THE GENDERING OF POETIC PASSION AS FEMALE IN SWINBURNE’S POEMS AND BALLADS

Chiung-Ying Huang
Ph.D. Research Scholar
Department of English
University of Bristol, UK

Abstract
The issue of Swinburne’s relation to the decadent idea of fleshly poetics has been a topic of considerable interest. My own idea about Swinburne’s lyrical representation of the flesh is somewhat different. By focusing on Swinburne’s association of lyric rhythm with the idea of pain embodied by quasi-divine female figures, I consider Swinburne’s fleshly language in the light of how it is related to a tour de force of poetic writing. I argue that the literary discourse of such consciousness may be traced back to both Baudelaire and Keats, whose notion of poetic passion embodied in feminine form was revealed to Swinburne’s Poems and Ballads.

In his discussion of Swinburne, George Harry Ford comments, ‘Swinburne reserves his highest praise for the great singers of poetry rather than for the pictorial poets, the Shelleys rather than the Keatses’ (166). Ford explains the reasons why Swinburne places his work on the periphery of the Keatsian tradition: ‘To have painted in words, as Keats did, was not enough for Swinburne, and what music he did find in Keats was not to his taste’ (167). Ford’s observation that Swinburne’s poetic voice reflects a sensibility which might be styled ‘Shelleyan’ rather than ‘Keatsian’ is convincing, for Swinburne does not appear to have absorbed Keats in the fashion of poets such as William Morris and D. G. Rossetti – he emphasises lyric music more than sight. Yet, although Keats is not a greatly influential voice in Swinburne’s work, I wish to suggest that the Keatsian aesthetic heritage does not completely die out in Swinburne, but that it re-emerges with new significance in his treatment of poetic passion and suffering; his Poems and Ballads(1866) is a compelling attestation to his fascination with these topics.

It is fitting that in the 1860s and 1870s, British Aestheticism was not merely represented by imitators of Keats; some different voices had intervened, collectively working to help shape and determine the development of Aesthetic culture. A return to Keats’s own aesthetic heritage was not enough; certain rebellious voices would stand out, giving a poet like Swinburne access to his ideal of an aesthetic renaissance achieved by defiance of authority. As Riede indicates, ‘like Blake and Shelley, Swinburne is born and baptized into the church of rebels, and his strength will be that of the Promethean, the strength of resistance’ (24). Additional voices from
the French also strengthen Swinburne’s aesthetic appeal, not least the Baudelairean. Swinburne’s work is informed by Baudelaire’s ideas of division or separation of the body and soul, and by his lyrical discourse that ‘figures’ woman as both seducer and torturer and in either case aestheticizes her as passionate heroine.

In Swinburne’s 14-line poem ‘A Cameo’ the poet chooses to encapsulate six subjects (Desire, Pain, Pleasure, Satiety, Hate, and Death) in a short descriptive literary sketch, depicting these six themes as starkly painted figures in an ‘image’. The sense of ‘image’ in question is lyric poetry, poetry that cannot be conceived outside the frame ofpassional image, including the poetic form and the poetic subjectivity it expresses. Swinburne defines the role of lyric poetry as a suffering figure, constructing a poetic space entirely devoted to the symbolic representation of ‘Desire’, ‘Pain’, ‘Pleasure’, ‘Satiety’ and ‘Hate’. The object of Swinburne’s lyric experience is constituted by these figures of passion, which live and speak in his verse; Swinburne emphasizes the intensity of his poetic passion by identifying lyric expression with actual musical performance which abounds in stressed syllables, alliterations and assonance. The lyric rhythm in ‘A Cameo’ is worth attention, as Swinburne focuses on the role of music in his lyric design. In the following textual analysis, alliterations are written in bold typeface; rhymes are marked by underlining:

There was a graven image of Desire
Painted with red blood on a ground of gold
Passing between the young men and the old,
And by him Pain, whose body shone like fire,
And Pleasure with gaunt hands that grasped their hire.
   Of his left wrist, with fingers clenched and cold
   The insatiable Satiety kept hold,
   Walking with feet unshod that pashed the mire.
   The senses and the sorrows and the sins,
   And the strange loves that suck the breasts of Hate
Till lips and teeth bite in their sharp indenture,
Followed like beasts with flap of wings and fins.
   Death stoodaloof behind a gaping grate,
Upon whose lock was written Peradventure.

For Swinburne, the most sublime emotions are conveyed by emphatic syllables, pointing to the voice as an object of passion. As the idea of passion is represented through sound, Swinburne creates a link between lyric rhythm and the idea of pain. Making his poem affectively charged, Swinburne writes as if to amplify the poet’s struggle of literary labour, evoking Flaubert’s search for le mot juste. Commenting on Swinburne’s poetry, a Victorian critic suggests that for Swinburne, the process of writing may be associated with a kind of sadomasochistic fantasy: ‘In a greater degree even than in his poetry Mr Swinburne is here the slave of his own wondrous vocabulary; his ideas are often determined by phrases instead of determining them – the only secret of simplicity; he is mastered by words; they command him, and hurry him along like a rider on a reiness steed’ (British Quarterly Review 563-564). In ‘A Cameo’, Swinburne suggests that the lyric reaches a state approximated to ‘Death’ when the poem disclaims any corporeal
quality and detaches itself from any expression of tortured feelings of desire, pain, pleasure, satiety and hate. Yet, as the last word ‘peradventure’ suggests, Swinburne questions whether poetry should be the bearer of death or pain (life).

William Michael Rossetti sees Swinburne as ‘radically indifferent, and indeed hostile, to what most persons care for; and he poetizes, for the greater part, from a point of view which they will neither adopt nor understand’ (Hyder 81). Swinburne’s rebellious spirit and his suggestion that it is the power of suffering from which lyric poetry is born may be seen to follow the Baudelairean line. Baudelaire is such an obviously informing presence in Swinburne’s poetry; Swinburne’s ‘A Cameo’ is reminiscent of Baudelaire’s ‘To the Reader’ (‘Au lecteur’), the poem that opens Les Fleurs du Mal. In this poem, Baudelaire sees the present life as haunted by endless images of vulgarity, decay, and evil, suggesting that human beings serve as Satan’s puppets in the world of ‘sin’:

Folly and error, stinginess and sin
Possess our spirits and fatigue our flesh.
And like a pet we feed our tame remorse
As beggars take to nourishing their lice.

Our sins are stubborn, our contrition lax;
We offer lavishly our vows of faith
And turn back gladly to the path of filth,
Thinking mean tears will wash away our stains.

On evil’s pillow lies the alchemist
Satan Thrice-Great, who lulls our captive soul,
And all the richest metal of our will
Is vaporized by his hermetic arts.

(ll. 1-12)

The poem epitomizes Baudelaire’s reflection about people’s existence in the world; its image of the hellish world becomes in every way characteristic of Les Fleurs du Mal, which is deeply marked by the fixed dichotomy of good and evil. For Baudelaire, the two opposite forces can never be reconciled in the future or be joined in the historical process; instead, evil finds its energy reinforced and its power exacerbated by the flight of time. And yet, if that were all, Baudelaire would not have received the condemnation he experienced when the poem was banned and he was prosecuted for outraging public morals. The problem was that the categories of good and evil were seen as unstable in Baudelaire’s treatment, with the poet confounding or inverting them, and doing so with deliberate perversity.

Maxwell has pointed to the influence of Baudelaire’s Les Fleurs du Mal on Swinburne: ‘Swinburne uses the poetry of Baudelaire to meditate on and presage the themes and perspectives of his own emergent Poems and Ballads’; she notes that in his review of Les Fleurs du Mal, Swinburne identifies Baudelaire’s poetic subjects as ‘sad and strange things – the weariness of pain and the bitterness of pleasure – the perverse happiness and wayward sorrows of exceptional people’ (87). I would go further by suggesting that the phrase ‘sad and strange things’ evokes the way Swinburne depicts the white girl’s emotional pain and her concern with the passing of love in ‘Before the Mirror’, the poem he wrote for Whistler’s The Little White Girl (later titled
Symphony in White, No. 2). In the final section of the poem, the poet arrives at a conceptual antithesis – ‘the notion of sad and glad mystery’:

Glad, but not flushed with gladness,
Since joys go by;
Sad, but not bent with sadness,
Since sorrows dies;
Deep in the gleaming glass
She sees all past things pass,
And all sweet life that was lie down and lie.

There glowing ghosts of flowers
Draw down, draw nigh;
And wings of swift spent hours
Take flight and fly;
She sees by formless gleams,
She hears across cold streams,
Dead mouths of many dreams that sing and sigh.

Face fallen and white throat lifted,
With sleepless eye
She sees old loves that drifted,
She knew not why,
Old loves and faded fears
Float down a stream that hears
The flowing of all men’s tears beneath the sky.

(III. 43-63)

As McGann suggests, the process of mirroring denotes the sense of grief, reflecting a universe where ‘all things remain mysterious and strangely mournful’ (177). The reader sees through the mirror not the girl’s own person, but a reflection of her solipsistic concern with the passing of youth and love; the reflection suggests that the source of her pain lies in the inchoate passion of the past. The tone of voice that Swinburne wants to catch is the sense of weariness and sadness. The sense of sadness is especially provided by the rhyme which takes effect between ‘fears’ and ‘hears’. Taken together their derivative meanings ‘pain’ and ‘sound’ are revealed, and we are perhaps reminded that the lyric voice is associated with the emotional pain of the poet.

The final stanza of ‘Before the Mirror’ bears an allusion to the first stanza of Baudelaire’s poem ‘The Swan’ (‘Le Cygne’):

Andromache, I think of you – this meager stream,
This melancholy mirror where had once shone forth
The giant majesty of all your widowhood,
This fraudulent Simois, fed by bitter tears,…

(ll. 1-4)
The phrase describing the river Simois as a ‘melancholy mirror’ where Andromache’s ‘majesty’—eventhough it was a ‘majesty’ of grief—‘had once shone forth’ crystallizes the poet’s sense of loss and diminution. As Katherine Elkins suggests, the speaker mirrors the poet’s turbulent moods, with his ‘self that experiences the present through mourning – seeing itself as voice for multiple lost pasts’ (14). As with Baudelaire, the woman as a subject finds an unusual position in Swinburne’s poetic work. Throughout Swinburne’s poetry, the representation of pain is often embodied by real or imagined female figures, among which ‘Dolores’ seems to be the most prominent.

In ‘Dolores’ Swinburne speaks to a personified figure of Pain, ‘Our Lady of Pain’, showing his fleshly subordination and attachment to this sacred female power. Swinburne, in showing himself a servant of love, gives the most explicit account of the way in which the idea of passion, which involves the juxtaposed images of pleasure and pain, is gendered as female. The poem begins with Dolores’s physical features, but Swinburne does not disclose Dolores’s actual state; his account of Dolores is shifting, evading definitive description:

Cold eyelids that hide like a jewel
Hard eyes that grow soft for an hour;
The heavy white limbs, and the cruel
Red mouth like a venomous flower;
When these are gone by with their glories,
What shall rest of thee then, what remain,
O mystic and somber Dolores,
Our Lady of Pain?

(ll. 1-8)

Swinburne’s account of Dolores evokes an ambiguous female figure, as Karen Alkalay-Gut suggests: ‘Swinburne’s speaker paints a weirdly idealized portrait of an estranging, indifferent, and unloving woman’ (232). The phrase ‘heavy white limbs’ seems to associate Dolores with the white body of a marble statue, yet she resists statue-like immobility. Swinburne may be recalling Baudelaire’s poem ‘To a Woman Passing By’, in which Baudelaire describes his encounter with a woman in deep mourning whose gesture, as she raises the hem of her skirt with a ‘splendid hand’, shows her ‘statuesque’ leg, and in whose eyes he drinks ‘The sweetness that enthralls and the pleasure that kills’, in the instant that she moves past and beyond him. But Swinburne’s Dolores, unlike Baudelaire’s statue-in-motion, remains to fascinate and torment her lovers: her ‘pleasure that kills’ is a function of her perpetual bodily changes, like those of Keats’s Lamia, of which the speaker is an appalled and rapt witness:

Thy skin changes country and colour,
And shrivels or swells to a snake’s.
Let it brighten and bloat and grow duller,
We know it, the flames and the flakes,
Red brands on it smitten and bitten,
Round skies where a star is a stain,
And the leaves with thy litanies written,
Our Lady of Pain.

(ll. 289-296)
Camille Paglia defines Swinburne’s meters as ‘an automation driven by a female robotlike despot’ (226). By associating Dolores with the serpent, Swinburne seems to suggest that lyric poetry speaks in the form of feminine and serpentine energy. In her article, Lene Østermark-Johansen offers significant insight into Swinburne’s ‘serpentine language’: ‘Swinburne’s text teems with snakes, both in the form of serpentine curls and in the repeated symbol of woman as the deadly serpent, utterly destructive in her mesmerizing power over male spectators and artists’ (50). Østermark-Johansen traces this motif in the syntax of ‘Notes on Leonardo da Vinci’:

In his prose Swinburne evokes the sinuous rhythm of a serpent’s movements, carefully balanced on an “s”-shape: proposition + conjunction + counter-proposition. His description of the female snakes in the old master drawings contain few finite forms of the verbs, but abound in past participles, adjectives and nouns…The abundance of stressed syllables suggests the gravity of the animal and link to its natural element, the earth (51).

A similar ‘serpentine rhythm’ can be found in ‘Dolores’ as well; yet this kind of ‘serpentine movement’ is tinged with sadomasochistic overtones:

O lips full of lust and of laughter,
Curled snakes that are fed from my breast,
Bite hard, lest remembrance come after
And press with new lips where you pressed.
For my heart too springs up at the pressure,
Mine eyelids too moisten and burn;
Ah, feed me and fill me with pleasure,
Ere pain come in turn.

(ll. 25-32)

The speaker cannot decide whether Dolores is feeding him, or feeding on him; her lips are ‘full of lust and laughter’, yet she may also ‘fill [him] with pleasure’. The ‘turn’ in the last line is significant: it is the only instance in this stanza in which the alliteration crosses the boundary of the line, so that ‘pleasure’ and ‘pain’ are both joined and separate. Swinburne seems to suggest that the truest music of lyric expression is found in a kind of song whose effects are equivalent to those created by sadomasochistic passion, in all its ambivalent conflicted energy.

In order to discuss further the importance of sadomasochistic passion in Swinburne’s decadent lyricism, it is necessary to think more about the operation of fragmentation in his ‘fleshy’ language. Since the late 1990s, Yopie Prins, Catherine Maxwell, and Margaret Reynolds have examined how the concept of lyric expression is closely linked to the representation of Sappho’s body in Swinburne. Swinburne’s Sapphic poetry possesses a corporeal nature, and its fragmentation is likened to bodily dismemberment. For instance, in ‘Satia Te Sanguine’, the speaker is tortured by his (or her) lover, who dissected his (or her) body into pieces, as Sappho’s fragmented body drifting in the sea:

As the lost white feverish limbs
Of the Lesbian Sappho, adrift
In foam where the sea-weed swims,
Swam loose for the streams to lift.
In the ninth stanza, the speaker expresses the same desire to break up his (or her) lover’s body:

I wish you were stricken of thunder
And burnt with a bright flame through,
Consumed and cloven in sunder,
I dead at your feet like you’.

In the following pages I will particularly examine how Swinburne recalls Sappho in his poem ‘Anactoria’, which serves to demonstrate what Isobel Armstrong has called ‘Swinburne’s fevered sense of the brute materiality of language’ (403). In ‘Anactoria’, which begins with ‘My life is bitter with thy love; thine eyes / Blind me, thy tresses burn me, thy sharp sighs / Divide my flesh and spirit with soft sound’, Swinburne represents a Sadeian version of Sappho in relating Sappho’s passion for Anactoria, and repeats his experiments with the incorporation of the broken (female) body into the poetic body. As Reynolds has observed, ‘Swinburne’s obsessive return to dissected body parts in his vision of Sappho makes the link between his idea of her and his reading of de Sade’ (174). In the poem, as Swinburne invokes Sappho to figure the shifting from the body of poetry to the body of flesh, Sappho’s lyrical body is embedded in Anactoria’s physical body: ‘but thou – thy body is the song, / Thy mouth the music; thou art more than I’. She evokes the beauty of Anactoria:

Ah, ah, thy beauty! like a beast it bites,
Stings like an adder, like an arrow smites.
Ah sweet, and sweet again, and seven times sweet,
The paces and the pauses of thy feet!

Swinburne’s language can play and pun: he adopts the word ‘feet’ in punning allusion to metrical feet. In Swinburne, Sappho’s body materializes in lyric terms as a dismembered figure. Swinburne’s pursuit of the disseminated body of Sappho leads to the immortalization of Sappho, as Swinburne puts it near the end of the poem:

And they shall know me as ye who have known me here,
Last year when I loved Atthis, and this year
When I love thee; and they shall praise me, and say
“She hath all time as all we have our day,
Shall she not live and have her will”– even I?

The immortality through verse which Sappho anticipates here—the traditional boast of poets—is a supreme consolation for lost love, and yet it is shadowed by the irony of her fate—which is to ‘live’, to enjoy her immortal status, only by the mediation of other poets (of whom Swinburne is the latest in a long line). In the very last lines of the poem, indeed, Sappho confronts this paradox by desiring, not immortal fame but utter, complete oblivion and self-erasure:

Yea, though thou diest, I say I shall not die.
For these shall give me of their souls, shall give
Life, and the days and loves wherewith I live,
Shall quicken me with loving, fill with breath,
Save me and serve me, strive for me with death.
Alas, that neither moon nor snow nor dew
Nor all cold things can purge me wholly through,
Assuage me nor allay me nor appease,
Till supreme sleep shall bring me bloodless ease;
Till time wax faint in all his periods;
Till fate undo the bondage of the gods,  
And lay, to slake and satiate me all through,  
Lotus and Lethe on my lips like dew,  
And shed around and over and under me  
Thick darkness and the insuperable sea.

It seems at first as though Sappho is rejoicing in the ‘life’ she will be given by those who love her poetry, who will literally give their ‘breath’ to it and thereby ‘strive for me with death’ (the rhyme breath/death emphasizes the point). But the phrase ‘strive for me’ is dangerously ambiguous. Does it mean ‘strive on my behalf’? or ‘strive for possession of me’? To be loved in this way is to lose possession of one’s self. In the end Sappho does not desire to be ‘saved’ in this way: what she wants is to be ‘purge[d] . . . wholly through’, to be ‘slake[d] and satiate[d] all through’ . Keats claimed to be ‘half in love with easeful Death’, and Swinburne both evokes and surpasses him with Sappho’s desire for wholeness, for ‘supreme sleep’ to ‘bring [her] bloodless ease’ (Keats ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, l. 52, my emphasis).

Works Cited


