

Swinburne's Existential Individualism: His Poetry and Aesthetics in Relation to Romanticism and its Legacies

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A number of critics¹⁾ have located Swinburne's poetry in relation to the Aesthetic Movement (including the so-called "Fleshly School of Poetry") or to Romantic poetry. To some extent, their views help to identify the historical significance of his poetry. However, I will be arguing here that Swinburne's poetry diverges from both Romantic and Aesthete poetic ideals. As will be demonstrated, his poetry stakes its own claim and represents an achievement unique in the poetry of the Victorian period, first, in the degree to which his impressionist technique is rooted in a sense of the tangible and, second, in the existentialist dimension of his radical individualism. In my discussion, I will stress Swinburne's distinctiveness as a poet, a figure whose work neither aligns with that of the Romantics nor qualifies as "representative" of the Victorian period and its poetry.

While Swinburne is deeply influenced by the Romantics, especially Blake and Shelley, his denial of the transcendental and Romantic celebration of the "infinite" suggests that his poetry moves away from key Romantic concerns. Rather than yearning for some ideal archetype, he focuses on the ordinary world as perceived and seeks to derive the fullest meaning from it. While accepting the human condition in its actuality and given presence, he believes neither in evolution of the spirit nor the possibility of social betterment at the far end of time, which, for example, Shelley advocates in *Prometheus Unbound*.²⁾ In place of an ideal human potentiality, Swinburne seeks to reassess the power of the human and its faculties, not only the imagination, but also under the limitations of the actual, and stresses the importance of the impression things make on the individual mind. Since these ideas are related to perception, it would appear that Swinburne continues to pursue the Romantic ideal of seeing things in their variety. His

poetics actually proposes a resolution of the Romantic dilemma how to reconcile the ideal and the actual, while it defends the creativity of poetry against the practical, utilitarian common sense of the Victorian age.³⁾

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Many of Swinburne's poems display distinctly anthropocentric features, the most striking example occurring in *Hertha*.⁴⁾ Swinburne insists on locating human existence on the earth, which he contrasts with the notions of a divine existence in some other-worldly realm. *Hertha* exhorts human beings to realize their fullest potentiality as mortal beings and to relinquish their yearning for an unreachable but barren heaven:

But what thing dost thou now,
 Looking Godward, to cry
 "I am I, thou art thou,
 I am low, thou art high"?
 I am thou, whom thou seekest to find him; find thou but thyself, thou art I.
 (*Hertha* 31-35)⁵⁾

In identifying herself with the human, she reveals the cleavage between an imagined existence in abstract concept and an actual life in contact with tangible surroundings. Reasserting a pagan way of understanding the world, Swinburne rules out heaven as a domain for man. Therefore, aspiration to that which is found "above" is repeatedly denied as a means of self-realization, while the natural life cycle is affirmed as the basis of human existence. Since human beings can recover their fullest power when they ignore the divine, they need to stand on their feet and extend their perception outward to that which can be seen around them. When such powers of perception are acquired, *Hertha* states, they will prove themselves to be the greatest offspring of the earth, almost god-like, commanding the world they view.

Man, pulse of my centre, and fruit of my body, and seed of my soul.

One birth of my bosom;

One beam of mine eye;
One topmost blossom
That scales the sky;
Man, equal and one with me, man that is made of me, man that is I. (*Hertha*
195-200)

In contrast to the traditional concept of heaven as the centre of the universe, Swinburne claims that human beings, though earthly beings, can conquer the sky/universe through their intellectual powers.⁶⁾ While his emphasis on the earth tends to deny the idea that the divine source of man's power exists somewhere beyond, it seems implicitly to accept the affluence and materialism in the late nineteenth century, which came with the economic growth of the time and rapid scientific development. Hertha sees man as capable of realizing his own world, unrestrained by a coercive heaven:

I bid you but be;
I have need not of prayer;
I have need of you free
As your mouths of mine air;
That my heart may be greater within me, beholding the fruits of me fair.
(*Hertha* 156-60)

This world can be understood only through man's perception, and only man can grasp its potential significance; without man, the world cannot reveal its hidden meanings. Swinburne's view precludes that of a unifying heaven and earth, as proposed in *Prometheus Unbound*. Swinburne's anthropocentrism is a matter of human perception, which is a result of an arbitrary free will and constantly varying impressions. In other words, his reassessment of man necessarily derives from his impressionism; his denial of the absolute authority or a deity discloses the fact that existence has to do with the individually appreciated perception. The logical conclusion of this thinking justifies but undermines Hertha's idea as biased and throws her authority in doubt as arbitrary. In the end, the poem describes Hertha as a figure imagined by human beings rather than as a deity.

By rejecting an absolute existing in some higher dimension and, subsequently, its categorical orders, moral judgment becomes less rigorous while aesthetic perception

comes to be the preeminent concern. Individual will basically decides the balance between the moral and the aesthetic; the significance of heaven and the earth reveals itself in how one appreciates one's perceptions and what one attributes them to. Not only does this imply a kind of impressionism but it also anticipates a kind of existentialism, as becomes apparent in many of Swinburne's poems expressing defiance of the gods, as in *Atalanta in Calydon* and *Tristram of Lyonesse*.⁷⁾ Meleager loves Atalanta against Althea's admonition that one submit completely to the gods' will: "Be man at one with equal-minded gods, / So shall he prosper; not through laws torn up, / Violated rule and a new face of things" (*Atalanta in Calydon* 474-76). Meleager's opposition to the gods is similar to that against his mother; it signifies his claim to autonomy and his assertion of individual will rather than his disdain of traditional religious and family values. As Hertha regards freedom as one of the most valued qualities of the human, Meleager treasures the free will he experiences in loving Atalanta even until his death, without any consideration for salvation. However, he forgives Althea and admits her more conservative respect for family. He considers life as complete in itself however it may be spent, and shows no regret about his love in spite of its tragic end.⁸⁾ The aspiration on the part of the individual to define the meaning of one's life resembles a kind of existentialism. Therefore, though the poem is tragic, its tone with respect to Meleager remains heroic and triumphant.

The same theme is repeated more clearly in *Tristram of Lyonesse*. Although he suffers from the awkward relationship between Iseult and King Mark, Tristram embraces his own way of life in love and battle, and, refusing divine succor, tries to find some positive aspect to his agony:

And though ye [divine things] had mercy, I think I would not pray
That ye should change your counsel or your way
To make our life less bitter: if such power
Be given the stars on one deciduous hour,
And such might be in planets to destroy
Grief and rebuild, and break and build up joy,
What man would stretch forth hand on them to make
Fate mutable, God foolish, for his sake? (*Tristram of Lyonesse* 3. 124-131)

Tristram regards every human struggle as meaningful, even if it does not alleviate pain and distress. He suggests that its significance lies in the very choice he

makes; sometimes man may transform a peaceful life into something tragic as a result of his own action. Tristram even feels a thrilling happiness as he challenges the uncontrollable sway of fate. This partly echoes the idea of the “superman” of Nietzsche; like the “superman,” Tristram welcomes pain and difficulty, and asserts that his life is fulfilling.⁹ Certainly Swinburne’s notion of life suggests something modern and existential and this, as McGann points out, should be contrasted with Christian notions of compensation for human fault through the performance of some religious service: “Incompletion is not something to be eliminated or even mitigated by pilgrimage or any acquirements. Limitation, death, silence, and all other things which men too often regard as negatives or evils are for Swinburne merely alternative representations of a greater wholeness than we like to realize. That wholeness is the entirety of lived human fact, which, once we are moved to be incorporate with it, consummates human life” (McGann, *Experiment* 167). Swinburne did not believe in the possibility of mind overpowering the actual or influencing the world in the realization of the subject’s desire. The world is unchanging in order that “man might have a larger hour for love” (*Tristram of Lyonesse* 3. 205). Swinburne’s proto-existentialism undermines the feudal order praised in the revival of medievalism by conservative writers of the period like Tennyson.¹⁰ In *Tristram of Lyonesse*, Swinburne’s re-creates the Arthurian world to propose a totally different feudalism, severing it from its Christian connection and re-locating it within a pagan context. Setting man in contrast to an overwhelming, uncontrollable force like nature, and a fate seen as inevitable and universal, he highlights the willpower of man as irreplaceably unique. At the same time, by describing protagonists’ contact with nature and struggles with destiny, Swinburne indicates that such will power is nurtured by impression and the interaction between inner and outer worlds.

According to Swinburne, traditional Christian dogma represses sensuous pleasure and passion, and therefore narrows the scope for impression. Heaven, as promised by such dogma only to repentant souls, is shown as barren and sterile while the dazzling variety of the earth waits to be culled by sensitive minds. In the act of repentance, which tends to repress pain, one is often forced to relinquish pleasures and passions which are nourished by rich impressions. As a result, heaven embodies intense suffering without consolation: “Smite the gates barred with groanings manifold, / But all the floors are paven with our pain” (*Atalanta in Calydon* 1088-89). Swinburne states that almost all that we relinquish for religious faith deserves to be valuable, even sensuous pleasures described in poems like *Anactoria*, *Laus Veneris*

and *Dolores*. In *Anactoria*, the narrator, Sappho, justifies her sadistic love towards the lesbian beloved, contrasting it to God's treatment of human beings: "God knows I might be crueller than God" (*Anactoria* 152). While god often demands the self-sacrifice of man, her expression represents the fullest expansion of human feelings even if it sounds too intense.

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! (*Anactoria* 111-114)

Her expression of carnal love and desire is extraordinary but nevertheless genuine and sincere. If man is blessed, it is because his experience is valued for itself. As Walter Pater claims in the conclusion of *The Renaissance*, if "Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end" (Pater 152). To "burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy" was, for Pater, "success in life" (Pater 152). In Swinburne's view; God kills rather than praises his creation; religious systems cause the fruits of life to wither away.

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

The gods have no interest in pursuing finer feelings and intense passions; they can only be appreciated and valued by man, and expressing them in artistic form man proves his own worth. Inverting the hierarchy of man and god, Swinburne compels the reader to realize that the highest possible achievement for man is art. He identifies Sappho, who rejected the poetic forms of her time, as the first poet to articulate this truth; she contrived her own way of expressing herself.¹¹⁾ The gods can only be stunned by her poetry as Swinburne suggests in "Sapphics":

Then the Muses, stricken at heart, were silent;
 Yea, the gods waxed pale; such a song was that song.
 All reluctant, all with a fresh repulsion,

Fled from before her. ("Sapphics" 65-68)

The artistic power required to transform the real world into her own can never be imitated by gods who only created the actual world. Her poetry is a monument to human triumph, demonstrating that the poet's impression of every kind of phenomenon can be intensified, heightened and rendered beautiful and can thus surpass itself. Sappho's poetry induces the reader to see nature only as her poetic creation: "Memories shall mix and metaphors of me . . . and like me / The land-stream and the tide-stream in the sea (*Anactoria* 214, 223-224). In *On the Cliffs*, Sappho's poetry is identified with the inspirational atmosphere of twilight, which confirms the priority of the perceived to the real world. For Swinburne, transformation of the universe as perceived is the ultimate function of art and poetry.

In *Laus Veneris* and *Dolores*, Swinburne pursues the comparison of the pagan with traditional Christian practice, contrasting the spontaneity of the erotic with repressive religious dogma. In *Laus Veneris*, erotic love is preferred to god's love (agape) because the former offers more sensual pleasure which is more immediate and more rewarding:

Alas, Lord, surely thou art great and fair.
But lo her wonderfully woven hair!
And thou didst heal us with thy piteous kiss;
But see now, Lord; her mouth is lovelier. (*Laus Veneris* 17-20)

Indulged in his love, the narrator (Tannhäuser) ascribes salvation not wholly to heaven but also to the earth, and recognizes consolation to be found in bodily sin rather than in spiritual repentance, although he concedes that such sin never pays in the end: "And in my flesh the sin of hers, alas!" (*Laus Veneris* 312) He praises all kinds of physical pleasures associated with Venus,¹²⁾ which are identified with his exotic imaginings in the manner of Baudelaire's "Parfum exotique":¹³⁾

Yea, she laid hold upon me, and her mouth
Clove unto mine as soul to body doth,
And, laughing, made her lips luxurious;
Her hair had smells of all the sunburnt south,

Strange spice and flower, strange savour of crushed fruit,
 And perfume the swart kings tread underfoot
 For pleasure when their minds wax amorous,
 Charred frankincense and grated sandal-root. (*Laus Veneris* 393-400)

Tannhäuser's pleasures derive from physical attributes, and he demonstrates that in intimate bodily contact intense perception amounts to imagined impressions.¹⁴⁾ The source of his imaginings must be there to be touched and felt: "I hold thee with my hand" (*Laus Veneris* 419). Associating feelings liberated from the constraints of religious dogma with the purely physical, Swinburne presents them as natural while anything having to do with the heavenly is merely abstract. He praises a life filled with moments of sensual excitement and pleasure, which alone can lend to life its full reality and significance.

Ah love, there is no better life than this;
 To have known love, how bitter a thing it is,
 And afterward be cast out of God's sight; (*Laus Veneris* 409-411)

Dolores examines the same theme in a slightly different manner, implicitly identifying Cybele with the Virgin Mary. Despite her divinity, Swinburne argues, her pain comes from within and her human-like desire :

O mystical rose of the mire,
 O house not of gold but of gain,
 O house of unquenchable fire,
 Our Lady of Pain! (*Dolores* 21-24)

She had to repress her desire and passion to play her sacred role, and Swinburne sees her more as victim than as a divinity. Her instinct is under the control of religious system and institution as in Christianity. Because of this restriction, she in turn ends up victimizing her followers and believers, leaving them with their own tormented flesh and desire. The contradictory nature of Cybele both attracts and agonizes them: "The desire of thy furious embraces / Is more than the wisdom of years" (*Dolores* 169-70). Humanizing a pagan goddess, Swinburne discloses how divine idols are created and underscores how religious doctrine can distort habits of thought and behaviour.

As in many other poems, Swinburne seeks to recover what is most fundamental about perception and emotion, something that in human experience is often uncontrolled by reason and is more congenially expressed by paganism. However, because of dogmatic interpretation, the problem (pain) and the delight (love) in life are experienced by Cybele in such a tortured manner as to distress worshippers; the inner conflict results in outer perplexity.

I could hurt thee – but pain would delight thee;
Or caress thee – but love would repel;
And the lovers whose lips would excite thee
Are serpents in hell. (*Dolores* 397-400)

These contradictory emotions are partly produced by the repressiveness of customs and institutions, and Swinburne pays attention to direct, raw sensations which have not yet been processed by habit. If love is one of the most significant phenomena in life, one has to restore a capability for personal love and eros, and overcome the demands of agape or impersonal love. In this sense, Cybele's agony is not so greatly different from Christ's. In "Before a Crucifix" Swinburne explains that the Church, which seeks power and domination, utilizes Jesus's personality as a means to strengthen its hegemony. In discussing erotic and philanthropic love, Swinburne questions whether Christ's emotions and deeds are impersonalized and consumed for the sake of the dominance of Church doctrine.

If thou wast verily man's lover,
What did thy love or blood avail?
Thy blood the priests make poison of,
And in gold shekels coin thy love. ("Before a Crucifix" 171-74)

Christ's love is abused in such a way to aggravate human misery; its true meaning is forgotten with the demand for philanthropic love. Swinburne's emphasis on earthly, tangible objects is combined with his idea of re-establishing the importance of personal, erotic love. The poem both urges recognition of the individual and criticizes the blind common sense of habitual thinking. This reconsideration of individual, personal love, which is craved even by gods and is therefore as good as or better than the salvation, comes to be regarded as a higher goal.

Swinburne's semi-autobiographical poem, *The Triumph of Time*, defines love between individuals as the greatest moment in life, a moment in which passion and sensibility achieve their maximum intensity: "Let come what will, there is one thing worth, / To have had fair love in the life upon earth" (*The Triumph of Time* 133-34). Since such love can induce a god-like state of mind, it does not matter if such love may eventually end.

We had grown as gods, as the gods above,
Filled from the heart to the lips with love,
Held fast in his hands, clothed warm with his wings,
O love, my love, had you loved but me! (*The Triumph of Time* 37-40)

In an existentialist view, the most ecstatic and fulfilling moments in love prove the superiority of man as the creator (through perception) of a totally fresh world. In contrast to the tedious, monotonous immortality of the gods, aesthetic experience in love produces something everlasting, unique and exquisite, beyond all interference: "Not wrath of gods, nor wisdom of men, / Nor all things earthly, nor all divine, / Nor joy nor sorrow, nor life nor death" (*The Triumph of Time* 150-52). This is the aesthetic triumph of impressions from an ordinary experience (love), and clearly different from an idealistic Romantic pursuit for beauty, which seeks to see the ideal through the actual. Even if one's impressions vary according to one's sensitivities, Swinburne sets love as an achievement of self-expression and admits any type of love as aesthetically genuine and beyond criticism. Of course, his idea of love is related to his sensitivity to the evanescent nature of human life as McGann acutely observes: "His world, moving through its ruinations, is a disaster redeemed only, but always, by an equally disastrous love. For Swinburne, the fidelity of such a love is witnessed most eloquently in art, where the presence of beauty is man's best witness of the deep care in which he holds everything that is lost to him and to all men" (McGann, *Experiment* 290).¹⁵⁾ For example, in praising Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Swinburne defends destructive love: "The love which devours life itself, which devastates the present and desolates the future with unquenchable and raging fire, has nothing less pure in it than flame or sunlight" ("A Note on Charlotte Brontë" 405). The power of love is celebrated even when the love is violent and self-annihilating as in *Anactoria* or *Laus Veneris*.

Sappho in *Anactoria* finds in her love a power to sustain life eternally: "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" (*Anactoria* 292-94). She can alleviate her anxiety about death because of this supreme outcome of her life. In *Laus Veneris*, Tannhäuser can almost forget his sin because the fire of desire which consumes him blazes more brightly than hell fire: "As after death I now that such-like flame / Shall cleave to me for ever; yea, what care, / Albeit I burn then, having felt the same?" (*Laus Veneris* 406-408) Finding their destinies in their love, Sappho and Tannhäuser are ready to accept them as their rewards. They seem to find the evidence of their love less in platonic communication than in physical contact even when they need spiritual confirmation of it. Tannhäuser feels that his soul, which he considers as united with hers, is physically held by her hands, almost assimilating his soul with his being: "And lo my love, mine own soul's heart, more dear / Than mine own soul, more beautiful than God, / Who hath my being between the hands of her" (*Laus Veneris* 386-88).

Swinburne's emphasis on the existential cultivation of erotic and aesthetic experience clearly denies any limit to free artistic expression. Criticizing moral codes as suppressive, he expresses the supremacy of the aesthetic in his essay, "Victor Hugo":

The rule of art is not the rule of morals; in morals the action is judged by the intention, the doer is applauded, excused, or condemned, according to the motive which induced his deed; in art, the one question is not what you mean but what you do. ("Victor Hugo" 386-87)

When love is considered as a result of condensed impressions unique in time and place, therefore as a form of art in life, various kinds of love can be justified. Their aesthetic value is established when literature represents their perfection which cannot be rehearsed; such expression both epitomizes and crystalizes life into a permanent form: "For art is very life itself, and knows nothing of death . . ." ("Victor Hugo" 388). If aesthetic expression has nothing to do with the moral, outer or natural surroundings providing vivid impressions must be considered as unrelated to the question of morality.¹⁶ To refine impressions, one has to ponder upon the relation between inner and outer natures.

As Swinburne suggests in "Dedication 1865," a pagan understanding of the

natural world offers a range of approaches and interpretations, or many “lights” on things, while the progress of Hebraism courts the growth of monolithic thinking. He uses metaphors of light to explain the uncomfortable situation in which poets find themselves when denied the liberty of expression. Artistic expression is forced to limit itself to brief night scenes when it attempts unconventional representation.¹⁷⁾

Though the many lights dwindle to one light,
 There is help if the heaven has one;
 Though the skies be discrowned of the sunlight
 And the earth dispossessed of the sun,
 They have moonlight and sleep for repayment,
 When, refreshed as a bride and set free,
 With stars and sea-winds in her raiment,
 Night sinks on the sea. (“Dedication 1865” 97-104)

However, Swinburne’s aestheticism challenges the dark, redefining, rediscovering and reviving nature, whether it be day or night, and in his art seeks to provide a more richly experienced environment. This starts out with the reawakening of the poet’s eye¹⁸⁾ as he describes Baudelaire’s insight in *Ave atque Vale*: “Fierce loves, and lovely leaf-buds poisonous, / Bare to thy subtler eye” (*Ave atque Vale* 25-26). With the aesthetic eye, nature is recreated every time it is observed, especially in its socially forbidden, sensuous aspects. Swinburne also implies here redemption of the ancient, pagan eye, which can appreciate nature without any ideological bias. He articulates this in “Charles Baudelaire: *Les Fleurs du Mal*”:

Stripped of its coating of jargon, this may mean that the poet spoken of endeavors to look at most things with the eye of an old-world poet; that he aims at regaining the clear and simple view of writers content to believe in the beauty of material subjects. (“Charles Baudelaire: *Les Fleurs du Mal*” 346)

To attain such artistic insight, one needs to accept things in the environment as they are, and not draw on one’s own imaginings. It is important to sense all subtle movements and changes in nature until the totality of nature becomes apparent. Following Baudelaire, Swinburne demonstrates how to perceive nature through

an “old-world” eye, notably in *A Nympholept*. In the poem, he senses something indescribable, which is about to reveal its secret but never does:

But the silence trembles with passion of sound suppressed,
And the twilight quivers and yearns to the sunward, wrung
With love as with pain; and the wide wood's motionless breast
Is thrilled with a dumb desire that would fain find tongue
And palpitates, tongueless as she whom a man-snake stung,
Whose heart now heaves in the nightingale, never at rest
Nor satiated ever with song till her last be sung. (*A Nympholept* 50-56)

In fact, silence never trembles; light has no emotions; the wood can never be thrilled with desire. But his expression is not of pathetic fallacy. He does not try to force his imaginings into the foreground; rather he tries to depict nature as seen in his eye in its subtle details and moods. In other words, he observes nature minutely and represents it in a way no one had tried before.¹⁹⁾ Unlike idealists who present natural objects as shadows of the ideal, Swinburne argues that the objects have many minor shades never explored. As some critics argue,²⁰⁾ he attempts to describe not only things but also their effects because we perceive phenomena, or the effect of things, not the things themselves as Kant argues in *Critique of Pure Reason*. Silence, twilight, woods and the nightingale actually impress the poet's senses to form the perceived world. Since it is impossible for nature to be understood and appreciated without the aid of the observer, nature appears not only incomprehensible and unanalyzable but also a synthesis of objects and senses, of the internal and the external. In this anthropocentrism, nature can be considered as momentary coalescence of phenomenological and psychological processes.²¹⁾ Such complex experience is symbolized as Pan “present and latent” (*A Nympholept* 122), for humanistic features felt through impressions are reflected back onto natural objects to form an imaginary entity. Swinburne perhaps replicates the process which ancient people followed when they encountered the unknown and unintelligible in nature and came to terms with it by denominating it. The poet subtly identifies himself with Pan by regarding his perception as not only given by but also giving to the natural surroundings: “And nought is all, as am I, but a dream of thee” (*A Nympholept* 273). This happens naturally when he repeatedly examines natural objects, without overriding them with his own imaginings.²²⁾

If nature exists with the help of the observer and its phenomena achieve

significance only through impression, there is no strict border between the external and the internal and between the subject and the object. In other words, this logic implies that inner and outer natures are originally inseparable. It is quite natural for Swinburne then to compare his poetry to natural objects in “Dedication 1865”:

Some scattered in seven years’ traces,
 As they fell from the boy that was then;
 Long left among idle green places,
 Or gathered but now among men . . . (“Dedication 1865” 17-20)

If poetic expression is a part of nature, it can harmoniously coexist with the outer surroundings.²³⁾ Does this mean that the subject can be dissolved into the background and the poet’s self works best when it is incorporated and merged into his poetry? Is Swinburne disinterested in affirming his ego in poetic creation unlike Byron? Discussing poetry as a profession, Swinburne comments on egoism in “Notes on Poems and Reviews”:

The work is not fruitful of pleasure, of honour, or of profit; but, like other such tasks, it may be none the less useful and necessary. I am aware that it cannot be accomplished without some show of egotism; and I am perforce prepared to incur the consequent charge of arrogance. (“Notes on Poems and Reviews” 348-49)²⁴⁾

This may sound contradictory in relation to the discussion above of impression and expression; his egoism basically suggests the idiosyncrasy of his poetry as distinctive from the work of others. Poetic expression can be achieved only on the basis of perception, but perception is filtered through the sensibility of the poet into individually characterized impression. Swinburne admits that his own ego acts both as such a filter and as a part of nature projected onto the surroundings, and when he tries to represent everything as it is (as it is perceived), his impression necessarily includes such projection. There is no other way that one is influenced by natural objects. In this sense, his egoism is clearly contained within his poetry while it tries to represent two natures as inseparably united. Given this line of thinking, different protagonists in his work can have their own distinct selves, and can contradict each other.

Since Swinburne is ready to treat outer and inner nature in a similar way, he is also ready to accept both the autonomy of natural objects and that of human beings. Rejecting the hierarchical Christian idea of man and nature and lacking an idealist framework for categorizing experience like some Romantics, he allows all objects to be equally independent and mutually interactive. The most remarkable example of that which possesses natural autonomy in Swinburne's poetry is the sea. In *On the Cliffs*, the sea is regarded as a poet while in *The Triumph of Time*, it is represented as ancient, time-enduring, fertile, and mysterious, the home and final destination of human beings:

But thou, thou art sure, thou art older than earth;
Thou art strong for death and fruitful of birth;
Thy depths conceal and thy gulfs discover;
From the first thou wert; in the end thou art. (*The Triumph of Time*
301-304)

Like the earth in *Hertha*, the sea is older and stronger than gods, invincible, eternal, and beyond control. If the earth represents man's potentiality, the sea signifies the power of nature. Both provide man with power against orders and restriction of institutional authorities. Swinburne describes such a property of the sea as the power of impermanency in *Hymn to Proserpine*:

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

The sea represents the autonomy many people have lost as a result of conforming to social and political codes. Swinburne's existentialism and anthropocentrism assert that human beings must assert their free will in order to re-establish their autonomy, and the sea exists as a vast model before man's eye. As depicted in *By the North Sea*, the sea's autonomy intimates that of man, as if its expansion reveals itself according to the observer's developing creativity or the autonomy of poetry:

“For the goal where his [the wind’s] pinions would be / Is immortal as air or as fire is, / Immense as the sea” (*By the North Sea* 288-290).²⁵⁾ The sea’s expansiveness metaphorically stands for that of man’s life, which is to be fulfilled by man’s own will, perception and imagination. In other words, the sea reflects all human activity down through the ages, though it never assists man in any way. Since the sea exists as the model (of autonomy) and the (indifferent) mirror for man, Swinburne defines it as the one and only consolation for man: “She is pure as the wind and the sun, / And her sweetness endureth for ever” (*By the North Sea* 377-78). Recognizing the sea as the birthplace, as the life stage, and as the final destination, Swinburne emphasizes its significance for man when Tristram and Iseult are buried in the sea at the end of *Tristram of Lyonesse*: “What grave may cast such grace round any dead, / What so sublime sweet sepulchre may be / For all that life leaves mortal, as the sea?” (*Tristram of Lyonesse* 9. 526-28) His interest in the sea is totally different from Tennyson’s who uses the image of the sea to metaphorically represent the journey into the afterlife in “Crossing the Bar.” Contrasted with the poet’s cruise in a boat in Tennyson’s poem, Swinburne’s voyage clearly tells of the final, physical plunge into the sea, and half criticizes the unnaturalness of religious salvation ascent into another world. He relies solely on his own will power to proceed as his poetry relies on his own impressions; he describes such a life course in “Prelude” to *Songs before Sunrise*:²⁶⁾

Save his own soul’s light overhead,
 None leads him, and none ever led,
 Across birth’s hidden harbor-bar,
 Past youth where shorewards shallows are,
 Through age that drives on toward the red
 Vast void of sunset hailed from far,
 To the equal waters of the dead;
 Save his own soul he hath no star,
 And sinks, except his own soul guide,
 Helmless in middle turn of tide. (“Prelude” 151-160)

Proceeding along this life course, Tristram experiences adventures, which always associate him and Iseult with the sea: “All tend but toward the sea, all born most high / Strive downward, passing all things joyous by, / Seek to it and cast their lives in it

and die" (*Tristram of Lyonesse* 3. 20-22). Their love, though blocked by fate, strives towards full perfection, disregarding socio-religious morality. Even before his fateful, final fight, Tristram playfully has physical contact with waves, as if demonstrating his independent life as free and inviolate: "And toward the foam he bent and forward smote, / Laughing, and launched his body like a boat / Full to the sea-breath" (*Tristram of Lyonesse* 8. 490-492). At the end of the poem, the narrator describes the sea as an ennobling grave for Tristram and Iseult as they are finally engulfed and embraced by the sea: "And over them, while death and life shall be, / The light and sound and darkness of the sea" (*Tristram of Lyonesse* 9. 575-76). The consequence of their deaths is so natural that it should be accepted and appreciated. Their lives are worthwhile as they are, and have nothing to do with the question of how their worth is judged posthumously in another world by inhuman agents. Proposing a life with and around the sea as harmonious with the autonomous wills of Tristram and Iseult, Swinburne seems to suggest a kind of psychological easiness when one's life accords with the course of nature despite the hardships the couple endure. Also in "The Lake of Gaube," Swinburne imagines a death by water in Lake Gaube as comforting and assuring, after he had swum in the fatal lake: "Death-dark and delicious as death in the dream of a lover and dreamer may be, / It clasps and encompasses body and soul with delight to be living and free" ("The Lake of Gaube" 37-38). The water's autonomy is omnipotent to overpower orthodox religious dogmas and to reassure those who are determined to live aesthetically and existentially: "Might life be as this is and death be as life that casts off time as a robe, / The likeness of infinite heaven were a symbol revealed of the lake of Gaube" ("The Lake of Gaube" 53-54).²⁷⁾

Swinburne chose sea mews as the appropriate symbol of the kind of beings who are fascinated by both the bliss and hardships of life and are also enticed and endangered by the sea; the people living with the sea or the truth of life. Sea mews live on the sea; however, the sea is merciless and they cannot avoid meeting accidental deaths when they come into contact with it. Their life metaphorically represents that of human being where reality can only be discerned by realizing the contradictory truth that it is completed only by acceptance of death. The birds maintain their autonomy and free will even if their destiny is to eventually sink "in middle turn of tide" ("Prelude" 160). Referring to the superstition that sea mews are the reincarnated souls of men (sailors), Swinburne represents them as the only possible form of afterlife. (This is not the kind of afterlife which many religions advocate, but the actual, physical existence through materialistic transformation.)²⁸⁾ In a sense, human existence is somehow

preliminary to the stage of sea mews' freer life; he compares these two, belittling the former in *By the North Sea*:

As the souls of the dead men disburdened
 And clean of the sins that they sinned,
 With a lovelier than man's life guerdoned
 And delight as a wave's in the wind,
 And delight as the wind's in the billow,
 Birds pass, and deride with their glee
 The flesh that has dust for its pillow
 As wrecks have the sea. (*By the North Sea* 81-88)

Here the tone seems to identify sea mews as spiritual rather than corporeal beings, and this kind of idealization reminds one characterization of birds in the poetry of the Romantics, such as Wordsworth's cuckoo, Keats's nightingale and Shelley's skylark. It is, however, important to note that the mews are not communicators from a transcendental or immortal realm. (For example, Swinburne's nightingale in "The Nightingale" not only embodies but also suffers human miseries and blessings, having the "sweet sad" nature of human beings which Shelley admits but denies it as attributive to the skylark.)²⁹⁾ As seen in "To a Seamew," the sea mews enjoy their flight on the wind and over the waves, expressing their delight at being in contact with the actual here and now. Swinburne yearns for the mews' independent, adventurous and self-determined life, accepting all of any fate; if they represent some ideal, it is the embodiment and implementation of the kind of existential philosophy Swinburne values.³⁰⁾ Such determination, he says, we lack and, instead, we tend to rely on our imaginings without any prospects of realizing them.

Our dreams have wings that falter,
 Our hearts bear hopes that die;
 For thee no dream could better
 A life no fears may fetter,
 A pride no care can alter ("To a Seamew" 97-101)

They complete their lives in harmonious symbiosis with the sea, without seeking to realize their imaginings; their autonomy complements that of the sea. The sea mews'

relationship with the sea certainly suggests the kind of perception of the world that many are incapable of achieving. But Swinburne's emphasis is more on the living being of the exquisite sea mews; he draws our attention in order that we see them vividly and appreciate how they fare in their wild environment. They find more pleasure from and respond with greater wonder to their native habitat, the sea, than human beings trapped in their oppressive civilization; the keener one's insight, the more there is to be sensed from one's surroundings. Swinburne envies their eyes, their wings and their songs; that is, their capacity to enrich the actual.

Ah, well were I for ever,
Wouldst thou change lives with me,
And take my song's wild honey,
And give me back thy sunny
Wide eyes that weary never,
And wings that search the sea ("To a Seamew" 113-118) [Italic mine]

Swinburne here does not wish to become like a sea mew as ideal being, but an actual bird, flying over the waves. In this complex rhetoric, he asserts his own potentiality for fuller artistic realization and the completion of life as an art. Swinburne states that such inspiration can be gained through the tangible: as Tristram plays with the waves, sea mews touch the surface of the sea. He can feel a connection to the birds in his experience of physical contact with the sea, for he too is fostered by the sea.³¹⁾ Sea mews are the model of a strong will in actual life surroundings, and in this attitude his poetics diverges from the Romantic tradition.

Swinburne's commitment to the tangible supports the variety of individual experiences as unique and existential. It should never be generalized and substituted by religio-political dogmas (like Christianity) or by abstract creeds and fancies (like Romantic idealism).³²⁾ He invariably asserts man's intellectual power to see what he needs to find as his mind's responses. He opposes Christianity because of its hegemony in the imposition of doctrine; he does not totally agree with Romantic idealism because it implies an exclusive society which those who share a certain esoteric communion are allowed to enter: "the select few." Both suggest one's commitment to the beyond while one is supposed to experience what one can have here on the earth and to consider how to make it rich and unique.³³⁾ As a harbinger of the tendency towards greater individualism in modern poetry, Swinburne describes individual,

original expression as “virile” in “Notes on Poems and Reviews.”

. . . if such a day should ever rise or return upon us, it will be once more remembered that the office of adult art is neither puerile nor feminine, but virile; that its purity is not that of the cloister or the harem; that all things are good in its sight, out of which good work may be produced. [. . .] Then all accepted work will be noble and chaste in the wider masculine sense, not truncated and curtailed, but outspoken and full-grown; art will be pure by instinct and fruitful by nature, no clipped and forced growth of unhealthy heat and unnatural air; all baseness and all triviality will fall off from it, and be forgotten; and no one will then need to assert, in defence of work done for the work's sake, the simple laws of his art which no one will then be permitted to impugn. (“Notes on Poems and Reviews” 359)

His sense of the masculine as “outspoken and full-grown” represents the autonomy of art almost as a natural growth,³⁴⁾ and he believes that such a growth eventually achieves the status of the aesthetic. Art born in this way can be so original and intense that it can alter the familiar world and the given system of categorizations. Swinburne's views thus secularize and demystify the idealism characteristic of Romantic thought, which served as a substitute for the religio-political thought of earlier eras. Swinburne encourages man to be independent, even though he is suspended between the earth and the sea, by transforming his life into art by his own efforts. Few can sustain such an inspired life and attain artistic recognition; even when one values aesthetic experience for its own sake, the quotidian tends to be dominated more by dullness than by euphoria unless it is provided with more aesthetic stimuli. Such a dichotomy still leaves a possibility for another stereotype to be re-established. Although Swinburne writes in a mood of triumph, the reader is left with uncertainty about the possibility of self-realization in the here and now, which remains the locus of pain, distress and troubles.³⁵⁾ If one is not strong enough to save oneself through perception, exploration and affirmation of the actual world, one is to be suspended between existential heroism and the intolerable quotidian. The value of Swinburne's poetry lies in the degree to which it calls for such strength and courage.

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- 1) Rooksby refers to the entries for Swinburne in the *Longman Companion to English Literature* and the *Cambridge Guide to English Literature* to show how lightly critics have treated him and the extent to which they regard his aestheticism as superficial: “the authors of such dictionary entries, histories, and reviews go on mouthing clichés” (Rooksby 1). On the other hand, critics like David G. Riede locate Swinburne in the tradition of Romantic literature: “a tradition that paradoxically rejects the passive acceptance of received doctrine while insisting on the metamorphic renewal of old myths, a tradition that insists on radical and fecund reinterpretation, a tradition, in short, that insists on the creative continuation of tradition itself as the one certain bulwark against meaninglessness” (Riede 220).
- 2) Although he opposed the conservatism of his time, Swinburne did not seem to believe in the overall progress of humanity, as Julia F. Saville points out: “Even Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* is in Swinburne’s view marred by moralism and progressivism . . . which he himself challenges with the republican fatalism of *Atalanta in Calydon*” (Saville 695).
- 3) As McGann suggests, it is always dangerous to see Swinburne simply as a rebel against Victorian social codes or “a mere child in revolt against the dodo of Victorian morality” (McGann, *Experiment* 50).
- 4) All quotations from Swinburne’s writings are from *Major Poems and Selected Prose*, eds. Jerome McGann and Charles L. Sligh (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), and are indicated either by line numbers or page numbers with titles. Swinburne writes to E. C. Stedman: “Of all I have done I rate *Hertha* highest as a single piece, finding in it the most of lyric force and music combined with the most of condensed and clarified thought” (“To E. C. Stedman [A Memoir]” 472).
- 6) McGann expresses this in a Protagorasan manner: “it merely means that man and not his ephemeral creations – physical, imaginative, intellectual – is the measure of everything that is. The *whole* man. When this condition prevails the world of created things itself gathers life, being, reality. Until then it is inert, oppressive, Urizenic” (McGann, *Experiment* 197). It is not just a relative way of thinking but a total awakening of human beings that Swinburne seeks and hopes to inspire with his poetry.
- 7) Although it is difficult to judge if his philosophy is existentialist, it would not be surprising if he had ideas similar to existentialists like Nietzsche. Some critics have remarked on Swinburne’s existentialism. Suggesting he lived too early to qualify as an existentialist, Murfin describes Swinburne’s beliefs as follows: “Swinburne, like Hardy, although born too late to embrace any faith, was born too early and too much a child of faith to accept what he thought he had accepted, that is, the unmediated vision of the here and now” (Murfin 165). David G. Riede also suggests Swinburne’s tendency towards existentialism in relation to Hardy: “He was able to reconcile modern rationalism and solipsism with romantic faith by insisting – as did William James – that reality is what we experience, not just what we can empirically prove. Swinburne inherited his agnostic mythmaking from Shelley, modulated it, and passed it on in altered form – with a greatly increased realization of solipsism and man’s dependence upon himself – to the greatest of his disciples, Thomas Hardy” (Riede 217).
- 8) Dying, Meleager entreats to Atalanta: “Drop tears for dew upon me who am dead, / Me who have loved thee; seeing without sin done / I am gone down to the empty weary house . . .” (*Atalanta in Calydon* 2293-95). McGann parallels his blind love for Atalanta with that of Althea for him: “All this makes Althea another unwitting victim of love, which is as much the spring of her life as of her son’s. Love blinds our good sense, she warns Meleager: therefore beware. But she too is

- blinded by love" (McGann, *Experiment* 99).
- 9) Riede comments on Swinburne's sense of balancing the imaginative with the actual: "Swinburne alone was able to fuse the truths of romanticism and Victorianism, the earlier generation's belief in the life of nature and his own generation's knowledge of nature's brute, impersonal carnality. In Nietzschean terms, Swinburne has recognized the need to incorporate Dionysian fear and ecstasy into a complete mythic view" (Riede 197). This paper focuses more on Swinburne's emphasis on the actual.
 - 10) Although influenced by the Pre-Raphaelites and Ruskin, Swinburne did not totally agree with their veneration of medieval Christian culture. This is partly why Swinburne praises literary rebels of the Middle Ages like Villon. In *Tristram of Lyonesse* he reaffirmed humane emotions and actions in the face of religious oppression when describing Arthurian legends just as he did when describing the dying pagan faith in *Hymn to Proserpine*.
 - 11) Together with Villon, Sappho represented, in Swinburne's view, the ideal poet because she created the kind of poetry which is almost identical with her perception of life and the world. In other words, it is poetry of the existential type, which is only attainable by human beings and envied by gods who can never experience the wonders of the world: "Yea, the gods waxed pale; such a song was that song" ("Sapphics" 66).
 - 12) His narrative tone here is less of hesitation than of determination in accepting a destiny in his lascivious life with Venus. So it seems that he attains his target, his beloved here and now. This is contrary to Garland's interpretation of Venus as unattainable: "Consequently, Venus, the object of Tannhäuser's desire, is forever unattainable, because, as much as he is attracted to her, his recognition of the religious transgression she represents is repulsive. [. . .] Swinburne's Tannhäuser is incapacitated by an unending repetition of the paradox that condemns him to continued acts of submission and revulsion without the possibility of ever reaching a resolution" (Garland 640).
 - 13) Cf. *Les Fleurs du Mal*, published in 1857, includes "Parfum exotique" and a part of the poem runs as follows:

Une île paresseuse où la nature donne
Des arbres singuliers et des fruits savoureux;
Des hommes dont le corps est mince et vigoureux,
Et des femmes dont l'oeil par sa franchise étonne.

Guidé par ton odeur vers de charmants climats,
Je vois un port rempli de voiles et de mâts . . . ("Parfum exotique" 5-10)
 - 14) Here, Swinburne's exoticism is rather different from that of Coleridge in *Kubla Khan*. Coleridge's narrator guesses the effects of the exotic surroundings and events while Swinburne's interest remains with Tannhäuser's ad hoc sensations from the beloved's actual presence.
 - 15) McSweeney also acknowledges Swinburne's acceptance of love as the aesthetic reward of life, that which upholds the significance of life while admitting the approach of inevitable death: ". . . a purely naturalistic vision of human existence can sustain and fulfil man despite the iron limitations placed on human desires; that human love, though doomed to extinction and sometimes twisted into dark, feral shapes, can be enough; and that the acceptance of death as the final end is a necessary step on the path to self-realization and freedom" (McSweeney 6).
 - 16) Murfin points out the differing views of Wordsworth and Swinburne with respect to morality and nature. For Swinburne, the Wordsworthian worship of nature is "a dogma built upon 'moral fallacies'" (Murfin 8) and nature is used to justify his own ethical thinking: "it was, in Swinburne's

- terms, colored by contact but not born of contact with nature ('Romantic nature poetry was anti-nature poetry')" (Murfin 14).
- 17) Just as Whistler experimented with his paintings of night and twilight scenes, one of which was severely attacked by Ruskin for its lack of sincerity, artistic motifs were often sought in dimensions other than under bright day time scenery.
 - 18) Carlyle repeatedly argues for the importance of the artistic eye, describing it as a power to divine the truth in nature: "That they have penetrated both of them into the sacred mystery of the Universe; what Goethe calls 'the open secret.' 'Which is the great secret?' asks one. – 'The *open* secret,' – open to all, seen by almost none!" (Carlyle 69)
 - 19) McGann describes this defamiliarization as expressing the world as musical: "The function of poetry is to re-present our phenomenal world in a musical form so that the phenomena will be taken for what they are: unique sets of appearances whose very transient passages expose and define the dynamic event that realizes and sustains them" (McGann, "Wagner" 631). This coincides with Carlyle's idea of poets' special understanding of the world in musical terms: "All deep things are Song. It seems somehow the very central essence of us, Song; as if all the rest were but wrappings and hulls! The primal element of us; of us, and of all things. The Greeks fabled of Sphere-Harmonies: it was the feeling they had of the inner structure of Nature; that the soul of all her voices and utterances was perfect music. Poetry, therefore, we will call *musical Thought*. The Poet is he who *thinks* in that manner. At bottom, it turns still on power of intellect; it is man's sincerity and depth of vision that makes him a Poet. See deep enough, and you see musically; the heart of Nature *being* everywhere music, if you can only reach it" (Carlyle 71-72).
 - 20) Levin says that Swinburne's poetry represents the effects of objects through his perception: "Poetry, he realizes, cannot and should not be concerned with the representation (and reconstruction) of the absent object, but rather with depicting the effect that the object has on the poet's consciousness" (Levin, "Theory"670). McGann compares Swinburne with Mallarmé here: "But language is identified with its object in Swinburne because its object is characteristically what Swinburne and Mallarmé both referred to as the effect of a thing rather than the thing itself" (McGann, *Experiment* 134).
 - 21) Weiner explains this process by the interaction between knowledge and intellectual power: "The resonant, evocative descriptions of Swinburne's later poetry thus convey, both formally and thematically, through technique and assertion, his conviction that the limitations of human knowledge in sense experience are matched by the expansive powers of the mind" (Weiner 20).
 - 22) Swinburne explains one of the main themes in *William Blake: A Critical Essay* as follows: "This old war—not (as some would foolishly have it defined) a war 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— was for Blake the most important question possible" ("From *William Blake: A Critical Essay*" 381-82). Swinburne is never troubled by the opposition between imagination and understanding because his aesthetic is based on the observation of actual objects.
 - 23) Poetic expression itself exists in the poet's mind as an object consisting of the perceived world. The musical feature of poetry has much to do with this inner-outer phenomenon because, as McGann suggests, it can render poetic expression personified as an entity: "as 'personified' the ideas resist being translated into abstract terms" (McGann, "Wagner" 628).
 - 24) Perhaps this egoism is the sincerity he attributes to Byron in the same writing: "His sincerity indeed is difficult to discover and define; but it does in effect lie at the root of all his good works:

deformed by pretension and defaced by assumption, marked by folly and veiled by affectation; but perceptible after all, and priceless" ("Notes on Poems and Reviews" 360). Swinburne is the closest to Byron among Romantic poets in admitting his egoism in poetry. Therefore, it is quite natural for him to deny public assumptions about him as a sage in "Poeta Loquitur": "But reckless the reader must be / Who imagines me one of the sages / That steer through Time's sea" ("Poeta Loquitur" 22-24). With respect to the expression of self, Swinburne seems to be quite different from Byron, as McGann points out: "Swinburne is the polar opposite of a man like Byron, not only in the matter of poetic craftsmanship but in fundamental poetic aims. Byronic self-absorption was almost unknown to him, whereas absorption in everything that was not himself came as readily as the celebration of that experience, or its stylistic analogue, pastiche" (McGann, *Experiment* 182-183).

- 25) Here, the inspirational object (the sea) and the produced effect on the observer (the subject) coordinate in feeling the rhythm of life, largely through the musical cadence of tides and poetry. Fippinger comments on *By the North Sea*, interpreting the poet listening to the sound of the sea as poetry from the past, which perhaps evokes all the great poets': "The poet is always alone, like Swinburne at the edge of the North Sea, and never alone, but constantly in the harmonic company of the elect of the sea" (Fippinger683).
- 26) Swinburne's determines to contemplate on this life, as McSweeney discusses: "But while man cannot be other than sceptical concerning the possibility of a phoenix-like renewal of life, all shall be well with him as long as he fulfils his great destiny in merely being a man, a free man living in the present and sustained by no power but his own. This is the same belief that informed the 'Prelude' to *Songs before Sunrise*, that turning point of Swinburne's early career, and that now sustains the aging poet meditating on his own inevitable death" (McSweeney 186). But he never leaves the question of afterlife aside, and proposes his own philosophical attitude as acceptable in the age of lost faith.
- 27) Murfin reads Swinburne's poetic message in *A Nympholept* and "The Lake of Gaube" as follows: "Am I the creator of the world that keeps me sane, articulate, alive? Has my response to an unbearable world, a world uninfused by light, power, and love, been to create *ex nihilo* a world where, because there is nothing real to usurp me, I am that light and power, order and love? The last lines of both poems are ambiguous, but they almost answer such questions in the affirmative" (Murfin169). Levin also sees a kind of salvation in the ending of "The Lake of Gaube": "Rather, the poet's ability to prolong his experience of heaven in 'The Lake of Gaube' symbolically represents the possibility of spiritual salvation in a world deprived of any gods" (Levin, *Swinburne's Apollo* 152).
- 28) Swinburne's sense of himself as an independent being finds its corollary in the solitary sea mew flying over the barren seascape. This may be similar to the idea of reincarnation of human beings into animals and insects, which is common in folk legends in the East Asia. Riede interprets this as a return to nature as a whole: "Metamorphosis into a bird would seem to be no better than a Wordsworthian metamorphosis into a sod 'rolled round in earth's diurnal course'" (Riede 152). Such an identification of nature, Riede says, makes death acceptable for Swinburne from his comparatively early stage: "Complete surrender to the deathlike state, an experience in life of the oblivious mergence sought in so many of the early poems, makes him realize that death is not a negation of life but a fulfillment and that acceptance of death eliminates the fear of process which inhibits freedom" (Riede 198).
- 29) Similarly Riede makes clear the difference between Shelley and Swinburne in their respective attitudes towards life: "For Shelley the negative connotations remain in the statement that life

'Stains the white radiance of Eternity.' Swinburne's fundamental divergence from his romantic predecessors is apparent in his conscientious elimination of negative connotations from this simile. The white light of eternity is, as we have repeatedly seen, only a euphemism for the void of eternity, and for Swinburne the breath that stains the glass does not disfigure it but only makes life and joy visible to soul" (Riede 213).

- 30) Eron defines such a characteristic as the spirit of the aesthetic, which continues to exist eternally whatever form it takes in different times: "The fact, however, that the body can transform, but as in Ovidian metamorphosis, the essence of a thing is never lost, allows for the ghostly quality that pervades much of Swinburne's landscape poetry and, perhaps, also accounts for the somewhat fearless attitude towards death in his erotic poetry. Such notions of concentricity, of unchanging change and ghostly essence also seem to give meaning to Swinburne's very humanized landscapes" (Eron 309). In a sense, this interpretation helps us to understand what Swinburne seeks to find in nature. However, it is true that Swinburne is more fascinated by the actual appearance or form of the spirit than the spirit itself. Without the graceful feature of the object, it is impossible for him to imagine such a spirit existing there.
- 31) Swinburne writes to E. C. Stedman: "I remember being afraid of other things but never of the sea. But this is enough of infancy: only it shows the *truth* of my endless passionate returns to the sea in all my verse" ("To E. C. Stedman [*A Memoir*]" 470).
- 32) As Murfin suggests exemplifying Arnold's case, Swinburne seems to have disbelieved both in Christianity and in the idealistic thinking of Romanticism: "Whether the supposedly harmonious and redemptive vision lost to the author of 'Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse' or 'Dover Beach' or 'In Utrumque Paratus' is romanticism or Christianity is just ambiguous enough to suggest that one faith has collapsed after the other and that now, although both continue to influence the present, neither remains tenable or valid. [. . .] Thus, just as 'religion' and romanticism are linked, both as twin losses to be mourned and as dead, twin tyrants to be scorned, so the phoenix of the coming age must create and elevate not only (in Arnold's words) 'spiritual . . . modes' but also 'an adequate literature,' a new and integrated 'basis of belief' (in Mill's terminology) which might be 'religious or merely human'" (Murfin 19-20). If Swinburne's idea amounts to anything as religious thinking, it is of a highly individualistic cast, based on each individual's experience and inquiry, as Riede describes it as "evangelical": "For Swinburne alone the evidence of experience was at least as real as the evidence of science; he alone was able to generate a saving personal myth. The contrast with Arnold is particularly revealing, for if Arnold was the high priest of culture, he was a high church high priest, laying down truths of culture as dogma. Swinburne, on the other hand, was evangelical, allowing each man to meet the divinity on his own terms" (Riede 186).
- 33) If the idealism of Romantic thought anticipates the absorption of self into the absolute or ideal as a final consummation, Swinburne's idea, which persists in stressing the significance of self, is completely opposite to it. McSweeney points out that this is in contrast to an escapist aspect of Romanticism: "But much more characteristic of Swinburne's poetry is an acceptance of human limitations and of man's separation from nature, and a determination to make the best of this situation. The opposite of his desire to sink to the level of a natural object is his positive attempt, in poems like 'By the North Sea' and 'A Nympholept,' to become united with natural process while retaining his individuality, something quite different from the attempt to heal the wound of selfhood and of separation from the natural world through the obliteration of the self" (McSweeney 138-9).
- 34) Boulet points out the problem of authors' accepting literary genteel codes as self-castration: "For

Swinburne, Victorian literary censorship, as promoted by moralistic critics but internalized by the artists themselves, is a form of figurative self-castration . . ." (Boulet 754).

- 35) In fact, these are not possible to be solved, but Swinburne suggests us to take the positive and negative aspects of life as fully acceptable when they, even for a moment, can create exquisite experience which was unknown before, if the primary source which constitutes what we are is perception, not action. This is an aspect of Swinburne's ambiguity which never reassures the reader and entices him to read the poem again, and such questioning, as it is universal for all, again makes us realize the beauty of life. Discussing "A Vision of Spring in Winter," McGann describes the meaninglessness in trying to find a salvation in Swinburne's poetry: "Swinburne here has found his own way of showing us that, in the continuous process of death which is the human world, an endless fullness of life is for ever born; but that, as well, such a fullness never for a moment cancels the reality and pain of that same world's unending entropic processes. The ambiguity is an absolute, as true and real as the punning phrase which also expresses its presence: 'doubtful death.' The world gains 'all its April' back at every spring when, however, the poet must experience again his eternal losses" (McGann, *Experiment* 235).