually be *seen*. Blake’s constant reliance on the tropes of vision and visuality in *Jerusalem* forces Swinburne to confront again the complicated relationship between visuality and the act of perception, especially to consider that “[b]etween retina and world is inserted”—ideologically—“a *screen* of signs, a screen consisting of all the multiple discourses on vision built into the social arena” (Bryson, “Gaze” 92, italics in original). We must read the passages of *Jerusalem* with “equal eyes,” Swinburne says, to find them ““full of wisdom and perfect in beauty”” (*Blake* 297), seemingly calling on the idea of stereoscopic vision. In “binocular parallax,” the angle of each eye differs even when each focuses on the same point in space; thus vision is

established as “an operation of reconciling disparity” (Crary, *Techniques* 119-20).²³

Moreover, nineteenth-century studies in optics suggested that the convergence or fusion of images viewed stereoscopically “might not actually be secure” (*Techniques* 120); to again quote from *Jerusalem*, “the Organs of Perception vary.”

In the case of Swinburne’s reading of Blake, the instability of stereoscopic or binocular vision seems employed to find a way to differently employ this screen, which filters out or at least obscures that which exceeds such discourses and that which does not seem to fit conventions of and for comprehension (making “meaning”).

This screen *casts a shadow* [of death].... For when we look through the screen, what we see is caught up in a network that comes to us from the outside: mobile tesserae of signification, a mosaic that moves. This network is greater than its individual agents or operators.... The screen *mortifies* sight. Its terms are points of signification, chains of signifiers, that of themselves have no light. The signifier operates on light and with light, but has no light of itself.... The signifier casts its shadow of darkness across my vision.... (Bryson, “Gaze” 92)

The fact that Golgonooza itself is described as the place of the “Shadowy Generation” might be cause for hesitation. If Golgonooza is just another production of screened discourse, then it is just another “mild heaven” of dreams and shadows reflecting the mortifying (meaning the limited and limiting) chains of signifiers. However, if the “multiple discourses on vision” include anamorphic discourses—as each eye “looks” at Golgonooza on a different axis, at a different angle—then it might be possible to “see”

²³ Binocular, or stereoscopic, vision was established by Charles Wheatstone in 1833.

what is obscured in the shadow of the almighty screen. However, Golgonooza's "shadowy" character could also indicate that it exists in some sort of netherspace in the shadow of darkness that falls across "enlightened" vision, and thus beyond the reach of rational, ideological "illumination." Golgonooza could be visuality beyond conventional vision.

Blake's declaration that the "Organs of Perception vary" in this unconventional visuality thus suggests to Swinburne a synaesthetic approach in which Swinburne finds the catalyst to pursue concepts of visualization beyond what the *eye* can *see*. He thus approximates the *gaze*—the attempt to imag(in)e visually that which the eye, or the conventional means of visualizing, renders invisible.²⁴ Swinburne assumes an aesthetic position in which he presumes to take a "lateral perspective" (Zizek, *Lacan* 90), a completely virtual—meaning knowingly artificial, not transcendent—position in which he *imagines* he sees both sides of the screen: that which is seen through the screen but also, more importantly, that which the screen obfuscates or prevents from being "seen" altogether. That which the screen excludes is subject to the Swinburnian gaze, which employs all organs of perception to "produce ever new 'hidden meanings'" for that which exceeds "the ground of the established, familiar signification" (Zizek, *Lacan* 91). In the *Poems and Ballads*, Swinburne will put this aesthetic theorizing into practice by creating poetic *embouchures*, abyssal mouths which are also gaping eyes, which signify the gaze and its many possibilities.

It is absolutely crucial to distinguish this as being different than the Romantics' quest to achieve a subjective "unmediated vision," to reclaim a "pure representation, a

²⁴ See Jay, *Downcast Eyes* 353.

vision unconditioned by the particularity of experience” (Hartman 155). The Romantic “unmediated vision” believes the screen can be thwarted or even obliterated. Swinburne has no such pretensions. The screen is very much present, very much a crucial component, in his schema of *remediated* vision. As indicated above, any myth of unmediated vision Swinburne may present is only used as artifice. In the Romantic-ironic style, Swinburne will utilize a myth of immediacy only to deconstruct it in his very use of it. Perception is always already mediated, and any claim to bypass the mediation is folly. However, if one actively remediates—that is, renegotiates—the mediating ideological boundaries, or the limits contained within the multiple discourses with which one contends in order to arrive at meaning and understanding, then the myths perpetually change. In other words, remediated vision is a procession of a flux of new fictions and new self-concepts that continually open new doors of perception by closing others. This is not quite a perpetual regression of perspective, *mise-en-abyme* style; if it were, this would merely be aesthetic redux, the reduplication of the same perceptive act, producing the same results, *ad infinitum*. Instead, in Swinburne’s remediated vision, the boundaries which place limits on perception are like a “repetitive but variegated surface, which is experienced in its expansiveness and its depth only through the work of the viewer’s own dis-integrated or decentered but expanded subjectivity” (Nicholsen 134).

The new conceptualization of selfhood Swinburne discovers in *Jerusalem* does not exactly stipulate the immanent, collective ego of the pre-Urizenic world, after all. Each individual seems irreparably “lapse[d] ... into separate self-righteousness” (Swinburne, *Blake* 251). The individual subject remains a differentiated and differentiating ego, but each individual’s particularities have a share in the trace memory

of “the final vision of an [undifferentiated] eternity where the ... personal affections ‘born of shame and pride’ will be destroyed or absorbed in resignation of individual office and quality” (*Blake* 284-85n1), as suggested in Blake’s concept of “One Man reflecting each in each.” Yet, remaining true to the principle that any universal can only be understood “in terms of its own meaning *not* lodged beyond the particular individuals who bear it” (Adorno, *Theory* 200, italics mine), Swinburne stubbornly clings to the utopian idea of a subjectivity beyond contradiction,²⁵ and settles on Blake’s hermaphrodite as the emblem of the universally particularized subject who both possesses and becomes a hieroglyph for remediating visibility. In this impossible unity of self and other, Swinburne imagines a being united in its very violence of disunity. In a sense, this is the closest Swinburne can approximate a Urizen-who-is-and-yet-lacks-Ahania.

The hermaphrodite, traditionally representing sexless (undifferentiated) beauty,²⁶ here represents for Swinburne a kind of trace memory of collective subjectivity within subjective differentiation. In chapter four of *Jerusalem*, Blake says, “... Man cannot unite with Man but by their Emanations / Which stand both Male & Female at the Gates of each Humanity” (Plate 88, lines 10-11). Though the hermaphrodite traditionally represents the “duplicity and division, perplexity and restraint” of the heterosexual relationship with feigns the fulfillment of being it cannot bring about, to Swinburne the hermaphrodite advocates the amalgamation and annihilation (*Blake* 282) of the problems of ego differentiation. The divided and inconsistent self becomes the site for a liberating

²⁵ See Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* 146.

²⁶ Richard Dellamora discusses the aesthetic tradition of hermaphroditism and how that tradition relates to the works of Swinburne and Pater in *Masculine Desire*; see pp. 67-69.

“play impulse.” This figure also represents how the imagination professes the paradoxical power of its powerlessness to escape the reality in which it is positioned. It divulges how the imagination’s fantasy of transcendence is grounded and inhibited by material reality while striking an uneasy ambivalence between fantasy and reality, providing moments which gesture toward *le trait unaire*, or what Žižek explains is the “differential feature that cannot be pinned to” a point of definite, delineated “symbolic identification” (*Lacan 75*). In sum, the hermaphroditic emblem suggests the imagination’s pivotal role in establishing a kind of subjective differentiation which works around ego-weakness. Moreover, as the next chapter will further illustrate, this emblem also suggests an artificial bridging of “the gulf between words and images to be as wide” as that division between language’s conventional usages and its aesthetic functions (*Mitchell, Iconology 43*), as Swinburne’s *Poems and Ballads* put into practice—and praxis—the complicated tension between visual images that pretend not to signify any real *thing* and yet signify what is supposedly unsignifiable in symbols that declare their artificiality but teem with diffuse and potential representative meanings.

CHAPTER FOUR
**The Influences on Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads*:
 Rossetti, Baroque Mirrors, and the Semblance of Truth**

"We know that once we are conscious of it, we have to react to the desire ingrained in us to overstep the limits."—Georges Bataille

"The artist's imagination scarcely ever completely encompassed what it brought forth."—Theodor Adorno

Swinburne's most infamous collection, the *Poems and Ballads, First Series* of 1866, was met with a public uproar that Swinburne, despite his claims not to have anticipated such a reaction, eagerly perpetuated. The initial reviews of the volume, all negative, appeared on August 4th of that year in *The Athenaeum* and *The London Review*, but Swinburne was particularly upset by the review appearing in the *Saturday Review*, the review which was arguably the most brutal of all.

The story of Swinburne's reaction to this review has become almost legendary. Swinburne, while walking around London with publisher James Bertrand Payne of Moxon and Company, purchased a copy of the *Saturday Review* and immediately began reading the article. Swinburne had been expecting the *Saturday Review*'s appraisal of his poetry to be more positive than the others, given that the journal had commissioned one of Swinburne's friends from Oxford, John Morley, to write it. Morley, as the editor of the *Fortnightly Review*, previously had been quite receptive to Swinburne and his work. However, Morley developed his vehement aversion to the subject matter and style of Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* into an attack on Swinburne's character. Swinburne's immediate reaction to the harsh criticism was to perform a "torrent of vituperation" (Rooksby, *Life* 136), a litany of obscenities and "scatological abuse" so intense that

Payne, embarrassed by his client's very public tantrum, begged Swinburne at least to scream his obscenities in French so other people would mistake him for an "eccentric foreigner" (Henderson 121).

In "Mr Swinburne's New Poems," Morley lambasts Swinburne for being an indecent and undignified person whose very "position makes it impossible for him to [be] receive[d] with anything but laughter and contempt"; moreover, he suggests that Swinburne is so incapable of adhering to the "social duty" of decency that it is "no use, therefore, to scold Mr Swinburne for grovelling down among the nameless shameless abominations which inspire him with such frenzied delight." Morley also proclaimed that the material in the *Poems and Ballads* was so prurient that even "a professional vendor of filthy prints might blush to sell" it.¹ Morley's rancorous reaction to Swinburne's poetry suggests the very radical character of Swinburne's aesthetic, though. Like many of their contemporaries, Morley was discomfited by the prospect of Swinburne, precariously tiptoeing the margins of the already-marginalized traditions of the "fleshly" Pre-Raphaelites and French decadents, changing not only the way art is perceived but also how art can change, if not in some way reveal new "truths" about the acts and modes of perception. Though Swinburne was enraged by the venomous tone of Morley's presentation, he was no doubt inherently pleased by Morley's discomfort. Morley exhibited the discomfort which Swinburne wished his art to instigate, the discomfort caused by tensions between the "delight" found in "nameless shameless abominations" and the ossifying constructs of "social duty" that often suppress the realm of human creative possibility.

¹ Material quoted and discussed by Henderson (118-20) and Rooksby (*Life* 136-40).

In 1856, Swinburne entered Balliol College at Oxford as an undergraduate, and he (at his parents' insistence) spent two summers doing additional study at neighboring Radley College as well. Swinburne's Oxford career was marked by numerous failures, inconsistencies, and disappointments. Swinburne failed his "Responsions" qualifying examination in 1857 because he spent his time reading Browning's *Sordello* instead of the assigned texts, and then failed his 1858 examination in classics, thus earning two stern warnings from the Master and Dean for "neglecting his studies." He was often assigned to work under tutors such as Benjamin Jowett who discouraged and even denigrated his interest in poetry. This made Swinburne even more despondent upon losing the Newdigate Prize for poetry to students he felt were his intellectual and poetic inferiors. His disgruntled landlady added to his trouble, lodging complaints with the Balliol Master about Swinburne's late hours, "questionable" company, and "irregular" behavior.² Finally, Swinburne left Oxford in 1859, despite an apparent improvement in his academic progress.³ Reportedly, he was asked by the Balliol Master not to return to the college until he was ready to retake his classics examination. He returned in 1860 to retake the exam, but this was probably done only to placate his mortified and angry parents; in the end, he failed to take a degree. Swinburne's real interest in Oxford had never been in his tutors or his coursework but in the surrounding intellectual scene, and, for Swinburne, the scene lost its appeal when Dante Gabriel Rossetti left Oxford in late 1858.

² See Gosse 63-64.

³ The reason for Swinburne's sudden departure is still somewhat a matter of conjecture. Following his careful examination of the Swinburne family correspondence, Rooksby suggests that Benjamin Jowett, Swinburne's Greek tutor, convinced Swinburne's father that a leave of absence was the only way to prevent Swinburne from having another clash with the Master and Dean of Balliol and thus preserve Swinburne's last chance to earn a degree (*Life* 59).

It is not surprising that Swinburne's academic breakdown coincides with the 1857 commencement of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's "Jovial Campaign"⁴ in Oxford. Rossetti and his friends Edward Burne-Jones (then simply "Jones") and William Morris were hired to paint pseudo-medieval murals on the walls of the new Oxford Union building. Swinburne had been intrigued by the works of Jones, Morris, and Rossetti, works in which these artists proclaimed their "Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood" as championing a new aesthetic movement. Swinburne was fascinated by the "sensuousness, ... symbolism, [and] mystery" which marked the Pre-Raphaelite effort and "by a quality often cruel and melancholy in its pictures, poems and tales" (Doughty 232). In Rossetti's redefinition of aesthetic criteria, Swinburne found an articulated defense of his own, often maligned, literary interests. And, in Rossetti, Swinburne found a literary mentor who inspired him to explore the immanent possibilities for human satisfaction latent in the material realm, to privilege the artist's subjectivity over the disinterested critique of the aesthetic object, and, ultimately, to create the "Lady of Pain" as the site of an emerging creative and aesthetic power.

By invoking what McGann calls a "debased" or a "contaminated Romanticism ... in which the poet comes to resemble Tennyson's Ulysses, who became a part of all that he had met" (*Game* 44-45), Rossetti undertook an exploration of the uncertainties of the artistic imagination and its relative powerlessness to unify self and other, flesh and spirit, the subject and the art-object. His creative work demonstrates that he was both dedicated to and disillusioned by the Enlightenment narrative of the universal, prolific, ideal self capable of overcoming all obstacles, transforming the objective world by means of

⁴ This was Rossetti's own name for the time he spent painting the Oxford Union murals (Doughty 224).

subjective revelation. He retains the Romantic notion that the “compulsion” driving the individual artist to create art “lies in the disproportion between [human] desires, or [human] ideals, and the world of reality” (Abrams 139), but with the realization that the individual artist cannot create proportion or bring about balance between human desire—the individual’s self-conscious aspiration to fill the lack or void preventing him/her from experiencing full knowledge/recognition of him/herself as well as accessing the full meaning of the symbols of the discourse which situates the subject⁵— and the reality of the material world.

Furthermore, Rossetti appears to realize that, if it is the individual’s exploration of the disproportion between desire and reality that serves as the inspiration for art, that disproportion must necessarily be maintained. Rossetti converts this narrative of constantly exploring this disproportion into the narrative of the process of self-recognition; for, as one’s desire leads him or her perpetually to propose grandiose schemes of fulfilling desire in reality, schemes in which the subject would no longer account for her/his existence by (mis)recognizing her/his “self” in an other, but see her/himself as *who s/he really is*; however, if these schemes were to work, the process of (mis)recognition would cease altogether, and the subject would fall into stasis, “becom[ing] one with the assumption of his desire (Zizek, *Lacan* 131; Borch-Jacobsen 85). Thus, these schemes necessarily fail because “desire’s *raison d’être* ... is not to

⁵ Here I have applied several definitions of “human desire.” As Borch-Jacobsen explains, the articulation of desire “means that it is spoken in the *language* (the marginal symbol) of the dream, the symptom, or the ‘individual myth,’ but without being recognized in that language in the form of full and authentic symbolic *speech*”; moreover, he reiterates the Sartrean idea that desire “bears witness to the existence of lack in the being of human reality” (153, 200, italics his). Zizek discusses the lack which “the symbolic edifice” offered in the symbolic network of discourse “attempts in vain to repair” (*Lacan* 32). And Lacan himself points out that, in discourse, “[t]he subject is presented as other than he is, and what one shows him is not what he wishes to see” (*Concepts* 104).

realize its goal” of fulfillment, “to find full satisfaction, but to reproduce itself” (Zizek, *Plague* 39). One is then led to recuperate his/her sense of “self” amid that failure to fulfill desire just as perpetually.

This requires Rossetti’s romanticized subject to re-establish his/her subject position continually in order to buffer his/her “poetic and spiritual”—or, for “spiritual” I would substitute *psychological*—“insecurity” (Hönnighausen 150). This insecurity emerges because the subject’s acts of self-recognition are misrecognitions (*méconnaissances*) or misconstructions of selfhood in which the subject (self) rather reductively exists only in the context of the unfulfillable fantasy. When the fantasy fails, the context for selfhood dissipates, causing the subject to disperse, or vanish (Lacan, *Concepts* 83). For Rossetti and subsequently Swinburne, as with Tennyson’s *Ulysses*, every failure to articulate self-recognition becomes an opportunity to try a different mode of articulation, “an arch wherethro” to reach that “untravell’d world whose margin fades / For ever and for ever” (“*Ulysses*” 19-21)—the as-yet “untravell’d” space in which the self could potentially articulate recognition of itself, in its relation to both fantasy and reality.

Rossetti channels this continual compulsion to articulate and recognize the self into a serious attempt to reconstruct or restore “the original point of vision” from which one can envision his/her own selfhood (*Concepts* 81-82) as well as to secure a more articulable subject position by altering the conventions of the fantasy providing its context. Rossetti believed that the repeated attempts to breach the margin separating desire and satisfaction, fantasy and reality, would find their eventual end in success, insofar as he believed his art could reveal the margin to be just “an illusionist projection”

(McGann, *Game* 102). Swinburne, though, is more interested in exploring the compulsion, *per se*, thus rendering the compulsion similar to *drive*, “the domain of the closed circular palpitation which finds satisfaction in endlessly repeating the same failed gesture,” a domain located “beyond the fantasy which sustains desire” (Zizek, *Plague* 30). More specifically, Swinburne is interested in how the self’s failure to recognize itself as a manifestation of drive corresponds to the structure of drive itself, as drive “attain[s] its satisfaction without attaining its aim” (Lacan, *Concepts* 203, 179). The Swinburnian self is constituted by a radical drama of self-dispersal, in that the Swinburnian self is compelled to enact repeatedly—and the self finds satisfaction in—the failure to recognize itself. In other words, it constantly aims for self-recognition, but it accepts and revels in the perpetual failure of desire, thus allowing Swinburne to find pleasure in the perseveration of the drive.

I believe Swinburne gleaned this idea in part through his careful study of Rossetti’s works. Swinburne seems to have recognized what Jerome McGann does later, that Rossetti’s poetic “self” is so “immersed in its turning and shiftings” that, even in the “[p]oems that seem evidently intimate and personal,” the constructions of “self” “are almost invariably haunted by other possible voicings” (*Game* 147). Rossetti’s “self” continually misrecognizes itself, and the “voices” of other possible misrecognitions, not yet revealed, haunt him. Rossetti, though, wanted to establish within the self a notable locus or matrix where all the “the great discourses of desire: dream, nightmare, art, poetry” (McGann, *Game* 155) could meet, and thus merge. In this way, he could position the self, meaning how he rendered *himself* in his art, as gatekeeper of the “untravell’d world” of unified signifier and signified, or art before the catastrophe of meaning.

Rossetti feels the inability to represent meaning with precision as a great loss; therefore, Rossetti explores the discourses of desire, searching for satisfaction through the constant construction of fantasies that are actually always what Žižek would identify as “the narrative[s] of this primordial loss” (*Plague* 32).

In Lacanian/Žižekian terms, then, one could say that, whereas Swinburne shows interest in the complex interplay between desire and drive sited in/by the subject, Rossetti is more interested in how the subject expresses and contends with desire, not drive. Rossetti’s artistic subjects, both the representations of “himself” and his other poetic personae, oppose what Žižek calls “the radical closure” of the drive, “the eternal return of the same” failure (*Plague* 31). The “desiring subject” opposes this closed circular structure with its “finitude [and] temporality” (*Plague* 31). In the case of Rossetti, the “desiring subjects” featured in much of his poetry are fixated on the physical body as the ultimate representation of human temporality and, especially in his later work, he demonstrates an obsession with death. One could even say that Rossetti continually falls under the spell of what Žižek calls the “false opening,” or the construction within fantasy of an ostensible way to circumvent the radical closure of the drive, whereas Swinburne entertains no such illusions, entertaining the “false opening” of drive only as a reminder that such circumvention is “precluded by the very fundamental structure” of the drive/desire interplay (*Plague* 29).

Even though Rossetti’s work, featuring desiring subjects such as the famous “Blessed Damozel,” explores the ideas of life after death and the existence of the eternal soul, Rossetti’s afterlives are such “false openings,” notoriously effecting the limitations of life on earth. For example, Rossetti’s Damozel “leaned out / from the gold bar of

Heaven” to look upon life on earth and “her bosom ... made / The bar she leaned on warm” (1-2, 45-46). Furthermore, she lies

across the flood

Of ether, as a bridge.

[And] Beneath, the tides of day and night

With flame and darkness ridge

The void.... (31-35)

Fundamentally distinct from the “the souls mounting up to God” which “[go] by her like thin flames” (lines 41-42), she represents the finitude of the material world. Clinging to physical form, she also clings to the fantasy of fulfilling her desire in physical sexuality;⁶ this fantasy serves “as the very screen that separates desire from drive” allowing the Damozel “to (mis)perceive the void”—that loss or *lack*—“around which drive circulates” (Zizek, *Plague* 32). Swinburne, on the other hand, presents “The Leper” in contrast to Rossetti’s “Blessed Damozel.” Like Rossetti, Swinburne renders a sexual relationship between one dead lover and one still living. However, there is a sense of an almost blind perseverance present in Swinburne’s desiring subject (the narrator) that is not articulated in the Damozel. Not only does Swinburne’s narrator continue his relationship with the corpse of the woman who detested him while she was alive, thus eschewing Rossetti’s notion of a transcendent sexuality, but he also notes it has been “Six months, and I sit still and hold / In two cold palms her cold two feet” (“Leper” 102-03). Rather than fulfilling him, this “Love bites and stings [him] through” (line 105).

⁶ In Rossetti’s poem, the Damozel beckons her lover to join her in heaven for a sexual tryst.

Arguably, Swinburne's narrator does not "(mis)perceive the void"—the loss, the lack—in the same way Rossetti's *Damozel* does. Instead, Swinburne's narrator articulates how this repetitive necrophilia fails to fulfill that lack:

... surely I would fain have done

All things the best I could. Perchance

Because I *failed*, came short of one,

She kept at heart that other man's. (132-36, emphasis added)

Swinburne's narrator repeats the act, knowing that it ultimately fails to fulfill him, and also knowing that his desire will never be recognized by his lover—in part because she is a corpse (thus unable to recognize anyone or anything) and in part because she, in life, had focused on her desire for a previous lover.

Here desire is the effect of the conjunction between the compulsion of drive and what Lacan calls "sexual reality," or the social structure which emerges because "[e]xistence ... rests upon copulation" (*Concepts* 150). Thus it "is more or less bound up with the finality of reproduction," manifesting itself as the "effective presence" of the libido (*Concepts* 153). The libido, for Lacan and, I would argue, for Rossetti and Swinburne, is not merely the compelling sexual instinct. It functions as a component of the ego which makes the subject "the representative of reality's demands"; the subject who looks for another to fulfill the lack attempts such fulfillment within a sexual relationship in which one finds "an 'object' of love" and becomes "an 'object' of love" for another subject (Borch-Jacobsen 28-29). However, Lacan also points out that "desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second" (*Écrits* 287).

In the libidinal economy situated in and by both Swinburne's and Rossetti's subjects, the object of the subject's "love"—the "object-cause of [his or her] desire" (Zizek, *Lacan* 4)—is not truly, completely attainable. The demand to be loved (recognized) by the other is never met, and both subjects demonstrate an awareness that they merely "encircle" the possibilities of satisfaction, knowing it will "elude [their] grasp no matter what [they] do to attain it" (*Lacan* 4). However, Rossetti's *Damozel* still attempts to find satisfaction in the fantasy "conceived as a scenario that realizes [her] desire" intended to satiate desire, rather than "reproduc[e] it as such" (*Lacan* 6-7), whereas Swinburne's leper finds a perseverant satisfaction knowing that his necrophiliac scenario manifests and reproduces his desire without satiating it. Because Swinburne explores the interplay between the failure of drive and the perpetuation of desire in his *Poems and Ballads*, he strays from Rossetti's conviction that one must retain hope that desire will not always fail to be satisfied despite art's perpetuation of the "vain desire" and "vain regret" which fails to "assuage the unforgotten pain / And teach the unforgetful to forget."⁷ However, haunted by Rossetti's hopeful belief in fulfillment, Swinburne wrestles with the failure of desire, not by hoping to find an immanent resolution within the perpetual and perpetuating structures of fantasy, but by renegotiating within art the very understanding of and possibilities for human satisfaction itself.

Swinburne admired what other critics detested about Rossetti's painting and poetry: its emblematic excesses, especially as they relate to the excessive "fleshliness" of Rossetti's erotic imagery. Whereas their contemporaries, such as Robert Buchanan,

⁷ Dante Gabriel Rossetti, "The One Hope," sonnet 101 from *The House of Life*, lines 1-4 and 13-14.

spurned Rossetti's aesthetic for asserting the primacy of aesthetic affectiveness over the "meaning" of the individual artwork, Swinburne embraced Rossetti's attempt to privilege aesthetic affect as a means of exposing the very indeterminacy of all processes of producing/deducing meaning. Buchanan's claim that Rossetti's poetry eschews the "clear, simple, natural, and beautiful" significations of "[t]he soul's speech and the heart's speech," and instead draws more attention to its own textual, or linguistic, "meretricious tricks" (895) uncannily resembles the criticism of Blake that Swinburne found iniquitous. Blake stood accused of creating "insipid" and "absurd" art which reinforced the "utter impossibility of representing *Spirit* to the eye" instead of surmounting it; Rossetti was subject to similar accusations. To Swinburne, at least during the time the majority of the *Poems and Ballads* were composed (or at least heavily revised from earlier manuscripts), Rossetti was the next "Blake," the Eternal Artist reevaluating a debased or contaminated Romanticism, focusing not on Romanticism's achievements but on its failures—that which exceeded the Romantics' grasp, so to speak.

Swinburne admired the "clear sheer power and weight of plain passion clothed with such luxury of colour and splendour of sound" of Rossetti's art (*Letters* 2: 64).⁸ He even compared Rossetti to Shelley, proclaiming that some of Rossetti's poems should supercede Shelley's. Swinburne's overzealous comparison is, of course, the result of his eager and sometimes blind devotion to Rossetti during this period. Nevertheless, it reveals Swinburne's awareness of the shift from, and the resulting "affinities and differences" between, Romanticism and the "late romantic symbolism" employed by the Victorians. Rossetti's Pre-Raphaelite symbolism ushers in "a new and striking self-

⁸ Swinburne, letter to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 7 Dec. 1869.

consciousness, colouring both intellect and sensibility, and, as a result ... a complete reorientation of its literary theory, forms and motifs" (Hönnighausen 5). As Lothar Hönnighausen observes, "late romantic symbolism" like Rossetti's moves away from the Romantic notion of creating "a direct experience of nature" in favor of exploring the mediated quality of that experience, making the experience itself "secondary to its symbolic implications" (40).

In the exploration of the mediation of experience, then, Rossetti strives to indicate that which exceeds direct experience, or immediacy, itself. In this contemplative deliberation and celebration of excess, Rossetti provides Swinburne a template for reorienting the development of post-Romantic art, revitalizing traditional forms and motifs with innovative possibilities. Shelley "conceives aesthetic experience as a formal process that produces—in the mind's engagement with the dynamics, textures, and resistances of art—critical thinking itself as a form of truth" (Kaufman, "Legislators" 709). As Robert Kaufman has argued, Shelley strives to "hol[d] emancipatory gesture and formal constraint together" ("Legislators" 710) by focusing on the relationship of the imagination to the "materials, instruments and conditions of art ... which limit and interpose between conception and expression" (Shelley 483). Rossetti, on the other hand, conceives aesthetic experience as an engagement with formal processes in a way that draws attention to what those processes exclude, acknowledging the excluded "excess" as a pivotal component in critical thinking. For instance, as McGann has noted, Rossetti's painting demonstrates a purposeful "erosion" of the typical way artists arrange perspective (*Game* 67); likewise, I would say Rossetti, in his poems, uses language in a way which purposefully erodes the readers' expectations of what such language usually

“means” in the given context. He reminds the reader that what the imagination conceives is always more than what the language can express. So, while Shelley in the “Defence” calculates a precarious dialectic between formal limitations and imaginative freedom to create a conceptual space for the aesthetic,⁹ Rossetti is more interested in gesturing toward that which cannot be calculated at all, or what exceeds any kind of aesthetic equation or formula. As Rossetti articulates in “Hand and Soul,” one should consider the trope or symbol in an artwork as something that the artist has imaginatively “seen,” but paradoxically also recognize that “it [is] not a thing to be seen by men” (56). The artist imaginatively sees what exceeds sight.

In both his paintings and his poems, the excesses of Rossetti’s visual imagery are gestures toward the excesses of symbolization. In other words, Rossetti relies on the production of verbal and visual excess in his art to convey his awareness that the artist’s symbol, or image, can never adequately represent the multiplicities of that which s/he intended to signify. He hopes such excess will intrude upon the symbol as it is presented, thus forcing the reader/viewer to consider the symbol as a virtual aggregate of all possible but otherwise unrepresentable meanings concentrated into one “spot,” to find the facet of the symbol which suggests that it has a “mysterious detail that ‘sticks out,’ that does not [otherwise] ‘fit’ into the symbolic network” (Žižek, *Lacan* 116). Thus Rossetti uses the formal processes of aesthetic representation to stage a breakdown of those processes by the very vulnerabilities in his language—the network of symbolic representation available to him.

⁹ Most compelling is Kaufman’s suggestion that, in his attempt to create a liberating dialectical relationship between enlightenment reason and poetic/aesthetic “sympathy,” Shelley must employ “calculative restriction” so that art can “enlarg[e] the circumference’ of calculation’s opposite number, the imagination” (“Legislators” 723).

The paradox lies in the fact that the unrepresentable is not, and by definition cannot be, a product of human intention, since it is specifically what resists being incorporated into symbolic representation. Rossetti did not claim to have found a way to overcome the paradox and to incorporate the otherwise incorporable into symbolism; rather, his project was dedicated to pushing the limits of this paradox. He intended to acknowledge the existence of the incorporable by creating visual and verbal excess, though he also seems to have recognized the limits of his intent. McGann notes that Rossetti's pictures provide "recurrent moments of perspective that play alongside moments that develop contradictory perspectives"—or glances aside—as well as "moments that refuse perspective altogether" (*Game* 111). In those moments that refuse perspective, Rossetti gestures at the limits of aesthetic representation as a way of gesturing toward the otherwise unrepresentable. In the end, Rossetti's intentional excesses do not capture the unrepresentable, but they bring the acknowledgment of the unrepresentable into play within the process of creating and viewing/reading art. His excesses, moreover, are not intended to "fit" into the accepted, or acceptable, symbolic network of the artistic conventions of his milieu. Rossetti's aesthetic works in reaction against these conventions, to demonstrate defiantly that art strives to contend with that which does not "fit" within the limitations set through the expectations set by convention and to exceed both these expectations and the limitations of "acceptable" symbolism.

To create this reactionary aesthetic, Rossetti utilized nostalgic treatments of the themes, tropes, and conventions of medieval, Renaissance, and baroque art, exploiting the tensions between past and present, retrospective utopian fantasy and the dissatisfactions of contemporary reality, seeing with the imagination and seeing with the vegetative eye.

Swinburne was particularly fascinated by how Rossetti figured all these binaries into one overarching, multi-faceted symbol which displaces, rather than erases, the schisms between body and soul, physical love and emotional love. Rossetti focuses his painting and poetry on a woman, the Beloved, in whom all binary tensions gravitate. Very much like the medieval love poetry of his idol and predecessor, Dante Alighieri, Rossetti's work does not seek to "define and instantiate" the Beloved but use the Beloved as the virtual site or center for the "presence and action" (McGann, *Game* 55) of his aesthetic.

The Beloved is

the apparition of Woman, of the woman who could fill out the lack in man, the ideal partner with whom the sexual relationship would finally be possible, in short, The Woman who, according to Lacanian theory, precisely does not exist. The nonexistence of this woman is rendered manifest to [the artist] by the absence of her inscription in the sociosymbolic network: the intersubjective community ... acts as if she does not exist, as if she were only his *idée fixe*. (Zizek, *Lacan* 80)

The Beloved does not exist in and of herself, because Rossetti presents her as male fantasy, or, as Zizek phrases it, "only as she appears or is mirrored in male discourse" (*Metastases* 105) situated by the male subjects/narrators in his poetry. Many of the women who play the role of Beloved in Rossetti's canon blatantly do not exist, in the most literal sense, because they are either deceased (the Damozel, the "dead ladies" of his translation of Villon, the first beloved featured in "The House of Life" sequence) or mythical figures (Lilith, Proserpine, Pandora). Rossetti has his male subjects/speakers (re)create these women in attempts to fulfill *lack* that really cannot be fulfilled. As

fantasies invented to fit into his male subjects' "'private' formula[s] for the sexual relationship"—inasmuch as “for a man, the relationship with a woman is [thought] possible only inasmuch as she fits his formula” (Zizek, *Plague* 7)—these supernatural or mythic women end up reinforcing the relationship's utter impossibility, consequently sustaining the male subjects' desire. Even the non-mythic, “living” women in Rossetti's poetry have almost as untenable an existence. They are depicted as prostitutes like his famous “Jenny,” who projects an image that exists only for the male gaze, and who approaches the sexual transaction as the kind of “asymmetrical non-relationship” in which, Zizek notes, the woman remains nothing but an object, an “inhuman partner” whose subjectivity is a non-issue (*Metastases* 108-09). Or, the women are presented as remote figures steeped in superstition or narratives of the distant past, like “Sister Helen,” a witch who seems as much as an object of curiosity as her wax fetish, and Aloyse of “The Bride's Prelude,” who seems more like a stock character in a cliché morality tale than a “real” woman. Because the Beloved's very “existence” is always so dubious, she is unable to establish a determined identity for herself: there are never clear moments in which “she realizes she is just a passive element in the interplay of libidinal forces,” so she is not established as a “subject” (Zizek, *Lacan* 64). “Deprived of every real substance,” she “functions as a mirror on to which the [male] subject projects his narcissistic ideal” (Zizek, *Metastases* 90), but what/who is being reflected by the Beloved? One cannot be sure if the Beloved demonstrates the male subject's “ego ideal,” qualities/possibilities he wants to possess, or if she demonstrates the subject's “ego that regards itself as the ideal,” qualities/possibilities the subject already has or thinks he has attained (Lacan, *Concepts* 61). The slippery slopes of identity here represent the same

kinds of important slippages between the other binary relationships Rossetti surveys in his work.

As Jerome McGann notes, “Identities, as well as the names and words that signify them, are fluid, dynamic markers of the presence of [the] action” of revaluating interpretative process in Rossetti’s aesthetic (*Game* 55). Moreover, this aesthetic is “pursued through a series of intense moments” (*Game* 57), moments that are always subject to change; meaning that a new, constellative relationship between seemingly binary or opposing elements is (re)forged in every successive moment of intensity. The Beloved is portrayed as both what she is and is *not*: dead and alive, absent and present, a real woman and a fictional character, a historical figure and a contemporary.¹⁰ Carole Silver points out that this entails a “dream logic” that allows “a single image [to] symbolize numerous wishes, impulses, attitudes, and persons,” “that one face may represent those of many people,” as well as allows one to see him/herself “as double or multiple” (11). Thus the perspective of the subject—both the viewing/reading subject and the artist-as-subject—is the catalyst for this aesthetic multiplicity. In sum, the Beloved is not so much a sign of imaginative unity but of the imagination renegotiating the old aesthetic, philosophic, and critical tensions.

Martin Danahay, in “Mirrors of Masculine Desire,” claims that Rossetti’s art precipitates Rossetti’s “search for his own identity ... through the realization of

¹⁰ For example, Rossetti painted the likeness of his wife long after her death, and he painted the likeness of Jane Burden Morris repeatedly, not only during their absences from one another but also after their affair had soured. Though his lovers served as models, the painted female figures are depicted as versions of the “non-existent” Beloved—mythic goddesses, epic heroines, literary figures. Consequently, the paintings were never intended, nor do they function, as portraits, *per se*. For a more detailed account, see McGann, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Game That Must Be Lost*, especially Chapter 6, “Venus Surrounded by Mirrors.”

differance, the sudden knowledge that what Rossetti would like to designate as an ‘I’ that is present to itself can only be represented through artificial secondary media, such as mirrors, texts, and paintings” (38). Yet Dahanay’s argument, though astute and useful, needs to be amended, especially when Swinburne’s evaluation of Rossetti’s treatment of “identity” is considered. Dahanay seems to suggest that Rossetti has a somewhat stable concept of his own identity, or ego, which is perpetually reinforced by his aestheticized relationship of otherness to the Beloved. The critical legacy of reading Rossetti’s poetry as autobiography and viewing his paintings like snapshots in a family album often tricks us into reading the historical “Rossetti” into the speakers of his poems. As Adorno reminds us, every artist gives his/her artwork “shape from out of him [or her]self”; nevertheless, “art is no replica of the subject” (*Theory* 41), nor is art a statement conferring identity. The reciprocity of subject and art object “cannot be that of identity” (*Theory* 166). Instead, the artist creates a “latent I” which is a self which only “speaks ... through the [art]work ... through the action of the work’s language” (*Theory* 167), a self which appears as an imaginary reconstruction of how the self is seen by an other; and, as the work’s language has been rendered vulnerable, the “I” rendered through such language becomes a virtual site yielding multiple possibilities for viewing/reading subjects to explore relationships between subjects and aesthetic objects.

More specifically, the “latent I” is a site where one can explore the paradox of desire, its requisite *méconnaissances* and the compulsory failures of self-identification in art. The “latent I” is part of the paradox of desire. The subject not only fails to identify (recognize) him/herself in the art object, consequently not fulfilling his/her constitutive lack of self-identification; the subject is also driven to seek and to represent him/herself

in an “endless sliding” of one signifier after another, all the while “get[ting] hooked on a particular object which thereby starts to function as the object-cause of his [or her] desire” (Zizek, *Plague* 81). “[I]nfinite desire”—especially in the form of self-dispersal it takes here—must “focus on a finite object” because the object must become the locus of the signifying chain that “governs whatever may be made present of the subject” (*Plague* 81; Lacan, *Concepts* 203). The object in this case, the Beloved, functions to “give body” to the subject’s lack (*Plague* 81), place-holding the lack she gives the illusion of being able to fulfill. In this way, the Beloved is a “specular image” of lack, she cannot be “anything but a decay,” or dispersal, of the process of identification (Borch-Jacobsen 96). As a “specular image,” she “gives body to the gaze” (Lacan, *Concepts* 84)—the gaze being the mechanism which configures one’s perception, or how one “sees” not only his surroundings but his or her self.

Nevertheless, to distinguish the Beloved, as Danahay does, as purely the site of a specular relationship between the gaze and human desire is to oversimplify the operation of the gaze and its compound manipulations. Notwithstanding its specular attributes, the gaze, as it is deliberated in Rossetti’s works, is the medium by which self-consciousness is established; like Sartre after them, Rossetti and consequently Swinburne reaffirm the Hegelian idea that “self-consciousness is real only as long as it knows its echo in another person” (Stern 93). As Sartre explains in *Being and Nothingness*, the gaze inculcates being-for-itself “determin[ed] ... to exist inasmuch as it cannot coincide with itself” (125-26): meaning, the self has “to exist at a distance from itself,” thwarting the principle of

identity¹¹ in that the “self” determined in the gaze is always indeterminate, not able to reach or to express the self “one *is*” (128, 367). The gaze requires one to re-circumscribe constantly his/her subject position, to remake oneself perpetually as a “subject”; in other words, the subject “is always in the making, always becoming” some other version of the self (Stern 99) because “self one *is*” will always be subject to misrecognition, the subject positioned by misrecognition.

Granted, Danahay does admit that “the masculine subject’s search for a complementary self-image” in the other is always “thwarted” by the Beloved’s “refusal to reflect accurately the artist’s self-image” (“Mirrors” 38), thus indicating that Rossetti’s aesthetic is concerned with the failure to recognize the self even through the mechanisms described above. Though Danahay correctly reads the Beloved as “a threat to the imaginative unity and coherence of the masculine subject” which ultimately leads to Rossetti’s “disappointment” (“Mirrors” 41, 50), he does not fully take into account that Rossetti, like Swinburne, was fascinated by and compelled to investigate those very “threats.” Christopher Nassaar has commented on how Rossetti upholds a very Victorian belief that “each human being has an unconscious mind”—or self—“where the real personality is buried and [s/he] often tries desperately to get in touch with the buried self” (24). Furthermore, Nassaar reads Rossetti’s Beloved figure as presenting selfhood from the “perspective of the agony of separation” (25)—what I read as the “separation” of the “self one *is*” from the versions of self perpetually interposed by the gaze.¹² I contend that this is the separation between the projected/projecting ego, which is a “degraded

¹¹ As Stern explains, “The being-for-itself, or human consciousness, was characterized as being what it is not and not being what it is. It *is* not at all, but is always creating itself; consequently it never coincides with itself, thus falling outside the principle of identity” (96).

¹² Nassaar presents this assertion in an explication of Rossetti’s “Proserpine.”

consciousness” and not “the adequate representation” of what the self *is* (Sartre 365), and the “buried self” that cannot be present—inasmuch as the subject will never “coincide with him [or her]self” (Stern 40), since the “true self” will never coincide with any of the subject positions imposed by the gaze of the other. When all these components of the Beloved are considered, we can “see” the very illusory quality of the presentation of the subject that is usually obscured. In other words, Rossetti’s Beloved allows the viewer virtually to “see” beyond the margins of the offered subject positions, virtually to “see” the dissonance between the representations of selves and the unrepresentable self, and to acknowledge the aesthetic importance of the dissonance existing within such artful renditions of the breakdown of art.

This specular quality—which allows the Beloved(s) of Rossetti’s work, and successively the “Ladies of Pain” which Swinburne creates, to operate as complex symbols of ego differentiation, desire, and dissonance—resembles the function of what Martin Jay calls the “baroque mirror,” which is not “the flat reflecting mirror” that aids “the development of rationalized perspective,” but an “anamorphic mirror, either concave or convex, that distorts” the flat, planar, rationalized “visual image” (*Eyes* 48). The “visionary” quality of the Pre-Raphaelites’ work—“the understanding that forms and images possess powers in themselves ... that cannot be comprehended or even entirely controlled by the artist who is their medium,” the creation of provisional vantage points to exercise the relativity instead of the stability of convention, subjectivity, making and discerning meaning (McGann, “Medieval” 108)—is a nostalgic nod to the art of their predecessors. This is a paradoxical treatment of the Lacanian Real here, the attempt to account for “that which is refractory, resistant, ... lacking in the symbolic order, the

ineliminable residue of all articulation, the foreclosed element, which may be approached, but never grasped: the umbilical cord” of all symbolic representation (*Concepts* 280). The Beloved figures the nostalgia for both the past and for a “return” to a mythic, prelapsarian moment of complete selfhood (in which the self could be “apprehended as a real existent,” in which the subject could be self)¹³ in art that she should conceal rather than express: Rossetti’s Beloved beckons the spectator/reader to become a “naïve other” to her, so that the spectator/reader can be “absorbed, enchanted” by the Beloved and believe in the “very illusion of perfect self-mirroring” she insinuates (Zizek, *Lacan* 114). She deflects the spectator/reader’s gaze, though, unsettling the spectator/reader, allowing for the kind of traumatic eruption supposedly screened from “the totality of [one’s] field of vision” (*Lacan* 114). Because the Beloved fails to revitalize the utopian aesthetic narratives of the past, she implies that a dystopic element lurks in nostalgia, that the past cannot provide us a vantage point from which we can objectively identify ourselves and thus aggressively counteract the gaze’s formative role in the construction of subjectivity. We cannot “see ourselves seeing ourselves” as others do; the subject cannot see her or himself as s/he appears in the other’s consciousness.

Even more so than Rossetti’s Beloved, Swinburne’s “Lady of Pain” subverts nostalgia to present the past *nostalgically as such*, to point out and exploit nostalgia purposefully, and to expose the efforts to conceal the eye/gaze antinomy¹⁴ as portrayed in

¹³ See Sartre 123.

¹⁴ Lacan distinguishes the antinomy between the gaze & the eye in his *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*. Zizek summarizes Lacan’s argument as follows: “[T]he eye viewing the object is on the side of the subject, while the gaze is on the side of the object. When I look at an object, the object is always already gazing at me, and from a point at which I cannot see it” (*Lacan* 109). This is a perspective so subjective that it cannot be shared. In other words, the subject cannot see the point from which s/he is being seen (in the act of seeing).

the relationship between the contemporary artist and his/her nostalgically objectified narrative of “history.” Swinburne’s “Ladies of Pain,” like the texts in which they are situated, function as screens assertively deflecting the gaze of the other; they establish “a fracture, a bi-partition,” so to speak, “which isolates the function of the screen and plays with it” (Lacan, *Concepts* 106-07). In other words, Swinburne’s texts are “screen-like” in that each text is a “locus of mediation” (*Concepts* 107) between the Beloved, who is “characterized by being what [she] is not and not being what [she] is” (Stern 96) and represents the past as it “no longer is” as well as the past that “is not” or never was (Sartre 162), and the artist whose subjectivity is established only within the gaze of the Beloved-as-other as well. There is no unity between the artist-as-subject and the Swinburnian version of the Beloved: the artist wants to incorporate into a penultimate version of “self” all possible “selves” anticipated via the Beloved’s gaze, though the Beloved is created to resist that very cohesion between “self” and “other-which-is-self.” As Adorno establishes in “Night Music,” nostalgic elements—such as those represented by Swinburne’s version of the Beloved—gesture toward sites in an artwork where cohesion disintegrates: the apparatus for interpretation and comprehension breaks down. The “original contents” of history “are visible solely by virtue of the disintegration of their gestalt-like unity in the form of the work,” and thus “interpretation wanders around lost among the fragments.”¹⁵ Swinburne, like Rossetti, cannot present the past except as a fragmented pastiche of what may have been. Yet, by employing an artistic technique of that fragmented, nearly inaccessible past—the baroque mirror—they both reflect on history anamorphotically, “reform[ing] a distorted picture” of history “by use of a

¹⁵ I have used Shierry Weber Nichol森’s translation, provided in *Exact Imagination, Late Work* 35.

nonplanar mirror” (Jay, *Eyes* 48).

Martin Jay, in “Scopic Regimes of Modernity,” describes the baroque as marked by a celebration of “the dazzling, disoriented, ecstatic surplus of images” as well as its rejection “of the monocular geometricalization of the Cartesian tradition with its illusion of homogenous three-dimensional space with a God’s eye view from afar” (16-17).¹⁶ In many ways, this could also be used to describe the Pre-Raphaelite art that so influenced Swinburne. Though Rossetti and his followers had stated in *The Germ* that their art was pledged to “truth to nature,” adhering to every detail and providing an exact reflection of such,¹⁷ Rossetti’s own work demonstrates his realization that any kind of truth content in artistic representation is constantly renegotiated.

Any attempt to represent nature truthfully is to question continually “the truth of something made,” which is “the question of semblance and the rescue of semblance as the semblance of the true” (Adorno, *Theory* 131). More simply, by attempting to be “truthful to nature,” Rossetti establishes that the concept of “nature” itself cannot be true. Here the concept of nature comes into being when the artist establishes him/herself as the dominating other. The artist creates the artwork which, “[w]holly artifactual ... seems to be the opposite of what is *not made*, nature”—nature distinguished here as that which is beyond human creation, cohesive in itself, and thus something existing independent of human reflection and human identity-thinking—yet “each refers to the other: nature to

¹⁶ To be fair, Jay draws upon the work of French philosopher Christine Buci-Glucksmann here—he cites *La Raison Baroque* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1984) and *La Folie du Voir* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1986).

¹⁷ *The Germ* was a short-lived journal dedicated to the new Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic. These phrases appear in F.G. Stephens’s essay on early Italian art, commissioned by Rossetti and published in the first issue. See *The Germ: Thoughts Towards Nature in Poetry, Literature, and Art*, intro. W.M. Rossetti, New York: AMS, 1965. (This is a reprint of the 1901 collection. The four individual issues of *The Germ* appeared in 1850.)

the experience of a mediated and objectified world, the artwork to nature as the mediated plenipotentiary of immediacy” (*Theory* 62, emphasis added). Through this constant mediation, culture violently imposes itself on nature; by doing so, in this particular case, the Pre-Raphaelite artist knowingly acts as an aggressive interlocutor between himself and nature, claiming that he can render nature truthfully because he renders nature as *other than* himself—and as a complete, cohesive *other* at that. To render nature truthfully in every exact detail would be to render nature’s complete cohesiveness: an impossible task. So, nature conceptualized as a unified whole becomes material for art,¹⁸ yet, as nature is always “in disunion with itself” (Horkheimer and Adorno 39), the dissonance created by such disunion will exceed the fullness of cohesion necessary for precise representation.

Such excess seems correlative to what Žižek calls “the foreclosure of the [Lacanian] Real,” meaning the exclusion of presymbolic “natural, substantial ... ‘being’ always identical to itself,” which nonetheless leaves an “indivisible remainder” which both sustains and traumatizes artistic representation (*Plague* 132; Borch-Jacobsen 17). Similar to the violent imposition culture is to nature, this lurking, traumatic constituent of the “Real” violently imposes itself on culture; it resists being “reduced to a place” or symbol, “even if it is an empty place in the symbolic order” (Žižek, *Lacan* 169). Thus a triangular relationship between artist, nature, and the Real emerges: the artist, subject to a symbolic network violated by the Real, violates nature in turn by trying to encapsulate nature in an inviolate state, consequently violating it via human mediation which takes

¹⁸ This is based on Horkheimer and Adorno’s statement that “nature as a whole is material for society” (87).

the form of domination. What results is disunion between all these contributing factors. Moreover, complicating matters even further, the precise details of such disunion themselves will exceed full representation, and the details rendered on the canvas or page will be a semblance of the truth—in Rossetti’s case, the truth of dissonance and its resultant surplus—that one may try to rescue but never fully recover.

Hence Rossetti’s use of a peculiarly flat perspective in his painting; in a very baroque move, he purposely fails to create fully the illusion of three-dimensional space on the canvas, choosing instead a more two-dimensional perspective which distorts conventional depth perception. Conventional depth perception, Jay argues, is often employed to de-eroticize art, as it “creates such a distance between the ... eye and the depicted scene that the painting lacks the immediacy associated with desire” (Foster 27). Baroque artists, however, wished to gesture toward that kind of immediacy by employing a distorted perspectivalism which “casts its attentive eye on the fragmentary, detailed, and richly articulated surface of a world it is content to describe rather than explain” (Jay, “Scopic” 13). A distorted, more two-dimensional perspective obliges the viewer to “look away” at the canvas, to view the canvas from several different angles to see the “exact details” on it. In this way, the viewing subject must approach the artwork “with an ‘interested’ view, supported, permeated, and ‘distorted’ by *desire*” (Zizek, *Lacan* 12, italics his), thus approximating the way relationship between subject and object, self and other, is always “distorted” by the economies of desire. This is not direct reflection but a multiplex of mediated and remediated reflections; and, with each different angle or perspective the subject assumes in considering the artwork, s/he “self-consciously revels in the contradictions between surface and depth, disparaging as a result any attempt to

reduce the multiplicity of visual spaces into any one coherent essence” (Jay, “Scopic” 17). Moreover, the false sense of the unification of this visual multiplicity evoked by/in the artwork is created by the visual excess or surplus of images in this multiplex. Though the multi-faceted qualities of the baroque-inspired perspective tirelessly gesture toward it, the “truth content” of art¹⁹ “negates the made” (Adorno, *Theory* 131). The content of nature, like the content of history employed in art, must be apprehended as exceeding its very conceptualization.

Swinburne, more consciously than Rossetti, engaged in acts of play with concept(s) of history commonly acknowledged to be unstable, fragmented, and even “untrue.” Antony Harrison points out that the majority of the Victorian artists treating historical themes produce “an idealization” of those earlier cultures which “loo[k] back nostalgically upon what they perceived as a period of uniform social and spiritual values, of social integration, of political and cultural stability,” portraying those epochs as instances of “man and his society [existing] in idyllic harmony with nature” and with one another (*Medievalism* 3-4). Swinburne’s poetry, however, adopts a more radical stance toward the past. He recognizes that any nostalgia for an era in which (hu)man and nature shared a kind of unmediated, symbiotic relationship is nostalgia for a trace moment of wholeness which occurred before culture violently imposed itself on nature, a moment that is both ahistorical and unreachable, never really having existed in history and distinguished only by its absence. It is as if Swinburne searches for a kind of placeholder that Horkheimer and Adorno call *mana*, a place-holder for the otherwise un-

¹⁹ Adorno points out that the meaning, the “truth content,” of artworks is enigmatic: “The indefatigably recurring question that every work incites in whoever traverses it—the ‘What is it all about?’—becomes ‘Is it true?’—the question of the absolute, to which every artwork responds by wresting itself free from the discursive form of the answer” (*Theory* 127).

placeable “remembrance” of a prior, undifferentiated nature “in the subject, in whose fulfillment the unacknowledged truth of all culture lies hidden” (40). Swinburne, though, seems aware that his fascination with past searches for *mana* has everything to do with reevaluating how past artists/spectators considered, searched for—how they “gazed” at—*mana*. Swinburne thus foregoes the illusory stability granted by nostalgic treatments of the past, instead opting to show how one’s perspective on the past is always shifting, always transforming the “past” into a distorted mirror reflecting the “present”—and present desire.

Consequently, he develops the themes of antiquity, medievalism, and the Renaissance into vehicles portraying his contemporary concerns: the relativity of social and spiritual values, social disintegration, and the instability of cultural conventions. To Swinburne, the ancient world is less the golden age of civilization than an earlier stage of the sensuous consciousness in revolt against the encroachment of reason; the medieval quest for the Holy Grail figures the failure of an ascetic Christianity, which is haunted by and is always perilously close to succumbing to the echoing thrall of the sensualities of paganism; and, the cultural and artistic triumphs of the Renaissance are infused with, if not a result of, the sexual treachery, religious hypocrisy, and moral depravity of elite ruling families like the Borgias. Like the decadent *fin-de-siècle* artists who succeeded him, Swinburne is an “aesthetic voyager” through history who “becomes a voyeur; unable to encounter the real world”—or “real” history, history as it “really was”—“he endures or lives an echo or a reflection or its visual counterpart” (Gordon 33). As Swinburne prefigures the *fin-de-siècle* decadence movement by twenty years, though, the decadence he draws upon is that which Jakob Burckhardt attributed to the end of the

Renaissance, which culminated in the baroque—a period, says Burckhardt, which ironically links “profound” moral and spiritual “corruption” with “an artistic splendor which shed upon the life of man a lustre which neither antiquity nor medievalism could or would bestow upon it” (2: 443). The baroque style interjected into the high Renaissance “sign[s] of irresolution” providing diffident yet ornate glimpses of the insecurity, disparity, and disunity lurking in its aesthetic conventions and the culture which created them; yet these singular moments of cultural disintegration became the seeds for “revolution or readjustment in the arts” (Sypher 106) as well as the subject’s relationship to art. Richard Le Gallienne, a major figure in late nineteenth-century British decadence, similarly describes the decadent aesthetic as “consist[ing] in the euphuistic expression of isolated observations” (81), particularly observations of the individual artist in dissonance with the world surrounding him/her. Similarly, Swinburne’s aestheticized history is comprised of observations (interpretations) of isolated historical incidents; and, in a very baroque fashion, these observations are “glaring flashes of perception” figured in “brutal acts and unexplained contradictions” (Sypher 123).

One of the best examples of Swinburne renovating the complex liaisons between subjectivity, desire, and history established in the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic can be found in “Satia te Sanguine.” This poem experienced some minor attention in the late 1960s when it was mentioned in a series of short articles about the life of Mary Gordon Disney-Leith, Swinburne’s favorite cousin, published in *The Times Literary Supplement*. Among the articles was an anecdote claiming that “Satia te Sanguine” was a “furious satire” Swinburne written about “the vein of cruelty [Swinburne] thought he sensed” in his

cousin, who seemed both to encourage and to repel Swinburne's romantic and sexual interest in her, including a sexual interest in flagellation (Henderson 269). Apart from such claims for the poem's biographical importance, though, the poem remains critically ignored in favor of the lengthier, more blatantly sexual poems like "Anactoria" or "Laus Veneris" and the mythically tragic attributes of "Dolores" and the poems to Proserpine. But, as it demonstrates rather succinctly the schemes for exploring subjectivity and perception Swinburne commences in grander fashion in these more celebrated works, the poem sets up a dynamic model for reading the other poetry in the volume.²⁰ Furthermore, Swinburne's portrayal of ritual sacrifice here serves as a rudimentary template for the portrait of the ineffectual, pitiable Christ figure he later creates in *Songs before Sunrise*'s "Before a Crucifix."

The poem's title indicates that it is loosely based on the legend of Queen Tomyris.²¹ According to Herodotus, King Cyrus of Persia attempted twice to capture the widowed queen's throne: first by seduction, which failed, and then by force, murdering her only son in the battle. In retribution, the queen had Cyrus killed and his decapitated head brought to her in a bowl of blood. The bowl was inscribed with the words "*Satia te sanguine quem semper sitisti,*" or, "Sate yourself on the blood for which you have always

²⁰ Philip Henderson reports that many of these poems discussed in this chapter and the next—"Satia te Sanguine," the Proserpine poems, and "Faustine"—were composed and continually revised between 1862-1864. "Anactoria" and "Dolores" seem to have been written slightly later than the rest of these.

²¹ The legend of Queen Tomyris was a somewhat popular subject for Renaissance and baroque painting. Queen Tomyris was among the historical and mythological figures painted by Italian Renaissance artist Andrea del Castagno in his famous fresco, transferred to canvas in the mid-1800s and displayed in the Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence; Swinburne went to Florence in 1864 and likely saw the painting when he toured the Galleria with novelist Elizabeth Gaskell. Queen Tomyris was also painted by baroque artists Jodochus van Winghe (the Flemish artist whose patron was Emperor Rudolph II) and Peter Paul Rubens. As his letters indicate, Swinburne traveled Europe several times during the late 1850s and early 1860s, frequenting art museums and galleries.

thirsted.” In Swinburne’s dramatic monologue, though, the names of Tomyris and Cyrus are never used. The speaker, a presumably male unrequited lover, addresses his distant, cruel beloved. This evokes a surplus of implied images, asking the reader to “look at” the dramatic situation of the poem from several different angles. From one perspective the speaker seems to be Cyrus failing in his attempt to seduce Tomyris, and from another perspective the speaker seems to be an emanation of the conventional courtly lover professing his devotion to the aloof object of his desire. Yet, from other perspectives, the speaker can be seen as either a disgruntled admirer seeking violent revenge for his spurned advances (“I wish you were stricken of thunder / And burnt with a bright flame through” [lines 36-37]) or a cowering would-be lover expecting to be harmed if not murdered by his beloved, who “kills men’s hearts with a breath” (line 47) and “suck[s] with a sleepy red lip / The wet red wounds in his heart” (58-59), again invoking the violent acts of both legendary figures alluded to in the poem’s title.

Because Swinburne merely gestures toward the legend of Cyrus and Tomyris and its various historical contexts (ancient, Renaissance, baroque, Victorian), the speaking subject of the poem cannot be firmly located. The subject, who both is and is not Cyrus and/or a courtly lover and/or the poet, is simultaneously positioned in several virtual sites, created by the allusory presence-which-is-absence of those historical contexts, while inhabiting no actual site at all. The poem creates in itself an amorphous fantasy space for self-negation, allowing for what Adorno terms “incapacitation of the subject,” or the moment in which one confronts “the truth which expels man from the center of creation and reminds him of his impotence,” imposing “a subjective mode of conduct [which will] confirm the sense of impotence [and] cause men to identify with it”

(*Negative* 66-68). The speaker of Swinburne's poem is impotent, or powerless, in that the truth of his desire—his *nothingness*, the objectless (beloved-less) void of desire he actually desires—renders him somewhat speechless within his very speech. For he can only identify himself, his own powerlessness, with a figurative "I" which cannot be definitively located, named, or identified. Consequently, he is not even the center of the speech acts he creates; he "speaks out of" the poem which does not depict him as a real, tangible subject, *per se* (Adorno, *Theory* 168). Thus this incapacitated subject "speaks himself by abolishing himself ... as 'real'" (Borch-Jacobsen 114).

Tellingly, in the last five stanzas of the poem, the speaker introduces a third term or person into the libidinal economy depicted in the poem. For the first twelve stanzas, the speaker seems interested only in depicting the self/other relationship, featuring himself as the "I," or imaginary ego, who desires the beloved and wishes the beloved to recognize, if not reciprocate, his desire in turn. However, in stanza thirteen, the speaker addresses the beloved as "you that *we* love" (line 44, emphasis mine), temporarily displacing himself—or the speaking "I"—as an object of/for desire in the stanzas that follow, transferring that object status to another figure, Christ. With this move, he also transfers the insatiability of his desire to the beloved, who violently tries to satiate her desire through the crucifixion:

As the tame beast writhes and wheedles,

He fawns to be fed with wiles;

You carve him a cross of needles,

And whet them sharp as your smiles....

You thrill as his pulses dwindle,
 You brighten and warm as he bleeds,
 With insatiable eyes that kindle
 And insatiable mouth that feeds.

Your hands nailed love to the tree,
 You stript him, scourged him with rods,
 And drowned him deep in the sea
 That hides the dead and their gods. (52-55, 60-67)

The Christ figure here, a “tame beast,” seems less than God and more like what Horkheimer and Adorno, in their discussion of “specific representation” in ritual, call “the sacrificial animal ... massacred *instead of the god*” (10, emphasis mine). The speaker obviously relishes in the violence enacted on Christ, evoking what Bataille in *Eroticism* calls “the ancient comparison of sacrifice and erotic intercourse” (90). As Bataille explains, both “the act of love” and sacrifice “reveal the flesh” (*Eroticism* 92). For the speaker, the beloved’s body, like “the lost white feverish limbs / Of the Lesbian Sappho, adrift” (l. 9-10), is not accessible to him, but the pleasures of the flesh can be revealed to him at least partially through the spectacle of crucifixion. Here the Christ figure and not the beloved becomes the object of the speaker’s fantasy of being “laid open to the violence of the sexual urges ...; to the impersonal violence that overwhelms [him] from without” (*Eroticism* 90). In this moment of specular fantasy, the speaker imagines himself as both Tomyris enacting violence on Cyrus and as Cyrus the victim of

frenzied violence, the denied courtly lover and the beloved taking pleasure in denial.²² In a very Sadean way, the speaker derives pleasure from fantasies of being both sexual victim and victimizer simultaneously. Thus Swinburne uses the Christian myth of Jesus's sacrifice to demonstrate the transformation of sacrifice into a virtual site for exploring the multiplicities of subjectivity—specifically, the multiplicities erupting from the interplay between *deflected* subjectivity and *destroyed* (or annihilated) subjectivity. The deflected subject identifies with another,²³ as when Swinburne's speaker engages in plural and inclusive serial identifications; the destroyed subject is “the imaged embodiment” of the lack, aware that “no wealth of experiences” or serial identifications can fill that void (Lacan, *Concepts* 89; Zizek, *Plague* 122).

When Swinburne has his narrator, in a mode of deflection, identify with both the victim and the victimizer, he seems to (re-)employ the Romantic notion of the self-transcending subject able to “see himself seeing himself” in various roles. However, as Swinburne brings the Sadean notion of sado-masochistic ecstasy into play, this “stepping out of the self” becomes a gesture of the destruction of the subject as well. Swinburne's narrator exhibits plasticity, as he is both the sadistic “absolute subject” who reduces another “to an object-instrument” for his own satisfaction *and* the victim divested of any

²² Because the speaker assumes two imaginary, simultaneous subject positions here, the speaker's masochistic fantasy seems reminiscent of the kind of fantasy Freud discusses in “A Child is Being Beaten”: Not only does the act of violence become “a meeting-place between [a] sense of guilt” which “transforms sadism into masochism” and “sexual love,” but it allows an individual to enact a “masochistic attitude [which] coincides with a feminine one” as well as assuming a sadistic attitude like that of the female aggressor who is “endow[ed] ... with masculine attributes and characteristics” (184, 193, 196). Ultimately, though, it seems Swinburne's speaker, like the “girl” Freud says “escapes from the demands of the erotic side of her life, ... is no longer anything but a spectator of the event which takes the place of a sexual act” (196).

²³ “What I myself am not (namely, a *subject*: free, autonomous, independent, and so on) is always another ... who is taking my place—that place or social position where I would like to be” (Borch-Jacobsen 24).

subjectivity, reduced to object status.²⁴ In sadism “we encounter direct negation” and “violent destruction” of the subject-as-masochist who “assumes the form of disavowal” negation takes here—“that is, of feigning, of an ‘as if’ which suspends [the] reality” in which subjectivity must be palpably signified (Zizek, *Metastases* 91). Paradoxically, then, Swinburne’s subject directly negates himself, assuming the “as if” moment in which he refuses the narcissistic fantasies sustaining identification of *self*; all the while, if not identifying, at least gesturing at, the subject as *he who negates*, or *he who sacrifices himself*.

As Horkheimer and Adorno have pointed out, “The transformation of sacrifice into subjectivity occurs under the sign of the artifice that was already a feature of sacrifice”; in that artifice, the “self loses itself to preserve itself” (56, 48-49). The sacrificial Jesus, God in human form, is supposed to signify “the appearance of the whole in the particular” (Horkheimer and Adorno 19), or every possible dimension of human identity in one particular, symbolic form. When the speaker of “Satia te Sanguine” addresses his the beloved as “you who *we* love,” this “we” seems to suggest the speaker’s identification with Jesus: “the absolute mediation” of the human and God “in the person of Christ, who is simultaneously the representative of God among human subjects and the subject who passes into God,” as “the only identity of man and God is the identity in Christ” (Zizek, *Metastases* 39). “God” is the signifier for that which can fill the lack. Failing to identify with the beloved, who reinforces rather than fills the lack, the speaker here enacts a sort of transference. Jesus becomes the “subject who is supposed to know” how the lack can be overcome (Lacan, *Concepts* 233). In yet another paradox, by

²⁴ See Zizek, *Lacan* 108-09.

enacting identification with Jesus with the inclusive pronoun “we,” the speaker attempts to “step out of himself” and sustain that “as if” moment signified by Jesus/God—a moment in which the desire for identification is suspended, and the schism between “the perishable individual,” subject of/to the temporal finitude of fantasy or specular identification, and the “perennial Universal,” the radical eternity of negativity, is not so profound (*Metastases* 40). Actually, though, by identifying with Jesus, the speaker subjects the god “to whom [sacrifices] are made ... to the primacy of human ends, and dissolve[s] his power” (Horkheimer and Adorno 50) to fulfill any lack or bring about any kind of transcendent “as if” moment. Žižek explains that Jesus’s sacrifice marks “not the passing of God’s terrestrial representative but the death of the God of Beyond”—the (im)possibility of the “as if” moment—“Himself” (*Metastases* 46). Swinburne’s poem suggests this as well, since he establishes that Jesus and the speaker are both subject to the impossibility of fulfillment. Jesus “loves” the beloved because he experiences the same “lack” as Swinburne’s speaker; or, perhaps more accurately, Jesus is portrayed as having the same “lack” as the speaker because Jesus, the superlative deity who would fulfill lack, does not really exist except as the speaker’s fantasy projection of his ideal “self,” just as the ideal woman does not really exist for the male subject.

Because the Jesus figure in this poem is just another of the speaker’s serial identifications, the traditional redemptive qualities of Christ’s sacrifice do not come into play here. An actual sacrifice does not even take place, as the person sacrificed does not really exist; the ritual of crucifixion is portrayed as artifice. In the poem’s final stanza, the speaker admits, “And for all this, die he will not; / There is no man sees him but

I" (68-69). The speaker has come full circle, again invoking the personal pronoun, speaking once again as an incapacitated subject. He is more aware of the impotence of his subject position, in that he recognizes the artificial quality of his fantasy of sacrifice and the failure of the sacrifice to satisfy his desire in ways the beloved either cannot or refuses to. After the charade of the sacrifice ends, the beloved "came and went and forgot" (line 70), obviously not as haunted by the emptiness of the violent act as the speaker is. The symbolic body of the Christ figure in the beloved's Sadean ritual is revealed as an empty placeholder. The speaker, identifying again with the beloved and thus detaching himself from the Christ figure, realizes that Jesus cannot recognize the beloved's desire, or any human desire, for fulfillment. He also realizes that fulfillment cannot be found in any representation of otherness (the Christ figure or the beloved). Thus, any pleasure the speaker initially takes in the transgressive Sadean fantasy of self-destruction and self-negation ultimately perpetuates rather than satiates the "pure empty Otherness" (Zizek, *Plague* 30) of desire. So, the body of the Christ figure, an ineffectual attempt to satisfy what is insatiable, is drowned in the deep sea "That hides the dead and their gods" (l. 66-67), indicating that here "Jesus" functions as yet another symbol of (to borrow Wordsworth's famous phrase) a creed outworn.

Importantly, the Christ figure, like the other characters in the poem, is never referred to by a proper name. This reinforces his role as a mirror of the speaker as incapacitated subject. Recalling the advocacy to castrate God that Swinburne explores in his Blake essay, Swinburne creates a decisively disempowered god figure, a signifier signifying the absence of God's presence in this world yet also representing humanity's relative powerlessness over the lack signified in death, or the "truth" of the Real. In sum,

the sacrifice as artifice is disclosed, and the speaker has realized “the inevitable experience of the uselessness and superfluousness of sacrifices” (Horkheimer and Adorno 53). In the poem’s final line, the speaker declares, “I hope he [the Christ figure] will some day die,” indicating that he wishes for a time in which the *actual* will be possible, for a time that will end any reliance on artifice. Swinburne’s choice to use “hope” instead of “know” is quite important, though, as it indicates a sensitivity to the limitations intrinsic to the material world.

The shadowy Queen Tomyris providing the tremulous foundation for “Satia te Sanguine” is but one emanation of the legendary heroine pervading the *Poems and Ballads*. Like the women featured in Pre-Raphaelite painting, many of Swinburne’s legendary heroines are real women elevated to cultic or mythic status through imaginative remediation. That is, just as history is constantly recreated and retold in his work, transformed by the constantly fluctuating dimensions of subjective experience (Nicholsen 50), Swinburne’s historical figures attain specific aesthetic properties: They become symbols, or placeholders, for the flux of multiple discourses and multiple subject positions that continually create new sites for exploring the shifting relationship between the given work of art and its subjective content(s) by displacing other, previously initiated or recognized sites.

Many critics, like Lene Ostermark-Johansen, find such perpetuity of flux a detriment to Swinburne’s aesthetic, clinging to T.S. Eliot’s famous dismissal of Swinburne’s inability to make determinate assessments of any work of art, or the function of any specific aesthetic properties in a given work. She claims:

Each passage builds up toward a climax, but most of the thoughts and ideas developed during [his] moments of excitement dissolve and are never integrated into a full conclusion. Swinburne's associative mind carries him from one image to the next, thus leaving the reader to finish his train of thought in the intervals before yet another outburst of his enthusiasm introduces another set of ideas. (50)

Ostermark-Johansen echoes Peter Anderson's claim that Swinburne is a poet employing "endless deflections" in a failing dialectic tension "not between surface and depth, but between surface and nothingness," a "nothingness [which] displaces depth"; in due course, because Swinburne does not want to disclose (and thus endlessly deflects) the "horror" of what Anderson calls "the void of desire," Swinburne "sought to escape in himself" ("Sterile" 18).

Anderson's identification of Swinburne's fascination with the nihilistic qualities of desire is crucial, as are Ostermark-Johansen's observations of the disintegrative element characterizing Swinburne's aesthetic. That being said, though, the characteristics of Swinburne's poems that these critics tend to disparage are reevaluated in the strong, thought-provoking counterarguments of other critics such as Rikky Rooksby and Ruth Robbins. Both Rooksby and Robbins, whose critical projects are influenced by the proliferation of Derridean deconstruction, recognize that the production of flux and deflection in Swinburne's poetry importantly functions to "circumlocate"²⁵ subjectivity and history in Swinburne's aesthetic. These critics apply Derridean notions of play and

²⁵ I have borrowed this term from Robbins, who coins it from her adaptation of Derrida's early work on the aesthetic.

deferral to their readings of Swinburne's poetry, characterizing Swinburne's poetry of flux as a seemingly endless "play of signifying references" eroding the limited possibilities of the circulation of representative "signs," thus allowing a symbol or signifier to function like "reflecting pools" or images which provide "an infinite reference from one to the other" but always defer definitive, concrete meaning—the "kernel of truth" one is trying to represent (Derrida, *Grammatology* 7, 36). Arguably, Swinburne seems to engage in what Derrida calls a "dangerous promiscuity and a nefarious complicity between the reflection and the reflected," in which aesthetic representation is a narcissistic exercise of self projecting "self," inasmuch as "one thinks as if the represented were nothing more than the shadow or reflection of the representer" (*Grammatology* 36). Additionally, for Derrida, writing (in this case, writing poetry) is the attempt to restore what the shadow or reflection denotes as absent or lacking by creating a "presence," but that presence will always be "disappointed" because it, paradoxically, continually dislocates what it attempts to restore (*Grammatology* 143). Ultimately, though, Swinburne's poetry suggests that this Derridean formulation can be used to indicate that the "condition of impossibility" of locating truth in representation, locating the "true" self, is simultaneously "its condition of possibility" (see Zizek, *Plague* 129). More specifically, Swinburne's practice of enacting deferral of meaning—the "reality" underlying aesthetic representation, the "real self" underlying the subject as s/he is represented—via the process of serial identification can be read as the condition of the possibility for representing subjectivity as such.

This, in turn, provides Swinburne the opportunity to display a dynamic of "unfolding and shifting perspectives" (Nicholsen 38) in the exploration of the "radical

intersubjective character” (Zizek, *Plague* 8) of fantasy and how it sustains desire.

Fantasy “‘stages’ desire” which “is not the subject’s own, but the *other’s* desire” (*Plague* 8-9). And the Swinburnian subject engages in serial identifications—trying on “shades of otherness,” so to speak—to answer the fundamental questions of desire—“What do others want from me? What do they see in me? What am I to others?” (*Plague* 9)—while endlessly deferring the actual (inaccessible) answer. This is not, as Anderson would have it, the “practice of profound poetic (self-)deception” (“Sterile” 18, parentheses in original). I believe it to be more like Adorno’s practice of seeking to meet human desires and to provide the grounds for finding satisfaction—pleasure—in the perseverance of an intense multiplicity of perspectives inherent in aesthetic experience itself.²⁶

It is important here to differentiate between the Adornian sense of *negativity* and the Derridean, especially considering that Swinburne’s strain of negativity arguably portends Adorno’s much more than Derrida’s. With Derrida, aesthetic negativity can translate into an “ultratranscendental” moment of “nonaesthetic cognition,” in which one is able to “make absolute claims” about “the reflective assembly of identity or meaning of signs,” assuming a grammatological position beyond the aesthetic; these absolute claims point “in the direction of resolution” to the problems of representation (Menke 225, 195-97). In Adorno, though, aesthetic enjoyment is unique, “based on pleasure ... which does not let itself be recognized or identified” definitively (Menke 12). In Adorno’s version of

²⁶ This is based on Adorno’s contention in *Aesthetic Theory* that the artwork, in its entirety, elicits the viewing subject to have a powerful aesthetic experience only inasmuch as the particular facets or elements of which the whole is comprised are “restored to the detail,” or not fully ceded to the whole. These uncoding individual facets or details, always in tension with the idea of artistic wholeness or “unity,” give the work of art an intensity which “thickens and explodes” with the flux of multiplicity (187).

the *via negativa*, that pleasure is found in the exposition of where and in what we fail to render that very pleasure literally, in the words and images and identifications which are necessarily limited in their ability to express what they do *not really* signify. In the Adornian mode of aesthetic negativity, when one intends to render something or someone in art literally, one really subverts his/her own act of rendering. An example of this is Swinburne's presentation of Lucrezia Borgia in his "Ballad of Death": the more Swinburne presents his Borgia as a literal rendering of the historical woman, the more it becomes apparent that his Borgia is a figurative rendering expositing the limits of the rendering, expositing what Borgia is *not*, but what she *could* represent. Swinburne does not create an "ultratranscendent" moment in which he (or his reader) becomes cognizant of the nonaesthetic, singular Borgia, in which one can "see oneself seeing" the "true" Borgia. Instead, Swinburne portrays Borgia as a fluid series of portrayals, each a different facet of the untranscendable limits of rendering her "presence."

Precisely because his poetic persona have this serial quality, Swinburne is often accused of providing only superficial portrayals of his subjects. In "Swinburne's Internal Centre," Rooksby argues that the superficiality often ascribed to Swinburne's aesthetic really results from a critical misunderstanding of Swinburne's use of "lyric emotion" as a mirror for the cycle of identifications his subjects enact in his poetry. Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* are indebted to the dramatic monologues of Browning and Tennyson, in that the situations or events portrayed in Swinburne's poems are relayed via the intonated voices of fictionalized speaking subjects, in a manner wholly dependent upon

those characters' emotional, expressive reactions and interpretations.²⁷ In Browning's work, for instance, one encounters a gallery of subjects whose monologues command a version of the "subjective utterance of the Romantic lyric," in which they confess their "intimate obsessions, fantasies, and pathologies," strongly persuading the reader/spectator to identify with them (Gregory 494-95). But, because these forced identifications rely on the use of an affected, bombastic rhetoric, the reader instead resists the identification and regards the subject of the monologue in a detached manner. The persuasion is revealed as persuasion *per se*, and the speakers appear more as superficial and limited case studies of specific pathologies rather than as figurative sites demonstrating the fluctuating dynamism of human subjectivity. It is probably for reasons like this that many critics typically contend that the "lyric emotion itself is regarded as untrustworthy and inauthentic" (Rooksby, "Centre" 26).

Swinburne, though, uses lyric emotion not to force identification with a singular figure, but to facilitate an encounter with the poetic language triggering the serial identifications which can express a wider variety of "human feeling" as well as "the articulation of a ... vision of human existence" distinctive to each reader (McSweeney 125). He entices his reader to approach his poetry outside of the role of enlightened spectator. Rooksby notes that the modern spectator cultivates distance from what s/he observes, and from that distance "comes detachment, [and] detachment brings

²⁷ Rooksby seems to have based his approach, in part, on Thais Morgan's contention that, due to critics' persistence in regarding *Poems and Ballads* "as the fictionalized autobiography of a sexually and socially maladjusted individual.... Swinburne was not granted the skill of aesthetic distancing" generally accredited to Tennyson and Browning (Morgan, "Dramatic" 176). Perhaps some of the critical perception regarding Swinburne's lack of "aesthetic distancing" stems from the young Swinburne comparing his style to the *lyrisme romantique* established in the work of his favorite French Romantic poet, Hugo. Hugo's poetry is "deeply subjective"; like the poetry of Alphonse de Lamartine, Alfred de Musset, and Alfred de Vigny, it "appear[s] to depend greatly upon the individual poet's experiences and feelings" (Cuddon 518).

alienation,” until eventually alienation “begets judgment” (“Centre” 26). But Swinburne wants his spectator, the reader of his poetry, to submerge him/herself in the voice of the poem’s speaking subject—to feel what Swinburne’s character feels, see what his character sees. In other words, Swinburne’s ideal reader will reflect upon the world as it is (in the spirit of the baroque mirror) *refracted* by his character’s distinctive perspective. What Rooksby calls Swinburne’s “lyric emotion” is the affective aspect of Swinburne’s poetry employed to overcome the alienation between observer and observed, gazing subject and gazed-at object, promoted by reason. The Swinburnian spectator should bypass the alienation which forces the observed “object ... [to] be dominated by preformed categories of the understanding”—meaning judgment—and instead experience the object “spontaneously,” “naively” (Nicholsen 17-18). Though, as Adorno would be quick to point out, such naïveté is an illusion, but an illusion that has not completely been subsumed “under the categories of a dominating conceptual understanding” (Nicholsen 18). This illusion is “something always already required by [the] contemplation” of artworks (Adorno, “Presuppositions” 97). Thus, for example, the historical figures featured in Swinburne’s poetry are not really the same figures described in canonical, historical narratives; instead, Swinburne reimagines them so that his reader encounters the figure, paradoxically, both outside of and despite the details already established and irrevocably flavored by conventional historical narratives. In this way, Swinburne’s historical figure symbolizes his practice of “circumlocating” the subject in art: exploring the multiple possibilities “in which a subject may be ... placed in terms of what is (spoken or written) around or about it” (Robbins 42).

Robbins's argument relies heavily on Derrida's notion of "aboutness"²⁸ and his claim that we must "negotiate, deal with, transact with marginal effects," especially concerning the "differential network" produced within and by a given text, "a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces ... overrun[ning] all the limits assigned to it" (qtd. by Robbins 42). Considering her emphasis on the *trace*, which is "the memory of an ever-receding origin that always remains elusively outside of what it produces in the present ... [which] never leads to spatial simultaneity and full visibility" (Jay, *Eyes* 506), Robbins suggests that the subject's position is always a virtual site, a kind of bridge provisionally suspended between the margins of past (what has already occurred, accessible only by recollection which is always erratic) and possible future experiences (what has yet to and may not ever occur, articulable only as conjecture), what one has and/or has not seen and what one has yet to and possibly may never see. This is the chaotic differential network of a subject's current frame of reference. In the particular case of Swinburne's treatment of the subject, Robbins notes,

Before we can begin to talk about something [or someone], we must know what ... limits it, defines it, frames it. What is at stake is the possibility of communication, the sending of messages across the frame from the picture to the world, or from self/selves to (the) other(s).... The frame is not a pure limit, but a series of mo(ve)ments, events, in time and space, strung

²⁸ "'About', as a preposition, offers us at least two modes of qualification—of time and space—which are also merely approximation," leading us to question "*circumlocution* (talking *about*) and *circumscription* (writing *about*) in order to think about the ways in which a subject may be *circumlocated*—placed in terms of what is (spoken or written) around or about it" (Robbins 42).

together or kept rigorously apart: it is several instances of the preposition ‘about’, multiple approximations. (43)

Because the Swinburnian subject is a circuitous “series of mo(ve)ments, events in time and space”—movements which sometimes seem to lack a manifest continuity—many critics have disparaged Swinburne’s characters for lacking a discernible “internal centre.” In doing so, though, these critics fail to acknowledge that the speaking subject of a Swinburne poem has for his/her virtual “internal centre” a kind of “tumultuous energy” (Rooksby, “Centre” 28) generated by the constant establishment and subsequent absorption of the limitations of the “self” or ego in the cycle of serial identification. The Swinburnian subject refuses to be defined by the limits s/he cannot transcend, so s/he perpetually lurks “about” these limits, recasting them with every turn of the identificatory cycle, finding some gratification in the drive-like persistence. In this cycle, the emergence of an expanded ego and the fragmentation of the ego coincide.²⁹ The ego seems large enough to encompass the compilation of dissonant identities it encounters, but it also becomes fragmented by the repetitive substitutions of the extraneous serial “selves” for its own. In other words, the ego expands to accommodate the very misrecognitions that fragment it. The ego is situated “about” its own dissolution.

In similar vein, then, Swinburne’s historical figures are situated “about” their usual contexts in traditional historical narratives. The frame of the conventional narrative is Swinburne’s point of departure. From there, he gestures at the traces of the Real in his poetic subjects, the remainder of the dissolute ego stuck in the grand concourse of

²⁹ My analysis here is based on Žižek’s assertion that the Cartesian *cogito*—the “pure thought” and “its bodily remainder”—is the site where “emergence and loss,” or the “void of self-relating negativity,” coincide (*Plague* 12-13).

méconnaissance the subjects of his poems have become, by inventing discourse threads which teasingly point toward what the reader will never fully know about those poetic subjects. Swinburne cannot, of course, represent that which exceeds historical, textual representation altogether, or the aspects of the subject that the spectator/reader will never quite see. However, he is aware that when one creates a representative figure, one involuntarily creates the excess lurking “about” the figure as well.

As I mentioned previously, the outstanding example of the fluid textual explorations “about” subjectivity is Lucrezia Borgia of “A Ballad of Death.” Swinburne’s Borgia, the first “Lady of Pain” one encounters in the *Poems and Ballads, First Series*, serves as a template for the endless deflection of self-certainty and the refusal to resolve desire falsely through the temporality of fantasy. In a somewhat restrictive fashion, Peter Anderson reads the motion of serial identification in the poem as futile activity simply marking “the essential emptiness of the beautiful image,” which is offered to the spectator/reader only “to be mourned as the lost object of desire” (“Sterile” 19). In his disparagement, though, Anderson dismisses the critical importance of the “emptiness” Lucrezia Borgia symbolizes in the poem. Swinburne’s “Borgia” is a study of the network of differential traces that once constituted the real-life subject that was Borgia, complicated not only by the spectator/reader’s navigation of the traces of Borgia sustained and created by history books but also by the spectator/reader’s awareness that Swinburne’s “Borgia” is not the historical Borgia but a figure created *about* Borgia.

The speaker in the “Ballad of Death” circumlocates Borgia by imploring the personified Love, the ostensible audience for his speech also seeking audience with the princess, to “Cover thy lips and eyelids” and “let thine ears / Be filled with rumour of

people sorrowing” (lines 4-5), immediately establishing that the “real” Borgia will not hear the invocations made in her name or be physically seen. Only by attuning oneself to a symphony of aural components—like the music which Adorno attests “is a non-conceptual, non-discursive language which ... represents the social world outside it” in a kind of “re-presentation [that] can be more than a simple mirroring” (Jay, *Adorno* 133)—can one reinvoked the dead princess via the imagination, to be seen only in “the mind’s eye.” Anderson astutely notes that Swinburne chooses Borgia to demonstrate his departure from the Pre-Raphaelite treatment of historical subjects: instead of the “sublime” idealism of Rossetti’s medievalism, Swinburne offers “a counter ideal of a lurid and bloodstained Renaissance” (“Sterile” 19). However, this is not exactly “Swinburne’s nostalgia for the lost licentiousness of the aristocracy” of the Renaissance/baroque epochs, as Anderson simplifies it (19), but it is a treatment of nostalgia nonetheless. Anderson convicts Swinburne of looking at the “licentiousness” of the Renaissance/baroque aristocracy as a “naïve other” enchanted by the illusion that, in Swinburne’s very fascination with Borgia, Swinburne sees in her his own gaze—as if he can see the world as Borgia had seen it. In Anderson’s reading, then, Swinburne’s Borgia seems very much like a copy of one of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s Pre-Raphaelite historical subjects, a subject who inhabits a world already re-enchanted by the “creative principle” of art³⁰ conveyed through the aestheticizing gaze of the individual artist. But, as much as the Pre-Raphaelite artists like Rossetti wanted their idealized depictions of history to project “aura or ‘mystery,’” this ends up becoming “a reifying process of aestheticization ... which purchases a frozen aesthetic moment, or a ‘moment’s monument’” within the

³⁰ See *Dialectic of Enlightenment* 5.

gaze “at the price of life in real time” (Barclay 19). However, Anderson, despite his important claim that Swinburne’s nostalgia is not the Pre-Raphaelite version, does not consider how Swinburne very pointedly plays with the concept of the Pre-Raphaelites’ failure to re-enchant the world through nostalgia.

In a different way, Swinburne presents his historical subject as object of the speaker’s gaze, demonstrating his awareness that the speaker (as well as the reader) will “apprehend” Borgia “as an object at a certain distance ... which escapes [the speaker] inasmuch as it unfolds about itself its own distances” (Sartre 343). The object, as “other,” is paradoxically very distant from the speaker and yet an interloper in the “space” in which the speaker establishes his own subject position; concurrently, the speaker must redefine that space as organized around this other, though there is something about the space—and the other who affects it—which escapes definition altogether. Borgia escapes total definition because she is something he cannot actually see; when the speaker says, “O Love, thou knowest if she were good to see” (line 21), he implies that “Love” sees what he cannot, or that which exceeds usual human vision. Swinburne’s speaker, unlike his Pre-Raphaelite poetic counterparts, acknowledges the *screen*, or the “opaque” space which mediates between self and other, making actual rapport impossible (Lacan, *Concepts* 96). Here “Love” is not only, like the screen, mediates between the speaker and Borgia; “Love” is also an imaginary audience, and also the name assigned to the virtual locus of the “self-conscious perspectivism”³¹ in the individual imagination. In such “self-conscious perspectivism,”

³¹ This is Martin Jay’s term. See *Downcast Eyes* 188.

one tries imaginatively to collapse “the distance between the subjective consciousness” of the observer and the object being observed (Jay, *Eyes* 190).

Moreover, the speaker also addresses “Time,” the personification of the virtual locus of varying historical narratives: “O Time, thou shalt not find in any land / Till, cast out of thine hand, / ... Another woman fashioned like as this” (22-25). Swinburne’s Borgia is circumlocated by what Adorno, in “Beautiful Passages,” calls *exakte Phantasie* or “exact imagination.”³² Shierry Weber Nichol森 explains that such a site

marks the conjunction of knowledge, experience, and aesthetic form ... point[ing] provocatively and explicitly to the relationship between exactness—reflecting a truth claim—and the imagination as the agency of a subjective and aconceptual experience[,] ... emphasizing the imagination’s capacity to discover, or produce, truth by reconfiguring the material at hand.... (4)

“Time” will not find another Borgia fashioned as the speaker’s Borgia, because the speaker’s Borgia exists only in the speaker’s “complex relationship to the shifting reception” of Lucrezia Borgia in history (Nichol森 50). That relationship always changes as the speaker’s current perspective, a kaleidoscopic revision of the traces of “Borgia” found not only in the conventional concept of Borgia but also in critique of that convention, shifts. In other words, the poem is a site at which we can explore variations on the theme of Lucrezia Borgia, “enact[ing] the mo(ve)ment” of the speaker’s imaginary encounter with Borgia—which in turn becomes the reader’s encounter—rather than

³² Here I am following Nichol森’s lead, translating the phrase as “exact imagination” rather than “exact fantasy,” because “Adorno [seems to] evoke Kant and the aesthetic rather than Freud” (229n9).

finding it presented “in a linear or narrative form” (Robbins 46).³³ And all these variations are “true”: the speaker’s implicit claim to have encountered the “true” Borgia in his vision is just as defensible as an individual reader’s claim to have encountered the “true” Borgia in his/her act of reading the poem and thus *enacting* the “imagination’s capacity to discover” the “truth,” which is always in a process of becoming.

The “Lady of Pain” is the template for this perpetual process of becoming. To quote again from Robbins, the “lady” in Swinburne’s work is a mirror image for the viewer (or reader), “an image in which the viewer’s gaze is ever caught between ... two faces”—the face that is reflected and face doing the reflecting—“searching for clues and equivalence in the space—parergon—between them” (50). This is not presented as a perfect(ed) mode of vision but as a suggestion of a remediated imaginative vision, indicative of an active renegotiation of the limit experience within the multiple conjunctions of knowledge, experience, and aesthetic form. In the sixth stanza, Swinburne renegotiates the conjunction(s) of satisfaction and dissatisfaction of desire, the paradox of finding ecstasy amid alienation, as he describes the permutations of his speaker’s ever-reflected-and-reflecting gaze reflected in the distorted (or baroque) mirror which is Borgia:

The tears that through her eyelids fell on me
 Made mine own bitter where they ran between ...
 She saying; Arise, lift up thine eyes and see
 If any glad thing be or any good

³³ Robbins actually uses these phrases in her explication of the poem “Verses: Before a Mirror” Swinburne wrote to accompany Whistler’s painting, *Symphony in White No. 2* (1865), but the aesthetic trope of “framing” Robbins discovers in the “Verses” is applicable to all Swinburne’s poems from this period.

Now the best thing is taken forth of us.... (51-52, 54-56)

Borgia's eyes are closed, initially suggesting a failure to recognize the speaker's desire. She cannot, will not, refuses to look at him. Thus she seems to function as a Lacanian mirror which

captures, freezes, and alienates the subject by expatriating him in an image that dominates, subjugates, and "suggests" him. On the other hand, and simultaneously, it permits him to see himself—that is, to separate himself from his image by seeing himself in front of himself. (Borch-Jacobsen 82)

With eyes wide shut, she redirects the speaker's gaze back to himself, specifically his tears. The speaker's tears "run between" Borgia's, because there is really no distinction. Borgia's tears are the speaker's because Borgia is really the speaker; or, more specifically, Borgia is a projection of the speaker's prolifically fragmented ego.

This is further made evident by the fact that what Borgia "says" in the poem is purposefully not set apart from the rest of the verse by the use of inverted commas. On a surface level, the speaker seems to disappear in the statement attributed to Borgia, "speak[ing] himself as nothing," but, on a deeper level, he uses Borgia as the screen through which to enunciate his own "pure desire of self" (Borch-Jacobsen 108). Desire is the "best thing taken forth of us" (line 56): it is not only what allows the individual subject to locate him/herself episodically among the "modulation of the signifying chain" of the material world, but also to access that which exceeds the common understanding of the material world as well—the truth(s) of "what we are as well as what we are not, our being and our non-being" (Lacan, *Seminar* 321-22). Here, the speaker speaks himself cryptically as both what he *is* and as what he is *not* (Borgia). In the terms Swinburne

introduces in *William Blake*, the speaker uses the modulations of the “kingdom of speech” to enter the “kingdom of dreams” (or, given the presence of Borgia in this case, one might suggest “queendom” is the better term here). In the realm of dreams, the speaker aspires to access the “magic of enjoyment” which exceeds the material world which binds him “to a specific social function and, ultimately, to the self” (Horkheimer and Adorno 105).

The speaker’s social function here would be that of a lover—specifically a courtly lover. The speaker notes that “At kissing times across her stateliest bed / Kings bowed themselves and shed” tears like “Pale wine” (lines 62-64), paying a respectful and honorable homage to the “sweet ... / Mouth whereby men lived and died” (73-74). To these mourning kings, Borgia is the courtly beloved, detached and unattainable. The kings are “condemned to remain an asymmetrical non-relationship” with Borgia, who remains “an inhuman partner”; as such, the relationship between them and Borgia cannot be “transposed into a symmetrical relationship between pure subjects” (Zizek, *Metastases* 108-09). The speaker, though, attempts to traverse the detachment the other mourners have toward her: He throws himself upon the corpse in grief, lets his tears “r[un] down / Even to the place where many kisses were,” and the parting kiss to the deceased becomes a series of cunnilingual kisses “fill[ing] the tender interspace” where “the flowers cleave apart” (lines 83-84, 87-88). He becomes what Zizek, borrowing from Poe, calls “the imp of the perverse”; by imaginatively engaging in necrophiliac activity with Borgia’s corpse, the speaker “accomplish[es] an act ‘only because it is prohibited’” (*Metastases* 99). This is a deliberate parody of funeral behavior intended to, in the spirit of Sade, reveal not only the perversions lurking but also the pervasiveness of excess within social

conventions such as acts of mourning. The perversion of Swinburne's speaker "marks the point at which the motivation of an act, as it were, cuts off its ... link" to external reality "and grounds itself solely in the immanent circle of self-reference" (*Metastases* 99).

However, in this circle of self-reference, Swinburne's speaker reinforces the more Lacanian "structure of perversion," the "inverted effect" of fantasy in which "the subject ... determines himself as object, in his encounter with the division of subjectivity" (*Concepts* 185). He portrays himself as "the object-instrument of the will-to-enjoy (*volonté-de-jouir*)—which is not his own will" but the other's; the speaker thus "does not pursue his [necrophiliac] activity for his own pleasure" (Žižek, *Lacan* 108-09) but to pleasure Borgia. Whereas Swinburne's other necrophiliac persona, the leper, all but admits that his actions are for his own pleasure (which he finds in his very failure to fulfill the lack at the center of all constructions of subjectivity), the speaker here is more pointedly portrayed as victim of the pleasure of the *femme fatale*, the embodiment of the lack, that fundamental divide which constitutes the subject, whose identity is always determined by what/who the subject is *not*.³⁴

Because Swinburne's speaker perverts the mourning rituals for Borgia so that they become more about the speaker's sense of lack than the actual loss of Borgia, Swinburne's speaker embodies the melancholia often mistaken for mourning, which is obfuscated by mourning rituals and yet exceeds them. Freud established that melancholia results when the subject's relationship with the object of his desire/"love," in whom s/he is supposed to recognize her/himself and be recognized by the other in turn, proves

³⁴ See Žižek, *Metastases* 51.

impossible. Rather than redirecting that desire of and for recognition to a new object, the subject withdraws it into his/her ego instead. This establishes “an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object,” which can result in “emptying the ego until it is totally impoverished” (Freud, “Mourning” 586, 589). Žižek develops this further, explaining,

[T]he mourner mourns the lost object and kills it a second time through symbolizing its loss, while the melancholic is not simply the one who is unable to renounce the object but rather the one who kills the object a second time (treats it as lost) before the object is actually lost.... [T]he melancholic is not primarily the subject fixated on the lost object, unable to perform the work of mourning, but rather the subject who possesses the object but has lost his desire for it because the cause that made him desire the object has withdrawn, lost its efficiency. (“Melancholy” 662)

Importantly, the melancholic has lost desire for himself: the “object-loss [is] transformed into an ego-loss and the conflict between the ego and the loved person”—the subject-as-object who is lost—is transformed “into a cleavage between the critical activity of the ego and the ego as altered by identification” (Freud, “Mourning” 586). Swinburne purposefully includes the contrasting detail of the kings to demonstrate the difference between melancholy and mourning in the poem. The kings, perhaps Borgia’s former lovers, move through the conventions of mourning not only to acknowledge the loss of Borgia but also to symbolize the loss of their desire—as their desire manifested itself through their desire *for her*—with the “spikenard bruised for a burnt-offering” (line 65). Importantly, the kings are a part of the speaker’s fantasy vision; they are meant to represent historical men who, unlike the speaker, had known the flesh-and-blood Borgia.

They had a physical “object-relationship” with her, a “narcissistic identification” in which each king wished to “incorporate” her into himself, that was “shattered” (“Mourning” 586-87). The speaker, on the other hand, “knows” Borgia only in his attempts to weave the historical traces of “Borgia” into an object of his desire. As Borgia is not actually present in the poem, “we cannot see what it is,” exactly, “that is absorbing him so entirely” (“Mourning” 584). So the speaker constantly grasps at these traces whose fullness is always already lost to him, demonstrating his fixation on the very gesture of loss.

The speaker’s fixation on loss becomes more evident in the stanza immediately following the described necrophiliac event. Abruptly, the speaker’s adoration of Borgia no longer functions as the central element of the poem, and the speaker’s passionate fervor suddenly turns bitter. His ecstatic engagement with the beloved shifts into a lament that “in the days when God did good to me, / Each part about her was a righteous thing,” and that “The beauty of her bosom [was] a good deed / In the good days when God kept sight of us” (91-92, 95-96). The cause that made him desire Borgia has withdrawn, and, as a result, the speaker withdraws into the kind of melancholy which occurs “when we finally get the desired object, but are disappointed in it” (Zizek, “Melancholy” 662). The difference is, of course, that the speaker only “gets” the desired object in the spectacle of fantasy created in the poem. Nevertheless, even the fantasy of “getting”—the artifice intended ostensibly to fulfill desire—causes the speaker disappointment. By invoking God for the first time in the poem, Swinburne motions to his use of God in other poems, like “Satia te Sanguine.” In “Satia,” the God-figure symbolizes an absence-which-is-presence in the material world—a function very similar

to that of Borgia here. Additionally, “God” reinvokes the catastrophe of meaning, in that “God” (as well as Borgia) is the ultimate signifier of aesthetic signifiers. The signifier no longer conveys meaning via its appearance, but the abstraction, and sometimes the very absence, of definitive meaning. Here, Swinburne seems attached to the very indexical gestures that mark the loss of definitive meaning.

The absence of the definite is marked by the “[s]cars of damage and disruption” by which “art desperately negates the closed confines” of the limitations which delineate the “definite” (Adorno, *Theory* 23). Swinburne gestures towards these scars in the final stanza, when his speaker again addresses his ostensible audience, though this time the audience is the poem itself, not “Love”:

Now, ballad, gather poppies in thine hands
 And sheaves of brier and many rusted sheaves
 Rain-rotten in rank lands,
 Waste marigold and late unhappy leaves
 And grass that fades ere any of it be mown.... (101-05)

On the surface, this appears a dismal description of encroaching autumn. However, the “sheaves” and “leaves” can be read as references to paper, especially the paper upon which the poem itself is written.³⁵ The speaker asks the poem itself to “gather poppies”—to numb itself, to diminish its own power and affectiveness. The poem’s power is further diminished by the state of the “sheaves” and “leaves” of the manuscript:

³⁵ Linda McDaniel has also suggested that this is “alternate imagery for printed poetry” (98). However, she also contends that the previous lines describing necrophiliac activity should also be read as metapoetic. She suggests that we should read Borgia as a metaphor for the book itself, considering “the bosom or ‘parted breast flowers’ [to] represent the twin, parted pages of an open book, ‘cloven apart’ at the ‘interspace’ where the pages are bound” (97).

rusted, waterlogged, and faded, the poem itself would scarcely be legible. Only a *trace* of the poem would be left on such soggy pages, and if the poem were reduced to a mere trace of other intersecting traces, one must begin anew the task of circumlocating Borgia, as well as the speaker's subject position. With the introduction of another trace, the viewing/reading spectator's perspective on these figures changes.

Swinburne chooses to end the poem with a very Hegelian commentary on desire itself, imploring the ballad to "Seek out Death's face ere the light altereth, / And say 'My master that was thrall to Love / Is become thrall to Death'" (107-09). From one perspective, the speaker of the poem (or a version of Swinburne-as-poet) is the "master" and the poem itself the "slave who works for the master," laboring to compress the master's affects "in relation to an idea, a concept" (Kojève 48)—in this case, Borgia. From another perspective, the master of the poem "act[s] not for the sake of subjugating a *thing*, but for the sake of subjugating another *Desire* (for the thing)" (Kojève 40, italics in original) by way of the screen, the locus of mediation between the gaze and the individual subject. It is as if the poem has become an other to the speaker, generating its own desire—portrayed here as desire for the desired object, Borgia—that competes with the speaker's own. The speaker's last attempt to subjugate the other's desire is to figuratively "kill" the ballad by ending it. Here, one could argue that the speaker attempts to move out of melancholy into mourning; for the speaker, mourning the loss of Borgia, symbolically kills her a second time with the symbolic "death" of the poem itself. All these things considered, though, neither Swinburne's speaker nor his poem can compete with the power of death itself, the "absolute master."

As mentioned above, the cause for Swinburne's speaker's desire of/for Borgia suddenly dissipates from the poem, as it is deflected; the speaker realizes that Borgia, like the uncanny Beloved of Rossetti's poems, is a specular image of himself—specifically, his real “desire of death,” or desire to recognize himself as “pure abysmal *ek-stasis* in the ‘nothing’ of the other's desire” (Borch-Jacobsen 96). In the conscious creation of Borgia as a fantasy object, Swinburne necessarily must have the speaker experience a “psychic reality” in which he realizes that he is “the identificatory character who ‘fulfills’ [his own] wish” as well as realize that identificatory acts “can neither ‘fulfill’ the wish nor ‘satisfy’ desire” (Borch-Jacobsen 95-96). Swinburne's speaker wearily bids, “Bow down before him [Death], ballad, sigh and groan, / But make no sojourn in thy outgoing; / ... Death shall come in with thee” (110-11, 114). Importantly, the poem can no longer speak but merely “sigh and groan.” This marks “the boundary” of the poem's “negativity,” or where the “artwork say[s] what is more than the existing, and ... do[es] this exclusively by making a constellation of how it is, ‘*Comment c'est*’”: the poem both represents the absolute (of desire, death) and keeps it at a distance (Adorno, *Theory* 132-33). The poem itself cannot absolutely signify the truth of desire. But, by constantly transposing each member of a group of signifiers that gesture toward the truth of desire, though at a distance, the artwork makes a “promise” to attempt to represent what is “yet to be heard, yet to be seen, even if it [is] the most fearsome” (*Theory* 135).

The “promise” of a meaningful representation of the interplay between drive, desire, and the misrecognitions inherent in any act of identity formation, in which we may find some satisfaction, is the goal of Swinburne's aesthetic. His Borgia, the template for all his poetic identities and identifications, may exist in a “‘between’ time

and ‘between-the-lines’ space”—the virtual space in which we establish subject-positions as well as meaning—but she clearly exceeds “her own implied annihilation, her framing into art” (Robbins 48). I think Peter Anderson is correct when he says Swinburne’s poetry is like a Foucauldian “incitement to discourse,” but rather than inciting a discourse which imputes universality (“Sterile” 20), Swinburne’s poetic discourse “is disruptive, not only of *what* we are seeing, but of the *who we are* that does the seeing” (Robbins 51, italics hers), as well as the *who we are actually looking at*. The imaginary portrait of Borgia becomes the imaginary portrait of the speaker-as-poet who, in turn, via acts of reflection and identification, becomes an imaginary portrait of the spectator/reader at a specific time, from a specific perspective. There is a vulnerability in this kind of constellative or serial approach to subjectivity, noticed and called nihilistic by Anderson and others, in that the plenitude of identifications risks identification entirely. In other words, in the constant, deflective deferrals that occur with every attempt to assert selfhood in the Swinburnian universe, “Who am I?” seems a hopelessly unanswerable question. Yet, as Adorno writes in *Endgame*, “[N]ihilism implies the opposite of identification with nothingness,” but the negation inherent in nihilism can also be “the possibility of another world”—or, in this case, a *self*—“not yet in existence” (qtd. by Zuidervaart 159). Re-viewing the constellation of selves serially produced in each poem, identity is not irremediably lost; it is present—made possible—as an “interface” between multiple impulses toward identification³⁶ with several possible “others.” In his article critiquing the “‘New’ Swinburne,” Anderson defines this nihilism as “infinite desolation”

³⁶ This is based on Jonathan Alexander’s suggestion that Swinburne’s fictional personae are established in “the free play of ... impulses” like one experiences in a consented-to sadomasochistic encounter: “Identity ... thus becomes the recognized, not sublimated, interface between simultaneously expressing violent impulses and delimiting them” (34).

and the “terror of total fragmentation” and accuses other critics of enacting “a denial” of its “disintegrative power” (32); in doing so, he ignores how Swinburne’s serial identifications demonstrate his investiture in constellative practices which create conditions of possibility rather than deny them.

CHAPTER FIVE

Serial Identifications and Constellations: *Poems and Ballads*' Imaginary Portraits

"[T]here is a picture for which I would give the eyes out of my head if I could see it without them...."—Algernon Charles Swinburne

"[W]e ourselves always stand at the center of these curious pictures."—Theodor Adorno

As his portrayal of the complex relationship of the spectator/speaker to Lucrezia Borgia in "A Ballad of Death" indicates, Swinburne's pursuit of subjectivity through the textual production of a constellation of selves renders identity—the idea of there being an individual subject to pursue—vulnerable. If one portrays the subject as a kind of nexus of multiple impulses toward identification with several possible "others," one runs the risk of presenting a model of subjectivity that seems too fragmented, too disintegrative to be actively effective or aesthetically innovative (Anderson, "New" 32); rather than allowing the subject the conditions of possibility which more traditional models would deny him/her, the subject-as-nexus might seem to be an agent reinforcing the condition of impossibility. Many critics have previously noted that Swinburne excelled in the creation of *pastiche*,¹ so much so that the patchwork of various personae and narrative threads in his poems seems (to some) disingenuously pieced together, the relationships between the borrowed elements calculatingly ambiguous. Some contend that Swinburne's *pastiche* is self-conscious of itself as such, a *pastiche* that makes readers suspicious. A constellatively produced and serially (re)positioned subject may seem to be another version of Swinburnian *pastiche*, a kaleidoscopic *mélange* which emphasizes its own kineticism more so than the important interpretative possibilities presented by each

¹ McGann discusses Swinburne and *pastiche* in great detail; see *Swinburne: An Experiment in Criticism* 79-91.

successive constellative connection being made. After all, pastiche is imitation; Swinburne's processes of serial identification may seem like *imitations* of multiple possibilities for identity-formation rather than *actual* possibilities. That being said, one must consider that, for Swinburne, pastiche—in the forms of imitation, allusion, and translation—was among the “essential marks of the poetic life” (McGann, *Swinburne* 81). Swinburne himself called it “[t]he miraculous faculty of transfusion” which “is the kind of test which stamps the supremacy of an artist” (*Essays* 76-77)—a transfusion of (re)discovered and unexpected possibilities into established forms and once-familiar personae. Swinburne, like Adorno after him, held fast to the belief that art “cannot be isolated from expression, and there is no expression without a subject” (*Theory* 42); believing in the multiple possibilities inherent in any single expression, he thus wanted to represent a subject constituted by the very multiple possibilities s/he expresses.

Swinburne practices this kind of literary transfusion in his recreations of historical and mythological characters—his “Ladies of Pain”—in the *Poems and Ballads*. He renders all these figures as monadic structures. As such, each character portrayed in Swinburne's monologues functions as an ideogram which attempts to gesture at the original version of the character, either the “real” historical person or the character as she appeared in the very first account of the myth—though that original version is continually displaced by the variants of the historical and mythological narratives that have developed over time, variants which are also accounted for ideogrammatically. This technique is not just a synecdochic practice in which one narrative strand is offered as the whole or “true” narrative; instead, it is a practice in which Swinburne attempts to crystallize the process of the variant narratives paradoxically differentiating from and

intertwining with one another. In other words, Swinburne creates the “Lady of Pain” to demonstrate that the individual figure is always multiple, always a conglomeration of the processes of serial identification.

In his recreations of historical women, Swinburne is primarily concerned with revealing how historical narratives fail to account for or to represent adequately the desires of history’s human subjects; he seems to have understood that human history is just as much “the history of a constant alienation of desire in the desire of the other” (Borch-Jacobsen 90) as it is descriptions of the actions notable people took in past events. Therefore, Swinburne’s historical portraits become spaces in which he represents the perpetual human desire for recognition (of one’s desire) as it shapes and interplays with conventional historical narration. However, Swinburne treats his mythological figures somewhat differently from the way he treats his historical ones. His mythological portraits, like his historical portraits, are sites in which he explores how desire shapes and interplays with the development and continuation of narrative, as well; but, they are also sites in which he explores the specifically tragic dimensions of desire. Whereas Swinburne presents his historical women with an awareness that their very narratives function to eternalize them, he imbues his mythic women with an awareness of the limits of expressing human desire and the dissatisfaction caused by experiencing those limits. As Lacan would say, the mythic characters demonstrate awareness that “life ... is [always] about to turn into certain death, a death lived by anticipation, a death that crosses over into the sphere of life, a life that moves into the realm of death” (*Seminar* 248).

Historical Portraits: Sappho and Faustine

Swinburne's most celebrated literary transfusion of a historical figure occurs in "Anactoria," which is probably the selection from the *Poems and Ballads* that has received the most critical attention. The speaker in this poem, Sappho, is a familiar legendary heroine who, presented as a constellative chain of possibilities throughout the poem, becomes increasingly defamiliarized. Once defamiliarized, she can "claim that 'I am Metaphor'" because, no longer limited by conventional narrative, Swinburne's Sappho can entertain multiple variants of the legend of Sappho, yet each version is presented in terms of a previous or "other" version; in this way, Sappho "mirror[s] multiple perspectives at once" (Wagner-Lawlor 917-18).

Swinburne knew the multiple histories and fictions framing the figure of Sappho well. What we supposedly know of the "real" Sappho is deduced from the fragmented remnants of her poetry, which are but traces and probable fictions in and of themselves. The "historical" accounts of her life appearing in later works are mostly suspect. Ovid, for example, reinvented Sappho as an ideally tragic poetess, a heterosexual woman who committed suicide because her love for a ferryman, Phaon, was unrequited. Renaissance writer John Lyly represented Sappho as a double for Elizabeth I, the "Virgin Queen," idyllically renouncing her sexuality for the sake of duty.² Lyly's presentation was a kind of model for the normative version of Sappho presented in the classical scholarship Swinburne studied at Eton: he was taught that Sappho was a model of purity and chastity, a poet and schoolmistress who lived the life of the mind by conceding, or at least de-

² In *Sappho and Phao*, first performed for Queen Elizabeth and her court and subsequently printed in 1584, Sappho abandons Phaon to preserve her chastity and accept her duty as foster-mother to Cupid. Given Swinburne's literary interests in the Renaissance and in euphuism, it is safe to assume that Swinburne was familiar with Lyly's play.

eroticizing, bodily pleasures.³ However, Swinburne was familiar with the invocation of Sappho and/or “her sisters” in decadent French poetry—specifically, Baudelaire’s and Gautier’s respective uses of “lesbian personae ... [to] cross over into the forbidden territory of feminine feeling and bodily sensation” (Dellamora 75)—and this invocation is the primary framing device here.⁴ Swinburne counts on his reader’s initial perspective of Sappho having been skewed by these multiple distorted accounts provided by previous writers. His poem acts as an anamorphic mirror in which these multiple distortions of the “real” character of Sappho can be brought together in a variety of constellated patterns, reflected into each other, and then refracted away from the reader’s perspective to suggest that the “real” Sappho will always deflect their gaze, inasmuch as the one, true, “real” Sappho is not accessible, or even present(ed), here. Swinburne goes to great lengths to suggest that Sappho—like any subject, in historical or mythical narratives, or in “real life”—is a cipher of multiplicity.

As he does in the other selections in the *Poems and Ballads*, Swinburne proposes the multiplicities of subjectivity by presenting his speaking subject in relationship to another, a beloved who is both present and absent. Unlike in the “Ballad of Death,” in which the audience (“Love”) was a separate entity from the beloved, in “Anactoria” the ostensible audience is the beloved. And, whereas in the “Ballad of Death” the virtual

³ Swinburne once remarked that the “fragments of Sappho ... [that] were part of the classical syllabus of boys in England’s leading public schools ... [were those] ‘which the Fates and the Christians have spared us’” (Rooksby, *Life* 142).

⁴ No recollections provided in any of the Swinburne biographies or in his collected letters indicate that Swinburne had read Mary Robinson’s *Sappho and Phaon* (1796). Perhaps this is not surprising, since, as Jerome McGann indicates, “Robinson’s work had little influence on subsequent treatments of Sappho” (“Robinson” 55). However, as Robinson’s poem portrays “Sappho’s own desire” and elaborates “a fully conscious eroticism” (“Robinson” 73), it seems equally surprising that Swinburne would not have had knowledge of the poem—especially considering Swinburne’s great, lifelong interest in all things pertaining to Sappho.

presence of Borgia was marked by the speaker's "dream vision" of her, Anactoria is present only as she is framed by Sappho's descriptions of her. Anactoria is found only in "aboutness," inasmuch as the poem is "about" her;⁵ Sappho, more so than the speaker of the "Ballad," realizes the power she can wield within discourse to both create and dispel the fantasies of sustaining and satisfying her own desire. Sappho is not eager to share this power, though, as she implores Anactoria to "sigh not, speak not, draw not breath" (line 5)—in short, Sappho warns Anactoria not to make a sound. Consequently, the virtual Anactoria remains silent throughout the entire poem (unlike the virtual Borgia, who is given somewhat of an entry into the speaker's language in the "Ballad of Death").

If Sappho were to give Anactoria entry into discourse, Sappho could not continue to exude what David Riede would call "Romantic authority," or the "illimitable ambitions" and power of artistic creation, over her: for Sappho, "communicat[ing] even uncertainties in tones of certainty, ... can only be done by writing"—or, in this case, speaking—"within a 'world of poetry' that is removed from the world of [material] actualities" ("Authority" 22, 37). Anactoria is circumscribed in Sappho's description of her own desire. Anactoria's "body is the song," her "mouth the music" (lines 75-76): here Swinburne again emphasizes the poem's existence on the very margins of materiality—the poem is a "song," a form of art without physical or visual body, rather

⁵ David Cook has argued that "the presence or absence of a listener in Swinburne's poem must remain an open question, for so many of Sappho's lines are addressed to Anactoria not in apostrophe but very much *as if* she were on the scene and capable of responding" (85, emphasis mine). I find Cook's use of the phrase "as if" quite telling, for it seems to contradict his insistence on leaving the matter open. Instead, the "as if" suggests that Anactoria is a *likeness*, or a virtual presence, which is *about* the paradox of representing the presence and absence of a desired "other" simultaneously. Moreover, Swinburne has based this poem on Sappho's poem "Anactoria" (also translated as "To an Army Wife") in which Sappho laments the loss of the already-absent Anactoria yet conjures up a specific visual likeness of her by employing both memory and imagination.

than a physical, visual artwork inscribed upon a page.⁶ But this is a body, a mouth, completely of Sappho's design and under Sappho's control. Sappho is quick to add, "[T]hou art more than I, / Though my voice die not till the whole world die" (76-77). Anactoria is "more than" Sappho because she is the symbol of Sappho as *herself* and as other. In other words, Anactoria is the "paradoxical 'mirror'" in which Sappho can "give body" to her desire yet create a body—within the poem, and/or the body of the poem itself—"that, this time, would no longer be the image of the body," *per se* (Borch-Jacobsen 232).

As Allison Pease observes, "Bodies are described [here] ... not as physical artifacts, but rather as one great"—and I would add *virtual*—"body of desire, a series of metonyms" (49). The (intact) physical human body itself conventionally suggests a kind of material unity, a completeness; it also suggests the hierarchy of the universal over the particular, insofar as, although the details of individual bodies differ, they all share the same general shape and set of characteristics. But, if the body is treated as a metonym, signifying a virtual rather than actual body (of desire), the descriptions of the body itself reveal "the illusion that the power of fascination" and desire "belongs to the object [or body] as such" (Zizek, *Lacan* 33). Moreover, it demonstrates that the body has no *real* material unity; instead, it is a structure like all others in the symbolic field: "always already barred, crippled, porous, structured around some extimate kernel, some impossibility" (*Lacan* 33). As Adorno establishes in his *Aesthetic Theory*, "The material unity of artworks is all the more illusory the more its forms and elements ... do not

⁶ Swinburne also alludes to the fact that Sappho's poetry originally was intended as an aural art form; her initial audience would hear the poem in recitation. Only later were the written poems pasted into scrolls.

emerge immediately from the complexion of the individual work” (186). The bodies Sappho constructs in her monologue—her own body, Anactoria’s body, the body of the poem—have no *real* distinction, nor are they unified. They emerge gradually, incompletely, abstractly. Each is a particularized fragment circumlocating “the great body of desire,” gesturing toward the possibility of representing what is impossible to truly represent in material form or symbol: all the possibilities of finding pleasure in the quest to satiate an ultimately insatiable desire.

Swinburne employs the fragmentation of and confusion between the bodies in this poem, so that the individual reader can arrange them in a constellative pattern, subsequently envisioning one or more possible relationships between them and thus find his/her own “meaning” in the poem. Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor astutely argues that the confusion of these aestheticized virtual bodies acts as “a kind of metaphorical ‘indiscretion’” marked by “that problematic crossing of subject (‘I’) and object (‘you’),” but she reduces it to a “symptom of warring impulses within a single metaphoric field” (920). I would contend that the metaphoric or symbolic field, due to its fragmented and porous quality, is never “single”; though we use the singular form (“field”) to name it, this field is a multiplicity of possible fields not reducible to a singularity (yet represented by a term that suggests singularity). The bodies in “Anactoria” demonstrate that the metaphoric visual image can no longer occupy merely one place, or function in just one field of signification, in an artwork. Any conventional metaphoric images of unity, such as images of bodies joined in sexual intimacy, speak only to the dissonance inherent in that supposed unity of self and other, signifier and signified, subject and object.

Swinburne deliberately repudiates the conventional use of sexual metaphor by presenting

sexual activity in this poem as sadistic, vampiric, cannibalistic. He must “disrup[t] the sexual fantasy of ecstasy and incarnation, in which the ideal becomes body” (Wagner-Lawlor 920) and attempt to demonstrate that those very disruptions of the ideal are the most aesthetically crucial because the failure of the sexual fantasy to realize the ideal revives the plenitude of possibility.

The ideal fails to become embodied in the scene of Sappho’s sexual fantasy, in which Sappho literally wants to devour Anactoria and become Anactoria incarnate. Sappho initially creates the fantasy as a means of transcending the separation between the desiring “I”/“eye” and the desired “you”/object of the gaze. To do so, Sappho must imagine that her “lips were tuneless lips,” silenced as Anactoria is silent; moreover, Sappho imagines Anactoria as the agent of her silencing, as Sappho is silenced by pressing her lips “To the bruised blossom of [Anactoria’s] scourged white breast” (lines 105-06). In the fantasy of her own silence, Sappho imagines herself surrendering control of her own mouth, which creates the “song”—the poem—which not only circumscribes the body of Anactoria but establishes Sappho’s own presence. In silence, the mouth that creates the poem, which gives it *presence*, would paradoxically create *absence* in the cessation of speech (as the poem would cease to exist, here, if Sappho were silenced), which is why Swinburne employs copious imagery of consumption:

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)

Though Swinburne creates very visual images of vampirism and cannibalism, he has Sappho articulate them in specifically oral terms to indicate that poetic vision is a process of attempting to represent visually those sensations that cannot really be seen (i.e., one can “watch” this process, but still not know how it would really *feel* to be engaged in this activity). In this cannibalistic “confusion of bodies,” the mouth mimics the activity of the gazing eye in that it wants to envelop and consume its object. But the mouth here also achieves what the gazing eye cannot: when the subject engages in the act of consuming the other, the image of the subject’s desire emblematically receives the object of her desire, implying that the subject is no longer “frustrated by an object in which [her] desire is alienated,” an object which represents the subject’s alienation from pleasure, from enjoyment (Lacan, *Écrits* 42).

Thus the mouth, transposing the eye, functions much like what Derrida calls the *embouchure*: the “mouth or outlet” that is the virtual locus of all correlations made in the metaphoric field of poetry—virtual in that it “can no longer be situated *in* a typology of the body but seeks to organize all the sites and to localize all the organs” (“Economimesis” 277, 282) in a site *about* the body. To apply this more directly to the poem, the virtual locus of the poem itself can no longer be situated in the trope of the body, neither Sappho’s own or Anactoria’s virtual body. Even more, Sappho cannot situate her subject-position with any precision in the body of her poem nor in the *other* body (Anactoria’s) she has created for herself, nor can she decidedly circumlocate her desire in any of these aforementioned bodies. In her fantasy of devouring Anactoria, Sappho attempts to localize in herself all the various aesthetic particularities generated

within the poem. Her mouth is an *embouchure* which consumes particular elements of art to (re)emit them as an individualized expression, inasmuch as her expression reorganizes those particular elements into a different constellated pattern. In other words, and to reinvoké Swinburne's cannibalistic image, Sappho wishes to consume the particular elements which comprise "Anactoria" so that she may (re)emit a different expression or version of "Anactoria"—a version which is more pointedly "Anactoria-as-Sappho." The Swinburnian *embouchure*, then, is an eye/mouth hybrid, an orifice that the subject both sees *through* and senses *with*, and then emits the affect of the experience.

With the *embouchure*, Swinburne does not intend to provide an easy solution for the "problems of identity and temporality" by conjuring a kind of *deus ex machina* in a trope meant to induce a subsuming "imaginative transcendence" (Wagner-Lawlor 918, 924). In fact, the *Deus* in the poem is woefully unable to transcend: "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). Like the God of the "Ballad of Death," Sappho's God has left the world;⁷ and, like the Beloved's crucifixion of the Christ figure in "Satia te Sanguine," Sappho's attempt to "kill" God reveals itself as an empty sacrifice. To Sappho, he is but a lacuna, like Anactoria, though he lacks the fluid materiality Sappho ascribes to Anactoria. In her deliberately enounced transgression of an absent authority figure, then, Sappho transgresses nothing (no thing) but the idea of a Godlike transcendence. She can imagine what it might be like to "be one with" everything in the world, "With all the high things forever" (lines 276-77). However, this dream vision of

⁷ "Anactoria," lines 175-77: "Hath he not sent us hunger? who hath cursèd / Spirit and flesh with longing? filled with thirst / Their lips who cried unto him?"

wholeness is always tempered by her admission that it is one of many possible, subjective renderings of the feelings, ideas, sights, sounds, experiences she has taken in and subsequently (re-)expressed: hence the poem's most famous line, "Memories shall mix and metaphors of me" (214). The very *personal* quality of the vision of transcendence here is its own limitation: one can never transcend the *self*, even if one situates her subject position in a virtual, fantasy space.

The canon of Swinburne criticism is overwhelmed with various interpretations of this cryptic line. I agree with Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor that it "points to a central problematic of the poem" (922). She claims that the problem is the poem's "central indiscretions—the conflict between states of love (I/you), of life (body/spirit), and of metaphor itself (identity/nonidentity)" (922). Concurrently, Thaïs Morgan argues that the central problem is that the very sexualized version of Christian sacrifice portrayed in the poem destroys binary categories; that in the physical contact Swinburne envisions between Sappho and God, "'Memories' of the deep relationship between religious and sexual 'metaphors,' between desire for God and desire for erotic ... pleasure, will trouble the reader until he or she is no longer sure" of any demarcations ("Dramatic" 184). Wagner-Lawlor and Morgan both effectively recognize Swinburne's poem as a careful study in binarism, but they both portray the binaries in the poem as static. Even if the demarcations get blurred, as Morgan observes, Morgan's assumption is that those demarcations are still there, just not apparent in Swinburne's blurry perspective. Morgan also assumes that Swinburne provides his reader with one specific perspective to employ while reading the poem; but, as I argue above, such is not the case. Rather, I prefer to reconsider Allison Pease's suggestion that Swinburne creates "semantically and

physically ambiguous” aesthetic bodies, bodies whose very indeterminacy allows them to exceed constructed conventions of gender and sexuality (50). Such ambiguous bodies illustrate how demarcations between conventionally binary categories are just as semantically and physically ambiguous here. As they were for Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the margins dividing separate elements in a sequence, separate narratives, separate identities and desires are constantly negotiable for Swinburne. The margins between Sappho and God, Sappho and Anactoria, Sappho and the poem are constantly renegotiated here as well. The reader navigates through the ambiguities, individually ascertaining how the “memories mix”—specifically, the cultural collective versions or “memories” of the historical Sappho—and produce the “metaphors of me”: not only the “I”/“me” which demarcates the character/persona of Sappho, but the “I”/“me” which demarcates the reader.

In these “metaphors of me,” the reader/Swinburne explores a kind of Adornian *non-identity*, which

doesn't just mean the opposite of identity ... or what doesn't fit into certain categories, which is usually just a metaphor for a *different* identity, but refers to what escapes or eludes *every* sort of identity ... which nevertheless exists in the shadow or penumbra of identity, as the fleeting reminder or glimpse of unrealized possibilities, of what that identity locked out, excluded, or can't quite become. (Redmond online)

Sappho, the Swinburnian “Lady of Pain” in this poem, is the metaphoric site establishing the non-identity of both the speaking subject and the reading/viewing subject. Sappho is more than the locus of all the historical trace narratives surrounding her persona; she is

more than what those traces gesture at. She offers a glimpse of the unrealized possibilities of everything “Sappho” could ever possibly represent. Swinburne does not offer his Sappho as just another *different* way of identifying Sappho; she is *every possible* way one could identify Sappho. The spectator/reader, led through a kaleidoscopic process of identifying “Sappho,” can perhaps consider his or her own identity—his or her own “metaphors of me”—just as kaleidoscopically. Importantly, though, Swinburne’s Sappho cannot “sing” what she has excluded in her auto-enunciation, what she cannot quite or has yet to become. At the poem’s end, Sappho admits that her metaphoric, poetic language is the “Lotus and Lethe on [her] lips like dew”; with every enunciation she speaks one possibility only to exclude or to eclipse another, the penumbra of which remains elusively “shed around and over and under” her, an ambiguity like “Thick darkness and the insuperable sea” (lines 302-04).

Swinburne’s “Faustine” offers another treatment of history, identity, and the penumbra which exceeds such constructs. In “Faustine,” though, Swinburne is able to explore the problematics of historical representation more explicitly than he does in “Anactoria,” since “Anactoria” is a poem which becomes more about the aestheticized psychology of the relationship between desiring subject and desired object than the continual displacement of the historical subject within the historical narratives that frame and circumlocate her. In tone and presentation, then, “Faustine” arguably resembles the “Ballad of Death” more than “Anactoria,” in that the speaker of “Faustine” passionately addresses a deceased historical figure. Like Lucrezia Borgia, both Roman Empresses Faustina—Faustina the Elder, wife of Emperor Antonius Pius, and their daughter, Faustina the Younger—are primarily historicized as figures of sexual scandal. Due to

Swinburne's considerable knowledge of and interest in the ancient world, his failure to specify which Faustina he writes about should be read as intentional and not accidental, suggesting yet another aspect of play in the precarious act of producing and recognizing identity.

Faustina the Elder was principally known for her charity work throughout her husband's reign; however, the elder Faustina became a figure of sexual depravity when her daughter (her *namesake*) did. Faustina the Younger was more politically active; she notably accompanied her husband, Marcus Aurelius, during most of his military campaigns. Some historical reports claim Faustina's devotion to her husband gained her the admiration of her husband's soldiers, who nicknamed her *Matri Castrorum*, "Mother of the Camp." Other accounts, like that offered by historian Sextus Aurelius Victor, claim that Faustina indulged in innumerable and sordid extramarital affairs with the soldiers.⁸ Oppositionally, though, Marcus Aurelius in his personal diaries describes his marriage as harmonious, and Faustina as "so obedient, so affectionate, so genuine" (qtd. by Burns online). Swinburne claimed to have written the poem after meeting a woman whose face reminded him of the profiles of Faustina printed on ancient Roman coins,⁹ which places him in a position not unlike his Sappho: from the "memories that mixed"—not only Swinburne's memory of the woman with a Faustinian profile, but also his

⁸ Following the title, Swinburne has appended "*Ave Faustina Imperatrix, morituri te salutant.*" As Marilyn Woroner Fisch has noted, this is "the very salutation addressed to Caesar by the gladiators 'about to die'" (1). The speaker assumes the role of the gladiator saluting his empress here; interestingly enough, one of the claims made by Faustina the Younger's detractors (a claim recorded in the *Historia Augusta*) was that her son, the Emperor Commodus, was fathered not by Marcus Aurelius but by one of his favorite gladiators.

⁹ Swinburne gives this as his inspiration for writing "Faustine" in his "Notes on Poems and Reviews" (365). However, this contradicts Frederick Sandys's earlier account, in which he claimed that Swinburne wrote "Faustine" while he and Swinburne were on a train; to pass the time, they decided to see who could write more lines of poetry using that specific name. (See Thomas 80.)

memories of the various historical accounts of the empresses he had read during his studies, and how the ancient historians themselves had let the accounts of each Faustina mix together—he creates a virtual (re)presentation of a Roman Empress which incorporates not only all he knows about each Faustina but also gestures toward what he can never really know about either one of them. In other words, Swinburne gestures toward the impossibility of desire: just as desire functions “not to realize its goal ... but to reproduce itself as desire” (Žižek, *Plague* 39), Swinburne’s “Faustine” functions not to realize the goal of determining all there is to know about the empresses Faustina, but to reproduce, continually and serially, variant versions of “Faustine.”

As David Riede notes, Swinburne adapts the “the Hellenic and Roman idea of cyclical alternation in generations” to his purposes here (*Study* 53), but this is not exactly a case of a Roman Empress being born again in Victorian England. Like the other historical women presented in *Poems and Ballads*, Swinburne’s Faustine is the figure representing the multitude of alternating possibilities of representing “Faustina,” even if every one of those alternate possibilities is not in itself available for aesthetic representation. By circumlocating the empress(es) Faustina in the “Faustine” of his poem, which was in turn supposedly circumlocated by an otherwise unnamed contemporary woman, Swinburne uses Faustine to enact “a process of alienation [and] divestiture of the self” or the subject position (Nicholsen 52), as Faustine is a multitude of possible “selves” shadowing the illusory constant “self” suggested by the singular name. Swinburne beckons the reader to “look” at Faustine, to see what (as Norman Bryson would say) exceeds the ideological screen which limits the perspective used to “view” Faustine. The speaker of Swinburne’s poem tells Faustine, “You have the face that suits

a woman / For her soul's screen" (41-42), indicating that the face marking Faustine's identity limits the expression of "soul," or spirit, in her aesthetic representation.

Faustine's face marks her function as *imago* in the poem: her image represents the perpetual "pregnant moment" of the poem itself, which resists its own concrete or material representation, beckoning the imagination not to hypostatize simply in the poem's "historical content" (Adorno, *Theory* 85) but to strive to exceed it. Faustine is an aesthetic image or, rather, a series of aesthetic images that "are not fixed, archaic invariants" already determined by conventional historical narratives (*Theory* 85-86); however, because Swinburne's Faustine refuses to be determined by narrative, she must fail to be determined sufficiently as plenitude within the poem, too. The *imago* of Faustine—as object of desire—may be the "goal," but the goal of desire cannot be obtained (*Theory* 85). Consequently, by describing Faustine as "A queen whose kingdom ebbs and shifts / Each week" in the constant recapitulation of "Wine and rank poison, milk and blood, / Being mixed therein" (11-12, 17-18), Swinburne suggests that she ultimately eludes his attempts to describe her in her multiplicity.

At first, the speaker of the poem declares, "You come back face to face with us, / The *same* Faustine" (63-64, emphasis mine). But, as he moves through various descriptions of the possible motivations and explanations for her return—"the slain man's blood and breath" which revived her (line 67), "the bitter lust / That galled" her (75-76), her rebellion against the "dust and din" of "years entomb[ed]" (81-82)—he finally realizes this Faustine is never the "same" at all. He poses two seemingly innocuous questions which actually demonstrate that the object of his desire eludes him in his monologue: "Where are the imperial years? and how / Are you Faustine?" (87-88). In

asking the first question, the speaker notes the passing of ancient Rome; in doing so, he separates those “imperial years” of ancient Rome from the time and place from which he speaks to Faustine. In doing so, on one hand, the speaker insinuates that continuing to place Faustine overtly in those “imperial years” will only reduce her to her external history;¹⁰ on the other hand, though, he paradoxically reinforces Faustine’s relationship to that external history, a history he cannot access directly or depict with accuracy. Because he can grant her only partial—and paradoxical, as it is wholly artificial—liberation from the external historical narratives of the empress(es) Faustina, then, the speaker must ask her the second question, in which he implores her to re-establish her identity, to determine, *how is she Faustine?* To ask the question differently, how can she be the Faustine of those “imperial years” if those years are long gone, if the real story of the empress(es) Faustine is unrecoverable from the traces of historical narrative that linger in the present—especially if one divorces Faustine from those narratives?

Swinburne answers the question by reinforcing his Faustine’s very artificial qualities. More specifically, his Faustine is an artifice representing the failure to reincarnate the very empress(es) who ruled in those irretrievable “imperial years,” all the while entertaining the prospect that the “Faustine” persona is “historically ubiquitous,” having omnipresent possibilities in the form of a “constant flux” (Riede, *Study* 53-54) persisting in all incarnations of this historical narrative. “Art is no replica of the subject” (Adorno, *Theory* 41-42), but it must employ a subject-as-artifice in order to express figuratively all the possibilities inherent in the artwork. “The first Faustine” is just one

¹⁰ My reading here is based on Adorno’s statement that artworks are “incommensurable with historicism” because, “instead of following their own historical content, [historicism] reduces them to their external history” (*Theory* 182-83).

constituent of the serial barrage of “new Faustine[s]” that the poem evokes; “after change of soaring feather / And winnowing fin”—meaning, with every reallocation of the flux—a “new Faustine” wakes (100, 109-12).

To reinforce his implication that Faustine is an ideal artifice for subjective expression, as a circumlocated, expressive aesthetic subject that flaunts its very aestheticization, Swinburne even offers a version of Faustine as an automaton:

You seem a *thing* that hinges hold,

A love-machine

With clockwork joints of supple gold—

No more, Faustine. (140-44, emphasis mine)

As such, Faustine on one hand seems, like the courtly Beloved of the previous poems, the “uncanny other,” a “pure machine, ... the Other which is not our ‘fellow-creature’” (Žizek, *Metastases* 90). On the other hand, however, Faustine only “seems” like a *thing*. Her very status as artifice challenges her static “thingness”; she is a dynamic form that, circa desire, defies the conventional reductiveness of form. She is a simple “thing” *no more*. She exemplifies the decadent condition “under which aesthetic subjects and objects become mutually substitutable, one for the other” (Gordon, “Spaces” 51); Faustine, as an aestheticized subject, is “bound up with, preformed and mediated by the object”—in this case, the object being this automatized body (Adorno, *Theory* 166). Yet she is more than simply the automatized body, inasmuch as the automaton, a work of art, is a *thing* which “become[s] the antithesis of the reified monstrosity” (*Theory* 167); Faustine is a place-holder for a plenitude that exceeds “thingishness.” Though she has not transcended (because she *cannot* transcend) form altogether—Swinburne is careful

still to mention Faustine's heavy hair (line 153), strong face and chin (157), and "sweet and keen" lips (161)—she becomes what Adorno would call an "open form" (*Theory* 141) in which, in a display of her "thingish" qualities, she openly aspires to represent, to express, more than any "thing" currently can.

Mythological Portraits: Phaedra, Philomela, Proserpine, Dolores

In her article on "Swinburne's Divine Bitches," Marilyn Woroner Fisch discusses what she calls "an anti-entropic monism" (1) common to Swinburne's revisionary treatments of female mythological characters, such as Proserpine in both the "Hymn to Proserpine" and "The Garden of Proserpine" and the notorious Dolores, Swinburne's archetypal "Lady of Pain." "Time can alter only the form" of Swinburne's mythic woman, says Fisch, but "her essence, and her function" as an "immutable" superfluity of possible permutations, exceed the physical form (10). Fisch claims these mythic women are all variations of the "divine bitch archetype," though she fails to define what exactly the "divine bitch archetype" is. I believe she has developed this archetype or trope by drawing from representations of the ancient Lycian goddess Malija, who was incorporated or "mixed into" the goddess Athena when Greek culture infiltrated Lycia.¹¹ Malija, as the goddess of the hunt, was often referred to as the "divine bitch." Also, as the appointed guardian of a portal between earth and the underworld, Malija was believed to lead her priests and priestesses in a journey to the underworld and back; paradoxically, though Malija asserts her independence from the typical female role of creatrix by

¹¹ It is likely that Swinburne had read about the archaeological studies of ancient Lycian culture occurring in the mid-nineteenth century. It is just as likely that Swinburne would have seen the artifacts Sir Charles Fellows had taken from his excavations of the ancient Lycian city of Xanthos and displayed in the British Museum.

maintaining perpetual virginity, she is responsible for the “re-birth” of souls rapt in the underworld. Thus Malija, the “divine bitch,” is a “monad” in that she represents the perpetual process of life and death as “immanent” yet “crystallized” into a specific form (Adorno, *Theory* 180); she is also a “monad” in that she has *valence*, or the ability constantly to produce an effect/affect.¹² Within her “self” she is never singular, just as Malija is not “just” Malija but also Athena: she is the combined effect/affect of self and other, identity and non-identity, being and becoming, representation and what exceeds it. One could argue that this combination is “anti-entropic,” as Fisch suggests, because it attempts to account for the loss of information or meaning which always occurs in any act of signification, especially the use of metaphor.

Though Fisch does not list either Phaedra or Philomela among Swinburne’s “divine bitches,” I think the poems featuring both characters can be explicated as significant case studies, though on a smaller scale than that of the major goddesses of *Poems and Ballads*, of how Swinburne uses his mythological figures, even more than his historical figures, to establish sites where the limits of artistic representation are pushed, stretched, and redrawn. Jerome McGann has already established that Swinburne’s mythic female figures should not be read as “‘compensations’ ... for the loss of a previously valued possession or ideal” or beloved, but as attempts to “fantasize a so-called reality, even live through it, in order to justify and make possible a continuous intercourse with the creatures of his imagination” (*Swinburne* 220).¹³ Yet, if one should

¹² Thus I am not only using Adorno’s modification of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz’s definition of “monad” but also applying how it is defined in chemistry (“an atom that has valence”).

¹³ McGann argues in *Swinburne: An Experiment in Criticism* that Swinburne’s “Ladies of Pain” are a montage of “essential images” of his beloved cousin, Mary Gordon (220), to whom Swinburne may or may not have proposed marriage. Rooksby also notes that, upon Mary Gordon’s announcement of her

not read the goddess-figure as a compensatory artifice by which Swinburne fulfills an otherwise unrequited love, one should not read the subject fantasizing reality and enacting a constant intercourse with art as the definitive Swinburne himself, either. The “Swinburne” of this imaginative process is carefully and consciously crafted as an aestheticized, artificial subject position; the subject who establishes a virtual (rather than real) intercourse with “creatures of his imagination” is just as virtually and artificially situated as those “creatures.” One could even go further and suggest that the “creatures of the imagination” are *affects* of the subject, or a Lacanian kind of “‘formative’ identification” going beyond “vision and ideal modeling”: they are multiple “matter[s] of *affection* of the ‘ego’ by the ‘other’” (Borch-Jacobsen 69, italics his). It “makes possible the ecstasy of alienation” in which the “I” of the poem attempts to become the “other, through a corporeal-affective mimesis” (Borch-Jacobsen 70), but the “ecstasy of alienation” is intermingled with tragedy in all these cases. Phaedra has “strange blood in [her],” which makes her realize that she is “not of [her kin’s] likeness nor of’ her stepson Hippolytus’s (“Phaedra” 50-51), and the alienation results in murder. Likewise, Philomela realizes that she is not of her kin’s likeness, either; her sister Procne has forgotten the murder of her son, which still haunts Philomela, and “The heart’s division divideth” them (“Itylus” 44).

In his seminar on *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan suggests that tragedy is the site of perpetual action in which

engagement to Colonel Disney-Leith in late 1864, Swinburne fell into a state of “bitterness and anger,” and was overheard proclaiming that Mary’s marriage marked “‘the tragic destruction of all his faith in woman.’” Rooksby concludes, “[H]e must have felt that [he and Mary] should have been together and that her choice was the wrong one for both of them.” He also notes that Swinburne wrote “Dolores” and “Satia te Sanguine” during this period. See Rooksby, *Life* 91-110.

[t]he hero[ine] and that which is around [her] are situated with relation to the goal of desire. What occurs concerns subsidence, the piling up of different layers of the presence of the hero[ine] in time. That's what remains undetermined; in the collapse of the house of cards represented by tragedy, one thing may subside before another, and what one finds at the end ... may appear in different ways. (265)

The difference in what appears at the end, of course, depends on the perspective with which one considers that end. The relationship between the different layers of subsidence can be arranged and interpreted in a variety of ways. This is similar to the presentation of Swinburne's historical women, in that the historical women are situated in relation to the speakers' goals of desire—not only the goal to “fill in” the aporia of desire, but the end goal of accepting the aporia desire will always cause, as well as *be*. They also consist of the “different layers” of the variant versions of their respective personae, how those personae have been reconstructed through the passing of time. However, Swinburne does not emphasize the tragic element of his historical women as he does their mythic counterparts. The “killing” of Anactoria is a mere gesture of tragic loss marking Sappho's melancholy as well as the triumph of her own narrative, her poetic voice; Faustine figures the speaker's resistance to reification and inertia in art via an embrace of indeterminacy. Nonetheless, Swinburne's historical women do not demonstrate the kind of *catharsis* enacted by his mythic figures; not a purgation as in a purification or a removal, but a release—a release of emotion, what Rooksby calls “a tumultuous energy, elemental, suffering but undefeated” (“Centre” 28). The *embouchure* of the “divine bitch” is not merely “vomitive or emetic,” as Derrida would say, but more “expressive

and emissive” (“Economimesis” 282), and she does not express any need for purification from or any other kind of forgiveness for behavior—specifically, sexual or sexually-motivated behavior—that resists the societal norm. Rather, to savor the excess in the realization “that she is just a passive element in the interplay of libidinal forces, she ‘subjectifies’ herself, she becomes a ‘subject’” by becoming “an object *for herself*” rather than just for an/other subject (Zizek, *Lacan* 64).

When the mythic woman becomes an object for herself, she still endures the kind of suffering that accompanies tragedy; as a “passive element” in any given scene, she sometimes seems more victim than heroine. But Swinburne’s mythic women resemble Sade’s Justine, who is both victim and heroine, and who is heroic because she is not destroyed by her victimization. Rather, the heroine’s victimization allows her to create her own virtual subject position, rather than simply allow others to establish that position for her. As Lacan points out, in this “typical Sadean scenario,” the victim

retain[s] the capacity of being an indestructible support. Analysis shows clearly that the subject separates out a double of [her]self who is made inaccessible to destruction, so as to make it support what, borrowing from the realm of aesthetics, one cannot help calling the play of pain. For the space in question is the same as that in which aesthetic phenomena disport themselves, a space of freedom. (*Seminar* 261)

In the expression of the “play of pain,” the heroine rebels against semblance, or conforming to societal norms. In this way, Swinburne’s mythic women—his “Ladies of Pain”—demonstrate what Adorno claims is art’s “rebellion against semblance, [its]

dissatisfaction with itself,” and expresses art’s “desire for dissonance” which is “effectively expression” (*Theory* 110).

Swinburne’s Phaedra is a “piling up of different layers” of the character offered in previous texts, Euripides’s *Hippolytus* and Jean Racine’s *Phédre*. Both texts are versions of the ancient myth of Phaedra, wife of King Theseus, whose unrequited desire for her stepson Hippolytus brings her to an unfortunate end. Racine’s *Phédre* embodies “[t]he soul of Racinian tragedy” established by his previous treatments of tragic classical heroines Andromache and Iphigenia: “the *machine infernale* steering the helpless and graceless protagonist fueled by his/her obsession and egoistic instincts to certain irredeemable doom” (Chapman online). Euripides’s Phaedra is similarly limited by *até*, or a “criminal desire”¹⁴ that entices one to exceed an established limit, that determinately brings an unfortunate end. However, Racine wanted his Phaedra, unlike Andromache or Iphigenia, to retain some dignity and nobility despite her adulterous and incestuous passion, dignity and nobility that he felt she did not have in the *Hippolytus*.¹⁵ Racine’s Phaedra regains her dignity by confessing guilt and then committing suicide as atonement for her sin; in other words, she regrets having exceeded the established limit, cedes her desire, and becomes noble only in that regret. Swinburne, too, wishes Phaedra to demonstrate a certain kind of nobility, but not through regret or atonement. His Phaedra proudly, unrepentantly refuses to cede her desire. Her nobility is in defiance, or what

¹⁴ This is Lacan’s rendering of the term, as he is not satisfied with defining it simply as “misfortune.” See *Seminar*, pp. 262-64, 283.

¹⁵ Whereas in Euripides’s version Phaedra herself accuses her stepson of rape as revenge for spurning her advances, making the accusation in her suicide note, Racine has Phaedra’s maid Oenone make the accusations instead.

David Riede calls her “Promethean urge,” akin to the inversion of Christian asceticism Swinburne reads in Blake’s “To Tirzah” (*Study* 55).

Swinburne structures a triangular narrative, voiced by Phaedra, Hippolytus, and a “Chorus of Troezenian Women.” Phaedra figures the *machine infernale* of excessive and exceeding desire, Hippolytus the object of that desire, and the Chorus the social attempts to limit desire. Unlike the typical function of the Chorus in classical drama, Swinburne’s Chorus does not provide “emotional commentary”¹⁶ but attempts to restrict Phaedra’s emotional outbursts by applying reason. Phaedra’s speeches are vibrant, affective catharses for which the Chorus admonishes her: “O queen, take heed of words; / Why wilt thou eat the husk of evil speech?” (10-11). The Chorus believes Phaedra’s speech is “evil” because they regard it as dangerously empty speech (a “husk”), performances gesturing toward what discourse should not express. Her speech reveals what the Chorus wishes to avoid. To put it another way, the Chorus reads Phaedra’s speech as a kind of “imaginary resistance” in which she wants to “avoid [her] desire by calling on the other”—the Chorus—“to bear witness,” but Phaedra’s speech is really “symbolic revelation,” signifying the recognition of (her) desire that Phaedra calls on the Chorus to witness (Borch-Jacobsen 117). Phaedra’s mouth is like an *embouchure*, which takes in the Chorus’s resistance to her confessions and recasts it as recognition of what cannot be fully embodied in the images provided in her speech. At one point, the Chorus describes Phaedra’s mouth in terms that evoke the *embouchure*, referring to her mouth as “an evil born with all its teeth,” spewing “love ... cast out of the bound of love” (74-75). The

¹⁶ Here I am privileging Lacan’s assertion that the Chorus in Greek tragedy typically functions to “take care” of the play’s “emotional commentary” (*Seminar* 252).

Chorus speaks husks of words with the husks of mouths, whereas Phaedra speaks about other possibilities of sensing the *sinthome*—the signifier as it is “not yet enchained” within discourse, thus “permeated with an enjoyment” impossible to articulate (Zizek, *Lacan* 132)—belying the usual articulation of the empty symbols of empty speech to which the Chorus usually “bears witness.”

Hippolytus, assuming the crown in his father’s stead, is also the empty husk of a king. At the beginning of the poem, Hippolytus begs Phaedra to stop making him the object of her gaze: “let me go; / Take off thine eyes that put the gods to shame” (1-2). This admonition has two functions: on one hand it is Hippolytus’s attempt to deflect Phaedra’s gaze, and on the other hand it is an attempt to wield authority over her. The Chorus also attempts to wield the same kind of authority over her in its appeal to her sense of “Pure shame” (line 46), to no avail. Hippolytus beseeches the Chorus to interrupt Phaedra’s gaze—“Let not this woman wail and cleave to me,” “Loose ye her hands from me” (42, 44)—because he is uncomfortable with his status as the *other* who is not only the object of but a “powerless witness” to Phaedra’s gaze. He is a microcosm of the Chorus, the “big Other” acting as “the agent of social authority” here rendered impotent, unable to enact any authority to limit Phaedra’s actions (Zizek, *Metastases* 74). Hippolytus is quick to attribute Phaedra’s behavior to “the gods’ wrath with her” rather than the configurations of desire, declaring that he plays “no part” (line 43) in her desire for him. By having Hippolytus so quickly deny his role in the dynamic of desire, though, Swinburne has Hippolytus reinforce his very role as the fantasy object, the other with whom the sexual relationship is impossible. Moreover, Hippolytus is importantly unable to comprehend that Phaedra, looking *awry* at him, eventually gazes *beyond* him; that her

gaze is transfixed, not on Hippolytus, *per se*, but on the awesome “event whose comprehension exceeds our capacity of representation” (*Metastases* 74)—the manifestation of desire itself. Phaedra admonishes him for his limited power to thwart or even interpret her gaze, as well as his readiness to believe that her desire is limited to desire simply for him: “Man, what have I to do with shame or thee?” (line 48). Moreover, by posing this question, Phaedra asserts that she really has *nothing to do* with Hippolytus. Swinburne’s Phaedra seems to understand that Hippolytus is not actually “an embodiment of the impossible Thing, ... the materialized Nothingness” (Zizek, *Lacan* 83) that will fulfill her desire. Even if she had *something to do* with Hippolytus—meaning, even if he were amenable to a physical relationship with her—Phaedra would not be satisfied. Her repeated requests for sexual contact are juxtaposed with requests for Hippolytus to kill her. If Phaedra is slain, then she can ostensibly traverse the actual distance between illusory fulfillment and actual fulfillment of desire.

As a “passive and impotent” observer to this display, Hippolytus is “divided between fascination with enjoyment and repulsion at it” (Zizek, *Metastases* 75), whereas Phaedra elides the division between being fascinated by and being repelled by the horror at the event horizon of death and desire. “My veins are mixed, and therefore I am mad,” she proclaims (line 53), but her “madness” figures her embrace of the dissonance and multiplicity contained in the poem’s narrative. Phaedra herself is what Adorno would call a figure of a “progressive [aesthetic] consciousness of antagonisms on the horizon of their possible reconciliation” (*Theory* 191). Yet she also delineates the impossibility of fully representing any such reconciliation; at one point, she asks Hippolytus, “What shall I say? / There is no good word I can compel thee with” (107-08). As yet there is “no

good word” to compel reconciling the different and antagonistic layers of aesthetic representation; there is only the unspoken practice of perpetually arranging the layers in constellation to approximate the possibility. And the *possible* is what Swinburne, in the poem, calls his readers to *visualize*, or “bear witness to.”

As Phaedra tells Hippolytus and the Chorus near the poem’s end, “I take you to my witness what I am” (130):

For like my mother am I stung and slain,
 And round my cheeks have such red malady
 And on my lips such fire and foam as hers.
 This is that Ate out of Amathus

That breeds up death and gives it one for love. (137-41)

Here she names herself inheritor of the legacy of her mother, Pasiphae, the notorious lover of the bull, as well as her sister Ariadne, who had previously been Theseus’s lover but was spurned by him; some versions of the myth name Amathus as the place where Theseus had abandoned Ariadne. Phaedra wants Hippolytus and the Chorus to *see* that she *is* the “red malady”—the symbol of the “criminal desire” or *até* that persists despite each generation’s attempts to erase it, control it, and even blind us to its existence. The “fire and foam” on Phaedra’s lips is the narrative of that perpetual desire which breeds death in love’s stead; again, this is part of Phaedra’s comparison of herself to her mother, as “Desire flows out of her / As out of lips doth speech” (147-48).

Like Pasiphae, Phaedra performs desire to give it representation; as these women affect desire, they provide “a locus of the sensual element in art” that does not require, nor does it promise, any “sensual pleasure in the observer” (Adorno, *Theory* 82).

Hippolytus certainly takes no sensual pleasure in Phaedra's performances of desire; by the time Phaedra delivers the speech quoted above, he has already recoiled from her, demonstrating his repulsion "with cloak upgathered to the lip, / [And] Holding his eye as with *some ill in sight*" (117-18, emphasis mine). Phaedra accepts her *ek-sistence*—the "ultimate possibility" of representing *all*, which is "a 'freedom-toward-death'" (Borch-Jacobsen 15) which only a tragic heroine can accept:

For now shall I take death a deadlier way,
 Gathering it up between the feet of love
 Or off the knees of murder reaching it.... (183-85)

Her acceptance is a display of "tumultuous energy," as she takes into herself the "elemental" quality of the *até* which drives rather than commands her; her narrative expresses her aspiration not only to situate a representation of all possibilities, but also to have others "bear witness" (recognize) her aspiration, and she remains at the end "suffering but undefeated" (Rooksby, "Centre" 28).

But what if the tragic heroine has to demand perpetually that someone "bear witness to" the narrative of desire that flows from her lips, speaking "what she is"? What if the tragic heroine, encumbered with immortality, is unable to emulate Phaedra and thus cannot accept her death at all? Can she still be an aesthetically effective cipher of the "tumultuous energy" of the limit experience that Swinburne celebrates? Swinburne considers such questions in his rendering of Philomela in "Itylus." Philomela is the emissary of many tragic events: she was raped by her sister Procne's husband Tereus, and Tereus cut out Philomela's tongue to prevent her from telling Procne about it. However, Philomela wove her narrative account of her rape into a tapestry and sent the tapestry to

Procne; as a result, Procne murdered her son (Philomela's nephew) and fed the body to Tereus in revenge, a grisly and cruel act to which Philomela bears witness. In some versions of this myth, Philomela plays an active role in the murder, whereas in other versions Procne acts alone. However, the gods took pity on these ill-fated women and turned them into birds: Philomela the nightingale, Procne the swallow. In Ovid's version of the myth, Procne's son is named Itys; "Itys," though, is a variant spelling of "Itylus" which, not coincidentally, is the name of the son of another tragic mythic heroine, Aëdon, who envied her sister Niobe so much that she conspired to kill Niobe's son. Aëdon murdered her own son by mistake, and the gods turned her into a nightingale forced continually to sing her sorrow.¹⁷ As in "Satia te Sanguine," Swinburne uses only the title of this poem to circumlocate his speaker's identity within the interwoven traces of several previous narratives; proper names are never used, and only the mention of the swallow—Procne—suggests that the speaker of the poem is Philomela. But Swinburne's version of Philomela is also a version or emanation of Aëdon, as both Philomela and Aëdon are complicit in the same "criminal desire" and, as nightingale(s), complicit in the same creation of an affective narrative of that desire.¹⁸

In her study of the poem, Margot Louis asserts that the narrative of "Itylus" also has a triangular structure. However, whereas the triangle of "Phaedra" is formed by three characters, the triangle of "Itylus" is formed by three different "modes of communication":

¹⁷ Margot K. Louis compares the myths of Philomela and Aëdon in more detail in "Family Secrets, Family Silences" (455).

¹⁸ In Swinburne's poem, Philomela and Procne have already been turned into birds, and the poem is the song the nightingale (Philomela) sings.

one a visual art, explicit but disastrous; another, a beautiful but meaningless poetry, an art of denial; while the third mode is that of a poetry powerful and painfully meaning-full, an art of memory and the affirmation of tragic events.... Swinburne's language can range from the non-referential or even anti-referential deconstruction of meaning, to a furious fullness which relies for its *energy* on a passionate belief in referentiality, a passionate commitment to referentiality. ("Family" 454, emphasis mine)

Swinburne must triangulate these three "modes of communication" to make the entropy—or "meaninglessness,"—of the poem's verbal aporias or blind spots aesthetically effective (and/or affective). Philomela's narrative, a verbal version of her tapestry, strives to provide visual images of the catastrophe of meaning, to retain the "tumultuous energy" of emotion that nostalgia otherwise tends to subjugate, to accommodate the immediate meaning which is otherwise lost. In comparison, the swallow's song lacks any real signifying capacity—that is, instead of abstractly gesturing toward the "no-thing of desire" that cannot really be signified, it fails to gesture at all—and Philomela (and, I would further argue, Swinburne) is troubled by this instance of failure.

Procne and her troubling song, much more manifestly than Phaedra and her performances of desire, address the problematics of the *sinthome*: Procne is the "certain One" who

does not partake ... of the articulation proper to the order of the Other.

This One is of course precisely the One of *jouis-sense*, of the signifier

insofar as it is not yet enchained but rather free-floating, permeated with enjoyment: it is this enjoyment that prevents it from being articulated into a chain. (Zizek, *Lacan* 132)

Philomela, on the other hand, cannot share in Procne's *ex-sistence*, the enjoyment which is impossible for her to experience, because that very enjoyment is excluded by her very referential song, which is part of the symbolic order. Through the character of Philomela, Swinburne seems to admit a version of the Lacanian realization that "we are always forced to choose between meaning and ex-sistence: the price we have to pay for access to meaning is the exclusion" of the kind of ex-sistence (*Lacan* 137).

The dizzying verbal/visual collage of Philomela's narrative can be compared, in several ways, to a phantasmagoria. In such a "magic lantern show," the projected scenes swiftly change; but the individual slides are arranged on a circular device, suggesting the repetitiveness of a cycle. Likewise, "A thousand summers are over and dead" (line 2) for Philomela, yet she has relived the same cycle—not only the cycle of seasons, but also the cycle of events involving her life's tragedy—repeatedly, in the same way, a thousand times. Swinburne also begins each stanza, save one, with a variation of the poem's first line, "Swallow, my sister, O sister swallow," to further suggest that the poem's cycles are almost inescapable. The problem Philomela has with her sister Procne is that Procne has literally *swallowed* the narrative of their tragedy and does not reconstitute or re-express it. Procne's song has become a beautiful but meaningless "art of denial," prompting Philomela to ask,

What hast thou found in thine heart to sing?

... Shall not the grief of the old time follow?

Shall not the song thereof cleave to thy mouth?

Hast thou forgotten...? (5, 10-12)

Philomela seems trapped in a cycle of nostalgia, in that she is transfixed on “[t]he small slain body, the flowerlike face” of Itylus (line 53); in her refusal to release her transfixion, she has extracted the figure of Itylus from the context of the past and “inser[t]ed it into a kind of mythic, eternal, timeless present” (Zizek, *Lacan* 112). In perpetually singing her nostalgic lamentation for Itylus, Philomela claims she is “fulfilled of [her] heart’s desire,” and her description of how the song emoted from her “tawny body and sweet small mouth / Feed[s] the heart of the night with fire” (15-18) suggests enjoyment. However, this claim is undermined by her identification with the figure of “the grief of old time.” For “to identify with the dead one ... amounts to identifying with a simple *image* of death, and thus to postponing enjoyment” (Borch-Jacobsen 96). Procne has not postponed but has embraced her enjoyment, and Philomela seems to resent her for it. In fact, Philomela wishes that she could do the same, crying, “Could I forget or thou remember, / Couldst thou remember and I forget” (41-42). In this nostalgic cycle, Philomela has a limited, imaginary existence in “the place of [desire’s] *unfulfillment* (or, if you will, of its ‘fictional’ fulfillment)” (Borch-Jacobsen 96). Her fulfillment is illusory, like the heightened illusions of semblance and unity projected by the phantasmagoria.¹⁹

It is important to note that Philomela *does* acknowledge her entrapment in the cycle of illusions in the fourth stanza. In this stanza, Philomela does not begin by addressing her sister, but by acknowledging her own subject position as fixed within the

¹⁹ See Adorno’s discussion of the phantasmagoria in *Aesthetic Theory*, pp. 102-03.

cycle of unfulfillment—a fixed quality which Procne, the ever-“changing swallow,” does not appreciate:

I the nightingale all spring through,
 O swallow, sister, O changing swallow,
 All spring through till the spring be done,
 Clothed with the light of the night on the dew,
 Sing, while the hours and the wild birds follow,
 Take flight and follow and find the sun. (19-24)

Here Swinburne triangulates the aporia of Procne’s song, the “painful meaningful[ness]” of Philomela’s song, and an explicit visual image of nostalgia, albeit a different perspective on nostalgia than offered in the previous stanza. Swinburne redirects the reader’s perspective to insinuate a parallel between Philomela’s nostalgic lament for Itylus and the poet’s nostalgic lament for an unmediated relationship with nature before human domination—the kind of nostalgia Swinburne reads into Blake. In the moment in which Philomela sings and the “wild birds follow,” Philomela seems to have become part of a nature which is not the “artificial domain” of “cultural landscape” which regulates and eventually displaces “natural beauty” (Adorno, *Theory* 64). However, in this poem, Philomela is treated as an artifact of a specific cultural landscape. As a mythic character, she is the product of the human mediation of nature implemented in antiquity; as a mythic character whose story is perpetuated in every succeeding era, she is as a figure of the continual human mediation of nature, as well. This is why the image of the wild birds is crucial here. Philomela does not follow the wild birds; they follow her lead. When she speaks “what she is,” her “criminal desire,” in

her narrative, it is not merely her personal tragedy of rape and murder; above all, it is the disenchantment of nature.

As Horkheimer and Adorno remind us, humans “have always had to choose between their subjection to nature or the subjection of nature to the Self” (32); even as a nightingale, Philomela leads the “wild” birds, making them her subjects as they “find the sun.” Nonetheless, when nature has already been disenchanting, “the dark horizon of myth is illumined by the sun of calculating reason” (Horkheimer and Adorno 32); Philomela is ordering the “natural” scene around her according to what Robert Kaufman might call a “self-interested narrative” (“Legislators” 718). Philomela’s narrative disrupts the “blur” of signifiers (Louis, “Family” 458), untethered to the symbolic network that gives meaning, comprising Procne’s song—intentionally, as Philomela later begs her, “I pray thee *sing not* a little space” (50, emphasis mine). By “resisting symbolization,” Procne’s song indicates that she has “lost [her] place in the symbolic universe” (Žižek, *Lacan* 136-37), and Philomela, in contrast, continually reconfirms her place in that symbolic universe by determining how the surrounding elements of the natural scene relate specifically to her, to the narrative she constructs. The unknowability of Procne’s total immersion into nature threatens Philomela’s affirmations of her *self*, her existence.²⁰

Procne does not acknowledge her *self* at all; the only vestige of Procne’s human identity or *selfhood* extant in the narrative is in Philomela’s constant cry of “sister,” which is Philomela’s attempt to tether Procne to the symbolic network through the

²⁰ Here I mean “existence in the sense of a ‘judgment of existence,’ by which we symbolically affirm the existence of an entity: existence is here synonymous with symbolization, integration into the symbolic order—only what is symbolized fully ‘exists’” (Žižek, *Lacan* 136).

“social bond” of discourse (*Lacan* 132). Philomela admits, though, that “where [Procne] fliest”—beyond the social bond of discourse—“I shall not follow” (line 28): in other words, Procne has flown to “the dimension of ‘what is in the subject more than [her]self’ and what [s]he therefore ‘loves more than [her]self’” (*Lacan* 132). Philomela, on the other hand, seems to remain “at the level of mythology at which the self appears as sacrifice to itself,” a “denial of nature in men [and women] for the sake of domination over non-human nature and over other[s]” (Horkheimer and Adorno 54). As a mythic figure, Philomela is a “figure of repetition” and “compulsion,” “programmed always to do the same thing” (Horkheimer and Adorno 58)—sacrifice that element of what is “more than herself” to repeating the actions of domination, subjecting everything in her midst to the social bond. Philomela is compelled to revisit “the occasion of an historic catastrophe” of sacrifice (Horkheimer and Adorno 51), because she cannot escape the event which for Procne is “all past over” (line 33). She “goes forth among sea-gulfs hollow / To the place of the slaying of Itylus” (46-47), to find “[t]he ruins and fragments” of the tragic moment “left behind,” which “take on an expressive quality” (Nicholsen 42) when woven into Philomela’s “tapestry of signifiers.”²¹ She takes in the ruins and fragments of Itylus’s life and death and emanates the artifice of

The hands that cling and the feet that follow,

The voice of the child’s blood crying yet

Who hath remembered me? who hath forgotten? (56-58, italics in original)

Her nostalgic object becomes the artifice by which she represents her “criminal desire,” her mediation of not only nature here, but subjectivity. By projecting the voice of Itylus,

²¹ I have borrowed the phrase “tapestry of signifiers” from Margot Louis (“Family” 460).

Philomela calls us, as readers/spectators, to bear witness to “what she is,” by speaking as who or what she is *not*: she is not Itylus, though she uses the sacrifice of Itylus to represent her own sacrifice of *self*.

As Louis defines her, Philomela is the tragic heroine circumlocating subjectivity via the “powerful plurality of modes” of communication “and the ways in which opposing voices within a single text actually cooperate to a single if complex end—the revelation and commemoration of the past” (“Family” 461). More than this, though, Swinburne’s Philomela calls our attention to the revelation of “truth” as it is only in “error, forgetting, slips of the tongue, bungled actions, deformation, and pretense” that she reveals herself to us, the readers—we “who insist on pursuing [her] where [she is] not” (Borch-Jacobsen 115). She commemorates the slain Itylus in her “radical negativity”: Philomela is a subject who negates herself at the end by adapting Itylus’s voice, coming close to representing “pure Desire, pure difference from [her]self as the condition of relationship with [her]self” (Borch-Jacobsen 191). Swinburne makes sure, however, that the divisions between “selves” and “others” in this poem are blurred, creating the kind of “compendium-like dialectic without detail” found in Adorno’s work, “in which one idea”—or one narrative, one subject, one historical moment—“shifts into the next *virtually* without boundaries” (Nicholsen 49, emphasis mine). Thus Louis’s comment should be taken further to indicate that Philomela is the virtual site for revealing and commemorating myth and myth’s failures, illusion and illusion’s inability to re-enchant a disenchanted world, artifice and artifice’s necessary failure to satisfy a desire which is ultimately unsatisfiable.

Both Philomela and Phaedra function as virtual sites for the constellative expressions of an aestheticized “revelation and commemoration” of desire, in the same way that Swinburne’s major goddesses, such as Proserpine and Dolores, do. The “radical negativity” of Philomela’s song and the “freedom-toward-death” expressed by Phaedra are modes of illustrating what Antony Harrison calls Swinburne’s “moments of life where hope and fantasy mingle,” in which the expressed lived moment becomes peculiarly similar to the “dissolution of the self” and “expansion into the world” Swinburne associates with his images of death (“Eros” 30). Harrison goes further to suggest that the end result is an approximation of a sought-after “perfect continuity with the world” in which “perfect freedom” is found in the “fluid unrestraint” of the subject’s “complete penetration of and combination with all surrounding elements” (“Eros” 30); nonetheless, I think he is mistaken in his assumption that Swinburne’s poetic “fluidity,” or flux, is unrestrained.²² Swinburne may stretch the restraints or limitations of discourse, perhaps even eliding some of them in his uses of artifice, but, as illustrated in his treatment of Procne, the “fluid unrestraint” of *le sinthome* cannot be reached. Procne’s song cannot be artistically rendered and, moreover, Philomela’s narrative reveals how myth attempts but fails to restore the “ruins and fragments” of the lost continuity of the enchanted world, including, of course, the dissolution of the established

²² Harrison makes a similar contention in a later article, claiming that Swinburne—drawing upon the “mythology of ‘Soul-Making,’” of “enrichment and redemption through desire and suffering” he admired in Byron’s and Keats’s poems, as well as the “interpenetration” of physical and moral passions in the works of Victor Hugo—does not deviate from his predecessors’ “fundamentally Romantic concern with the need to escape the constraints and limitations of mortal life and carnal passions” (“Losses” 690-91, 699). I agree that Swinburne is interested in pushing the limits of any kind of boundary or “constraint”—material, ideological, visual, verbal—but I think Swinburne is clearly invested in pushing those limits within the scope of material existence and most definitely carnal passions. Many of his characters exhibit a conspicuous desire for death but any transcendence via death is suspect; likewise, many of his characters are dead but, as they remain very much a part of the material world (e.g., his Borgia), they do not represent transcendence or escape strongly at all.

dichotomies between human and nature, flesh and spirit. Yet the very presence of Procne in “Itylus”—and the very mention of the song that even Swinburne cannot transcribe—retains and renews the hope of restoring the lost continuity amid the failure.

In the Proserpine poems, Swinburne finds that conventional renderings of myth—and the conventional renderings of goddesses in those myths—merely force “all dead years [to] draw thither” to portray “Dead dreams of days forsaken” (“Garden of Proserpine” 67, 69). Such a “dead dream” fails to suggest the possibility of restoring such continuity; and, left merely to express dead years and dead dreams, Swinburne’s goddesses become tragic figures, languishing in their discontinuity with the world, seemingly having no place in it whatsoever. By portraying the goddesses’ estrangement from the world while simultaneously provoking his readers to hope continually for the goddesses’ return to it, Swinburne arguably offers, in an Adornian fashion, “a critique of myth as well as a [movement] toward its redemption” or revaluative recovery (*Theory* 118). Proserpine is still relevant “To men that mix and meet her / From many times and lands” (“Garden” 55-56). Like the other tragic goddesses, she is perpetually (re)made relevant by the men and women who read Swinburne’s poem, mixing the threads of various narratives about the goddess, in their readings of the poem and consequently “meet” the new possibilities that the goddess figures. In short, the goddess becomes a trope in which the “tumultuous energy” she represents is predominantly generated by the affect engendered in the reader. In the reader/spectator’s encounter with the figure of the Swinburnian goddess, s/he encounters a virtual site in which (as Harrison claims) “hope and fantasy [can] mingle,” but where fantasy is comprehended as failing to satisfy human

desires, where the limitations of the fantastic in art are acknowledged as such, and the hopefulness for the future moment in which human desires can be met still remains.

Proserpine, like Philomela, is traditionally caught in a nearly inescapable cycle; as the reluctant goddess of the underworld who emerges annually to banish the winter, she seems to *be* the inescapable cycle. But Swinburne questions this traditional reading of her. The customary versions of the myth portray Proserpine's time in Hades as a misery she longs to end with her joyful production of the spring, but in Swinburne's "Garden of Proserpine," she has withdrawn her promises of regeneration from the seasonal cycle. The spring does not arrive to replenish the "Blown buds of barren flowers" (line 14) and nothing grows but "bloomless buds of poppies" (27) and the "grapes of Proserpine" which "she crushes / For dead men deadly wine" (28, 31-32). Here Swinburne echoes Keats's reference to "nightshade, [the] ruby grape of Proserpine" in the "Ode on Melancholy" (line 4); however, whereas the speaker in Keats's ode exhorts his listener not to withdraw from the world by partaking in such "poisonous wine" (2), the speaker of Swinburne's poem aspires to achieve that withdrawal. Swinburne's speaker vocalizes a desire for death in his proclamations that he is "weary of days and hours" and longs for the "sleep eternal / In an eternal night" ("Garden" 13, 95-96).

The same occurs in the "Hymn to Proserpine," in which the speaker beckons the absented goddess to return to the Christianized world, to save the world from the empty ritual of Christ's death and resurrection and its untenanted promises of eternal life. The speaker of the "Hymn" derides "the pale Galilean" conqueror as well as Christianity's use of the "ghastly glories of saints, dead limbs of gibbeted Gods" (lines 35, 44) as concrete proofs that "life goes on" even after death, rather than as abstractions suggesting

the indeterminacy of death.²³ Instead of seeing the “gibbeting” of God as symbolic sacrifice, the speaker sees it as an empty “imitation of fear” that still subordinates the individual subject (Adorno, *Theory* 47), as it operates only on the subject’s fear of death.²⁴ Yet death is an inevitable part of nature; and the “pale Galilean,” thwarting death, making it into a fearful taboo, has trumped the natural cycle, leaving the speakers of both Proserpine poems victims of “too much love of living” (“Garden” line 81) and thus not able to embrace the death which brings “fulfill[ment] of unspeakable things” (“Hymn” line 52). The natural cycle as traditionally figured by Proserpine has been disrupted. Now, reminiscent of Philomela, Proserpine is the uncanny element in her milieu. She signifies disenchantment, specifically here the disenchantment of the Christian attempt to “re-enchant” the world. The speakers of both the “Hymn” and the “Garden” call on her limited powers—as a goddess assumed immortal but able to die in a disenchanted world—to demonstrate that “dead men rise up never” (“Garden” line 86), that “there is no God found stronger than death” (“Hymn” line 110). Christianity can suggest that death in the material world is insignificant in light of the suggestion of eternal life, but Proserpine—a disenchanted figure—must necessarily re-emerge as the “freedom toward death,” the *desire*, that Christianity cannot eclipse.

²³ My reading is based on Adorno’s discussion of how an artwork’s abstractness—“that irritating indeterminateness of what it is and to what purpose it is”—“is a provocation, [since] it challenges the illusion that life goes on” (*Theory* 22-23).

²⁴ To some readers, Swinburne’s negative treatment of Christianity seems almost glib, superficial, even forced. Margot Louis attributes this to Swinburne mixing his interest in “demonic parodies”—such as Baudelaire’s “Les Litanies de Satan” and, of course, Sade’s over-the-top reversals of Christian moral codes—with a more seriously thoughtful and deeply felt “pessimistic, anti-sacramentalist vision of language itself [as] one aspect of a broad and bitter pessimism” about a God who seems powerless to stop “the disintegration which proceeds everywhere and always.” See *Swinburne and His Gods*, pp. 22-25, especially the section on “The Tradition of Blasphemy.”

Remarkably, then, Proserpine's significance lies in her suggested insignificance to the Christian world, because the Christian world dismissed her for locating the possibilities of exploring the "desires and dreams and powers" ("Garden" line 15) it sublimates. To underline this play of "significance," Swinburne does not have Proserpine speak in either poem, rendering the reader/spectator unable to "bear witness to" the goddess; she is only gestured at, circumlocated by the multitude of layers created within the speakers' impassioned pleas. Margot Louis has argued that both poems portray Proserpine in "faint figures of the ... fleeting and uncertain things we call material realities, or of the still less certain prospect of a better and ideal existence" and in words that "can only be flung at" the goddess "they attempt to describe," words that "can only evoke"—because they are unable to "embody"—"a reality beyond themselves" ("Proserpine" 317-18). Louis astutely recognizes that, as readers of Swinburne's poems, we must not rely on the ordinary processes of finding the goddess and deciphering what she "means" in Swinburne's poems. Like the speaker of the "Garden," Proserpine's ersatz worshipper, Swinburne's reader must look at the world via a perspective of "doubtful dreams of dreams" (lines 4-5).

Consequently, this suggests embracing a kind of "crisis of aesthetic semblance" (Adorno, *Theory* 101); for, in dreaming *about dreams*, the kind of perspective determined by the conventional limitations of the material world is doubly altered. This perspective allows one to embrace the "inconsistency in the form of contradictions" between what something "appears to be" and "what it is," and to see how Swinburne "emphasizes" Proserpine, art(ifice) like the poem itself, as "[art's] own impossibility" (*Theory* 101). Here Swinburne applies the Pre-Raphaelite "dream logic" that he admired in Rossetti:

Proserpine is “a single image” symbolizing “numerous wishes, impulses, attitudes” and thus can be seen “as double or multiple” (Silver 11).²⁵

From the dream perspective, Proserpine performs a different kind of mimesis in that she does not merely “foste[r] assimilation to the world and Others” by simply providing the reader/spectator access to Swinburne/the poet’s specific wishes, impulses, and attitudes which may be other than his/her own; by affecting each reader individually and provoking a variance of wishes, impulses, and attitudes in each reader, she makes “sensuous access to the world” possible (Gebauer and Wulf 288). Such “sensuous access” is not a “pessimistic” practice of the “sexual delights of pain” that Louis claims undermines the hope for a “better and ideal existence” (“Proserpine” 315). Instead, it is the sensual (re)affirmation of the promise of “all the joy before death” that Proserpine figures—the possibility of some day accessing the “things fairer than all these things” currently available to one in the material world (“Hymn” lines 26, 29). As Bataille explains it, the “joy before death belongs only to the person for whom there is no *beyond*; it is the only intellectually honest route in the search for ecstasy” (“Joy” 236, italics in original), or a sensuous experience of enjoyment *in* the world. The “pale Galilean” defers desire and ecstasy to the beyond, but Proserpine represents the limit disconnecting the *here* from the *beyond*: that is, she represents the beyond of death—that which cannot be tethered to symbolic discourse—only as it can be artificially represented in the here and now. In the embrace of that artificiality, she implies that the *beyond*, like the *sinthome*, is

²⁵ Louis offers a similar comparison between Swinburne’s and Rossetti’s depictions of goddesses: “[In Proserpine] we find two constructions of the feminine, one inextricably involved and identified with the world of the senses, one almost entirely detached from that world. This duality is very common ... in the works of D.G. Rossetti” (“Proserpine” 317). However, whereas Louis explicitly sees this as Swinburne’s way of exploring binary constructs, I wish to emphasize Swinburne’s concentration on *multiplicity*, how the “single image” proposes *numerous* (and not just two) possibilities.

inarticulable. In the material world, one can certainly dream and fantasize about articulating the inarticulable, but dreams and fantasies are indeterminate illusions of exceeding material limits, not guarantors of actual transcendence. The “dream logic” just allows one to manage those limits differently, to generate new possibilities of representation within those discursive limits.

Notwithstanding the above observations, the following question is still left partially unanswered: why must this aesthetic require reaffirming the promise of enjoyment through pleasure-which-is-pain? The answer, I believe, can be found in a reading of Swinburne’s poem, “Dolores,” about his notorious, penultimate “Lady of Pain”—the professed epitome of all the women of his *Poems and Ballads*. Antony Harrison has commented on the poem’s “consuming ‘depth of feeling’” and its “tortured expression of simultaneous lust, fear, doubt, rebellion, and hope” (“Losses” 693); Allison Pease on its “transgression away from the frame of civilization and its ... emotional norms” (47); Jerome McGann on its “self-indulgent histrionics” (*Swinburne* 208); and David Riede on its parodic treatment of “the spiritual, emotional suffering of the Blessed Virgin” and her role in Christian asceticism (*Study* 50). However, these critics tend to read the poem’s dialectic of “asceticism and sadism” as potentially resolving itself in a kind of praxis²⁶ that Julian Baird suggests is the transformation of spiritual love into physical cruelty (55).

Yet where Harrison wants to find the poem’s “redeem[ing] ... subtle spiritual qualities” (“Losses” 693) and Riede wants to find “an eternal feminine principle” (*Study*

²⁶ Praxis in the sense that the dialectic is resolved via an envisaged “transformation of these forms” or categories, transcending the boundaries separating these supposedly diametrically-opposed categories (Lukacz, *History* 177).

54), there is only the perpetual flux of expression which “shall change as the things that we cherish, / Shall fade as they faded before” (“Dolores” 429-30). She arguably embodies Bataille’s “Heraclitean Meditation” in that she allows the reader to “imagine human movement and excitation, whose possibilities are limitless: this movement and excitation can only be appeased” or even represented “by war” (“Joy” 239)—or, more specifically in this case, the violent extremes of human sexual behavior which bind one to the *here* of the material world, the experience of the body, rather than what lies beyond it. Swinburne is vigilant in his insistence that Dolores is “A beautiful passionate body / That never has ached with a heart” (81-82). Like one of Sade’s heroines, she neither practices nor responds to the transformation of sexuality into tenderness which “express[es] the delusion of spiritual love”—what Sade’s Count Belmor, in *Juliette*, calls “a false and always dangerous metaphysic” like religion; when lust is transformed into love, the lover and the beloved are both prevented “from being seen as what [she or] he really is” (Horkheimer and Adorno 108). To avoid all prospects of seeing such delusion, “the pulse of [Dolores’s] passion” (line 221) must be *felt*, and the feelings of extreme pleasure and extreme pain exhibited in the poem attest to the “richness of detail” Swinburne uses in his art to celebrate the “diffuseness” in which every visual aesthetic element engenders a non-visual—a moving, exciting—counter-impulse (Adorno, *Theory* 188). This also re-examines the issue of “joy before death” that Swinburne introduces in the “Hymn to Proserpine.” Like the worshippers of Proserpine, the worshipper of Dolores focuses on no other object than what is presented him in the immediate, material life (Bataille, “Joy” 236).

In “Dolores,” the speaker is not deluded into thinking his worship of Dolores is a spiritual encounter in the religious sense.²⁷ Rather, the speaker encounters the “spirit” of the aesthetic, or that quality which makes an art of appearances seem more than mere appearance. Twice he calls Dolores “mystic” (in lines 7 and 20) but only ironically. The poem may denote an attempt at communication between man and goddess, but only as it represents the actual impossibility of such communication as well as its inability to quench “the hunger of change and emotion, / ... the thirst of unbearable things” or to satisfy “the desire that outruns the delight” (105-06, 110). Swinburne/the speaker can write Dolores into being, but her only “mystic” quality is what Derrida would say is “in the *tracing* potency of the *trait*, at the instant where the ... inscription of the inscribable is not seen” (*Memoirs* 45, italics in original). We are called to bear witness to Dolores, “our lady of suffering,” through the performative speech acts of Swinburne’s speaker, though she “escapes the field of vision” (*Memoirs* 46). Or, to put it another way, we are called to bear witness to *how* Dolores escapes the field of vision, how she “shalt blind” the speaker’s—and thus our—“bright eyes though he wrestle” with the task of representing her (line 201). Dolores cannot be seen, so she must be sensed in other ways; to experience Dolores, one must, as the speaker does, *affect her*.

And, to do so, one must rediscover “the ability to live intensely, [though] this has been lost”; the speaker of “Dolores” suggests that this rediscovery lies in “[t]he ability to sin intensely” (Riede, *Study* 54).

As our kisses relax and redouble,

²⁷ “I have passed from the outermost portal
To the shrine where a sin is a prayer;
What care though the service be mortal?” (129-31)

From the lips and the foam and the fangs
 Shall no new sin be born for men's trouble,
 No dream of impossible pangs?
 ... Too sweet is the rind, say the sages,
 Too bitter the core. (89-92, 95-96)

The tragedy of Dolores is that she expresses the “lips” and “foam” and “fangs” of an expressive “criminal desire” which goes largely ignored. The “sages” of Christian asceticism have decided the range of possibilities in its tastes are too extreme and thus forbid experiencing them; but, in this narrowing of experience, the “sages” advocated a life devoid of intensity, in which enjoyment is always postponed, unattainable. The speaker here, then, resembles Swinburne’s Philomela: his offering to Dolores is also a song gesturing toward “the place of [desire’s] *unfulfillment* (or, if you will, of its ‘fictional’ fulfillment)” (Borch-Jacobsen 96). Such songs to Dolores had been silenced by those “sages,” but Swinburne’s speaker’s song is a very purposeful rebellion against that silence; his song is what Adorno would call a “desecration of silence” (*Theory* 134). Because Swinburne’s speaker repeatedly refers to physical experience as “sin,” the poem does seem “entangled in the nexus of the guilt” (*Theory* 134) of Christian asceticism; however, Swinburne uses the word “sin” only to negate that guilt typically invoked by it. For, also like the case of Philomela, it is the guilt that postpones and prevents fulfillment that must be refracted—deflected, obscured—from experience. In the heightened illusions of semblance and unity offered by the ascetic Christian promises of fulfillment in the *beyond*, Swinburne’s speaker longs for a moment, now lost, in which “Pain melted in tears, and was pleasure; / Death tingled with blood, and was life” (“Dolores” 179-80).

Like all the other characters and speakers in the *Poems and Ballads*, the speaker in “Dolores” strives to establish a constellative moment in which “rebellion against semblance, [its] dissatisfaction with itself,” and art’s “desire for dissonance” (Adorno, *Theory* 110) can be effectively expressed. In this way, Swinburne attempts to situate his readers, as well as himself as “poet,” within a relationship to dissonance and dissatisfaction. In this relationship, the multiple ways of discerning dissonance and dissatisfaction become, in themselves, experiences in which one approximates beauty and pleasure in the resistance to what is traditionally beautiful and pleasurable, and one approximates satisfaction in the perpetuation of the attempt to satisfy insatiable human desires.

CHAPTER SIX
In the Space between Decadence and Democracy:
Swinburne, Republicanism, and *Songs before Sunrise*

“I have tried not to get the mystic elemental side of the poem, its pure and free imaginative part, swamped by the promulgation of the double doctrine, democratic and atheistic, equality of man and abolition of gods....”—Algernon Charles Swinburne

“[L]anguage is itself something double. Through its configurations it assimilates itself completely into subjective impulses; one would almost think it had produced them.”
 —Theodor Adorno

“My voice was often the voice of many, the echo of an idea shared by the young.”
 —Giuseppe Mazzini

Following the publication of *Poems and Ballads, First Series* in 1866, Swinburne began to pursue his interests in European revolutionary politics more actively. At Oxford, Swinburne had demonstrated an evident amount of sympathy and allegiance with the republican movements in France and Italy. However, at that time, his republican fervor seemed more like a reiteration of his friend John Nichol’s republicanism than a fully realized personal commitment. Both Nichol and Swinburne were members of the Old Mortality Society, a group of Balliol students who met weekly to discuss “the more general questions of literature, philosophy, science, as well as the diffusion of a correct knowledge and critical appreciation of our Standard English Authors”¹—and, at Nichol’s urging, politics. As fellow member A.V. Dicey once noted, Old Mortality’s discussions took up “the cause of foreign nationalities, and especially of Italy, the crimes of Louis Napoleon, and the abolition of ... all restrictions on the freedom of opinion” (qtd. by Rooksby, *Life* 51). Swinburne became interested enough in these discussions to place

¹ The name “Old Mortality” refers to the members’ belief that they were all in delicate, questionable health and thus were going to die young. This often-quoted description of the Old Mortality Society’s purpose is taken from *The Old Mortality Register*, the minute-book of all their meetings, which is now in Oxford’s Bodleian Library, MS. Top., Oxon. d. 242.f.4.

two portraits of revolutionaries on his wall: one of Felice Orsini, who tried to assassinate Louis Napoleon in 1858, and one of Giuseppe Mazzini, a prominent figure in the Italian revolutionary movement (the *Risorgimento*), whose name was linked to Orsini's at the time.² At this time, Swinburne also began writing about republican themes,³ but once Rossetti's "Jovial Campaign" arrived at Oxford, Swinburne seems to have transferred his fervor from revolutionary politics to the Pre-Raphaelite project.

In some ways, Swinburne's interest in social and political revolution seems to have been, like his forays into Sade, French decadence, and Blakean Romantic prophecy, a measure of rebellion against the orthodoxy expected and promoted by his privileged upbringing. Swinburne's maternal grandfather was an aristocrat, the third Earl of Ashburnham, who claimed to trace his family lineage back to the Norman Conquest. His favored paternal grandfather, Sir John Swinburne, having lived the majority of his life as a nobleman in France, continued to maintain the social and political principles and even the customary dress of the *ancien régime* even after moving to England. Sir John did eventually renounce his Catholicism and become an "ultra-liberal" member of Parliament (Henderson 6); as Donald Thomas has noted, though, "Sir John did not believe in taking his political radicalism to extremes," having considered the post-revolutionary socialist movements in France as "enemies of liberty" (10), and Swinburne shared his

² However, by the time Orsini attempted to assassinate Louis Napoleon, he and Mazzini had already severed ties, and Orsini never informed Mazzini about the assassination plans. Because Orsini's bombs had been manufactured by a British engineer, Thomas Allsop, who was sympathetic to Mazzini and his cause—and because Orsini had frequented Mazzinian circles in London before the assassination attempt—it was publicly assumed that Mazzini had been involved in Orsini's plot. (See Sarti 178.)

³ For instance, Swinburne wrote a poem about republican Rome, "Temple of Janus," for a poetry contest he did not win and thus seemed to have lost interest in the piece. At this time, he also wrote an "Ode to Mazzini," which was found among Swinburne's private papers only after his death and posthumously published by Edmund Gosse.

grandfather's lifelong suspicion of democratic equality for all citizens.⁴ He seems to have combined his grandfather's suspicion of democracy with Victor Hugo's belief that *noblesse oblige* and revolutionary leadership were complementary (Thomas 10).

Undeniably, Swinburne took pride in his aristocratic lineage throughout his life, using the posture of *noblesse oblige* during his most republican period: for example, in a letter to one of Mazzini's more radical associates, Emilie Ashurst Venturi,⁵ he boasted of how "unspeakably important" his aristocratic background was (*Letters* 2:29-30).

Swinburne's insistence on reminding his correspondents of his aristocratic lineage also divulges his lingering interest in how his predecessors' poetry is admixed with *noblesse oblige* politics. In the precedent established in the works and lives of Byron and Shelley, in particular, Swinburne found the paradoxical alliance of nostalgia for aristocratic privilege and the encouragement of revolution. Ideally, the aristocrat was in a unique, privileged position to be called to the "duty to become an active, transfigurative force in material life" (Eagleton 21). The aristocratically privileged poet, especially, had right of entry into what Shelley calls "an additional *class* of emotions" which produce a "treasure of expressions" which can become "the representation and the medium ... [for] equality, diversity, unity, contrast, mutual dependence, ... the principles alone capable of affording the motives according to which the will of a social being is determined to action" (481, emphasis mine). Robert Kaufman identifies this orientation as the site of an Adornian tension between "emancipatory gesture and formal constraint"; in this case, the emancipatory gesture of "imaginative aspiration" which presents itself as political

⁴ Edmund Gosse, in the introduction to his *Life of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, famously quips, "The poet, although so great a republican, was no democrat" (3).

⁵ Venturi and Swinburne corresponded frequently between 1867 and 1871. The letter is dated "September 28," but the year is missing; Lang presumes it to be 1869 (*Letters* 2:29).

aspiration (“Legislators” 710) collides with the constraints of the position of privilege, which “takes for granted” the “under-class[es]” who exemplify “a struggle for survival to which all else is sacrificed” (Lucas, “Republican” 42)—a struggle that the privileged poet’s “imaginative aspiration” not only conspicuously conflicts with but also romanticizes.

One of the most interesting aspects of Swinburne’s political poems is that his republican lyrics retain the monarchical structures associated with the governments Swinburne advocates dismantling. Freedom/Liberty is almost always represented by—or personified as—a benign monarch or humanized divinity, very much like the representation of Freedom in Tennyson’s “Of old sat Freedom on the heights.”⁶ In Tennyson’s poem, Freedom is “in her place” “on the heights”; she must step down from her lofty position “To mingle with the human race” (lines 1, 5, 10). This mingling, though, seems rather aestheticized. Tennyson’s Freedom is a source of imaginative inspiration, a “fair form [which] may stand and shine” (line 21), but a form which seems psychologically rather than physically manifest; Freedom here is the intangible belief that “light[s] our dreams” (22) and thus inspires the labor of political struggle. Yet, though this inspiration may be the “Grave mother of majestic works” (13) of liberation, the inspiration seems somewhat removed from the labor required to actuate these “majestic works,” since the poem does not account for them.

⁶ Swinburne’s rather vehement dislike for certain aspects of Tennyson’s personality as well as his frequent deprecating remarks about Tennyson’s poetry have been well noted. Donald Thomas observes that, in the 1870s in particular, Swinburne made Tennyson into the archetypal “sanctimonious philosopher” to whom he directed “merciless ridicule” (183). However, Swinburne and his friend Edwin Hatch had once spent an evening discussing poetry with Tennyson in January 1858, and the experience left quite an impression on Swinburne, so much so that Swinburne recounted the conversation of that evening, quite fondly and in vivid detail, when offering his condolences to Lady Tennyson upon Tennyson’s death. (See Rooksby, *Life* 55, 269-70.)

Similarly, in Swinburne's *Songs*, those who labor to restore "Liberty" to the seat of power perform aesthetic labor which is presented without its corollary, material (manual) labor. For example, in "A Watch in the Night," Liberty assumes one of the *noblesse oblige* voices featured in the *Songs*, wistfully noting that, distanced from the bloodshed and physical warfare,

I feel not the red rains fall,

Hear not the tempest at all,

Nor thunder in heaven any more.

All the distance is white

With the soundless feet of the sun. (146-50)

The revolutionary subject-as-poet is the "prophet" who uncomfortably stands "Banished, uncomforted" yet "free" on the verge between the privilege granted by previous structures of undemocratic government and the desire to "Freely to freedom ... [give] / Pledges" ("Watch" 10, 31-32) to undermine the very structures ensuring that privilege. This is Swinburne's way of re-engaging the Romantic paradox of resisting the status quo at both ends of the spectrum: in his poems, Swinburne reveals what Adorno would call the "yawning schism between their aesthetic *trouvailles*"—discoveries, which require *travail* (work)—"and a political posture that is manifest in the content [*Inhalt*] and intention of [art]works," a schism which purposefully and "significantly damages artistic," and even political, ideological "consistency" (Adorno, *Theory* 254).

Swinburne's return to exploring republicanism was the compound result of his discussions with friends William Michael Rossetti and George Meredith, who shared John Nichol's political fervor, and meeting Mazzini, whom Swinburne came to call his

“Chief,” on March 30, 1867. Before this meeting, Swinburne’s correspondence with several friends demonstrates his increased desire to become more politically oriented. Swinburne implored Meredith for details about Meredith’s experience as a war correspondent in Italy and Austria “when the heat of the storm” of political unrest “was raging” (*Letters* 1:231).⁷ William Michael Rossetti, whose father had been exiled from Italy in 1821 for conspiring against King Ferdinand and his Austrian supporters, corresponded with Swinburne often about their shared hope for “a present revolution and republic” in Italy as well as for “a successful Orsini to plunge France into a Medea’s caldron of life-restoring troubles and ferments” (1:230). In a letter to Bayard Taylor, dated March 18, 1867, Swinburne even expresses a wish to leave England, “this Siberia, this exile’s Lapland, for my chosen Mother Italy” (1:232). And, after finally meeting Mazzini, Swinburne told his sister Alice that he “cannot ... believe more in the Republican cause” (1:240).⁸

As many biographers have noted, it is unclear if Swinburne arranged to meet Mazzini through politically connected friends, such as Nichol, or if he arranged the meeting himself through his correspondence with the exiled politician. There is also an often-repeated tale, attributed to Edmund Gosse, that Swinburne’s former tutor Benjamin Jowett gathered a group of Swinburne’s friends and acquaintances together in early March 1867 to figure out “what could be done *with* and *for* Algernon” (Gosse 166, italics in original). Many of Swinburne’s associates, including Jowett, were troubled by

⁷ Letter from George Meredith to Swinburne, 2 Mar. 1867. Meredith was recounting the events of the previous year. In 1866, Italy formed an alliance with Prussia and declared war on Austria. The Italian armies did not fare well in the war, but, as Austria suffered a major loss at the hands of Prussian forces at the battle of Sadowa, the Italian forces were able to liberate Venice from Austrian rule. Austria then relinquished its political interests in Germany to Prussian reunification efforts.

⁸ This letter is dated 10 Apr. 1867.

Swinburne's activities during this period: his regular visits to London's flagellation brothels, the bizarre behavior he exhibited during his frequent public drinking binges, and his association with Simeon Solomon and George Powell, both of whom were rumored to be homosexual and thus were considered socially disadvantageous.⁹ Supposedly, Jowett recruited Mazzini to divert Swinburne's attention from his vices and from disreputable friendships.¹⁰ This account, like many of the other anecdotes in Gosse's *Life of Swinburne*, is questionable, but Gosse is correct in his report that Mazzini did have some interest in Swinburne's "moral improvement" (166).¹¹ Mazzini told Swinburne that he disliked most of the *Poems and Ballads*, which he considered "songs of egotistical love and idolatry of physical beauty," and that Swinburne was wasting his talents on meaningless poems that could "lull us to sleep" (Mazzini qtd. by Henderson, 137). However, Mazzini apparently thought well enough of the few politically charged poems that do appear in that volume to encourage Swinburne to continue to write political poetry in the spirit of "do[ing] good and serv[ing] others exclusively" (*Letters* 1:242).¹²

In the late 1860s, Mazzini lived in London and organized the Universal Republican Alliance, a group of European and American supporters of republican ideals. Roland Sarti comments that "[s]omething resembling a personal cult developed around

⁹ Solomon's arrest for soliciting sex in a public restroom confirmed the suspicions about his sexual orientation, but this arrest did not occur until February 1873. After the arrest, though, Swinburne refused any further contact with him.

¹⁰ See Thomas 158-59; Henderson 137.

¹¹ A significant portion of Gosse's book depends on uncorroborated stories from people who knew Swinburne only briefly and on second- or third-hand accounts of events which occurred before Gosse befriended Swinburne in the early 1870s, after nearly all the work on the *Songs* had been finished. Moreover, Gosse's text is an uncomfortable balancing act between his admitted "hero-worship" of Swinburne (Gosse 200) and his professed need, as he told Thomas Wise, to "conquer a feeling that Swinburne was rather sickening [as] there is a very ugly side to him" (Gosse qtd. by Greenberg, 96). This discomfort leads Gosse to admit that he did not consider Swinburne "quite like a human being" (Gosse 201), and, as such, Gosse's *Life of Swinburne* is a work of "concealments and distortions" (Greenberg 96).

¹² Letter from Swinburne to Lady Jane Swinburne (his mother), 7 May 1867.

[Mazzini],” as Emilie Ashurst Venturi garnered support for Mazzini’s causes from the scholars, philanthropists, and other “free-thinking Christian” political activists in her family’s acquaintance (121, 112).¹³ As Cecil Lang notes in his introduction to Swinburne’s *Collected Letters*, it is only because Venturi saved her letters from Mazzini that we know about the prolific correspondence Mazzini and Swinburne shared during this time (1:xxxv). Very few of the actual letters between Swinburne and Mazzini remain. Mary Gordon Disney-Leith burned any letters she found upon Swinburne’s death that “disturb[ed] the marmoreal image of Algernon that she wanted to bequeath to posterity” (Lang 1:xxxii), likely including Swinburne’s correspondence with Mazzini, of whom Swinburne’s family sharply disapproved, and Mazzini did not save any of the correspondence he received (Sarti 8). Among one of the extant letters, though, is one Mazzini sent to Swinburne on March 10, 1867, before they had even met face-to-face. In this letter, Mazzini commands Swinburne to “shake us, reproach, encourage, insult, brand the cowards, hail the martyrs,” to “[g]ive us a series of ‘Lyrics for the Crusade’” and thus fulfill “his great Duty” as a poet of revolution (qtd. by Henderson 137). Thus Swinburne began to work seriously, and sometimes in fits of frustration, on the poems that comprise the *Songs before Sunrise*.

It is important to note that the shift from hedonistic dissolution to revolutionary vehemence is not as great as Mazzini (or possibly Jowett) may have thought, particularly considering that Swinburne’s interest in the political corollaries of Sade’s writing was

¹³ Emilie Venturi was rather well connected in London. Her father, William Henry Ashurst, was a prominent London solicitor who had campaigned for many radical causes including the emancipation of women. The family’s circle of friends included Thomas and Jane Carlyle. The family also had notable connections in the British government, as Emilie’s sister Caroline married an “ultra-liberal” member of Parliament.

part and parcel to his interest in the Sadean explorations of human sexuality. Despite the disappointment Swinburne claims to have felt in “that ‘rosy hour’ with eyes ‘purged by the euphrasy and rue’ of the Marquis de Sade and his philosophy,” discovering that Sade’s shock value depended mostly “on the pungency of the perfume and its power over the nerves,” he was still intensely affected by how Sade “stimulate[d] the senses by that preliminary pleasure so as to inflict the acuter pain afterwards on their awakened and intensified susceptibility” (*Letters* 1:78).¹⁴ In other words, Swinburne perceived Sade’s writings as attempts to awaken human sensibilities in a way that would allow for what Marcuse calls the “release of sensuous energy,” a release that allows for freedom which can “only ... [be] founded on and sustained by the free gratification” of individuals (191).

Furthermore, as Dorothea Barrett suggests, Swinburne saw in sadomasochistic practice the possibility that such practice could be used as a model for ideal “human interaction” (111)—a model in which all human interactions are recognized equally, democratically, without censure or exclusion. Just as one “confront[s] the mutability and proximity” of supposed opposites “pleasure and pain,” one must confront the mutability and proximity of social, political, and religious polarities (Barrett 111). However, a model which privileges these kinds of sensual expression must also account for the economy of desire—and, specifically, what desire *lacks*—which compels human interaction as well. Just as Swinburne was fascinated by how Sadean fantasy reveals the inability of fantasy to (ful)fill the lack (desire),¹⁵ and thus perpetuates itself, he was also

¹⁴ Letter to Richard Monkton Milnes (Lord Houghton), 10 Feb. 1863. As Lang notes, Swinburne quotes here from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Book XI, line 414.

¹⁵ Inasmuch as the desired object of the fantasy is “not symmetrical with the subject” but is instead “the ‘lack of object’ insofar as the subject finds him [or her]self in it as the object [she or] he is *not*—that is, as desire” (Borch-Jacobsen 200-01).

fascinated by how revolutionary struggle demonstrates the inability of revolution to meet its own goals, and thus perpetuates itself. The bodies subject to sexual violence in Sadean fantasies are “so displaceable ... that the narrative cannot reach any closure, or rather only a kind of ‘half relief’ that administers salt to [the] wound,” or the un(ful)fillable lack (Vincent 284). Likewise, the bodies—agents—of revolutionary struggle in Swinburne’s political poems are displaced via the same kind of serial identifications enacted in the *Poems and Ballads*, so that the narratives of revolution they profess do not reach any closure, either, and instead punctuate the inability of revolution to fulfill its own goals.

Revolutionary Failure and Political Androgyny:

Glimmers of the Republican Aesthetic in the *Poems and Ballads*

In her recent study of Swinburne’s political poems, Stephanie Kuduk identifies what she calls the “republican aesthetics” informing and being formed by Swinburne’s poetry of the late 1860s/early 1870s. In the republican aesthetic, “poetry [is] an agent of social and political change,” and poets “translate republican ideals ... into poetic form” (Kuduk 253). In *Songs before Sunrise*, Kuduk asserts, Swinburne explores “[t]he republican idea that ideological and physical power are united” by providing within each poem a site where the conflation of political power and repressive ideology can be negotiated (260). Revolutionary action aims to challenge the ideas that sustain the dominant ideology—the body of ideas representing the social needs and aspirations of a specific culture, as promoted and upheld by the government—or to replace it entirely. When one thinks of revolutionary action, likely one thinks of some kind of physical,

material conflict, like Orsini's assassination attempt on Louis Napoleon, Garibaldi's revolt against the monarchic rulers of Sicily, or even the organization of political activist associations like the Universal Republican Alliance. However, as Mazzini communicated to Swinburne, physical, material conflict can only put into practice the ideals already generated by the persuasive, creative power of the intellect. To Mazzini, "[l]iterature ... was the secret political weapon" (Sarti 32) upon which the success of any revolutionary activity depends; Kuduk's definition of the Swinburnean republican aesthetic echoes Mazzini's assertion that "the ink of the wise is a match for the sword of the strong" (qtd. by Sarti 54). Three poems featured in *Poems and Ballads, First Series*—"A Song in a Time of Order," "A Song in a Time of Revolution," and "Les Noyades"—can be evaluated as initial considerations of the politicized and politicizing aesthetic Swinburne later negotiates in the *Songs*. However, these poems seem to suggest that the "ink of the wise" reveals the shortcomings of the republican "sword"; instead of assuring its strength, the poems demonstrate how a politicized aesthetic can conflict with the predominant ideas of actual political movement which inspires its very creation.

"A Song in a Time of Order" is subtitled "1852," which is not the actual date of its composition¹⁶ but the date marking the false sense of despotically imposed calm that existed before the revolutionary storm that would soon overtake Europe. In 1852, the citizens of France voted to give Louis Napoleon the title of Emperor, thus ending the period of the post-revolutionary Second Republic; Camillo Benso, Count of Cavour, who opposed Mazzini's "radical" ideas for revolution, became Prime Minister of Sardinia-

¹⁶ As Rooksby notes in *A Poet's Life*, 1858 is the earliest date of composition for any of the *Poems and Ballads* (132). Rooksby does not offer a more specific date for this poem, but Swinburne did publish the poem in the April 26, 1862 issue of the *Spectator* prior to including it in the *Poems and Ballads*.

Piedmont and used his power to undermine the revolutionary efforts of Mazzini's factions; and Austria, which controlled many Italian principalities, passed the *Sylvesterpact*, or New Year's Eve Edict, which returned the country to the rule of an absolute monarchy. The speaker of Swinburne's poem exhorts his audience, the revolutionaries quieted by the resurgence of absolutism, to "Push hard across the sand" of the desert of such ossifying autocracy, to retain or to rediscover the hope that their ideals can still be translated into a material expression: "For the salt wind" of a still-possible republicanism still "gathers breath" (lines 1-2), and the revolutionary movement remains "The pulse tide of the sea" which "swells and welters and swings" with the promises of "the fresh fierce weather" of a radical political vitalism on the horizon (7-8, 13). These possibilities will be materialized, the speaker promises repeatedly, by the "three men" who "hold together" so that "The kingdoms are less by three." These men are not named, but one of them is undoubtedly Mazzini; one could argue the other two are followers of Mazzini's—perhaps Giovanni Pianori, who attempted to assassinate Louis Napoleon in 1854, and Giuseppe Garibaldi, who led several armies of revolutionaries in attempts to oust the French and Austrian rulers from their Italian strongholds. However, Swinburne could just as easily refer to other Mazzinians such as Carlo Pisacane, who led an army to liberate Naples from Bourbon rule in 1856, or the priest Enrico Tazzoli, a Mazzinian organizer in Austrian-controlled Lombardy. In the end, definitively identifying those who complete the Mazzinian trinity here may not matter, as to Swinburne any of these candidates are synonymous with Mazzini himself. Like so many of the other personae created in *Poems and Ballads*, the figures in the poem are purposefully not named

because they are intended to figure in the processes of serial identification: they are all versions, or traces, of the republican savior.

Notably, all the men I have named as possible historical analogues to the shadowy revolutionary figures mentioned in this poem are marked by failure, as are the other Christ figures featured in *Poems and Ballads*, who fail to fulfill the conventional promises of redemption or transcendence. The plots that began to take shape in 1852 all failed: Garibaldi suffered major losses in his early military ventures on behalf of Mazzini's cause, Pianori was executed for his crime, Pisacane committed suicide to prevent being taken a prisoner of war, and Tazzoli was arrested for conspiring against the Austrian government and publicly whipped.¹⁷ Furthermore, Mazzini's popularity was greatly diminished due to his prolonged exile from Italy as well as Cavour's skill at using his political triumphs to make Mazzini look ineffective and out of touch with the needs of Italian people.

At the same time, it is important to realize that Swinburne writes about 1852 with the allowances of hindsight. Swinburne recognizes, as Karl Marx does in his 1852 essay on the "Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," that the failures of the past "weig[h] like a nightmare on the brain of the living" (Marx 595). Swinburne saw the culmination what Marx had predicted: that many of the revolutionary ideas that evolved from the reinstitution of authoritarian order in Europe that year failed to counteract that oppressive authority. Furthermore, Swinburne's remediated vision of 1852 serves as an example of how, in their attempt to "creat[e] something entirely new," revolutionaries "anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle

¹⁷ Interestingly, in line 50 of the poem Swinburne specifically mentions "the Austrian whips."

slogans, and costumes to present the new scene ... in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language” (Marx 595). Marx stated that revolution in the nineteenth century should not “draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future”; that revolution “must let the dead bury their dead” (597). In similar vein, Swinburne’s poetry demonstrates how drawing upon the past, how reconstructing templates for revolution from “the bones of the dead,”¹⁸ will necessarily result in the failure of that revolution—albeit the kind of necessary failure which allows the revolutionary “to keep [his or her] passion at the height of ... great historical tragedy” (Marx 596)—the kind of tragedy which, Lacan tells us, “reveals to us the line of sight that defines desire” (*Seminar* 247). In this “line of sight,” one is forced to describe revolution as Lacan defines desire, as a “perpetual effect of symbolic articulation”; revolution is envisioned as a self-perpetuating event.¹⁹

Such emphasis on the tragic dimension of political revolution suggests a notable and important difference that exists between Mazzini’s republicanism and Swinburne’s—one that existed well before Swinburne was officially drafted into Mazzini’s circle, and one that would cause Swinburne to write poems that did not quite characterize the revolutionary effort in ways Mazzini wanted, or even anticipated. Whereas Swinburne’s political poetry anticipates revolutionary failures, thus concentrating on the struggle itself rather than its improbable, even utopian, goals,²⁰ Mazzini never fully acknowledged the

¹⁸ See line 46 of Swinburne’s “Song in Time of Revolution.”

¹⁹ See the “Translator’s Note” to *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, pp. 278-79.

²⁰ Swinburne’s treatment of revolutionary failure shares some similarities with Shelley’s, such as Shelley’s depictions of cyclical violence in “The Mask of Anarchy” and the perpetuated conflict between Asia and Demigorgon in “Prometheus Unbound.” Notably, at the time he composed many of the *Songs before Sunrise*, Swinburne corresponded frequently with William Michael Rossetti concerning Rossetti’s upcoming volume of Shelley’s poems as well as with the poet Mathilde Blind, whose “Shelley: A Lecture” was published in 1870. Swinburne’s letters suggest he was more intrigued by Shelley’s poetic style than Shelley’s political agenda. At one point, though, Swinburne asked W.M. Rossetti to read portions of the

possibility or prospect of failure in his quest to create an Italy unified by republicanism. Throughout his life, Mazzini truly believed he “had to carry out the will of God on earth ‘so that the divine plan may be fulfilled’” (Sarti 81). He presented himself as the messiah of the Italian people, “the *Cristo uomo* sacrificing [himself] for their redemption”; in other words, Mazzini is the universal symbol of the possibility of a unified, less autocratic Italy not lodged beyond the particularities of the Italian people, whom he called “the *Cristo popolo*” (Sarti 81). Swinburne was aware that the possibilities once signified by Mazzini’s public persona had not materialized, especially as the *Cristo popolo* demonstrated “a notable lack of interest in prolonging the national revolution” (Sarti 198). On the surface, the “Song in a Time of Order” seems a call to relight former revolutionary fires; upon a closer reading, though, it seems more like a statement pronouncing the inevitable failure to bring radical possibilities to fruition. There is a sense of bravado in the speaker’s exhortation to “Let the wind shake our flag like a feather” and face “the teeth of the hard glad weather” (lines 45, 53), especially as he has already admitted that “the ranks that are thin shall be thinned” and “the names that were twenty are [now] ten” (35-36).

The companion piece to this poem, “A Song in Time of Revolution (1860),” considers the political climate of that year. 1860 marks the end of Louis Napoleon’s dictatorship, as he initiated a series of liberal reforms relinquishing many of his powers to France’s National Assembly; likewise, Emperor Francis Joseph I introduced a form of constitutional government in Austria. In Italy, Garibaldi finally experienced military

success, capturing Sicily and creating a provisional government there; the Piedmontese army invaded the Papal States, wresting political authority from the church; and Cavour convinced several other Italian principalities to vote for annexation to Sardinia-Piedmont, setting the stage for the creation of the unified Kingdom of Italy the following year.

Swinburne's poem, though, expresses only muted happiness at such turns of events. The speaker of this poem comments that the wind pushing the old regimes out of these lands "is full of the shouting of mirth" (line 33), a mirth which is sustained by revolutionary chaos—the priests are "scattered like chaff," the rulers are "broken like reeds," the aristocracy is left "utterly naked and bare" (lines 6, 16). Strangely, though, Swinburne's poem focused more on the ousted parties, who "are grieved and greatly afraid" and "grievously stricken at heart" (11, 29). The only revolutionaries specifically mentioned in the poem are deceased. The events of 1860 comprise "the song of the quick ... to the ears of the dead" (line 2), though the song does not stir them, and the events are also "the breath of the face of the Lord that is felt in the bones of the dead" (46), though it fails to breathe life back into them.²¹

The Christian Lord may be "the life and the resurrection" (John 11.25), but Mazzini, the self-proclaimed Lord of the Revolution, is unable to fulfill that role and thus is conspicuously absent from this song. His sacrifices for his *Cristo popolo* have been made in vain. Mazzini was estranged from the events of 1860: Garibaldi, like Cavour, had distanced himself from Mazzini in order to appease the political moderates, and there

²¹ See Ezekiel 37.1-14. In this vision, God shows Ezekiel a valley of dry bones which represent those who are exiled from Israel and thus are not in a position to rebuild Israel as the kingdom of God. In the vision, though, Ezekiel is commanded to prophesy while God breathes on the bones, and the bodies are reassembled and resurrected. Notably, in Swinburne's poem, the exiles remain dead, thus unable to rebuild Italy as a unified kingdom.

were anti-Mazzinian demonstrations in the streets as well as anti-Mazzinian tracts printed in several newspapers following Garibaldi's victory. As a result, Mazzini's figurative "sword of the strong" is rendered dormant and ineffectual in Swinburne's poem: "Where the sword was covered and hidden, and dust had grown in its side, / A word came forth which was bidden, the crying of one that cried" ("Revolution" 43-44). Again, though, whereas the traditional mythic Christ is the "Word made flesh" (John 1.14), an example of a performative fiat that accomplishes its goal of rendering the ideal in the material world, the savior of the revolution's performative fiat is an empty gesture. It is "bidden," perhaps by the memory of the lost revolutionaries; thus it seems perfunctory, a duty of mourning rather than a contemplative act of belief, solicited in a time of anguish rather than fervor for and sincere devotion to the cause—qualities that Swinburne's poem purposefully refuses to evoke. Just as Christ cried out that God had forsaken him, the supposed savior of the revolution—the "sword of the strong"—cries out that he has been forsaken by the revolution itself.

The failures inherent in the Italian revolutionary struggles are anticipated in the failures experienced in the French Revolution, which Swinburne chronicles in "Les Noyades." As Karen Alkalay-Gut argues, the poem in part demonstrates a "supremely romantically and politically fulfilling death, a dream of gratification made possible only by the Revolution" (54); but, like all other dreams of gratification Swinburne explores in his poetry, the dream actually gratifies nothing. Instead, it perpetuates a kind of drive circling around the very impossibility, a lack, of fulfillment, again demonstrating how Swinburne equates revolutionary struggle with the erotic pursuits he investigates in his poetry; his revolutionary politics, like his sexual preoccupations, become a "strange

domain ... of the closed circular palpitation which finds satisfaction in endlessly repeating the same failed gesture" (Zizek, *Plague* 30). In "Les Noyades," revolutionary political fantasy and sexual fantasy are the same.

The poem's title (literally, "The Drowned") refers to French revolutionist Jean Baptiste Carrier's practice of drowning political prisoners in the Loire River during the Reign of Terror (1793-1794). Carrier would strip the prisoners naked, tie each man face-to-face with a woman, preferably pairing a peasant with an aristocrat, and then drop the "couple" into the river through trap doors in the bottom of his ship; he called this practice *mariage républicain*. In his account of Carrier's *noyades*, which inspired Swinburne's poem, Thomas Carlyle recounts that Carrier, seeing "the pale swollen corpses ... tumble confusedly seawards along the Loire stream, the tide rolling them back," marveled that the scene embodied "[le] torrent révolutionnaire" (648-49). The revolutionary torrent is the excess of terror made visible; by focusing on the corpses, Carlyle/Carrier redirects our attention to how the "external, material feature[s]" of revolutionary atrocities reveal a "truth" about revolutionary idealism that would otherwise be eclipsed (Zizek, *Plague* 3). Carrier's remark demonstrates what Zizek would call an attitude of "contemplative fascination" toward the corpses which are the "traumatic" "excremental excess" of the revolution; Swinburne's poem shares that attitude, though it also demonstrates how that fascination creates an ambiguous and unsettling "relationship between fantasy and the horror of the Real it conceals" (*Plague* 5, 7). Swinburne's poem recasts Carrier's fascination with the corpses into a fantasy in which the corpses embody physical sensuality, a fantasy meant to conceal the horror of death and yet "at the same time ... creates what it purports to conceal" (*Plague* 7).

In the poem, Swinburne assigns the fantasy to a man “rough with labour and red with fight” who is paired with a “faultless, ... wonderful, white” noblewoman (lines 14, 18), awaiting the watery completion of their “republican marriage.” The laborer declares that the event of his demise, though a “small thing in [God’s] eyes, / ... is greater in mine than the whole great sea” because he will drown with his fair lady (43-44). Both critics who have offered thorough studies of this poem previously, Robert Greenberg and Karen Alkalay-Gut, have read it as a companion piece to “The Leper,” in which Swinburne explores sexual taboos by manipulating the trope of the untouchable fair lady of courtly love. Greenberg sees the poem as an attempt to capture the “transgressive moment” of passion (103); similarly, Alkalay-Gut decides it is a description of being “[d]rowned not in water but in passion” (59). However, whereas the leper has an authentic experience of passion in his relationship to his “fair lady,” the laborer seems very far removed from any sort of experienced passion. When the laborer declares, “I have loved this woman my whole life long” (line 45), the statement seems empty since nothing in the poem indicates that the laborer and the noblewoman had any prior connection.

Here Swinburne superimposes fiction onto historical fact, since he would have known from his studies that Carrier paired his victims together at random. Swinburne uses the fiction of the laborer’s unrequited love for his *femme républicain* to emphasize the inhumanity and injustice of the laborer’s death—a meaningless death which displays the inhumanity and injustice that characterized the Reign of Terror in revolutionary France. By constructing a fantasy in which he orgasmically drowns “laughing for love” (line 55) with an ostensible lover who is a part of himself (“we are one not twain” [50])—a lover who he claims will “mix with me, touching me, lips and eyes” (56), filling his

lack and offering transcendence—the laborer attempts to make his death meaningful. He tries to present his death as the moment in which he overcomes adversity, his class status, his human limitations; the laborer boasts, “For never a man, being mean like me, / Shall die like me till the whole world dies” (53-54). With this boast, Swinburne demonstrates how the laborer obfuscates the horror of his own situation, his own death, by constructing a sexual fantasy in which the formerly sublimated happiness and pleasure can re-emerge. The laborer’s fantasy is one in which dying with his desired other becomes the attempt to recognize and to retrieve what he had hitherto lacked,²² as well as the attempt to release himself from “the eternal struggle against suffering and repression” (Marcuse 18, 29).

The laborer’s death is also a “forced choice,” the only option he has in the Reign of Terror, though his fantasy deludes him into portraying his own death as a freely made choice among multiple options ostensibly available for him to consider. Here the fantasy operates to “maintai[n] the false opening”—a construction, says Zizek, which reinforces rather than disrupts the public symbolic order (*Plague* 29). Paradoxically, the revolutionist regime of France, despite its declarations of *liberté*, imposes a “phantasmic frame of unwritten rules” which determines how each individual will “choose ‘freely’” (*Plague* 29)—rules which differ, of course, based on one’s social class and political affiliations. The laborer desires *la liberté* as promised in the Revolution’s slogan, although Carrier’s scheme here implicitly excludes him; his very “capacity to desire involves the paradoxical structure of the forced choice” that reinforces his exclusion (*Plague* 30). I think Swinburne purposefully represents the laborer’s desire for freedom through the construction of fantasy, just as he purposefully chooses to describe this desire

²² See Borch-Jacobsen 200.

in a *laborer's* voice. Through the fantasy, Swinburne equates the libidinal economy of sexual fantasy with that of revolutionary fervor; the lover will always fail to attain his beloved, and so the revolutionist will always fail to attain the utopian government of true equality, liberty, and fraternity. This failure represents the desire for attainment it sustains. Attainment would imply a troubling self-dissolution, since the lover/revolutionist would no longer labor to sustain "that dialectic of the ego and/or the [desired] other" which is equated here with the dialectic between the "proletarian," whose sense of self is positioned in his alienation from the "master," and the "master" in whom the proletarian wants to recognize himself—a dialectic which would be dissolved in a "universal and homogenous State (alias the classless society)" (Borch-Jacobsen 86, 90). Yet one *labors* for that all-elusive attainment nonetheless. Swinburne's laborer, though, performs what Robert Kaufman, following Adorno, calls the "special kind of labor" of aesthetic experience, in which "the subject," "effectively reconstructing what Adorno will represent as the artwork's own process of discovering still-obscured areas of the social," realizes that "significant facets of society remain to be discovered" although "such discovery is unlikely to occur through use of society's own extant concepts for understanding itself" (Kaufman, "Social"). This kind of re-discovery of the social condition requires finding ways to (re)position the ego in a plenitude of new positions which allow for reconsiderations of the very alienation such ego-positioning entails—rather than the attainment of one's ultimate goal.

Conceivably, it is the recognition of fantasy as *just* a false opening which is obscured in the social and political milieu. If one were to recognize the false opening for what it *really* is, then one could "traverse the fantasy," or "suspen[d] the phantasmic

frame of unwritten rules” by treating the forced choice as a true choice (Zizek, *Plague* 29). In this particular case, the laborer treats the forced choice (the “choice” to die made for him by Carrier) as a true choice (as if he really does have the option to not enter into the deadly “republican marriage” but freely chooses not to exercise it). If the laborer were to traverse his fantasy, though, he could recognize that his professed autonomy—his ability to choose between options—is merely “appearance *qua* appearance,” or artifice. Importantly, the laborer fails to recognize his fantasy as a false opening *as such*. He is problematically limited to two choices in this libidinal economy: he can either embrace his own death or retreat into fantasy, and he does the latter. Either way, the laborer is stuck in a very limited position; in death as well as in the escape fantasy provides, the laborer is excluded from the plenitude of possibilities for what does not *yet*—but *could*—exist in the material world,²³ despite the many limitations that world exacts.

Accepting the dual limitations of the libidinal economy is not the same as considering its limitations as fluctuating, variable, subject to redefinition. Seemingly recognizing the stalemated position of his laborer, then, Swinburne abruptly breaks from the character of the laborer, introducing another speaker to contrast the laborer’s voice. At first, this speaker seems to share the laborer’s fantasy of drowning with a lover in the Loire; however, he uses only conditional verbs in his speech, distancing himself from the fantasy in a way the laborer could not, consequently indicating that he recognizes that fantasy is an unreal event of an improbable fulfillment. “Lost beyond hope, [and] taken far out of sight” (line 63), this second speaker is aware that there is no end to his longing.

²³ I have based this, in part, on Adorno’s contention that “art stands as a reminder of what does not exist” (*Theory* 240).

He realizes that “fantasy cannot be the mere capacity to escape the existing by positing the nonexistent as if it existed” (Adorno, *Theory* 173). Still, like the laborer, he cannot effectively use fantasy to reveal the moment of total demystification. Swinburne uses both personae in an Adornian fashion to propose that fantasy is able to suggest an “unrestricted availability of *potential* solutions” to the problems of social and material limitation (*Theory* 173, emphasis mine) inasmuch as political revolution entails the constant production of *potential* means of resolving, rather than *actual* resolutions for, social ills and material inequities.

Swinburne’s eroticized description of Carrier’s “republican marriage,” the supposedly fulfilling fusion of male and female, borrows from the tendency in nineteenth-century French literature to make hermaphroditic or androgynous characters symbols of republican/revolutionary ideals. As A.J.L. Busst remarks in his landmark study of the androgyne in nineteenth-century literature, “In the class strife of post-Revolutionary France, ... the androgyne often signified ... absolute social equality” (9).²⁴ Busst points out that this idea was developed considerably by the philosopher Pierre-Simon Ballanche, who compared the French Revolution to the conflict between the patricians and the plebeians in ancient Rome. According to Ballanche,

[t]he male, patrician principle will rehabilitate the female, plebeian principle by gradually initiating it into the knowledge of the religious, moral and civil laws which God gave man to prevent him from misusing

²⁴ Busst also notes that “[t]he distinctions ... between the terms ‘androgyne’ and ‘hermaphrodite’ have always been purely arbitrary and consequently often contradictory” (1). As Busst’s study is both careful and compelling, I defer to his scholarship for my purposes here and use the terms somewhat interchangeably, as he does, with the understanding that both indicate aesthetically “a person who unites certain of the ... characteristics of both sexes and who, consequently, may be considered as both a man and a woman or as neither ..., as bisexual or asexual” (1).

his liberty, and which the patricians handed down from generation to generation. (Busst 21)

This idea was echoed in some of the French literature Swinburne read, notably that of Victor Hugo and Honore de Balzac. Swinburne carefully studied how both Hugo and Balzac expressed the socio-political implications of the hermaphroditic trope in the very material components and physical activity of the hermaphroditic body. Their treatment of political androgyny resembles the Saint-Simonian philosophy of the French social reformer Barthelemy Enfantin, who had belonged to the Carbonari, the secret society dedicated to the Italian revolutionary cause, at approximately the same time as Mazzini.²⁵ To Enfantin, “republican marriage” was a paradigm for civic virtue rather than punishment. He insisted that “the social individual is a couple, composed of a man and a woman—in other words, that the individual citizen is an androgyne” or hermaphrodite (Busst 26).

Yet, as Busst explains, Enfantin’s doctrine of the androgynous republican is a celebration rather than a disparagement of the substance of human sexuality: “[T]he material world must be shown to be in no way inferior to the intellectual or moral world, the activity of the body to the activity of the mind, manual labour to philosophy” (25). According to Enfantin’s Saint-Simonian doctrine, “thought and matter are not two distinct entities but just two aspects of existence” (Busst 25). “The rehabilitation of matter” allows for “the rehabilitation of the flesh”; “to raise woman up from her inferior

²⁵ Enfantin joined the French offshoot of the Carbonari, a faction founded by the many Italian exiles living in Paris at that time, in 1823; Mazzini did not seek membership in the Carbonari, and thus start agitating the Carbonari to step up their revolutionary efforts, until 1827. There is no evidence that Mazzini and Enfantin ever met, but Mazzini did spend the early 1830s in Paris trying to incite the Carbonari there to liberate the province of Savoy from Piedmontese rule.

position”—to allow her equal standing with the male principle in the hermaphroditic trope—is “to legitimize sexual pleasure,” to legitimize “the natural activity of the body” (Busst 25), as a way of demonstrating the possibilities still available in the material world which could be made evident through revolutionary socio-political change. Thus, in nineteenth-century French literature, Swinburne found revaluative treatments of the premise he found important in Sade’s work: the reimagined body as the site for the equal and inclusive recognition and legitimation of all human interactions and pleasures.

However, as Busst also notes, literature written in the latter part of the nineteenth century emphasizes the “isolation, loneliness, ... and despair” of a decadent, hermaphroditic sexuality (39). This shift demonstrates the revolutionists’ disappointment at their failure to actualize their goals and to live their ideals, the citizenry’s impatience with wavering (and often poorly organized) revolutionary causes, and a pervasive pessimism generated by class struggles which were perpetuated rather than reconciled. From the French decadent writers he admired, such as Henri la Touche and Theophile Gautier, Swinburne distinguished how the failure to achieve a position of autonomy in the “real world” often led one to seek such a position within art and to find similar failure there. In La Touche’s *Fragoletta*, a novel set during Napoleon Bonaparte’s struggles to control Italy, the hermaphroditic hero/ine dies without establishing effective relationships with any of the persons he/she encounters, and his/her inability to establish a definite social role for him/herself subtly mirrors the instability of the Italian political climate.²⁶

²⁶ I agree more with Nigel Smith’s reading of *Fragoletta*, which opposes Busst’s. Busst dismisses La Touche’s novel as a poorly written potboiler that exploits the hermaphroditic trope for its sensationalism; in doing so, Busst completely disregards (by not even mentioning) the novel’s many political subplots, subplots which often depict actual historical figures that had played a part in Bonaparte’s rise to power. Nigel Smith notes how the juxtaposition of *Fragoletta*’s hermaphroditism and the France/Italy conflict

And, in Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, the androgynous title character who is the embodiment of an aristocracy detached from (and thus made to seem extraneous to) the everyday world, pronounces herself the heir of the "thirst for the impossible" associated with the degeneracy of the privileged class of ancient Rome; this suggests that she feels she has no place in a post-Revolutionary society.

Swinburne mirrors these sentiments in poems such as "Fragoletta" and "Hermaphroditus." In "Fragoletta," a poem inspired by La Touche's novel, he creates a "sexless" (line 4) Medusa-like androgyne who delivers empty promises of sexual fulfillment in fleeting dreams. Likewise, in "Hermaphroditus," an homage to Gautier's similar poem "Contralto," Swinburne declares that "the fruitful feud of hers and his" has turned into "the waste wedlock of a sterile kiss" (lines 18-19). These poems are read appropriately as statements about the impasse of *l'art pour l'art*—demonstrating with eerie precision how "artworks with truth content do not blend seamlessly with the concept of art" (Adorno, *Theory* 227). Adorno notes that "[t]he truth content of artworks, which is indeed their social truth, is predicated on their fetish character" (*Theory* 227). In these poems, the hermaphroditic/androgynous body is a fetish—a concentrated locus or site of expressive power—which, though a product of the social milieu, is situated as something outside of that milieu, containing a self-sufficiency, or "ideological autonomy, ... allowing it to speak against the very social order" which produced it (Eagleton 348).

demonstrates the "clear development of a *mise en abyme* of binarism" (67). Furthermore, Smith suggests that La Touche, who published his novel in 1829, "undoubtedly felt that the situation in [Italy] ... reflected that of his own society as it headed towards another revolution" (69).

Such a symbol, as offered in art, cannot express the “truth” of its social relevance; instead, it perpetually expresses the triangular conflict between art itself, the condition of its production, and the variety of ways a work of art can be interpreted.

This continuum of conflict, as demonstrated by the *Poems and Ballads* as well as the study of Blake, plays out in its own virtual space, responsive to its own artificiality, on the margins of the “real world.” In the case of the *Songs before Sunrise*, as we shall see, Swinburne’s poems are not quite lyrics for a real-life crusade but lyrical explorations of a revolutionary aesthetic which parallels, rather than advances, the real-life politics of their historical moment. Swinburne foretells Adorno’s conviction that a work of art “is internally revolutionary,” inasmuch as art “has the tendency toward social integration” although society does not tend to want to integrate art into itself (*Theory* 228). Moreover, he also foretells Adorno’s conviction that art is revolutionary because it depends upon—and perpetually redefines—the “palpable dependencies and conflicts” between art’s “autonomy and [its] *fait social*” (*Theory* 229). Rather than aiming to enact social and political change among the masses, as Kuduk claims, Swinburne’s revolutionary aesthetic aims to enact artistic and introspective change on an individual level by offering a superfluity of possibilities for social critique which are subject to constellative interpretations.

As part of the development of this revolutionary aesthetic, as I will demonstrate below, Swinburne brings his earlier explorations of the hermaphroditic trope to his poems about Italy. Swinburne offers the *Songs before Sunrise* as an aestheticized field of myriad and sometimes contradictory revolutionary possibilities, lodged in diverse representations of an ineffectual messiah in an uncomfortable relationship to an ancient

divinity, a gender-full god/dess of “the Beloved republic” (“Hertha” line 227), who can only fail to fill his lack. This is not to claim that all of Swinburne’s political poems specifically revolve around the transformation of the hermaphroditic trope, though. Rather, Swinburne uses the Italian revolution itself in the *Songs before Sunrise* in the same way he uses the hermaphrodite/andogyne in his works—as a fetishized trope locating the conflict between art and reality, the conflict between an aestheticized perception of the material world and the ossified perception of that world offered by the dominant discourse. Of course, this involves various treatments of the complicated figure of Mazzini, the celebrated visionary whose political vision is exposed as incongruously indeterminate.

“I set the trumpet to my lips and blow”: Childe Swinburne to Republicanism Came

Swinburne told William Michael Rossetti that “The Eve of Revolution,” the third poem in *Songs before Sunrise*, is “the centre poem and mainspring of [the] volume” (*Letters* 2: 95).²⁷ Kuduk finds the poem to be indicative of Swinburne’s “experiment with formal strategies for realizing [the] power” of poetry to articulate the formulations of political change through “the fusion of one man’s specifically literary endeavor and the fiery power of republican politics” in action (259-60). McGann, though, reads such articulation as an end in itself, pointing out that Swinburne is unable to envision “the *final* end of war or suffering or struggle because his understanding ... [of it] is cyclical”

²⁷ Letter from Swinburne to W.M. Rossetti, 14 Feb. 1870. Also, in this letter, Swinburne mentions that the poem is “all but finished.”

(*Swinburne* 248-49, italics his).²⁸ While the poem does suggest that “poetry can break the chains” of ideological power “by liberating the reader’s consciousness,” it does not quite reach the purported goal of “secur[ing] the complex relation between song and sword,” thus “mak[ing] automatic the political power of poetry” (Kuduk 260-61). Instead, the complex relation between the aesthetic and the political is perpetually renegotiated—thus never secured—in what McGann calls “a feeling for death and the flux of change” (*Swinburne* 249). Moreover, even if the poem lives up to its promise to “liberate the reader’s consciousness,” liberation of consciousness on such an individual level does not guarantee the generation of any kind of mass political power; thus the poem does not provide a definitive call to political action. Instead, I contend that the poem almost seems like a retreat into artifice, a defiantly decadent escape, via art, from an environment of socio-political dissatisfaction.

I believe that the speaker of “The Eve of Revolution” should be recognized as a slightly distanced commentator masking his irresoluteness of authority or purpose with an oscillating voice of bravado rather than, as Kuduk claims, a Blakean prophet of “political radicalism” (257). The speaker does emote the lofty, authoritative tone of the prophetic seer that Swinburne admired in Blake’s *Prophetic Books*, a tone which conveys the new “evangel” of a revolutionary aesthetic in words bearing “strong significance and earnest passion” (*Swinburne, Blake* 194). But, it is important to note that Swinburne was,

²⁸ Again, Swinburne’s depiction of human/social struggle is similar to Shelley’s. Elsewhere in his book, McGann says that Swinburne uses a Shelleyan “technical [poetic] device” in which he “pour[s] out a succession of images as analogues or facets of a single subject or perception,” and “[t]he repetitive character of the device makes it extremely adaptable to the sort of prophetic lyric Swinburne constantly wrote.... [T]hey heighten ... one’s attention to the vastness of the unity of cosmic harmonies and correspondences” (*Swinburne* 73). Applied to the political poems in particular, this device demonstrates how the social and political conflict of any historical era “is equally involved in [such] processes of repetition and variation” (*Swinburne* 249).

at times, perplexed by, if not skeptical of, that style of delivery; as Swinburne notes in his Blake essay, the prophetic tone featured in some of Blake's poetry allows for "the confusion, the clamour ... and other more absolutely offensive qualities—audacity, monotony, bombast, obscure play of licence and torturous growth of fancy" that accompany and perhaps even taint the prophetic message of impending revolution and promises of the fulfillment of the republican ideals of social and intellectual freedom (*Blake* 185).²⁹

Additionally, one might also propose that the prophetic voice is used ironically, given the poem's resemblance to Robert Browning's "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came."³⁰ Referring to his propagation of revolutionary prophecy, the speaker of Swinburne's "Eve of Revolution" says repeatedly, "I set the trumpet to my lips and blow." I believe this line refers to the end of Browning's poem, in which Childe Roland declares, "Dauntless the slug-horn to my lips I set, / And blew ..." (203-04). In Browning's poem, Childe Roland, having "Heard failure prophesied so oft" (line 38),

²⁹ Though Swinburne is careful here to add that such "offensive qualities" ultimately do not "quench or even wholly conceal the living purport and the imperishable beauty" of Blake's Prophetic Books (*Blake* 185), he discusses the portentous qualities of the works repeatedly. Curiously, Swinburne felt that the bombastic tone of Blake's poems specifically about political revolution detracted from their effectiveness. He calls *America* "a noble myth of rebellion" which nonetheless suffers from "ha[ving] more of thunder and less of lightning" than Blake's other works; *Europe*, he says, is equally lamentable in that Blake's apocalyptic prophecy of revolution seems just a "somewhat halting and bewildered fable" (*Blake* 237-39, 243-45). Yet one could argue, nonetheless, that the "Eve of Revolution" somewhat resembles Blake's *Milton*—particularly the end of Blake's poem, in which Satan "Come[s] in a cloud, with trumpets & flaming fire," declaring, "I hold the Balances of Right & Just & mine the *Sword*" (*Milton* 2: Plate 38[43], lines 50, 54, emphasis mine). In his explication of *Milton* in the Blake essay, Swinburne claims that a "single, final act of redemption" in which one successfully reaches a goal of peaceful perfection "is not admitted as sufficient, or even possible" (*Blake* 267).

³⁰ Swinburne knew Browning's poem well and admired it enough to borrow almost exactly Browning's descriptions of Roland's inhospitable environs to describe the barren landscape of Mentana, Italy, in a letter to Lady Trevelyan, 19 Jan. 1861 (see *Letters* 1:38). Mentana was also the scene of Garibaldi's failed attempt in 1867 to take over papal territory—a failure Swinburne commemorates in other poems in the volume, "The Halt before Rome" and "Mentana: First Anniversary." Additionally, Swinburne seems to have had some regular acquaintance with Browning during the time he was writing the *Songs* (see Rooksby, *Life* 164, 199).

seems resigned to the futility of his quest, and the “furious, self-frustrated energy” (Bloom, “Broken” 549) that Childe Roland experiences throughout the quest becomes an end in itself. The quest is undertaken for the sake of questing and not with the hope of successfully finding the impossible object he seeks.³¹ In the poem’s open-ended finale, Childe Roland is flanked by the ghosts of his predecessors, all fallen knights marked by their failures, who conditionally form around him “a living frame / For one more picture” (200-01). All Browning offers us is Roland heralding his own arrival at a pivotal moment in which, to borrow one of the lines from Swinburne’s poem, “[His] name is not yet writ with theirs that fell” (“Eve” 251); but, by calling out his own name, Roland seems to add it to the list of the fallen. However, Browning’s poem effectively casts doubt on the prophetic mode in its demonstration of uncertainty: prophecy suggests the impending attainment of the goal of a quest, even if the goal is one’s own death, but Childe Roland does not experience any sort of attainment. As Leslie M. Thompson has carefully noted, one can read Roland’s journey as paralleling the journey of the Christian believer who lives life preparing for the imminent, apocalyptic battle between good and

³¹ As Robert Langbaum notes, Browning’s poem is a tale of “sheer questing” in which “the experience not the situation” (192), not the goal or the end result, is important. Somewhat similarly, Harold Bloom (in “How to Read a Poem”) has suggested that Browning replaces the “ego-ideal of the traditional quest” with the enigmatic Dark Tower as a way of demonstrating that any object of a quest is unattainable. The majority of the criticism of Browning’s poem notes—and, in some cases, laments—that it is not clear what, exactly, the goal of Roland’s quest *is*. Given the often-noted similarities between “Childe Roland” and Tennyson’s “Sir Galahad,” one could allude that Roland is on a Grail quest, especially if one agrees with John King McComb’s assertion that “the object of the quest ... [should] be imagined as some bright spiritual success” (464–65). Furthermore, Mario D’Avanzo compares the poem to Shelley’s “Triumph of Life,” asserting, “The spirit of beauty and truth that rewards the once uncorrupted Rousseau with visionary power [in Shelley’s poem] ... is akin to the grail vision that Roland has quested to achieve” (703).

evil because Browning borrows heavily from the language of biblical prophecy (347).³² Whereas the biblical prophecies suggest this conflict will be ultimately resolved, though, Browning leaves his hero irresolute, perhaps pronouncing nothing more than bravado when faced with the radical closure of his situation—a situation in which his final act, irresolute though it may be, seems forced by prophecy itself. In some ways, it can be compared to the forced choice masquerading as a false opening in the symbolic framework like that faced by Swinburne's laborer in "Les Noyades"; only Childe Roland demonstrates awareness of the prophecy as a limit experience, noting that the forced choice, "ended, then, / Progress" by comparing the forced choice to "when a trap shuts— [and] you're inside the den" ("Childe Roland" 171-72, 174).

The speaker of "The Eve of Revolution" proclaims the coming of the "hidden hour that hast our hope to bear" (line 418) which seems to be just another false opening in the political framework. To make the false opening seem like an actual prospect of freedom, he claims to be invested with a prophetic authority originating from "The trumpets of the four winds of the world," which "From the ends of the earth blow battle ..." (lines 1-2). Swinburne's speaker seems eager to present the revolutionary events as ushering in an epoch "of liberation that go[es] beyond the historical instant" and to insinuate that his song is "fraternally allied with the world spirit" (Adorno, *Theory* 208). The "world spirit," in this case, is posited in the idea of an Adam Kaedmon-like "single, individual," hermaphroditic being—not unlike Blake's Albion—whose separate parts, driven "to the four corners of the modern world," strive for harmonious

³² Various lines in Browning's poem evoke the warnings given to the Israelites by Isaiah and Jeremiah as well as the apocalyptic scenes prophesied in the Book of Revelation. For specific details, see Thompson, pp. 349-51.

reunification; this struggle to recuperate a lost wholeness thus becomes the template for all “universal history” (Busst 13).³³ On the “Eve of Revolution,” the world spirit suffers from this diffusion: Swinburne’s speaker counterposes the oppressive “dim tribes of *kings*,” “reaping *men* that reap *men* for their sheaves,” with a freedom-seeking feminine force whom he describes as an invasive “night [that] heaves, / With breasts palpitating and wings refurled,” inspiring revolution with her “wild wind of vision” (lines 2-11, emphases mine). The speaker problematically relies on a grandiose creation myth to authorize his voice. And, even more problematically, the speaker does not have direct access to the prophetic vision entrusted to him; the original vision is twice-removed from him. First, the vision is given to the speaker synaesthetically, “With many tongues of thunders” (line 18)—meaning, what was once an ideogrammatic visual communication, a “synchronic structure” conveying a multitude of intellectual ideas and affective states simultaneously (Mitchell, *Iconology* 25), is transmuted into vocal speech which cannot signify all the possibilities inherent in the ideogram. Secondly, the speaker receives the transmuted vision indirectly, as the message of revolution is delivered by a voice distinct from the goddess-like force’s “wild wind of vision.” Described as “A voice more instant than the winds are clear” (24), it

Say[s] to my spirit, “Take

Thy trumpet too, and make

A rallying music in the void night’s ear....[”] (25-27)

³³ This is actually Busst’s gloss on the development of this idea offered in Victor Hugo’s *Fragment historique* (1829), a work with which Swinburne—given his enthusiasm for, as well as extensive correspondence with, Hugo—would have been familiar.

This voice, as it echoes his request for Swinburne to deliver a “series of lyrics for the crusade,” is surely meant to be Mazzini’s.

Consciously portraying himself a leader of the revolution, both the historical Mazzini as well as Swinburne’s fictionalized version upheld himself as the chosen one authorized not only to receive the prophetic vision but also to share it; since Mazzini consciously mythologized himself as the *Cristo uomo* despite his inability to manifest much of his claimed political clout, his authority is somewhat suspect. Yet the Mazzini figure in Swinburne’s poem shares this tenuous position of “authority” with the speaker and urges him to “set the trumpet to [his] lips and blow” (38ff.). The Mazzinian prophet, though, is presented as another failed Moses, unable to meet his goal despite the very prophecy which promised him the impending satisfaction of reunifying the “world spirit” in the Promised Land. Mazzini and/or the speaker remain(s) divorced from the “one Republic” (line 270), the vision of a new, political Canaan. The night, which earlier brought the prophetic vision of freedom, “is broken eastward” (49). Moreover, the promised land—the embodiment of that freedom—is a barren mother who once nursed

The weanling peoples and the tribes that were,

Whose new-born mouths long dead

Those nine-fold nipples fed.... (l. 56-58)³⁴

But now, as a “Dim face with deathless eyes and withered hair,” a distanced “Fostress of obscure lands” (59-60), Freedom’s impending promise to manifest herself rings false.

³⁴ These lines allude to the nine tribes of Israel that God bade Moses to lead to the Promised Land (Joshua 14.2; Num 34.13).

Thus Swinburne's speaker, trying to renegotiate the impasse between the prophet renounced by his own prophecy and the promised land that cannot be reached, interjects a nostalgic lament for "where for us began / The first live light of man": Greece (73-74ff). Greece is a manifold emblem in the poem, signifying not only another example of nineteenth-century political revolution but also a lost "golden age" of republicanism. Mazzini had encouraged the *Risorgimento* to model itself after the *Philiké Hetairia*, the secret society of revolutionaries who instigated the 1821 Greek revolt against the repressive rule of the Ottoman Empire. Though Swinburne had some interest in the Greek revolution due to Byron's involvement in it, he was much more interested in the political climate of ancient Greece—as much for the Greeks' constant political struggles, I believe, as for their idea of the *polis*, a representative government equated with the notion of "the whole citizen body" (Morris 26), a unified "world spirit." Swinburne is careful to include sites of both ancient Greek success and despondency in his description; tellingly, all the sites Swinburne mentions are important to the Persian Wars, in which the city-states of Athens and Sparta had to work together to defeat a common enemy despite their very different ways of putting the idea of the *polis* into practice. "[T]he sun" guiding the speaker's survey of the imagined Grecian landscape first rests on Thermopylae (line 86), the site of the Spartan army's defeat at the hands of the Persians in 480 BC and then becomes "The light [which] is Athens where those remnants rest," presumably meaning the remnants of the city after the Persians burned it to the ground following their victory at Thermopylae; but the "light" is also "Salamis the sea-wall of that sea," where the Greeks managed to defeat the Persians in a naval battle (lines 87-88). By carefully counterbalancing each site of Greek victory with one of defeat, Swinburne

implies that the “golden age” of Greece was an age of perpetual political strife and, consequently, implies that the European struggle for freedom will be just as unremitting.

Moreover, as Swinburne knew from his very meticulous study of ancient Greek history, the Greek victory at Salamis did not lead to any political stability in the region. It led to the formation of the Athenian Empire which smothered the previously independent Spartan city-state. As an empire governed by an elite group of dictatorial *archons*, Athens itself became wholly incompatible with the idea of the *polis* on which it was founded. With Athens’ traditional social fabric so frayed, rebellious Spartans were able to overthrow the Athenian Empire in the following Peloponnesian War; the resultant era of the oppressive Spartan Hegemony eventually gave way to the Theban uprising; the Theban rulers were subsequently toppled by the formation of the Second Athenian Empire, and so on. By proposing the comparison between the political instability of ancient Greece and nineteenth-century Europe, then, Swinburne suggests that the struggle to “Build up our one Republic state by state, / England with France, and France with Spain,³⁵ / And Spain with sovereign Italy ...” (270-72) will never end with the creation of a unified republic, or even the installation of similar practices of republicanism in each individual country. There is no way to unify the “whole citizen body” of Europe with one trope, one rubric, or even one prophecy.

Because the prophecy of republican unification presents itself as untenable, just as the goal of establishing a stable (if not utopian) republican government remains untenable, Swinburne’s speaker attempts to abandon the prophetic mode near the end of

³⁵ In 1868, Queen Isabella II traveled to France to cement an alliance with Louis Napoleon; she returned to find her country in a state of civil unrest and political upheaval. Shortly following Isabella II’s abdication of the throne, Giuseppe Fanelli, who had once headed a Mazzinian organization in Naples and fought in Garibaldi’s army, moved to Spain and began the Spanish anarchist movement.

the poem: “I take the trumpet *from* my lips and *sing* ...” (369, emphases mine). Here the speaker consciously constructs his own song, a song that allows him an escape into an isolated, purely aesthetic realm. In fantasies of a “Swift Revolution” ushering in the era of a “Serene Republic,” the speaker “Strike[s] music from a world that wailed and strove”: he proclaims that the “very freedom” one seeks in political revolution should be found in the “change and death, / Whose now not hateful breath / ... gives the music swifter feet to move” (374-414). On one hand, the speaker’s own “song,” distanced from the prophetic mode, could be polemical music in the Adornian sense, in that it “sets itself at a distance from ... the impoverishment and falsity” of the previous mode of discourse (Adorno, *Theory* 177). In it, the “crackling” of “the friction of the antagonistic elements that the artwork [otherwise] seeks to unify” (*Theory* 177) can be heard—in this case, meaning the “crackling” of the antagonism underlying the pairing of the Mazzinian and the Swinburnian voices, the pairing of political idealism with aestheticized fantasy.

Earlier in the poem, the speaker advocates shifting international borders in the formation of the idealized single Republic; here he demonstrates the perpetual shift but constant delineation of the border between the actual practice of revolutionary politics and the aesthetic representations of those politics. On the other hand, this kind of “republican aesthetic,” despite the self-aware negotiations of its own internal tensions, may not completely “break the chains” of the dominant discourse and achieve the “liberat[ion] of ... consciousness” (Kuduk 261). Whatever “autonomy” the speaker’s song claims, whatever independence his song achieves from the earlier prophetic mode, it is still “a function of the ... consciousness of freedom” that Adorno tells us remains “bound up with the social [and political] structure”—and prophecy—it claims to defy

(*Theory* 225). The speaker can only “take the trumpet from [his] lips” once he has used the trumpet of prophecy to establish his position; meaning, in other words, it is only in a differential relationship to the prophetic mode that the speaker’s anti-prophetic “song” is granted independence from prophecy. Just as “art becomes social by its opposition to society” (*Theory* 225), the speaker’s song of liberation becomes prophetic by its very claim to oppose the prophetic message. As such, the speaker’s escapist fantasy of ideal freedom falters in the end, for the speaker reverts back to the prophetic mode, beckoning the exiled *Cristo uomo*, Mazzini, into his fantasy, as if Mazzini could make his fantasy a reality: the speaker asks the prophesied “child-god” to “Come forth, be born and live,” to bring the “hand reconquering heaven, to seat man there” (lines 419, 427-28).

Evocatively, in the poem’s last line, the speaker begs the messianic leader to “Hasten thine hour” of his prophesied deliverance of the people into a new era of governance, as the speaker’s song itself seems an ineffective call for liberation.

In “Super Flumina Babylonis,”³⁶ Swinburne recreates the fantasy of ideal freedom which falters in “Eve of Revolution,” but this time the fantasy includes the “blast of deliverance [which] in the darkness rang, / To set thee”—meaning the *Cristo popolo*, the audience addressed in the poem—“free” (“Babylonis” 7-8). The first incarnation of the *popolo* in the poem, though, are the ancient Babylonians, for whom the revolutionaries alternately weep and sing (1, 5). King Cyrus of Persia, when he conquered Babylon by

³⁶ The title of this poem refers to Psalm 137:

By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there
we wept
when we remembered Zion. (137.1)

This psalm is a lament of the Jewish exiles for the lost holy city. Interestingly, the exiles in the psalm are asked by their captors to “Sing us one of the songs of Zion” (3). However, in his poem, Swinburne seems to equate the Jewish exiles with the Babylonians subject to Belshazzar’s tyranny.

dethroning the tyrannical King Belshazzar in 539 BC, was heralded by the citizens as their “deliverer,” but Swinburne seems to question whether Cyrus delivered the Babylonians out of their oppression. Cyrus, considered a predecessor of Christ, was a prophesied savior of God’s chosen people: after Babylon fell, he allowed the Jewish captives to return to their homeland. But he also created the vast, powerful Persian Empire, imposing his monarchic rule on the Babylonian people. Xenophon and other ancient historians may have characterized Cyrus as a rather benign and ethical ruler; nonetheless, as Cyrus’s legacy remained an exemplar for future projects of empire-building, Swinburne seems to have found him a problematic messiah. An aspect of cruelty persists in sovereignty, as Swinburne makes evident in *Poems and Ballads*’ “Satiate Sanguine,” in which Cyrus engages in fantasies of sado-masochistic subjugation. In “Babylonis,” Cyrus engages in another form of subjugation, leaving the “bondmen and bondwomen” who struggle to replace an empire with a republic “to be scourged and smart, / To toil and tend”; as long as his empire persisted, they were “harrowed,” “subdued,” and “crushed” by the weight of oppression, and “no change came” (lines 23-28). The supposed deliverance does not occur until Babylon is figuratively reborn as nineteenth-century Italy, and the neo-Babylonian/Italian people, in torpor because they have forgotten or dismissed their prophetic legacy,³⁷ will meet the next coming of their deliverer (29ff.)—Mazzini.

However, Babylon, even as it is reborn as Italy, remains a fallen state in which the messianic leader has always already been crucified and resurrected. As such, the leader

³⁷ “[T]hey knew not their forefathers, nor the hills and streams / And words of power, / Nor the gods that were good to them ...” (37-39).

is only accessible within the elusive, speculative fantasy of a unified republican nation. The revolutionaries are unable to have actual contact with—and thus are unable to relate to—the fantastic, transcendent incarnation of their supposed deliverer. Instead, they encounter an angel who announces that Mazzini has been resurrected as an all-encompassing “Mother Italy” (see lines 77-88).³⁸ The angel further instructs them to “Put no trust in men’s royalties, nor in great men’s breath, / Nor words of kings” (91-92); here the serial identification between King Cyrus and Mazzini is interrupted, and the angel—the very agent of prophecy—instructs the revolutionaries to disregard the prophecy he decrees fulfilled (the prophecy the revolutionaries would have received via the “breath” of “great men” [line 91]), revealing it as artifice.

The opening of the sepulchre itself, an alleged act of revelation, is another mode of artifice exposed in the poem, representing the false opening for republicanism that Mazzini and his followers created in Italy’s dubious political framework. Instead of bearing witness to a resurrection, Swinburne’s audience is asked to bear witness to an ideological vulnerability lingering within Mazzini’s republican movement.³⁹ In the rhetoric of his public speeches and published political tracts, Giuseppe Mazzini tended to “trea[t] abstractions”—such as the God of deliverance (the Father of a Nation), the unified Mother Italy, and the Italian people delivered into republican utopia—as if they were corporeal entities” or entities waiting to manifest themselves corporeally and thus

³⁸ The angel tells them that Mazzini/Italy’s “body most beautiful, and her shining head / These are not here” (81-82). Swinburne draws upon two New Testament accounts of the resurrection here. In Matthew 28.1-7, the angel appears to Mary Magdalene in front of Jesus’s empty tomb; in John 20.17, Jesus himself appears to Mary Magdalene, instructing her not to touch him, calling his materiality into question—it is as if he is a presence-which-is-absence. One could also argue that this is an allusion to the “daughter [of] Babylon,” or the personification of the Babylonian people, featured in Psalm 137.8.

³⁹ My reading is based on Žižek’s discussion of how “phantasmic support of the public symbolic order ... bears witness to the system’s vulnerability” (*Plague* 28).

transform material reality (Sarti 41). Yet, like the liberatory ideals explored in “The Eve of Revolution,” these abstract possibilities are only possible inasmuch as they are functions of the political system they claim to defy; these are the possibilities the current system “is compelled to allow for” while simultaneously ensuring that they “will never actually take place” (Zizek, *Plague* 28).

Swinburne’s poem shows Mazzinian abstraction to be an artifice; the blending of Mazzini, the proclaimed Father of a Nation, and Mother Italy into a seamless “republican marriage” proves to be, like Swinburne’s Hermaphroditus, the ineffectual “waste wedlock of a sterile kiss.” In “Hermaphroditus,” the hermaphroditic figure is an inaccessible ideal of harmonious unity that ultimately fails to signify an ideal state of achieved integration, self-sufficiency, and praxis; in “Babylonis,” the androgynous messiah-figure fails both to signify a similar ideal state and to deliver the *Cristo popolo* into it. Instead, this “perfect” political androgyne is a political ideal so transmuted into a purely aesthetic object that its relevance to political practice is questionable. The aesthetic object can mediate between lived experience (in the material world) and aesthetic experience, but, if the object does not have a significant presence, the reading/viewing subject will not be able to situate him/herself in a dynamic, effective relationship to it.⁴⁰ Aesthetic experience as lived experience should “co-enac[t] or follo[w] ... the internal dynamic” suggested by the object (Nicholsen 17)—in this case, the aestheticized object internalizes the dynamic between the revolutionary and the ideal, unified Italy. However, if the object is inaccessible, then the possibility of converting the aesthetic experience of the object into lived experience becomes inaccessible as well.

⁴⁰ See Adorno, *Theory* 175.

Significantly, Mazzini-as-Italy-incarnate never actually appears in the poem; the resurrection is never made manifest except in the angel's proclamation. So what the revolutionaries in the poem—and, consequently, Swinburne's readers—see is a failed dynamic, the alienation between revolutionary and revolution, Mazzini and Italy, even the power of the pen and the power of the sword.

As he also illustrates Mazzini's very alienation from the unified "Mother Italy" which is the object of his (Mazzini's) desire, Swinburne demonstrates how the perception of the revolutionary spectators shifts. In doing so, Swinburne introduces a differential relationship what the spectators wish to see and how the Mazzini figure is situated in/by their gaze; in a very Lacanian way, then, Swinburne allows the Mazzini figure to be seen "as other than he is" (*Concepts* 104). Here Swinburne's version of Mazzini is not meant to be perceived as the *Cristo uomo* inspiring a "religion of politics," or as a cipher encompassing all the possibilities promised by the *Risorgimento's* faith in the revolutionary cause; he is *fantasmata*, a place-holder for the "revised versions of those impressions called up by the imagination in the absence of ... [that which] originally stimulated them" (Mitchell, *Iconology* 10). His lack of presence in the poem demonstrates the ineffectiveness of the split subjectivity the historical Mazzini cultivated: Mazzini spent his life trying to adapt himself to the revolutionary movement's expectations of political and social freedom—enacting a "being-for-others" in which he became an object signifying the goals of the revolution as a way of obtaining "acknowledgment of [his] being" (Stern 93) within the collective gaze of the *Risorgimento*—so desperately that he eventually began to project himself as the "punctiform object" of his fantasy, a revolutionized, socio-politically liberated Italy,

itself. (See Lacan, *Concepts* 83.) Yet, even in his incarnation as an aestheticized subject who becomes his desired object, Swinburne's Mazzini still appears in a divided state in which he signifies the revolution and its goal only by signifying its impossibility. In other words, he signifies his own *aphanisis*; he is a vanishing subject fading from view (*Concepts* 208-10), his vanishing act rendered *in media res*. Even the angel admits as much, saying, "For an hour, if ye look for him, he is no more found, / For one hour's space" (lines 109-10).

In "Before a Crucifix," Swinburne creates one of the most notable brief spaces in which the Christ/Mazzini figure is (re)visualized. As both Margot Louis and David Punter have previously noted, the poem makes strong statements about the hypocrisies of Christian doctrine and the failure of Christian practice to bring relief to the suffering or to bring freedom to the subjugated. Both critics acknowledge the poem's political subtext: Punter, using the lens of Deleuze and Guattari's theories, reads the poem as an exploration of how religion is a political tool used to produce social repression; Louis reads it as an analogue of the French Revolution peppered with ideas borrowed from Victor Hugo, Jules Michelet, and Ernest Renan.⁴¹ However, neither critic situates the poem in the context of the volume's Italian theme, and, problematically, neither critic even mentions Mazzini. Both critics do provide crucial assessments of the poem. Louis observes that "Swinburne attempts to affirm the worship of Christ in a new sense" only to find "that any kind of Christian affirmation is impossible" (*Gods* 98)—an observation

⁴¹ Jules Michelet, a friend of Victor Hugo's, wrote *La histoire de la révolution française* (1868), an enthusiastic firsthand account of revolutionary France before the rise of Louis Napoleon; in the book, Michelet claims that Christian ideology and Republican idealism are the two antagonists of revolutionary struggle. Ernest Renan was a noted scholar of history and philosophy dedicated to the Republican cause; he wrote *La Vie de Jésus* (1863), in which he suggests that "the human Christ is 'hidden' behind the 'viewless veil' woven by centuries of Christianity" (Louis, *Gods* 94).

that could be used to describe the challenge Swinburne issues to Mazzini's Christian posturings. Punter claims the poem is Swinburne's rebuke of a Christianity which fails to articulate the particularity of human desires, since Swinburne draws our attention "to an ambivalence at the heart" of Christianity which forces any messianic figure in the position "to deny *difference*" ("Cross" 356, italics his); Punter's claim seems supported by Swinburne's commentary on Mazzini's singleness of vision and his alienation from the Italian people in other poems.

That being said, though, the poem does not aim to create "a symbolic system [which] can adequately present the People, their suffering and their self-regeneration," as Louis suggests (*Gods* 98), nor does it, as Punter contends, really "provid[e] us with enactments of the poet, the artist, striving for a place in this world where power swings free and has the means to make us experience anew the wound," or psychic trace, of "the violence of generations" perpetuated by "self-defeating lust" ("Cross" 359). Instead, Swinburne takes extreme measures to demonstrate how such a symbolic system functions as a constellative field denoting only the possibilities of representation, as well as to suggest that any messianic figure's claim to rematerialize fully the trace of generations-old human struggle, and then rectify it, is yet another mode of artifice.

Swinburne portrays the "piteous God" of the crucifixion (line 8) as an icon of human alienation. He is "God of this grievous people, wrought / After the likeness of their race"; yet, with his "blind, helpless, eyeless face" (13-14, 16), he hardly serves as the *other* who allows the people to recognize themselves in him. Instead, the eyeless Christ is a symbol of *mecomnaissance*: the individual subject's construction of the illusion of transcending one's pitiable state by "seeing oneself see oneself" (Lacan,

Concepts 83) is frustrated if the figure meant to epitomize the attainment of this godlike view is really eyeless. The scene of the crucifixion is what Lacan would call “[t]he spectacle of the world,” the punctiform of “the gaze which circumscribes us,” which “appears to us as all-seeing” (*Concepts* 75). The figure on the cross in Swinburne’s poem, as “the likeness of [the] race,” is the aggregate of humanity’s common Platonic fantasy “of an absolute being to whom is transferred the quality of being all-seeing”; in the body of Christ, all unattainable or previously lost perspectives/possibilities are allegedly (re)constituted “not from the body, but from something”—or *someone*, in this case the deity—“... call[ed] the flesh of the world, the original point of vision” (*Concepts* 75, 81-82) in which form *is* content, in which meaning is immediate rather than interpreted.

However, the Christ figure fails to reconstitute lost and otherwise inaccessible perspectives; he cannot (ful)fill *lack*. “The sacred body hangs and bleeds,” so the “flesh of the world” is mutilated, incomplete, not fully (re)constituted; he has not “fed full men’s starved-out souls” (lines 84, 39). The Jesus icon is like an artwork “whose real powerlessness and complicity with the principle of disaster becomes plainly evident” (Adorno, *Theory* 234). He cannot avert the “disaster” of human suffering, just as he cannot rescue the “original point of vision” from the “catastrophe of meaning” in which, Adorno tells us, “appearance”—that which remains visible, attainable, comprehensible—“becomes abstract” (*Theory* 22). The Christ figure’s failure to overcome the principle of disaster, even by sacrificing himself to it, is revolutionary only inasmuch as the symbolic system which iconically maintains him demands an element “of heroism, of sacrifice”—of a dynamic of contestation—which is a “self-deception” concealing “the limitations of

the content of their struggles” (Marx 596). Similarly, as an aestheticized icon to which the people he supposedly exemplifies cannot relate—supposedly an “other” able to complete that which each individual “self” lacks—the Christ figure characterizes a subjectivity which is “self-alienated and concealed” (*Theory* 169).

Swinburne also notes that the “slain, spent, and sacrificed / People” themselves are “the grey-grown speechless Christ” (101-02). Paradoxically, then, each individual *is* that “other” to which s/he cannot relate. So, in this move, Swinburne not only portrays Christ as an individual *other* who promises (but fails) to fulfill the subject’s desire for wholeness but also as the *Other* Lacan says is “the locus of speech” which determines the emergence of the subject (*Concepts* 129). Swinburne further emphasizes the impossibility of establishing a relation to Christ by shifting his speaker’s perspective from that of a witness to the “actual” crucifixion to that of a modern agnostic in lines 133-35:

And mouldering now and hoar with moss

Between us and the sunlight swings

The phantom of a Christless cross....

By depicting Christ as a mere trace of past mythic narratives here, Swinburne reveals the previous, highly visualized account of the crucifixion to have been only a fantasy. It was not Christ who was able to (re)constitute lost and otherwise inaccessible perspectives; rather, the speaker, the artist, is the one able to offer virtual recreations of a lost historical/mythical “original point of vision.”

Punter proposes that, in this moment, Swinburne’s absentee Christ, presaging Deleuze and Guattari’s notions about the face determining signification via language,

“suggests to us that the figure of the cross is that which arises to deny facialisation, to fit all humans” (“Cross” 356).⁴² But, Punter does not note that even in the fantasy Swinburne’s Christ was eyeless, thus having a distorted face, “destroyed, dismantled,” arguably just as much “[o]n the road to the asignifying and asubjective” (Deleuze and Guattari 171) as the bodiless phantom. Where eyes once were, Swinburne presents *embouchures* which emit the very “purpose-lessness [*le sans-fin*] which leads [one] back inside” oneself (Derrida, “Economimesis” 279), to the inarticulable abyss or void which is “the undecidability as to where [one’s] true point is,” somewhere between the “‘real’ self” and one’s “external mask” or *face* (Zizek, *Plague* 141). Just as the elements of representation break down in the fantasy of Christ, they break down outside the fantasy, too: The cross is “Consumed of rottenness and rust, / ... Dead as their spirits who put trust, / Round its base ...” (139, 142-43). The *Cristo popolo* are left “muttering” (line 143) what Punter calls “a trope for inarticulacy, for the silence of the powerless” (“Cross” 354).

Contained in this “trope for inarticulacy” is also “the seed of a reproach”:

[R]eproach for a failed intercessor, one who should have been “articulating” the connection of humankind to the divine and yet could only find it in himself to believe himself forsaken by the very god who had sent him to perform that function.... [T]he poet is calling the people’s attention *to* the “grey-grown speechless Christ” and thereby joining in, and

⁴²For Deleuze and Guattari, the face is the intersection between *signifiance*, the “white wall” on which the “signs and redundancies” of the symbolic order—discourse—is inscribed, and *subjectification*, the “black hole” in which “consciousness, passion, and redundancies” is lodged. The face is a kind of place-holder allowing for identification, a place-holder for the process in which the limited subject expresses him/her “self” in discourse by “overcoding,” a fantastic filling of, the “surface-holes” of his/her indeterminacy, fluidity, the abyss of that which cannot be signified, that which cannot be related to an/other (169-70).

encouraging others to join in, with the mockery offered to the crucified Christ. (“Cross” 354, italics in original)

On one hand, this is precisely what Punter distinguishes as Swinburne’s rebuke of a Christianity which fails to articulate the particularity of human desires (“Cross” 356) and thus, as Margot Louis says, offers a discourse which, socio-politically, “is worse than useless” (*Gods* 95). On the other hand, this is just as much a rebuke of Mazzini; despite Mazzini’s decades-long struggle to revolutionize Italy,

... we seek yet if God or man

Can loosen thee as Lazarus,

Bid thee rise up republican

And save thyself and all of us.... (127-30)

The people’s mockery here is the derision of Mazzini: the anti-Mazzinian demonstrations following the revolutionary victories of 1860, Mazzini’s inability to “save” or even to relate to his “*Cristo popolo*” from his jail cell during the liberation of Rome in 1861 (as well as his inability to “save” himself from incarceration), and the opportunities for revolutionary action that Mazzini and his peers did choose were not ones in which they could actively achieve enough distance from the existing socio-political structures they purported to oppose.

As Swinburne himself admitted, one cannot “do good and serve others exclusively; ... I can’t. If I tried I should lose my faculty of verse ...” (*Letters* 1:242)—in other words, he would be rendered inarticulate. In several published articles in which

he discusses aesthetics from a political perspective,⁴³ Mazzini maintained that Romantic and post-Romantic art was the articulation of a “socially irresponsible individualism”; to “rise up republican,” the new artist would have to speak with a “new voice capable of giving artistic expression to [a] spirit of association” (Sarti 87), to develop a discourse of universalizing representation which would not alienate the artist/speaker from his/her audience. Such universalizing representations, Swinburne contends, are like religious doctrine, always alienating one’s audience as they weave “a viewless veil” over the “hidden face of man” (“Crucifix” 169-70). Mazzini’s insistence that “religion [was] a necessary element of revolution and faith in God the necessary underpinning of political conviction” (Sarti 4) is exactly what Swinburne calls “The poison of the crucifix” (line 186). According to Deleuze and Guattari, “It was under the sign of the cross that people learned to steer the face and processes of facialization in all directions” (178-79), and Punter uses this to make the case that Swinburne introduces a sense of play into “the aesthetic gift of Christianity over many centuries of representation” (“Cross” 356). Nevertheless, this poem seems to show instead that an aesthetic Christianity, as lately represented in Mazzini, “freezes” the republican cause in a static metaphor—a metaphor so static that it causes the very struggle of revolution to cease altogether.⁴⁴

When the metaphor becomes static, it also becomes degenerate, ineffective, and unable to sustain the kind of play Punter wishes it to demarcate. Whereas in “Super

⁴³ Many of these articles appeared in *L'Italiano*, a publication produced by *Risorgimento* members and sympathizers exiled in Paris, in the mid 1830s. Swinburne’s correspondence with William Michael Rossetti during the mid to late 1860s and early 1870s suggests that W.M. Rossetti had shared some of Mazzini’s publications with Swinburne.

⁴⁴ Here I have borrowed from Kuduk’s assertion that, in poems such as “Hertha,” Swinburne relies on paganism to show how it differs from the Judeo-Christian tendency to “freez[e] spirituality in a particular metaphor” (265).

Flumina Babylonis” Mazzini and “Mother Italy” are allowed at least the artifice of making a “republican marriage,” here the Christ figure is faced with

The leprous likeness of a bride,
Whose kissing lips through his lips grown
Leave their God rotten to the bone. (178-80)

The “leprous” bride is what Žižek would call the “undead” core of the static metaphor or fantasy that “lives” on; she signifies how Mazzini, as the metaphoric Christ, “cannot find [his] proper place in the text” or in the discourses of either Christian tradition or revolutionary politics (Žižek, *Lacan* 23). The static metaphor becomes “a disturbance ... in the process of symbolization” (*Lacan* 23), or the kind of playful representation Punter claims Swinburne endorses. Corrupt and contagious, “Mother Italy” cannot give herself to the supposed “Father of the Nation” and form the kind of hermaphroditic image suggested in “Super Flumina Babylonis”—paradoxically because the Father of the Nation from whom she is (to be) created as well as to be reunited is mere “carrion” (“Crucifix” line 192) in the same state of deterioration and disease. This more vividly reinforces what was more subtly implicated in “Babylonis”: that the political hermaphrodite, “the symbol of the union of the self and the non-self” (Busst 66), represents nothing but its failure to represent such a union. However, in “Babylonis,” the failure of the hermaphroditic trope to signify such union (because the trope exists in the context of a prophecy of unification) at least signifies the possibility for such a union, though the possibility cannot *as yet* be actualized; here, where the prophecy of the union is absent, even the possibility of such seems to be precluded.

The “bride” Mazzini/Christ looks for but does not receive in “Before a Crucifix” is likely Hertha, the goddess of the republic, who is

the mouth that is kissed

And the breath in the kiss,

The search, and the sought, and the seeker, the soul and the body that is.

(“Hertha” 28-30)

Swinburne presents Hertha, a disenchanted but still awe-inspiring Gaia figure, as the “I AM which began,” which begat both “God and man / ... equal and whole” (“Hertha” 1-3). But Hertha, once “The life-tree” who offered the promise of salvation in the “sap of [her] leaves” (118, 120), has become the crucifix itself. She declares that “Gods ... / That take and that give,” such as Christ/Mazzini, “are worms that are bred in [her] bark that falls off; they shall die and not live” (“Hertha” 121-22, 126). In turn, these cast-off elements, whose “foul foliage” is “ingrafted by priests” back onto Hertha, obscure her true form and instead portray her as “The tree of [Christian] faith” (“Crucifix” 163-64); the “foul foliage” of Christian dogma becomes a parasitic infection in the wood “Consumed of rottenness and rust, / Worm-eaten of the worms of night” (“Crucifix” 140-41).⁴⁵ Though she claims to be a separate deity who has become contaminated by the Judeo-Christian God, Hertha’s monologue reveals that she *is* (at least a part or version of) the God whose worship commands the hierarchical ordering and the oppression of the natural world; to put it more simply, Hertha, the “Earth Mother,” has become the symbol of her own

⁴⁵ “Hertha” immediately precedes “Before a Crucifix” in the volume, suggesting that Swinburne purposefully paired the poems together. As a result, I believe that Swinburne expected the tree images in both poems to be read intertextually—especially as Swinburne told William Michael Rossetti that “Hertha” “has the most in it of my deliberate thought and personal feeling or faith” (*Letters* 2:85), thus serving as counterpoint to his lack of faith in Christianity as represented in “Crucifix.”

oppression.⁴⁶ Yet her monologue implies that she still holds the promise of redeeming the natural world by subsuming the version of God who represents men's "unmediated lordship and mastery" over that world.⁴⁷

Moreover, she is "All forms of all faces, / All works of all hands" ("Hertha" 157-58): Hertha is "a metonym for humanity" who "collectivizes human experience, integrating individual lives into the ongoing life of 'man'" (Kuduk 265). As such, she seems to be the penultimate serial identifier, a personification of the mode by which Swinburne explores the multiple possibilities allowed by subjective differentiation without slipping into the kind of "ego-weakness" which renders art little more than "the attunement ... to the most fleeting individual reactions" (Adorno, *Theory* 239). Because Swinburne takes great pains to show Hertha as a multiply-positioned subject able to identify with, and to incorporate into herself, what falls on both sides of existing ideological dichotomies—death/life, time/infinity, man/woman, body/spirit—it is tempting to suggest that Swinburne is consciously eluding the trap of creating nothing but an "interiority of landscape" (Pittock, "Nineties" 122), a decadent landscape in which one, individual perspective is concretized and thus cannot provide any opportunity to entertain variant perspectives. In such a landscape, the "fleeting individual reaction" that Adorno warns us about is upheld as a universal (and universalizing) experience, although it is really a "fictional" experience in which "no one is actually participating" (*Theory* 239), an experience which cannot be engaged dialectically. However, as Margot Louis notices, Hertha "does not really assimilate disparate elements" (*Gods* 113). In her

⁴⁶ "I am that which unloves me and loves; I am stricken / and I am the blow" ("Hertha" 23-24).

⁴⁷ See Horkheimer and Adorno 12.

monologue, she commands the reader to “behol[d] the fruits of *me* fair” while promising, “I am *with* you, am *in* you and *of* you” (lines 192, 210, emphases mine). The equation of Hertha and the “you” of humanity is always interrupted by a preposition; Hertha continues to sustain the separation of herself from humanity until the very end of her monologue, and, as a result, the majority of the poem sustains the kind of (Christian) hierarchy Swinburne finds and maligns in “Before a Crucifix.” Hertha’s self-references are meant to seem inclusive, but her monologue insists on the differentiation between her all-inclusive “self” and the “other” of humanity: early in the poem, Swinburne establishes Hertha, the “Mother, not maker,” as quite separate from humanity, the “children [who] forsake her” (lines 79, 81).

Her metonymy, then, is problematic. Swinburne applies the “logic of ‘fetishistic inversion’” to his presentation of Hertha, as Hertha demands that her audience—collective humanity—treat her as the realization of the (im)possible Thing/God(dess), while actually she is God(dess) only inasmuch as her audience continues to recognize her as such. As soon as her audience becomes cognizant that her Goddess-hood is a “performative effect, the effect itself is aborted” (Zizek, *Lacan* 33). As Zizek explains, once “we attempt to ‘subtract’ the fetishistic inversion and witness the performative effect directly”—as performance *as such*—her “performative power will be dissipated” (*Lacan* 33). And this helps to explain Swinburne’s choice to present “Hertha” as the precursor to “Before a Crucifix.” In the latter poem, Swinburne’s speaker reveals that godhood, and all the promises of unity, redemption, and/or transcendence detailed in “Hertha,” is absolute performance. Thus, when one returns to the very last line of Hertha’s monologue—“Man, equal and one with me, man that is made of me, man that is

I' (240)—one finds that it rings false. The witness to the crucifixion always already knows that the “magic” of the kind of signification in which the divine signifier *really* signifies collective humanity and its myriad desires “is utterly untrue” (Horkheimer and Adorno 9).

Kuduk claims that, in the final line, Hertha offers an intuitive apprehension of rather than a definitive (and thus limiting) designation of human desires, “appearing to evoke for humanity its own power and divinity,” thus revisiting Blake’s notion that “all deities reside” within humanity itself,⁴⁸ and preparing the way for realizing “a vision of a sustainable republic of love, community, and equality” (268). The crucial word here is “appear”: the intuitive power of “Hertha” is concretized and aestheticized as a political *concept*, a concept which is both limited and limiting, and thus is not actually present in the poem or truly accessible to humanity at large. Conceptualized, Hertha’s “power” is precluded from perspectives and circumstances yet to be imagined. Besides, as Adorno would caution, the kind of synthesis prescribed for this ideal republic is false because it conceals its own “no less false, rigid polarity; the aesthetics of intuition is founded on the model of a *thing*”—not an idea or intuition *qua* intuition—and “[in] the synthesis” provided in the poem “the tension, its essence, gives way to a fundamental repose” (*Theory* 97, emphasis mine). Hertha’s final statement evokes the vision of a static “republic” which quells the dissonance upon which the republican struggle depends. As Emilie Venturi once described it, Mazzini “viewed man as a perfectible creature” (Sarti

⁴⁸ In *William Blake*, Swinburne notes that, whereas “others” treat religious faith and devotion by prescribing “inductive rule and law,” Blake offers “assumptive preaching and intuition” (149). Also, Swinburne sums up “Blake’s Pantheistic Iliad in a nutshell”: “*Extra hominem nulla salus*. ‘God is no more than man; because man is no less than God’” (*Blake* 165n1, italics in original).

209)⁴⁹ and, likewise, Mazzini always believed that a republic was a perfectible state.

Despite Mazzini's exhortation to the Vatican's 1870 Ecumenical Council that one must affirm the inexhaustible "continuity of creation" instead of the stasis of concepts like perfection (qtd. by Sarti 209), even in governance, his continual expectation of attaining the perfect, and arguably static, end to his political struggle demonstrates how he valued the impossible goal much more so than the aim.

Swinburne confronts Mazzini's belief in human perfectibility and the possibility of a perfect republic his "Hymn of Man," written on the occasion of the Ecumenical Council's decree in papal infallibility. In this poem, Swinburne reinvokes Hertha, attempting to—and calling attention to his failure to—re-imagine her in her "true" form, or to see her as if his vision was not mediated by the Judeo-Christian worldview. In other words, he wants to see Hertha as a monadic goddess in which all the possibilities immanent in her are immediately comprehensible, rather than subject to the conventions and modes of interpretation. He imagines seeing Hertha before the event of the catastrophe of meaning, before her appearance was abstract:

When her eyes new-born of the night saw yet no star out of reach;
 When her maiden mouth was alight with the flame of musical speech;
 ... [With] Eyes that had looked not on time, and ears that heard not of
 death;
 Lips that heard not the rhyme of change and passionate breath....

(7-8, 11-12)

⁴⁹ Venturi's assessment is applicable. As Sarti explains, Mazzini "rejected the fundamental doctrines of original sin ... as 'absurd'" (34).

As in “Eve of Revolution,” Swinburne considers the possibility of a prelapsarian mode of musical communication which exists in a kind of Adornian negative dialectic to “the impoverishment and falsity” of conventional language (*Theory* 177); here “The word of the earth to the spheres” is the same as “the note of her song” (“Hymn” line 3). Still, by emphasizing Hertha’s mouth and eyes and then making the synaesthetic move of presenting her lips that hear, suggesting that her speech is immediately heard and not mediated by interpretative structures, Swinburne gestures toward the *embouchure*-like image he presents in “Before a Crucifix.”

But the poem then shifts; Swinburne’s speaker notes that, in this “perfect” state, Hertha does not experience “passionate breath” or “The rhythmic anguish of growth, and the motion of mutable things” (“Hymn” 12-13). Hertha’s/Swinburne’s failure to evoke speech whose meaning is immediate—not dependent upon mediation via existing, necessary interpretive structures—mirrors the untenability of the Mazzinian goal of a utopian republic. Hertha, the Goddess of the Republic, is impoverished, mediated if not completely eclipsed by “the God that ye make you [who] is grievous” because he separates “spirit” from earth “and gives not aid” in the attempt to reconcile the two (line 41). Because the belief in the God who separates spiritual passion from earthly passion is so pervasive, any description of Hertha’s “Lovely ... firstborn passion, and impulse of firstborn things” seems false, especially as “Love”—desire—still “lay shut in the shell world-shaped” (lines 24, 27). Thus Swinburne can only construct the artifice of Hertha’s *mana*-like wholeness to obfuscate the otherwise-inarticulable abyss or void at the heart of human desires. In such a “perfect” state, there would be no desire because there would be no emptiness to conceal; in complete fullness and satiety, there would be no passion—

no suffering, no alienation to endure—but also no longing, no aspiration, no perseverant struggle in which to find satisfaction. Such an absence of passion is troublesome to Swinburne because it marks the absence of the aesthetic dimension which particularizes “the complex of physical sensations by which we move in and know the world”; without such passion, the human existence is “anaesthetic” (Bruhm 123, 128). Hertha’s “song” becomes static, and the divine word becomes more like what Adorno would call a “mute and inconsequential” conceptualization of human struggle (*Theory* 18).

Rather than simply “replac[ing] the divine word with human expression as the source of material and poetic creation” (Kuduk 262) or attempting to “destroy [the] symbolic system” of Judeo-Christianity by parodying it (Louis, *Gods* 99), Swinburne presents “the word”—language—in its very concretizing *thingishness*, as one of the “Things” he explains “are cruel and blind” since “their strength detains and deforms” (“Hymn” line 65). One is “detained” from reaching Hertha, the ideal, because any language used to signify her presence excludes her from realization, denoting her absence not only from the poem but also from the formation of any republic. Like the writing which constructs “the ‘screen of the word’” (Derrida, *Grammatology* 31), Hertha’s “song” is “the locus of mediation” (Lacan, *Concepts* 107) between the representable/attainable and the unrepresentable/unattainable. Hertha is an imaginative place-holder of the attainability of perfection, unity without dissonance; but that attainability is a fantasy, only appearing “In thunders of vision and dream, and lightnings of future and past” (“Hymn” line 68)—the future which cannot be known and the past which is always subject to the reconstruction of trace narratives. “Man is the master of *things*” (line 200, emphasis mine) because he cannot transcend them. “Ears hath he, and

hears not; and eyes, and he sees not; and mouth, and is dumb" (184): Hertha's song, once rendered into language—the symbolic network of human expression—is so mediated that it is inaccessible. Swinburne does not "destroy the symbolic system" because this system still incorporates "the tongue [which is] more than the speech" (line 137), though the "tongue" is obscured. Thus, he demonstrates the importance of the individualized and individualizing struggle to create a textual space in which new possibilities of expression can be explored by contravening and exploiting the system's very limitations.

Overall, because Mazzinian politics values the struggle only as it is a progressive means to an achievable, perfectible end, Swinburne's enthusiasm for those politics is forced. Most critics dismiss these poems in a sweeping gesture, characterizing them as a rather unfortunate result of the supposedly highly impressionable Swinburne's blind devotion to (and perhaps misplaced faith in) a figure who liked to court controversy as much as he did. But such readings fail to consider how the poems pointedly call attention to the very forced quality of the politically charged language. Although it is tempting to claim, as Kuduk does, that in these poems Swinburne finds the "potential ... to speak for all of humanity" as he attempts to ascribe a singular voice to the human multitude (270), the poems themselves, exploring the fragmentations and eccentricities of subjectivity as well as the impossibilities of achieving utopian perfection through the use of serial identifications, suggest that the concept of perfectibility is another concept which "detains and deforms" the possibilities for fulfilling human desires yet to be realized.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“What strange height of saddest speech”:

Revis(ion)ing the Catastrophe of Meaning in *Atalanta in Calydon* and *Erechtheus*

“I must say I always read [the Greeks] with the most passionate sympathy and magnetic attraction to the thought and utterance alike that any poet ever puts into me.”

—Algernon Charles Swinburne

“Tragedy is the perfect aesthetic model, both as source and explanation, of human existence.” —Jerome McGann

“The basic tendency in tragic forms, in contrast to its mythical subjects, the dissolution of the spell of fate and the birth of subjectivity, bears witness to ... the collision between mythic law and subjectivity, to the antagonism between fateful domination and a humanity awakening to maturity.” —Theodor Adorno

With the publication of *Erechtheus* in January 1876, Swinburne marked his poetic coming of age, as the long classical drama shows the maturation of the aesthetic brought forth in the *Poems and Ballads, First Series* and cultivated in the *Songs before Sunrise*. *Erechtheus* is arguably the greatest example of the paradox at the heart of Swinburne’s poetry: he presents an exhaustive treatment of religious myth, both pagan and Christian, in the continuous series of allusions embedded in the poem’s complex imagery—imagery which plays against the austere power of a *pathos* that seems almost deceptively simple in its forthright, and sometimes brutal, candor. In *Erechtheus*, Swinburne reconsiders the kind of tension between utopian political idealism and the failure of such idealism to sustain the hopeful development of sustainable political practice, this time placing it in ancient Greece rather than nineteenth-century Italy. At the same time, though, Swinburne continues to emphasize the hopeful possibilities to be found in the failure to achieve lofty, utopian ideals, concentrating on political and human struggle rather than the expectation of achieving the impossible solution. Swinburne more clearly establishes

a pattern of socially and politically productive failures in *Erechtheus*, represented by the Athenian *polis*, than he does in any of the *Songs before Sunrise*. Whereas, in the *Songs*, the Mazzini figure always experiences failure in isolation, failure in *polis* becomes a collective experience; moreover, the collective experience of failure, and the struggle and suffering caused by failure, provides the *polis*—a construction much like art itself is a construction—what Adorno would call its “humane content.”¹ I believe that exploring the “humane content” of human failure will help better explain why some previous critics, such as W.R. Rutland, claim that Swinburne’s aesthetic achieves a kind of “ethical intensity and spiritual elevation” in *Erechtheus* that does not appear in any of his previous works (191).

One might surmise that Swinburne offered *Erechtheus* as a serious demonstration of his poetic gifts in order to curry favor with his peers and critics—especially since *Songs before Sunrise*, though it did not generate the kind of vitriolic criticism that the *Poems and Ballads* did, was not received favorably. The *Saturday Review* had dismissed the volume as evidence that Swinburne was still “[o]ffensive ... as he always is,” merely trading his interest in “unnatural” love for “delight” in “blasphemy” and “in the reddest of Red Republicanism”;² the *Athenaeum*’s reviewer was slightly more kind, offering mild praise for “Hertha” but dismissing two of the poems, “Before a Crucifix” and “Hymn to Man,” that Swinburne felt were especially crucial to the volume. Many of the critics who had responded to his previous work ignored the *Songs* altogether, which further added to Swinburne’s angst. Because the *Songs* remained a personal rather than a professional

¹ I have based this on Adorno’s observation, in his *Aesthetic Theory*, that “suffering ... is [art’s] expression and in which form has its substance. This suffering is the humane content that unfreedom counterfeits as positivity” (260).

² *The Saturday Review*, 14 Jan. 1871.

milestone for Swinburne, his only taste of real critical adulation still remained the publication of *Atalanta in Calydon* in March 1865, nearly a full year before he would come to be identified almost entirely by the fracas over *Poems and Ballads*' daring sexual content and its hostile reception.

At the time of its publication, Swinburne considered *Atalanta*, a long poetic drama about the mythic Calydonian boar-hunt, "the best executed and sustained of my larger poems" (*Letters* 1:115).³ While Swinburne had worked on *Atalanta*, he had also been revising fragments of *Chastelard*, a long drama about Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots, which he had written sporadically since his days at Balliol. *Chastelard* was published on the heels of *Atalanta*, in hopes that *Chastelard* would gain favor and popularity precisely because it was a work "by the author of *Atalanta in Calydon*." However, as Rikky Rooksby notes, *Chastelard* is a cheerless work "celebrat[ing] a perverse and wilful death-wish" (*Life* 122), chaotic in form and plot, since it is a patchwork of rewrites and rearrangements sporadically undertaken over a six-year period; as such, it not only failed to appeal to readers, but literary critics also found it extremely disappointing. Following the *Songs*, Swinburne returned to writing long poetic dramas: he composed another play based on the life of Mary Stuart, titled *Bothwell* (1874), and a retelling of the legend of Tristram and Iseult, *Tristram of Lyonesse*, which he began in 1870 but would not finish until July 1882. Like *Tristram*, *Bothwell* was an arduous and often unsatisfying project, in part because Swinburne found it difficult to manage its overwhelming length and scope, but perhaps more so because the poem's very length and scope alienated his targeted readership. Even Swinburne himself commented that, with *Bothwell*, "It may

³ Letter to Lady Trevelyan, 15 Mar. 1865.

well be that my ambition to give it such fullness of national and historical interests as the subject seemed to me to demand has overleapt itself.... [T]he mark might be beyond [my] reach" (*Letters* 2:301).⁴ What had always seemed very much within Swinburne's reach, though, was classical Greek drama. As popular as *Atalanta* had been, Swinburne later found the poem "not Greek enough"; so, desperate to revisit and perhaps even surpass his former success, he set out in August 1875 to create "a companion piece to *Atalanta*" which would be "a more perfect original example of Greek tragedy"⁵ and thus be "more universal (so to speak) in its relation to human thought and emotion" (*Letters* 2:55, 67).⁶

Erechtheus was written during a three month period in which Swinburne, under the watchful eyes of Benjamin Jowett and Theodore Watts, experienced a calm and sober respite from an otherwise tumultuous time in his life. Following the publication of the *Songs* in 1871, Swinburne's behavior became even more erratic and dissolute. His excessive drinking, now nearly uncontrollable, not only caused many of his friends to shun his company but also caused prolonged periods of serious illness in which his parents took him away from London to "rest" in an environment in which he had no access to alcohol. During that year, Swinburne's perpetual alcoholic rages were compounded by his anger over the publication of Robert Buchanan's infamous "Fleshly School of Poetry" tract. Though Buchanan's real target was Dante Gabriel Rossetti—for Swinburne merits only occasional mentions in the piece, as Buchanan more or less

⁴ Letter to John Nichol; the specific date is missing, but Lang's research indicates that Swinburne wrote it sometime "in the middle of July," 1874.

⁵ Letter to William Michael Rossetti, 21 Aug. 1875.

⁶ Letter to E.C. Stedman, 8 Sep. 1875. Stedman was commissioned to write an article about Swinburne for *Scribner's Monthly*; during the time Stedman was researching his article, he and Swinburne began a friendly correspondence which they maintained for several years.

dismisses him a “little mad boy letting off squibs” (890)—Swinburne took the attack personally, especially because his friendship with Rossetti became a casualty of Buchanan’s attack. In 1872, not long after Swinburne learned of Mazzini’s death, Rossetti abruptly severed ties with Swinburne as part of his (Rossetti’s) attempt to recuperate from a nervous breakdown and subsequent suicide attempt.⁷ Within a period of a few months, then, Swinburne lost the friend and mentor who had inspired the *Poems and Ballads* as well as the friend and mentor who had inspired the *Songs before Sunrise*. As a result, Swinburne seemed to lose all remaining direction in his life. The next few years found him devoting an increasing amount of time to his friendships with John Thomson, who shared his interest in London’s flagellation brothels, and George Powell, whose fascination with pornography and unconventional sexual practices rivaled his own. Benjamin Jowett, whose antagonism to Swinburne’s chosen vocation as poet lessened in his later years, again stepped in to provide Swinburne some guidance, as did a new acquaintance, the solicitor Theodore Watts. Both men were concerned that Swinburne was becoming increasingly depressed, bored, and restless, having spent the greater part of the early to mid 1870s under his parents’ watchful eyes. In August of 1875, Jowett invited Swinburne to accompany him on a vacation, during which, in an attempt to distract Swinburne from seeking solace in alcohol, he re-engaged Swinburne in the study of classical literature. Out of that study the idea for *Erechtheus* was born. Theodore Watts then took Swinburne on vacation to Southwold (on the east coast of England) during the months of September and October, where the poem was finished.

⁷ Buchanan’s article is generally attributed to causing Rossetti’s breakdown, though Rossetti’s physical and mental health had been shaky for some time prior to the publication of Buchanan’s piece.

Reconsidering *Atalanta*: The Subject, the Animated World, and the Problem of *Até*

Because Swinburne wrote *Erechtheus* as the companion piece to *Atalanta*, one cannot appreciate its complexity without first exploring the features of *Atalanta* that the more mature Swinburne reconsidered, revised, and then embedded deep within its many allusory layers. As several critics have already pointed out, both works can be read as Swinburne's attempt to write his own version of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*. For example, David Riede, working from Thomas Wymer's earlier reading, sees *Atalanta*'s main characters, Althaea and her son Meleager, representing "a split between the old and new orders"; Althaea's "submission to the will of the gods, stoic acceptance of fate, and unquestioning obedience to law" mirrors the "old ways" explored in the first two plays of the *Oresteia*, *Agamemnon* and *The Libation Bearers* (Riede, *Study* 93), whereas Meleager represents the "new order" of a "creative kind of law" flexible enough to uphold "life as something not merely to be endured but to 'lighten and lift up higher'" (Wymer 5), the kind of flexibility implied in the final play of the *Oresteia*, *The Eumenides*. Jerome McGann, on the other hand, argues that *Erechtheus* stands alone as "a collapsed *Oresteia*" because *Erechtheus*'s "tragedy is pure and formal," issuing "a mood of awe and wonder," whereas *Atalanta*, focused on "passion ... [which] is sapphic and elemental," "devolve[s] into wild desires for beauty and order" (Swinburne 128-29). Ian Fletcher's reading seems to support McGann's because Fletcher finds it "difficult" "to detect Aeschylus as a model" for *Atalanta*; rather, he says the model is Euripides's *Hippolytus*. Fletcher detects a "mysterious moral tone" in the poem since he reads Swinburne's characters as helplessly controlled by divine caprice like Euripides's Phaedra ("Atalanta" 180, 182). And Rikky Rooksby notes that *Atalanta* was probably

influenced, at least in part, by the fragments of Euripides's *Meleager* included in a volume of classical literature⁸ given to him by friends upon his graduation from Eton (*Life* 113).

Swinburne's own correspondence suggests that perhaps he felt that Euripides's influence was too great on *Atalanta*, as he wrote to Edmund Gosse that he resented anyone comparing *Erechtheus* to the work of Euripides, "who was troubled with a dysentery of poetic imagination and a diarrhoea of rhetorical sophistry" (*Letters* 3:100).⁹ Interestingly enough, this comment echoes some of the negative reviews standing out among the sea of praise he had received for *Atalanta*, especially Browning's pronouncement that the poem was "a fuzz of words" and Ruskin's more pointed observation that the poem, while impressive, was like the "foam at the mouth" of a "demoniac youth" (qtd. by Henderson 107), or even Lord Houghton's opinion that it overflows with a "bitter, angry anti-theism" which is suited "among the aberrations of human nature."¹⁰ This rather modern strain of "bitter, angry anti-theism," though, is what Swinburne came to equate with the political and cultural idealisms he associated with Greek culture. While working on *Erechtheus*, he wrote to William Michael Rossetti that Greek culture was "the highest and most sacred possible" subject for him to write about, because he found "the birth and redemption of Athens, i.e. of the world's supreme type of poetry and liberty and light in all kinds" (*Letters* 3:80) to be a more appropriate narrative for human salvation than the birth of Christ and Christ's later redemption of

⁸ *Poetarum Scenicorum Graecorum Fabulae Superstites* (1851), ed. Karl Wilhelm Dindorf.

⁹ This letter is dated 2 Jan. 1876.

¹⁰ The review by Lord Houghton (Richard Monckton Milnes) appeared in the *Edinburgh Review*, July 1865: 202-16.

humankind.¹¹ In comparison, at the height of *Atalanta's* popularity, he often contended that conventional Christians were “slaves of faith and fear” who misguidedly characterized any human attempt to assume responsibility for personal or cultural renewal as “blasphemous rebellion against their Supreme Being” (*Letters* 1:114).¹² For Swinburne, the divine caprice of the Greek gods that Swinburne explores and questions in *Atalanta* represents the same divine caprice he attributes to the Judeo-Christian God; but, he arguably felt, in retrospect, that *Atalanta* did not critique human resignation to the divine as much as it could have.

Atalanta in Calydon calls into question the enchanted world of Greek pantheism. The poem embodies what Horkheimer and Adorno identify as the opposition of reason and spirit, “the true antithesis of enlightenment and mythology”:

Mythology recognizes spirit only as immersed in nature, as natural power. Like the powers without, inward impulses appear as living powers of divine ... origin. Enlightenment, on the other hand, puts back coherence, meaning and life into subjectivity, which is properly constituted only in this process. (89)

The myth of the Calydonian boar hunt was a good testing ground for this dialectic, especially as Swinburne could explore the opposition between divine decree and the impulse of the human subject by recasting Meleager's death at the hands of Althaea as an act of subjective impulse, rather than as an act resulting not from human will but from the will of the gods, the austere realization of prophecy or divine caprice. Swinburne

¹¹ This letter is dated 19 Oct. 1875.

¹² Letter to William Bell Scott, 15 Mar. 1865. In this letter, Swinburne reacts to the comments that Lord Houghton and other “rampant critics” made concerning *Atalanta's* anti-theism.

skillfully parallels Althaea's act of filicide with Meleager's act of slaying the boar, the destruction of a symbol of the enchanted "natural" world inasmuch as the boar appears at first to be the agent of Artemis's rather subjective and vengeful impulse; though, "as an organism which [appears] ... and [then] dies when it has run its course," the boar more strongly symbolizes a "natural law" that both precedes and supercedes the rigid laws of the gods, which are really the rigid laws of man (Prendergast 70). In short, *Atalanta* becomes a story about the disenchantment of the pantheistic world of ancient Greece.

Swinburne's narrative constantly plays against the traces of the original versions of the myth woven into his poem, versions in which the boar hunt is merely the setting for an entire pre-ordained chain of events. Traditionally, Artemis is portrayed as the representative of the gods' order, controlling the course of events; because Oeneus's failure to pay tribute to her opposed that order, she must restore that order through retribution—specifically, the death of Oeneus's son, Meleager, is the tribute she demands. Thus, she creates the boar hunt as the occasion to enact that retribution: Oeneus's son, Meleager, meets and falls in love with Atalanta, the only female hunter in the party, and Meleager's love for Atalanta consequently causes a chain reaction of retributive deaths in the poem, leading up to his own.¹³ Initially, Artemis purports to assert the "living powers" of her divinity over the world: she sends the boar to wreak havoc on Calydon. However, by the end of the poem, Artemis's power over the lives of her subjects is questionable, shaken by Althaea's attempt to determine fate for herself (and express her desire for recognition) rather than leaving it only to the gods' will.

¹³ Mark Siegchrist points out that the boar only "at first glance seems [to be] the agent of her vengeance"; rather, Artemis really seems to use the boar to bring Atalanta and Meleager together, thus providing "the occasion for ... destruction" so she can "stand back to watch it happen" (697).

Swinburne also portrays the deities of the pantheon as subject to, rather than in control of, the natural cycle that “remoulds and discreates” the world. Zeus, for example, “hath fear and custom under foot,” and though his “will” controls “Much,” it cannot control the natural cycle that determined how “each thing live its life” (*Atalanta* lines 457-62). The very human qualities of tyranny attributed to Zeus cannot destroy the trace memory of an unsubjected nature,

the grace that remains,

The fair beauty that cleaves

To the life of the rains in the grasses, the life of the dews on the leaves.

(3063-65)

By contrast, Swinburne presents Althaea as a subject actively engaging the world, suggesting that the world is subject to human (rather than the gods’) order. Meleager stands in opposition to both Artemis and Althaea, though, suggesting that either ordering principle is ultimately impossible: despite Meleager’s romantic idealism—his belief that the natural world will present itself like “a child born with [the] clear sound and light” to guide him (line 365)—he fails to revive hope that one can (re)discover the *mana* of enchantment. Instead, Meleager eventually submits to a death which is like an “empty weary house,” “Where no flesh is nor beauty” (line 4095). Like Swinburne’s favorite Blake character, Thel, Meleager envisions his death as a capitulation to the natural cycle,¹⁴ “The source and end, the sower and the scythe” (4010). And, as is the case with Thel, Meleager finds that his idealism was the “trickery which elevate[d]” him “to the status of vehicle of divine substance” (Horkheimer and Adorno 51) or potential, for he

¹⁴ See Riede, *Study* 101-02.

discovers at the end that his “flower of life / [Was] Disbranched and desecrated miserably”; death easily “minished all that god-like muscle and might,” making his strength not only un-“godlike” but also “lesser than a man’s” (4028-31). Meleager’s death demonstrates how his attempt to position himself outside of customary ideology was merely artifice as well as demonstrates that Swinburne realizes that the aesthete’s attempt to keep alive the hope of (re)enchanted the disenchanting world is just as artificial.

Swinburne uses Greek myth to argue that “[m]an needs a new language” in which one can demonstrate how relative, human, and artificial “truths have gone beyond those of the old order” established in myth (McGann, *Swinburne* 112). In doing so, I think that Swinburne is very careful to challenge his reader’s knowledge Greek myth, and thus his or her expectations about the “truths” explored in those myths. Contrary to the majority of previous critical readings, then, I contend that Swinburne uses Althaea’s speeches to challenge the easy fatalism of the educated reader. For example, Swinburne purposefully makes sure that Althaea’s commentary on other mythic characters, such as her sister Leda and Leda’s family, does not reflect the elements of the myths already familiar to his audience. When Althaea praises Leda’s husband, Tyndareus, for his devotion to the gods and praises the integrity of Leda’s daughters, Helen and Clytemnestra, wishing them “good loves and lords,” “a perfect life and blameless bed” (lines 423-25), Swinburne ensures that Althaea’s language carries no foreshadowing of what the educated reader already knows happens to Leda and her hardly “blameless” family: Tyndareus, repeating Oeneus’s error, forgets to sacrifice to Aphrodite, and thus Aphrodite supposedly curses both Helen and Clytemnestra to make marriages, wrecked by infidelity, that will bring

deadly consequences. Because Althaea's language does not feature *double entendres* pointing to the calamities which befall her nieces, I believe he shatters the hubris of mythic foreknowledge.

As a result, Althaea's speeches concerning prophecy, predestination, and the powers of the gods—more specifically, the prophecy of Meleager's death—can be read as attempts to undermine those very concepts. Althaea questions the enchantment of her world; for example, she refuses to praise Artemis “for all this harried land,” suggesting that the natural occurrences of death and destruction signified by the boar are not supernatural “things ... to praise” (lines 163-69). Swinburne presents the Chorus as her opposition, reinforcing the notion that the world is enchanted by the gods. When so goaded by the Chorus, Althaea retreats into prophetic mode, repetitively describing the imagery of the fire and the brand that was foretold to be Meleager's undoing;¹⁵ but, since Althaea's actions seem influenced by human voices rather than divine ones, Swinburne continues to suggest that it is the Chorus, not Artemis, manipulating Althaea by the very human power of suggestion to fulfill the “prophecy.” As in classical drama, the authority of the Chorus is not above interrogation.

It is important to note that Artemis herself never appears in the poem, even when called upon; in Swinburne's *Calydon*, she does not *really* exist. Though most readings of the poem, like Mark Siegchrist's, claim that Artemis is the poem's “pivotal figure” because all the characters are subject to her “expert manipulation of her victims’

¹⁵ According to the myth, Althaea dreamed of giving birth to a burning brand instead of a human child during her pregnancy; upon Meleager's actual birth, the Fates appeared to her with a burning brand and “prophesied” (Swinburne's word) that Meleager would live only as long as the brand burned. So Althaea extinguished the flame on the brand and tucked the brand away to save—or, as I would argue, maintain control over—Meleager's life. (See Swinburne's prologue to *Atalanta*, “The Argument,” pp. 243-44 in *Collected Poems*, vol. 4.)

psychology” (695, 697n4), I suggest instead that Artemis is pivotal only in her failure to display a palpable, definitive manifestation of her power. Artemis is not capable of manifestation in Swinburne’s poem because she is present only as the “phantasy to be found in the Platonic perspective of an absolute being to whom is transferred the quality of being all-seeing,” the determinant “gaze that circumscribes us” (Lacan, *Concepts* 75). And, because Artemis’s gaze is only ostensible, her ability to circumscribe all the events in the poem is questionable. Rather than portraying the gaze of Artemis as the frame limiting the actions of the plot, Swinburne presents it as a frame the characters themselves precariously superimpose on their actions to justify—to explain away, to give “meaning” to—the tangled web of accidental, subjective circumstances the events which comprise the plot.¹⁶ The characters in the poem are manipulated by their own psychology—their compulsions either to fulfill (Althaea, Meleager) or to sublimate (Atalanta) their desires, to have their desires recognized by an/other—as an effect of their discourse. Artemis exists in the poem, albeit virtually, to suggest that there is *no-thing* “beyond the domain of discursive existence” (Zizek, *Metastases* 143).

The contentious interplay of what is “natural” versus what is “unnatural”—meaning, not only the dichotomous interplay between the “natural world” and human domination of it, but also the dichotomy separating “natural,” meaning normative, human behavior and that behavior which falls outside the norm—is heightened by the purely virtual existence of the goddess in the poem. Artemis is comparable to Lacanian woman, the woman “who could fill out the lack in man, the ideal partner with whom the sexual

¹⁶ Inasmuch as “the many mythic figures can all be brought to a common denominator, and reduced to the human subject,” and myth, like magic, is “transform[ed] into the pure truth and act[s] as the very ground of the world that has become subject to it” (Horkheimer and Adorno 6-7, 9).

relationship would finally be possible, ... who does not exist" (Zizek, *Lacan* 80).

Swinburne continually emphasizes Artemis's chastity, specifically the vow of chastity Atalanta made to show her devotion to Artemis. Such continual references reinforce the impossibility of the sexual relationship, in the Lacanian sense that the sexual relationship neither fulfills human desires, nor does it allow for the unification of self and other.

Atalanta is continually described as "unnatural"; as Lacan would say, Atalanta is "unnatural" because she allocates her desire not to human (sexual) expression but in her aim for "the beyond of *até*," which is "beyond the limits of the human" (*Seminar* 263). And, inasmuch as "[*a*]*té* concerns the Other, the field of the Other" here (*Seminar* 277)—in this case, the Other being Artemis and the field of the Other being the virtual authority of her divine law, which is an illusory structure governing what is considered "natural"—Atalanta can be read both the representative of the Other as well as what Zizek calls "The Other of the Other" who, as I will argue below, is not deceived by the illusory structure, although she "holds and manipulates the threads of the deception proper to the symbolic order," maintaining the illusion of the enchanted world (Zizek, *Lacan* 81).

The Chorus proclaims Atalanta to be "holier than all holy days or things" (line 195). Arguably, in this description, the Chorus places Atalanta in opposition to Artemis herself, thus establishing Atalanta as "holier," and thus *other* than, the goddess.

Described as having "no touch of love," as she is "Pure iron, fashioned for a sword" and thus incapable of human feeling (lines 189, 199-200),¹⁷ Atalanta is dehumanized:

paradoxically, despite the ways in which she seems to oppose Artemis, she still is little

¹⁷ Consider the rest of lines 199-200 not quoted above: "... and man / She loves not; what should one such do with love?" This can be read two ways. On the surface level, this is another comment about Atalanta's chastity, but this also questions Atalanta's very humanity. Her sexual inexperience seems to indicate an inability to forge the more common bonds of empathy with others.

more than the sword which is a metonym for Artemis's power. Yet Atalanta's inhumanity is not an "immediate property" of her character, especially since Swinburne devotes very little time in the poem to developing Atalanta as a character; in the entire poem, Atalanta speaks only five times. Rather, Atalanta's inhumanity is established by the Calydonians' behavior toward her, as they treat her with suspicious awe and anxious consternation. This is a "performative effect of their symbolic ritual" (Zizek, *Lacan* 33) of appeasing an ambivalent—and illusory—goddess. Atalanta recognizes the limitations of being perceived as a metonymic representative of Artemis's will, admitting,

for all my forest holiness,
Fame, and this armed and iron maidenhood,
[I] Pay thus much also.... (964-66)

Yet, at the same time, by claiming that she is no less "godlike" in "heart" and "spirit" than Artemis (994-96), she calls into question that which she metonymically represents. By momentarily projecting the illusory image of herself as a goddess, Atalanta implies that perhaps Artemis's goddesshood is just as illusory.

Identifying with such tenuous divine power causes Atalanta to lead a life she finds "cold" and "strange" (line 971), though she claims a special, almost transcendent, relationship with an enchanted, animated nature as compensation for her lack of human experience:

Me the utmost pine and footless frost of woods
That talk with many winds and gods, the hours
Re-risen, and white divisions of the dawn,
Springs thousand-tongued with the intermitting reed

And streams that murmur of the mother snow—

Me these allure, and know me; but no man

Knows, and my goddess only.... (979-86)

Atalanta makes this speech to pacify the Calydonians, to reinforce their symbolic belief system as well as to convince them that her participation in the hunting party provides divine assurance of the hunt's success. Her claim rings false, though, because her descriptions are rife with images of division and dissonance instead of images suggesting an undifferentiated relationship between human and nature. Atalanta's speech is not the field in which the transcendent qualities of the enchanted world are given full expression; instead, this speech is her attempt to convince herself of an illusory transcendence. Especially considering that she repeatedly uses the personal pronoun "me" as the locus for every "proof" of the animate world, her speech shows only how she is "separated from transcendence"; ultimately, despite her intentions, it implies that transcendence is "unreal," "subjectively mediated" by Atalanta herself, *not* her goddess.¹⁸ Atalanta seems a transcendent figure because of her "eloquence"—an eloquence beyond "the oaths / That bind the tongue of men ..." (lines 1006-07)—but it is the kind of consciously scripted eloquence Adorno says is rife "with broken or veiled meaning" (*Theory* 78). In other words, her self-possession is undermined by the "thousand-tongued" voices that Atalanta discursively represents—the voices or several layers of myth imposed upon the world in attempts to explain the world and give it meaning. Her monologue is like "myth turned against itself" inasmuch as her description of transcendent immediacy becomes the

¹⁸ See Adorno, *Theory* 78.

catastrophic instant that destroys immediacy.¹⁹ As her language “undoes” itself, it expresses the ruins and fragments of the catastrophe of meaning which speak to the mythic quality of humanity and its differential and alienated relationship to *mana*. As the Chorus remarks in the commentary following Atalanta’s monologue, human speech serves only to “divide and rend” human beings from the kind of immediacy represented by God (line 1202).

Althaea’s speeches similarly express these kinds of “ruins and fragments” of a trace memory of wholeness and unity before the “fall” into subjective differentiation. Specifically, Althaea questions the role of the “fallen” subject—how that subject perpetually intervenes in the disenchanting world in order to exercise some control over it—and ponders her ability to express her own will. On one hand, Althaea seems to deny that she can exercise her own will:

But all the gods will, all they do; and we

Not all we would, yet somewhat; and one choice

We have, to live and to do just deeds and die. (1759-61)

The significance of this passage hinges on the word “choice.” Is the “one choice” to be mere agents of the gods’ will, to commit deeds that are “just” only because the gods willed them so? Or, is the “one choice” to live according to one’s own will, to impose one’s will on the world and, in doing so, commit deeds that are “just” because one subjectively determines them to be so? The Chorus interprets Althaea’s statement to imply the latter treatment of “choice,” for they admonish her for the “Terrible words she

¹⁹ I have adapted this from Adorno’s contention that “the modern is myth turned against itself; the timelessness of myth becomes the catastrophic instant that destroys temporal continuity ...” (*Theory* 23).

communes with”; yet this is also the moment in which they remind her of the prophecy, reinvoking the treatment of “choice” which is no one’s choice but the gods’, saying she “murmurs as who talks in dreams with death” (lines 1762-64). The fragmented allusion of the prophecy of Meleager’s death appears here as if the Chorus “want[s] to prevent the catastrophe by conjuring up its image” (Adorno, *Theory* 33). Instead, though, when the Chorus conjures the image of Meleager’s death, they effect, not prevent, the catastrophe of Meleager’s death.

The choice Althaea makes is to kill her son, supposedly a “just” act of honor and duty that avenges her brothers’ deaths at the hands of Meleager. More pointedly, though, it is an act that defies the gods themselves, an act in which she subjects the world to her ego:

You strong gods,

Give place unto me; I am as any of you,

To give life and to take life.... (1863-65)

She exerts this control by murdering Meleager to demonstrate “the might of [her] strong desire” (line 1963). Furthermore, Althaea resents Meleager for believing that the world—nature—is enchanted by the gods and thus possesses “a creative and radiant potentiality” (Prendergast 68) that was once, and could again be, actualized. In other words, Meleager does not share in Althaea’s emerging assumption that such potentiality would be a strictly human one that can be actualized through the individual ego.

Meleager believes that creative potential can be actualized through dedicating oneself to the gods in order to access nature immediately; he praises Atalanta, “a light lit at the hands of gods” (line 915), because he believes that she has accessed that potential

through her pious dedication to the gods' order. He even murders his uncles because they dishonor Atalanta and hence refuse to pay homage to the gods' emissary, to recognize Atalanta as the symbol of the potentiality granted by divine will, when they celebrated victory over the boar. As McGann points out, Meleager is "high-minded" and "attracted" to the abstract, if not objective, ideal of "perfection" and perfectibility which he believes Atalanta represents (*Swinburne* 96); Atalanta contrasts with the concrete, "created ... reality of life and value" represented by Althaea and his uncles (Coleman 18). By dishonoring Atalanta, Meleager's uncles dishonor, by failing to recognize, his desire for a "plenipotentiary of immediacy"—or *mana*—amid an otherwise "mediated and objectified world" (Adorno, *Theory* 62). Such plenipotential immediacy is impossible in Althaea's world view; by dedicating himself to his desire for it, then, Meleager is just as "strange" and "beyond the human" as Atalanta.

I believe that Althaea is at variance with Meleager because she perceives that his desire for a plenipotentiary of immediacy has a "radically destructive character" in that it defies the "social body" (Lacan, *Seminar* 283), or the *polis*. Adam Roberts has argued that the destruction of the social body of Calydon is "twofold": the *polis* is attacked from the outside (by the boar) and the resulting chaos "undermines its unity from the inside" (760). However, whereas Roberts reads Artemis as the force causing this destruction, I read Artemis as the place-holder for Meleager's "radically destructive" desire. Consequently, Althaea's act of filicide can then be read, in part, as her choice to salvage individually what little unity is left in the *polis* by meting out justice: "Being just, I had slain their slayer atoningly" (line 1640). Yet Althaea does not perceive that, because her act is rife with subjective differentiation in that she reifies her "fleeting individual

reactions” (Adorno, *Theory* 239) into “law,” she similarly defies the social body. It is Meleager, not Althaea, who recognizes that the social body of Calydon is “foul / With the kinship of contaminated lives” (3082-83); the law of the *polis* can be “chalked up to [each individual’s] guilty desires” and, as a result, “[i]t suits”—or, perhaps more aptly in this case, *fosters*—“domination” (*Theory* 239). Here, such guilt, “the context of social delusion” (Horkheimer and Adorno 41), revolves around *até*—what Lacan calls “the relationship of the hero to the limit,” or the “criminal desire” of the mother which is “the founding desire of the whole structure” (*Seminar* 286, 283).

Até, in this case, corresponds to what Žižek calls the “maternal superego.” In the Lacanian schema, the maternal superego opposes the paternal ego-ideal which organizes social structure: the “primal father” symbolically represents the authority/social order in which an individual situates him or herself as well as organizes the repression of desires which would otherwise undermine that social order, but the maternal superego represents resistance to this authority, the very desire that is otherwise repressed. In Swinburne’s Calydon, the “primal father,” Zeus, is merely a paternal metaphor (“the sole steersman of the helm of things” [line 715]) invoked to uphold divine order; when Meleager invokes him, though, Meleager only incites Althaea’s resistance to godly/paternalistic authority. Likewise, Oeneus is an ineffective king who is unable to enact or enforce any law that will influence the course of events. Because the paternal ordering principle represented by Zeus and Oeneus is ineffective and thus “deficient,” the law of the *polis* “regress[es]’ toward a ferocious maternal superego” which “disturbs” normativity (Žižek, *Lacan* 99).

On one level, Artemis figures this regression because, as a chaste goddess who demands chastity from her followers, she prevents the “normal” sexual relationship upon

which human relationships are modeled. However, because Artemis is physically absent from the poem, the maternal superego seems more fervently represented by Atalanta and Althaea. Atalanta cannot engage in a “normal” sexual relationship with Meleager; because she represents the impossibility of fulfilling human desire, she perpetually, ferociously, disruptively re-evokes those desires that the social order attempts to repress—inasmuch as desire always perpetuates and sustains itself. Atalanta violates the “rule” with her “perverse will” (lines 476, 469). “Unwomanlike,” Atalanta disturbs normativity, since she “treads down use and wont / And the sweet common honor that [woman] hath” (477-78) under the paternal rule:

Not fire nor iron and the wide-mouthed wars
 Are deadlier than her lips or braided hair.
 For of one comes poison, and a curse
 Falls from the other and burns the lives of men. (482-85)

However, because Atalanta insists that, despite the social disruption she brings to Calydon, she still acts in accord with the “law given and clean command” (line 896)—meaning, only within the established social order and only because she wishes to maintain that order—she represents the limit of *até* that Althaea will exceed.

Ultimately, the *polis* is undermined because Althaea embodies the “(real) knowledge” of subjective, differentiating “agency that perturbs and hinders the [symbolic] rule of the Name-of-the-Father” upon which the *polis* depends (Žizek, *Lacan* 27, 97). Althaea constantly dismisses Atalanta for being “beyond the human,” but, “[a]s one made drunk with living” and “mad for joy” (line 1915-16) upon committing her act of filicide, Althaea is the one who is “beyond”:

I am severed from myself, my name is gone,

My name that was a healing, it is changed,

My name is a consuming.... (1942-44)

Althaea is “severed from herself” inasmuch as her prior expression of “self” was as the queen of Calydon, the representative of a whole social body; now, though, the Chorus—the collective voice of the *polis*—decrees that, as “Her robes” are no longer “manifold” but too differentiated, “the days of her worship are done, / [and] Her praise is taken away” (1956-58). Her act of “justice” did not heal the social body; rather, the social body was expended (“consumed”) in her desire to find a “locus of truth” outside of the field of the Other.²⁰ The poem ends with the Chorus asking,

Who shall contend with his lords

Or cross them or do them wrong?

Who shall bind them as with cords?

Who shall tame them as with song?

Who shall smite them as with swords? (4111-15)

The Chorus then answers their own questions by proclaiming that there is no one who can go beyond, no one who can exceed these limits, “for the hands of their kingdom are strong” (4116); but, the poem itself contradicts the Chorus’ answer.

McGann has previously stated that the tragedy, though “formally” Meleager’s, is really Althaea’s (*Swinburne* 95). However, whereas McGann finds Althaea tragic because her “life has been broken” by the limitations of fate (*Swinburne* 95), I believe

²⁰ As Lacan points out, the Other (*le grand Autre*) is the symbolic ordering principle (the “Law”) which gives the subject its position. Here, though, the subject—Althaea—wants to inhabit a position that is not determined by that ordering principle. (See Lacan, *Concepts* 129.)

Althaea is a tragic figure because she must actively renegotiate her relationship to the limits that prevent her from achieving the goal of desire—all the while failing to achieve that goal—rather than passively accept those limitations as what Horkheimer and Adorno would call a “false absolute.”

“The gods are overthrown by the very system by which they are honored”:

The Politics of Serial Identification and Renegotiating the Limits in *Erechtheus*

Perhaps the most obvious difference between *Atalanta in Calydon* and *Erechtheus* is in Swinburne’s treatment of identity. As David Riede has noted, *Erechtheus*’s aesthetic importance “must be understood from its form, not its plot,” since it is often difficult to distinguish major differences between individual characters; the characters, developed according to Swinburne’s “system of correspondences” in which “everything in the play eventually suggests everything else,” seem fluidly interchangeable (*Study* 116). Because the poetic form is of utmost importance, Swinburne chooses an extremely, but deceptively, simple plot: the Delphic Oracle has instructed Erechtheus and Praxithea, King and Queen of Athens, to sacrifice their daughter, Chthonia, to ensure Athens’ victory in the war against Thrace. Erechtheus is reluctant though compelled to obey, but Chthonia obeys willingly, recasting blind obedience to the gods as a willing choice to sacrifice herself for the greater good of Athens. Whereas *Atalanta*’s intensity comes from the complications of its plot, with each individualized character offering contiguous but distinct perspectives for Swinburne’s multitudinous look into the mythopoeic, *Erechtheus* is intense because it is Swinburne’s attempt to complicate conventional modes of identification by intermixing multiple characters’ perspective(s) in a mode of

plethoric simultaneity. Every character, every image, is an ideogram, or what Martin Jay would call a cipher of the “richly articulated surface of [the] world” it figuratively describes rather than literally explains (“Scopic” 13). In this way, Swinburne establishes a negative dialectic—or amalgamation of identity and non-identity—of “likeness” between art’s immanent “spirit” and a “later, derived ‘material’ application” or representation of that spirit (Mitchell, *Iconology* 32-33). As Adorno explains in *Aesthetic Theory*, the “spirit” of an artwork is that which becomes more than—exceeds—its appearance; spirit is what is implied, what can only be gestured at, via the “configuration” of art’s signifying elements. Thus, for Swinburne, the image or symbol is “not to be held simply identical” with what it feigns to represent; instead, the image or symbol can resist being “fixated in immediate identity” with the unrepresentable (*Theory* 86-87). In *Erechtheus*, Swinburne comes closer to approximating the “plenipotentiary of immediacy” denied to Meleager under the unforgiving absolutes in *Atalanta*.

Erechtheus’s opening monologue establishes the mode of Swinburnian plethoric simultaneity that dominates the poem. In this, the only sizeable speech he makes in the entire poem, Erechtheus is established as the nexus of aesthetic representation and resistance, beginning with his claim to be interchangeably the son of Gaia, the son of Hephaestus, and the foster son of Athena. In doing so, Swinburne braids three narrative threads of the parentage of Erechtheus into one. With his considerable knowledge of classical literature and equally considerable translation skills, Swinburne would have been aware that the stories of Erechtheus and his grandfather Erechthonius were typically conflated in most of the classical accounts. According to Athenian foundation myths, the first Athenians were half-serpentine *autochthons*—meaning, they were parthogenetically

formed from the earth; Erechthonius, the second king of Athens, was one of these autochthonic beings. Another version of the myth claims that Erechthonius was born out of a failed union between Hephaestus and Athena: disgusted by Hephaestus's attempt to make love to her, Athena jumped from the bed before Hephaestus could impregnate her, and Erechthonius sprung from Hephaestus's spilled semen. Then there are the myths delineating Erechtheus's human parentage²¹ though maintaining that he was actually raised as Athena's child. The allusions to Erechtheus being of parthenogenetic parentage while he, paradoxically, is also the son of a "strong cunning God" (line 7) present him as a Christ figure, though the inclusion of a simultaneous allusion to Phaeton recalls the ineffectual Christ figure of the *Songs before Sunrise*. Like Phaeton losing control of the fiery "four-yoked chariot" of his father, the sun-god Helios who both is and is not Apollo,²² Erechtheus feels he is losing control of his kingdom: He describes himself "the king / Who stand[s] ... naked" before the earth, subject to a greater power which, like a "curse / ... fall[s] as fire upon us" (17-18, 23-24), subsuming the narrative thread of Phaeton's disastrous end into his own, arguably to invoke the image of catastrophe to prevent it. The law of nature, "of life and death and all men's days" represented by the earth, is trumped by the "curse" of the imposing father figure (Hephaestus, Helios, the Judeo-Christian God) whose symbolic law denies one access to the earth-as-"mother of all men born" (*Erechtheus* 1, 19). The tyrannical imposition of the symbolic law, "God's

²¹ The non-parthenogenic Erechtheus is said to be the son of Pandion (also one of the kings of Athens, sometimes also named as the father of Procne and Philomela) and a nymph, Zeuxippe.

²² Initially, Helios was a separate deity from Apollo; however, in later incarnations of the Greek pantheon, especially those developed under the influence of the Romans, Helios became conflated with Apollo, and thus Apollo became the god representing the sun.

will,” is exemplified in the gods’ demand that Erechtheus sacrifice his daughter, Chthonia (line 78).

The supposed agency of the Delphic Oracle issuing this charge is incorporated in the image of Helios. The image of Apollo/Helios, “a fire-souled king” (line 47), is grafted onto the image of Poseidon, whose edict is the “loud brood of the Thracian foam” imposing his will “on the sea-wind” of war “blown” toward Athens (lines 44, 56). In this passage, Poseidon plays a similar role to that of Apollo in the *Oresteia*, issuing an edict for murder to reinforce the primacy of what Lacan would call the “name of the father.” In Aeschylus’s play, Apollo calls for Orestes to kill his mother, Clytemnestra, for asserting a version of the maternal superego and killing her husband, Agamemnon; in *Erechtheus*, Poseidon issues a similar call for the death of Chthonia to reinforce his paternalism, punishing Erechtheus for waging war against the Thracians, led by Poseidon’s son Eumolpus. Since Poseidon’s edict is “A strange growth grafted on our natural soil, / A root of Thrace in Eleusinian earth” (48-49), the traces of the myths that claim Erechtheus was punished for causing the death of Eumolpus’s son, Himmarados, during the previous war between Athens and Eleusis are evident here. Moreover, since Eumolpus is also the son of a god—ostensibly the agent of that god’s will on earth—who is eventually killed (sacrificed) by Erechtheus as well to “save” Athens, Eumolpus becomes another Christ figure. He exists in a negative dialectic with Erechtheus²³—especially because Swinburne establishes in Erechtheus’s opening monologue that there

²³ My reading directly opposes David Riede’s analysis that “the division between Athens and Thrace, between Erechtheus and Eumolpus, suggests a division between Erechtheus’s mother, earth, and Eumolpus’s father, the sea,” providing a static binarism that foregrounds and maintains the poem’s system of “metaphoric correspondences” (*Study* 117). Though I agree that Swinburne sustains the gender divisions in the poem, I otherwise find Riede’s reading too literal, as it dwells on the maintenance of dichotomies and ignores the reconfigurations of identity formation so crucial to the poem.

is no “fixed *I*-identity” in the world of this poem. In the negative dialectic, Adorno tells us, “the individual is not flatly for himself. In himself, he is his otherness and linked with others”; the individual ego, the “self” initially formed in contrast to an/other, must accommodate (rather than constrain) the other which opposes it and render the other as “something beyond contradiction” (*Negative* 161, 146). Identity here becomes a subtle, fluid, constant process of relating otherwise discrete qualities. One must follow “the accumulating ranges of pattern,” the presentation of “motif and variation” (McGann, *Swinburne* 119) in a constellative mode which allows the borders separating individual subjects—individual egos—to bleed into one another. In this way, Swinburne allows the “fixed-*I* identity [to] dissolv[e]” between Erechtheus and Erechthonius and between the various gods. As a result, the relationship between Erechtheus and Eumolpus, as fluid subjects only superficially establishing the poles of conflict in this poem, remains open to the kind of Adornian model of intersubjectivity that Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf say “is not immediately ascribable”; in this model, each subject or “self” opens itself “to what is not identical,” potentially providing access to the other subject or “self” in the dialectic relationship (287).

By blurring the boundaries establishing Erechtheus’s identity as separate from Eumolpus’s, Swinburne also blurs the boundaries that make the gods’ will dissimilar from the sons’. Erechtheus declares that

what [the gods] will is more than our desire,
 And their desire is more than what we will.
 For no man’s will and no desire of man’s
 Shall stand as doth a God’s will.... (75-78)

But, for Erechtheus (as well as Eumolpus, by constellative association) the struggle between divine agency and human agency has become the struggle to establish “sovereignty over existence.” Both Erechtheus and Eumolpus, like Althaea in *Atalanta*, “pay for the increase of their power with alienation from that over which they exercise their power” (Horkheimer and Adorno 9). The gods’ will is “the projection onto nature of the subjective,” in that these gods are “mirror images of [these] men who allow themselves to be frightened by natural phenomena” (Horkheimer and Adorno 6)—particularly, in this case, death. Man’s desire is for a “freedom-toward-death,” to fulfill desire by mastering it, by seeing one’s own death, reaching the impossible goal of satiating desire in death’s nothingness. However, the human expression of desire cannot assert such frightening “pure and insatiable vacuity” (Borch-Jacobsen 11); thus, one substitutes a desired *thing*—here, Chthonia, whose impending death gestures at the death of Himmarados palimpsestically traced in Swinburne’s poem—for the real goal, and consequently, this substitution (of seeing another’s death rather than one’s own) perpetuates desire itself.

As a Christ figure, Erechtheus is denied a death which is *nothingness*. Erechtheus dies in battle, but he is killed by Zeus rather than by another human being, such as Eumolpus. The battle is really Erechtheus’s Calvary, where he is always already forsaken by Zeus, whom Swinburne describes in Judeo-Christian terms as the “King of kings, holiest of holies, and mightiest of might, / Lord of the lords ...,”²⁴ who has preordained for Erechtheus “an end for the path of the fires of the sun”—a path which the

²⁴ Rev. 19.16: “On [the Messiah’s] robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, ‘King of kings and Lord of lords.’”

Chorus acknowledges will “Take off us [humans] thy burden, and give us not wholly to death” (780-82, 791). Not incidentally, the mention of the “holiest of holies” recalls an earlier reference in the poem to the “shrine of Pandrosus” (line 460), the earthly, metonymic sanctuary devoted to the martyred king incorporated into of the Temple of Athena Polias.²⁵ With the phrase “holiest of holies,” Swinburne plays on the biblical language of Hebrews 9.1-10, in which Moses’s “earthly sanctuary” to God, the metonymic altar of God’s power called the “Holy of Holies,” is reinvoked to mark the advent of “the time [which] comes to set things right,” or the time of a new covenant between God and humanity initiated by the death of Christ. In *Erechtheus*, the time to “set things right”—to establish a new relationship between humanity and the divine, the law of the *polis* and divine law—comes when the Athenians retrieve Erechtheus’s body from the battlefield, “bear[ing] him slain of no man but a God, / Godlike ...”; “through him”—the supposed power represented in his lifeless body—they claim Athens is “Saved[,] and the whole clear land is purged ...” (1588-91). By claiming that the gods, and not a human agent him or herself, holds such power over the entirety of death, either in caprice or by providential circumscription, the Athenians paradoxically wield “the discourse of full satisfaction” (Borch-Jacobsen 11) while becoming increasingly alienated from it. At this point, the Athenians’ worship of their dead king’s body as a site of power reinforces the very sense of alienation rife in Erechtheus’s initial speech questioning divine will. Moreover, it also reinforces the importance for the human agents in the poem to reinvent Athens as a “Dear city without [a] master or lord” (line 138)—without either a living human lord or even the pervasive presence of a divine one.

²⁵ See Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 1.26.5.

Consequently, most criticism on *Erechtheus* identifies Chthonia, not Erechtheus, as the more critically important Christ figure in Swinburne's poem because this "city without a master or lord" must be founded upon a feminine principle—what Roberts calls "a sort of super-fertility" (766)—that both corresponds to and offsets the "name of the father" which has become counterproductive. From the "death" of Athens' paternalistic ruler comes its rebirth: as Margot Louis argues, "All Athenians will be the children of Chthonia" rather than Erechtheus, privileging Chthonia's proclamation of herself "for all the world / ... a saviour," although a savior who evokes the trace memory of Mother Nature before she was subjected to men, a Gaia/Hertha whose "womb / ... brought forth / For all this people freedom" (*Gods* 66; *Erechtheus* 939-40, 930-31). This is not the same disruptive feminine principle that Swinburne creates in the triangulation of Althaea/Atalanta/Artemis in *Atalanta in Calydon*, though, because the extreme subjective differentiation that causes the tension within that triad is notably muted in the plethoric immediacy that appears in the presentation of Chthonia—who is (her mother) Praxithea—who is Athena, all of whom *are* Athens, in *Erechtheus*.²⁶ In *Atalanta*, the triangulated female characters create the "arbitrary" and "'irrational' maternal superego" which inhibits and denies pleasure, thus creating an "unresolved tension in intersubjective relations" (Žižek, *Lacan* 99); this repudiation of pleasure is suggested by the emphasis placed on Artemis's and Atalanta's virginity as well as the emphasis placed on Althaea's desire, desire that causes her to pursue not pleasure but "the violence that [her] desire institutes" (Guzynski 210). I contend, however, that the female characters in *Erechtheus*

²⁶ This is based, in part, on McGann's prior assertion that, the characters' "identities tend to dissolve into other characters and contexts" so that "the characters and actions in *Erechtheus* seem to share [a] sort of radical vagueness...: because everything is necessarily conceived and defined in terms of something and everything else" (*Swinburne* 127).

are not forced to inhibit and deny pleasure by the same kind of maternal superego. Instead, as I will argue below, Chthonia and her mother, Praxithea, find a pleasure beyond the limits of either the maternal superego or the paternalistic prohibition, a pleasure that does not originate in the alienation between human law and the law of nature.²⁷

This is the pleasure of intimacy between human law and the law of nature first indicated by Erechtheus in his appeal to Gaia, describing his ideal Athens as a

girdle of gate and temple and citadel

Drawn round beneath thy bosom, and fast linked

As to thine heart's root—this dear crown of thine. (84-86)

Erechtheus cannot experience this kind of intimacy, but his desire for it is intensified in Chthonia's acceptance of her role as a human sacrifice. Because she can regard herself as a cipher for the possibilities of realizing a new kind of "dominion and freedom" for Athens (line 1095) which will not so distinctively alienate "[i]nexhaustibility [and] unending renewal," she seems able to tap into what Horkheimer and Adorno call the "something of *mana*" left in the world (17). Thus Chthonia surrenders herself:

I put on me the darkness thy shadow, my mother, and symbol, O Earth, of
my name....

In thy likeness I come to thee darkling, a daughter whose dawn and her
even are the same. (1102-04)

In *Erotism*, Georges Bataille asserts that the Christian "wish" is "to open the door to a completely unquestioning love" (118). By presenting Chthonia's death as a moment in

²⁷ See Marcuse 227.

which she simultaneously discovers and submits to a “completely unquestioning love” like that between mother and daughter, Swinburne renders Chthonia’s sacrifice as an attempt to fulfill a similar kind of Christian “wish.” The element of *mana* Chthonia intuitively here is like the hopeful Christian belief that the “lost continuity” between humanity and nature can be rediscovered through “boundless and uncalculated love”; the boundless and uncalculated love she has for the Gaia is the same love she has for Athens, the city which is “the fruit of [Gaia’s] body” and whose citizens are Gaia’s “children true-born” (line 1157). Through her self-sacrifice, Chthonia hopes to transform the “vision of violence” of human sacrifice “into its opposite,” a serene vision of unselfish love that can incite the “world of selfish discontinuity” to become instead a “realm of continuity afire with love” (*Erotism* 118).

By identifying the “dawn” of human hope with the “shadow” of mythic fear in a negative dialectic, Chthonia seems to renegotiate the conventions, or limits, of ritual sacrifice. The kind of Christ-like sacrifice Chthonia makes typically requires a selflessness; in other words, the sacrificing self is assumed to disregard her own self, her own fears and desires, in order to alleviate the fears and capitulate to the desires of others. However, Chthonia’s sacrifice becomes just as much about Chthonia’s desire as it is about her heroic gesture of regard for an other or others (Athens). Her death seems a conscious choice not to cede her desire: she fully accepts the nothingness of desire, refusing to see herself as a victim but instead as a pure subject assuming the death drive imposed upon her. That choice allows her a moment in which she paradoxically “seems permeated with intense pleasure” though she also “suffers immensely” (Zizek, *Lacan* 65). Though in death she claims to experience a kind of “love” in which she can “Laugh

without word, filled with sweet light, and speak / Divine dumb things of the inward spirit and heart,” she also laments that she will be left with only “dead thoughts of dead things” in a “sterile” grave-bed “with its void sad sheets” (lines 916-24).

Regarding herself as the cipher of Athens’ potential, she also experiences herself as the object of the ritual, striving for her own “radical self-annihilation”—which, like Zizek states, entails going “beyond mere physical destruction” and performing “the effacement of the very symbolic texture of” the continuity between “generation and corruption” her sacrifice is supposed to restore (*Lacan* 64). Like the promise of redemption and eternal life signified by Christ, she is the object by which “mankind tries to avoid the terms set to individual discontinuity, death, and invents a discontinuity unassailable by death—that is, the immortality of discontinuous beings” (*Bataille, Erotism* 119). And, because Chthonia subjectively chooses her self-annihilation while concurrently capitulating to her status as ritual object, she exhibits the kind of ambiguity that Zizek attributes to the *femme fatale*, in that “[w]e can never be sure if she enjoys or suffers, if she manipulates or is herself the victim of manipulation” (*Lacan* 65). At the same time, though, it is because Swinburne creates this lack of certainty regarding the palpable limits of her sacrificial death—her limit experience, so to speak—that Chthonia seems to achieve the dis-alienation that Erechtheus cannot.

Praxithea shares in the intensity of traversing conventional limits and experiencing pleasure which is suffering; she engages in self-conscious manipulation of her given situation while concurrently being manipulated by the social conditions which place her in that very situation. There is a sense of elation in Praxithea’s willingness to give her “gift,” “This flower of this my body, this sweet life, / ... And give it death,”

because Chthonia's death "is more, / Much more is this than all we [are]" (1032, 1034-39). On the surface, Praxithea claims that her daughter's sacrifice is hers to make but, importantly, she does not ascribe to it the kinds of subjective reasons Althaea makes for her sacrifice of Meleager. Because she does not dwell on such subjectively differentiated reasons, she is able to articulate her position as a particular Athenian representing, and not striving beyond, the collective position of the *polis*. In the careful inclusion of the pronoun "we," Swinburne has Praxithea not only identify herself with Chthonia as the "flower of ... [her] body," but also with the entirety of Athens:

See now, friends,

My countrymen, my brothers, with what heart

I give you this that of *your* hands again

The Gods require for Athens; as *I* give

So give ye.... (1069-72, emphases mine)

In this way, Swinburne presents Praxithea as manipulating the gods' edict for sacrifice as retributive justice by making it into a call to strengthen the *polis*, though Praxithea—who is ideographically all of Athens here—is still manipulated by the compulsion to make the sacrifice in the first place. Sacrificing Chthonia, whether undertaken merely to appease the gods or to foster a new sense of "a human society ruled ... by ethical responsibilities" (Murfin 210), is still an attempt to barter with the gods: Praxithea maintains, much more than she disrupts, the texture of the traditional symbolic network by using Chthonia as what Horkheimer and Adorno call "a device of *men* by which the gods may be mastered" (49, emphasis added).

The gods are still present here as very separate from—beyond—men, especially as the Athenians promise to worship Chthonia's name after her death: "such grace / The Gods have dealt to no man" or woman, save Chthonia, who bears a "heavy sorrow" beyond human comprehension (1085-86). The Chorus proclaims that Chthonia has "godhead in [her] blood" and, as such, her "name / Shall be ... this city's," worshipped next to "hers that called it Athens"—meaning, Athena's (1087-91). The martyred Chthonia, then, still parallels her martyred father in that she seems more *Cristo deo* than *Cristo uomo*. Additionally, the Chorus remarks upon Chthonia's death:

her mouth was a fountain of song,

And her heart as a citadel strong

That guards the heart of the city. (1195-97)

By choosing to have the Chorus use words similar to those spoken by Erechtheus as he imagines the idealized, sanctified Athens in the poem's opening monologue, Swinburne demonstrates how Chthonia, via serial identification with Praxithea as well as Erechtheus, "sums up in herself both the female and male agents of redemption; she, perhaps, is the perfect [Swinburnian] hermaphrodite" (Louis, *Gods* 66). That being said, the presentation falls short of being utterly convincing until the figure of the divine, Athena, is transformed into a totem for "that ideal agnostic state" (Murfin 210), representing men striving, and sometimes suffering in their failure, to maintain community with others rather than causing men to suffer arbitrarily and for selfish reasons.²⁸

²⁸ In *Swinburne and His Gods*, Margot Louis applies Ludwig Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* (1854, trans. George Eliot [New York: Harper, 1957])—particularly Feuerbach's statement that "he who suffers

At first, Athena's appearance as the *deus ex machina* solidifying the nascent "agnostic state" of Athens seems idiosyncratic—especially considering that, in *Atalanta*, Artemis, who is presented much more discernibly as an instrumental artifice of manipulative divine power, never materially manifests herself in Calydon. However, Artemis remains a problematic presence in Calydon specifically because of her absence. As absence-which-is-presence, Artemis's abstract or virtual "appearance" in *Atalanta* is comparable to what Adorno recognizes as the "imitation of fear"—the primal fear of the unknown²⁹—in that Artemis "perpetuates the mythic spell" of fear against which the Calydonians simultaneously "rebel" yet to which they remain "subordinate" (*Theory* 47). If Artemis were to appear in Calydon, she would break the spell, reveal herself as artifice, and thus transfer her supposed control over "the incomprehensibility of death ... to wholly comprehensible real existence" (Horkheimer and Adorno 29). But this transfer of control is precisely what Athena accomplishes in the final action of *Erechtheus*: as McGann astutely suggests, "[t]his Pallas is no longer an Olympian, but a Republican" (Swinburne 129). Like the Athena of Aeschylus's *Eumenides*, Swinburne's refashioned goddess demonstrates how the human-centered republic of Athens "cannot progress by exterminating its old order" but by "absorb[ing] and us[ing]" the old order as part of the new (Greene and Lattimore, *Aeschylus* 31).

for others, who lays down his life for them, acts divinely, is as a God to men"—to her reading of *Erechtheus*. I have loosely adapted from Louis's reading here. See *Gods* 68-69.

²⁹ In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno contend that humans create mythic stories of the gods because "[m]an imagines himself free from fear when there is no longer anything unknown" (16); mythic constructs are offered to explain the unknown and thus alleviate some of the fear. Yet the arbitrary quality of the gods in these myths paradoxically makes human beings fear the very gods constructed to alleviate fear. And, as Adorno notes in his *Aesthetic Theory*, "mythical fear diminish[es] with the awakening of subjectivity," though the "old images of terror" persist because the subject, unable to free her/himself from them completely, "perpetuates the mythical spell" of that fear "against which [s/]he rebels and to which [s/]he is subordinate" (47).

Though emphasizing that the transition of power occurs by her “command” and is meant to honor what “The Gods have stablished” (*sic*, lines 1666, 1668), Athena tells the Athenians:

thine shall be

The crown of all songs sung, of *all* deeds done

Thine the full flower for all time; in *thine* hand

Shall time be like a scepter ...

... *thine* eyes

Shall *first in man*’s flash lightning liberty,

Thy tongue shall *first* say freedom.... (1681-89, emphases added)

In his pivotal reading of *Erechtheus*, Ross Murfin claims this is the moment in which republican citizenship is established: from this point forward, he argues, “[t]he only citizenship which would have virtue after the moment of man’s spiritual and social revolt” against the old order of divine caprice “would be man’s natural citizenship within Nature” (210). In this case, such “natural citizenship” suggests that humans will accept their failure to exert control over the inevitable cycle of birth and death; the “scepter” of time may be in human hands, but only in the sense that human will, rather than divine circumscription, determines how women and men spend the time allotted to them. As Athena reminds them, “time and change” will remain “masters and lords of all men” even though time and change will seem to “be made / To thee that knowest no master and no lord / Servants” (1725-28)—echoing Chthonia’s earlier reminder that, though she dies to purchase freedom for Athens, still “Day to day makes answer, first to last, and life to death,” as she, like all else, was “Born for death’s sake, die[s] for life’s sake” (884-85).

Swinburne, while regressing back to the mythic mode in which spirit is recognized “only as immersed in nature, as natural power,” concomitantly envisions the mythic mode allowing for the exploration of “the sensual consciousness of the identity of the general”—in this case, the *polis* as a communal whole—“and the particular”—meaning, each individual member comprising the communal whole—“as naturalized mediation” (Horkheimer and Adorno 89, 101). This mediation, of course, must occur in a world that he will always fail to re-enchant, though he finds hope in his failure nonetheless. In failure, Swinburne realizes that the renegotiation of disenchantment allows glimpses of the trace memories of a time in which the unalienated pleasure of unnaturalized immediacy was possible.

Swinburne claimed that *Erechtheus* “is throughout ... imbued with awe and reverence towards the moral and religious law of nature (not of theology)” (*Letters* 3:100).³⁰ Notably, he previously had made a similar claim for *Atalanta*, telling Lord Houghton that the natural “theology” of *Atalanta* was like that of “de Sade with a difference,” as Sade “saw to the bottom of gods and men” (*Letters* 1:125).³¹ Within the Sadean nature outlined in the Blake essay as personifying a “criminal desire” that is indeed beyond the human, “no destruction seem[s] to her destructive enough.... [I]t is by criminal things and deeds unnatural that nature works and moves and has her being, ... labour[ing] in desire of death” (Swinburne, *Blake* 157-58n1). Artemis and Althaea personify these same qualities in *Atalanta*. Like Madame Durand of Sade’s *Juliette*, Artemis is the enchantress embodying the commanding law of nature that supposedly

³⁰ Letter to Edmund Gosse, 2 Jan. 1876.

³¹ Letter to Lord Houghton; the original has no date, but Lang dates it 14 July 1865.

refuses to be subjugated to men; yet, her power and authority—like the unsubjugated nature from which she draws that power and authority—proves to be illusory, imaginary, artificial. And Althaea's expressions of desire, orchestrated within the development of the maternal superego, demonstrate how nature, always already dominated and conceptualized under the name of the father, remains part of the paternalistic social order that demands the "repressive organization of sexuality" and, consequently, subjugates pleasure (Marcuse 40). Quite paradoxically, nature is dominated and repressed, but it also can function as a virtual site for pursuing the traces of that repressed pleasure. That pursuit, moreover, becomes destructive inasmuch as "objects of desire become agents," and I would add also the recipients of, "punishment" (Bersani 97). Althaea—also like Sade's Madame Durand—remains manipulated by the "name of the father" because she fails to absorb the paternalistic order into any "new" order she wishes to establish. Like Artemis, who in many myths is often caught bathing by male admirers, Althaea remains a subject positioned within the prohibited rule of the name of the father, or the male (paternalistic) gaze.

As the paternalistic gaze is diffused and negatively identified with the feminized "super-fertility" that catalyzes the establishment of the "new order" in *Erechtheus*, though, I believe that Swinburne proves himself as the "Sade[an] with a difference" much more so in that poem than he does in *Atalanta*. Whereas, as Horkheimer and Adorno point out, "the individualism which Sade proclaimed in combating the laws ends in the absolute rule of the generality" (117), the "generality" of the Athenian *polis* in *Erechtheus* cannot be a universal which transcends its particulars. The plethoric immediacy established throughout (within the form of) the poem holds traces of the

dissonant, “excessive” condition of desire that cannot be otherwise incorporated into a static rule of generality. The exemplary “beacon” of republican citizenship will always remain in tension with the “darkness of change on the waters of time” (*Erechtheus* line 1765). In Swinburne’s Athens, republicanism will not cease to express its struggle with itself. And the *polis*, as a structure which will always have to contend with the flux of change as well as its failure to become a perfect(ed) form of government, represents the Swinburnian work of art. The Athenian *polis* becomes a site between the constant collision of social and political representation and its powerlessness to represent every possible facet or particularity of the human condition—every particular experience of each member of the city—in itself. Similarly, then, the poem becomes the site of the constant collision between art’s expressive powers of representation and its powerlessness, or failure, to salvage the immediacy of representation after the catastrophe of meaning. In other words, even an artwork that features serial identifications, fluid systems of perpetual correspondences, and the negative dialectic ultimately will fail to represent thoroughly all possible meanings—though it is compelled to strive continually toward that fullness of immediate representation, all the same.

By comparing *Atalanta* and *Erechtheus*, one can trace the development of Swinburne’s aesthetic and notice some perhaps subtle but nonetheless important changes in the way he negotiates the failure of fantasy to fulfill desire. Since it was written at approximately the same time that Swinburne not only began the first draft of the Blake essay but also began writing the poems that would later comprise *Poems and Ballads, First Series*, *Atalanta* shares many similarities with these works. In his readings of Blake’s poetry, Swinburne finds that aesthetic experience fails to allow one to transcend

the material world and its limitations; this failure to transcend is embodied in Meleager. As both Thomas Wymer and Ian Fletcher have suggested previously, Meleager is an aesthete. Wymer argues that Meleager represents an individualized “creative kind of law” which regards “life as something not merely to be endured but to ‘lighten and lift up higher’” or, in other words, life is the quest for *transcendence* (5); Fletcher contends that Meleager, whose death marks his failure to achieve transcendence, “realize[s] the price that a weak-bodied aesthete must pay” (“Atalanta” 183) in a material world that cannot be transcended. Meleager represents the kind of ego-weakness—in which the subject falsely concludes that s/he is the same as the other, the object of desire, but suffers in her/his separation from the desired other—that Swinburne reads into Blake’s Urizen: just as Urizen cannot enact any kind of fulfilling reconciliation between self and other in his world, Meleager cannot find a similar kind of fulfilling reconciliation in Calydon. By asserting a kind of ego-strength that Meleager lacks and actively renegotiating the boundaries between self and other, Althaea attempts to provide an effective countermeasure to this ego-weakness, but she, too, fails in that the renegotiations break down very quickly due to her overt identification with Meleager as “other.” Her failure is productive in that it suggests a new way of considering the material world which entails replacing divine order with a human one, but Althaea’s limit experience does not seem to inspire the Calydonians to reconsider their world and the way they assign their world “meaning”: the Calydonian Chorus has witnessed Althaea’s embrace of *até* but has largely rejected it, just as the Troezenian Chorus rejects Phaedra’s embrace of *até* in *Poems and Ballads*’ “Phaedra.”

Thus the potential for renegotiation of limits is introduced in both *Atalanta* and “Phaedra,” although the audiences constructed in these poems (the Calydonians, the Troezenians) are not very willing to recognize and to embrace the tensions. In these earlier works, Swinburne occasionally seems to question his own process of (re)discovering the possibilities for substantively implementing the creative tensions generated by the ongoing dialectic between the imagination’s potential for transforming material reality and the material reality that both grounds and antagonizes the imagination. For example, in “Itylus,” though Procne’s unrepresentable (beyond the discursive) song gestures at the lost, tension-less continuity between imagination and reality that perpetuates the tension which sparks creativity, Swinburne remains more focused on Philomela’s discomfiting place within a discursive tension she cannot transcend. Likewise, in “Anactoria,” Swinburne valiantly struggles not only to circumscribe Sappho within the margins of materiality but also to circumscribe Anactoria as a completely imaginative or virtual presence antagonizing those margins, but ends his poem by resignedly admitting that there always remains a “Thick darkness” and “insuperable sea” (“Anactoria” line 304) that may confound the attempt to employ failure as a key factor of aesthetic production.

However, after completing *Songs before Sunrise*’s exploration of how the failure inherent in political revolution create tensions that renew and revitalize the struggle to contend productively with the failure to fulfill human desires, Swinburne seems to have found a way to portray failure more effectively as a mode in which one can find satisfaction and even pleasure, rather than delaying the experience of satisfaction and pleasure for the advent of a perfect resolution that is actually impossible to achieve. In

Erechtheus, he portrays the Athenian *polis* as the site of perpetual struggle with failure, where the tensions between the desire to realize ultimately unreachable goals and the practice of perpetuating that desire can be productively and fluidly renegotiated and utilized. Athena is no longer the agent imposing divine order on the Athenians but the signifier for the *polis* itself, a new human order which will strive to counteract ego-weakness by accommodating all possibilities for subjective differentiation; in other words, the *polis* attempts to collectivize all possibilities of particularity and difference without imposing upon itself the false expectation of successfully achieving unity without dissonance. The *polis* will strive to “live / Beyond all human hap of mortal doom / Happy,” yet retain the tension of the “Plight for continual comfort” as the catalyst for their striving (*Erechtheus* lines 1744-45). Just as Swinburne’s art is a rather Adornian site in which experimentation “takes shape as the testing of possibilities”—tests that are undertaken not to achieve an end result but for the sake of the testing itself (*Theory* 37)—Swinburne’s aesthetic *polis* is a site in which fantasies that fail to reconcile tensions take shape as the testing of possibilities for reevaluating—for “revis(ion)ing”—and not actually reconciling or transcending, those tensions.

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