

## **‘Poetry in Motion’: Movement as the Internal Logic of A.C. Swinburne’s “The Nightingale”**

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### **Abstract**

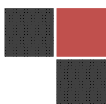
Algernon Charles Swinburne was a nineteenth century English poet and critic who until the first decade of the twentieth century was the most well-known and critically appreciated of the decadent period poets of English Literature. This paper tries to re-evaluate and re-view one of his early fragments collected in his poetic juvenilia: “The Nightingale.” It tries to explore the fragment’s relationship with some of his other lyric poems specifically the Sapphic poems of Swinburne and analyses this multifaceted poem as an exemplar of such diffuse themes as transformation, unbridled and insatiable desire, creative energy, fusion of binaries, order out of chaos and ultimately death. Moreover, it contends that the central logic that follows from this multitude of themes, both in terms of form and content, is ‘Movement.’ Keeping in mind the observations of Jerome J. McGann regarding the same the paper tries to arrive at a comprehensive working definition of Movement and searches for numerous manifestations of movement within the poem.

**Keywords:** movement, transformation, desire, creative energy, flux, fusion, death.

Considered by many to be the last of the great Victorian poets, A.C. Swinburne was nominated six times by the Nobel committee from 1903 to 1907 and then again in 1909. Swinburne is credited with introducing the English literary scene to the writings of the French Symbolists such as Charles Baudelaire and Stephane Mallarme. There is evidence of mutual admiration between the aforementioned poets and Swinburne with whom they frequently corresponded. Swinburne is also one of the poets credited with ushering in the aesthetic movement in British art and culture based upon the principle of *l'art pour l'art* (art for art's sake). His adherence to the aesthetic tenets of Theophile Gautier, the principal originator of the phrase *l'art pour l'art*, and that of Baudelaire is quite explicitly stated in his major critical work, *William Blake: A Critical Essay* (1868). According to Swinburne, "Art for art's sake first of all, and afterwards we may suppose all the rest shall be added to her" (91). It is often acknowledged that the controversial first volume of *Poems and Ballads* (1866) was a product of his belief in art for art's sake.

The sensuous nature of the subject matter of *Poems and Ballads* in particular led to widespread furor and the subsequent withdrawal of the first edition, also called the Moxon edition. In this context, A.E. Housman mentions an interesting anecdote in his posthumously published essay on Swinburne that is emblematic of the notoriety of Swinburne or more specifically the notoriety generated by the publication of the first volume of *Poems and Ballads*. The anecdote is related by Thomas Hardy who describes radical young men in London who were often seen carrying the Moxon edition of *Poems and Ballads I* in their breast-pockets as a sign of rebellion against the constrictions of Victorian mores. Despite this early notoriety generated by Swinburne's poems the critical value of his overall poetic oeuvre has diminished over time, especially since the advent of modernist criticism. As a result, Swinburne continues to be neglected by a large majority of scholars and the academia in general.

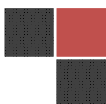
The direct cause of the neglect and lack of understanding of Swinburne's highly abstract and unique poetics stems from the influential evaluations of the poet by two of the greatest modernist poets, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. Ezra Pound in his 'Review' of Edmond Gosse's *Life of Swinburne* described Swinburne and his poetry as lacking in intellect (326). In Pound's view, Swinburne's genius rested solely in his ability to recognize and transform words into pieces of verbal music which he termed as Swinburne's "rhythm-building faculty" (328). T.S. Eliot, likewise, in his essay entitled 'Swinburne as Poet' criticized Swinburne for lacking in concrete thought and focus (147) while adding that Swinburne dwelled exclusively in a world of words which allowed the words to take on a life of their own and become mere "hallucinations," i.e. disconnected from the referential (visual) world of objects (149-150). Pier Giuseppe Monateri rejects the Saussurean concept of arbitrariness inherent in language in order to justify T.S. Eliot's criticism of Swinburne. He does this exclusively from the viewpoint of Eliot's theory of Objective Correlative which focuses on the 'visual' referents of language rather than on the musical aspect of language (06) while Leslie Brisman's impassioned essay titled 'Swinburne's Semiotics' launches a vociferous attack on Eliot for expecting easy visualization and rejecting all abstract thought based on its perceived lack of reference to concrete objects. Georges Lafourcade, one of the foremost Swinburne critics insists that "the intellectual element [...] can never be absent from true poetry" (Preface, xiii). Lafourcade further views Swinburne as the practitioner of the grand style since in Swinburne we find "music and rhythm combined with grandeur or stateliness" (Preface, xviii).



Much of what is said about Swinburne's poetry is said in the context of his published work, both his poetry and his critical work. Critics have singled out poems from his published works for praise while condemning the rest. Pound praises some of his early poems such as "The Ballad of Life," "the Ballad of Death," "The Triumph of Time" and "Dolores" from the first volume of *Poems and Ballads*; 'Siena' from *Songs Before Sunrise* (1871) and the [Francois] *Villon translations* (1904) while Eliot believes that the reading of a few poems such as "The Leper," "Laus Veneris" and "The Triumph of Time" from the first volume of *Poems and Ballads* along with a reading of the verse dramas like *Atalanta in Calydon* (1865) and *Tristram of Lyonesse* (1882) should be quite enough for an accurate measurement of Swinburne as a poet. A.E. Housman, on the other hand, suggests that *Atalanta in Calydon* and *Poems and Ballads I* were the only works written by Swinburne at the height of his powers and all his other works since showed a gradual decline in terms of both artistry and sales. Not much has been written about the unpublished (during his lifetime) or posthumously published poems of Swinburne. It was Lafourcade who compiled a selection of Swinburne's poetic juvenilia as a volume entitled *Swinburne's Hyperion and other poems* (1927). The title of the collection is an obvious reference to the influence of Keats (who wrote two vastly different fragments on the myth of the defeated Titans titled 'Hyperion' and 'The Fall of Hyperion' before his death) on the early poetic development of Swinburne on which Lafourcade wrote an essay entitled 'Swinburne and Keats: An Essay' that is attached to the collection.

The short lyric poem that will be discussed during the course of this paper is titled "The Nightingale." The poem was collected by Thomas James Wise but the manuscript somehow went missing. Lafourcade, instead, received a typescript of "The Nightingale" which was later republished as the introductory poem in the Everyman edition edited by Catherine Maxwell. Swinburne most likely read Keats in his Eton years but the poems themselves were written during his Oxford years, sometime between 1856 and 1860. It is generally agreed that Swinburne wrote these poems while at Balliol College, Oxford after getting acquainted with the pre-Raphaelite poets, in particular, William Morris and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Lafourcade assigns meaning to the poems based solely on the imitative quality of the verses. Although it is true that the poems are informed primarily by the spirit of Shelley, Keats and even William Blake this paper tries to argue that there is a singularity of purpose, a central logic in this early fragment that informs much of his later poetry. The central dominant logic that gives shape and form to the poem and that which subsumes the numerous individual themes is the element of Movement or motion. A working definition of movement or motion is constructed here based on observations made by Jerome J. McGann in his experimental critical work titled *Swinburne: An Experiment in Criticism*. Movement in poetry refers to the literal, symbolic or the purely abstract dynamism in verse that is either progressing forward in a linear fashion or moving in circles as in a 'vortex' or vortices. To clarify, the use of the term vortex must be read here merely as a convenient image and is in no way a reference to Ezra Pound's theory of the vortex although the parallels between Swinburne's poetry and the latter are uncanny, to say the least.

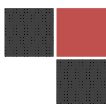
There are three types of motion or movement to be discerned in the form of "The Nightingale:" one is abstract motion; the second is a linguistic or literal motion and the third and perhaps the most important one is termed as imagistic motion. Abstract motion refers to the movement towards 'poetry in the condition of music,' a phrase first used by



Richard Wagner and popularized by Walter Pater in his essay 'The School of Giorgione,' first published in 1877. Literal or linguistic motion refers to replication of literal movement or action in terms of language while imagistic motion, refers to the accumulation of images around seemingly fixed symbols.

The general consensus among all of Swinburne's critics is that the essence of his genius resides in the musical quality of his poems. Charles E. Russell makes an interesting study of Swinburne based on musical notations while Gunnar Serner, in his ambitious study *On the Language of Swinburne's Lyrics and Epics* introduces Swinburne as one of the "greater painters in sounds" (7) and goes on to make a linguistic analysis of Swinburne based on his choice of words and his unique construction of sentences. Theodore Wratish also makes constant comments on the musical element in Swinburne's verse dramas as well as his poems in his influential work *Algernon Charles Swinburne: A Study*. Thomas E. Connolly in *Swinburne's Theory of Poetry* provides a detailed explication of Swinburne's theory of music emphasizing Swinburne's careful distinction between inner and outer music while Jerome J. McGann in his full length study of Swinburne finds musicality and the lack of concrete meaning in his poetry an important element of "pure poetry" (59). But the documents that inform the aspect of music in the present paper are Jerome McGann's essay entitled 'Wagner, Baudelaire, Swinburne: Poetry in the Condition of Music' that reads Swinburne in the context of the Wagnerian theories of music and its relation to poetry and vice-versa and Walter Pater's 'The School of Giorgione.' McGann mentions three key texts, either related to or written by Richard Wagner. The first is the pamphlet written by Charles Baudelaire 'Richard Wagner et Tannhäuser à Paris' published in 1861 and gifted to Swinburne in 1863; the second text is Wagner's *Quatre Poèmes d'Opéra* also published in 1861, a copy of which Swinburne possessed; and the third is Wagner's *Oper und Drama* published in 1852 and translated into English in 1855-56. The question here is whether Swinburne was aware of the 3 volume *Oper und Drama* or had even read it in Oxford, while he was composing the poem in question. It is highly doubtful that he did but it is undeniable that the aspect of music is inbuilt into the schema of "The Nightingale." "The Nightingale" comes very close to embodying Wagner's theories about poetry "aspiring to the condition of music" (McGann, Wagner... 624).

Music, according to Wagner, has an internal demand to explain itself and this demand could only be fulfilled by a poet. The poet figure who could 'still' the need inherent in music is of a very particular kind, according to Wagner. Only a "poet who is fully alive to music's tendency and exhaustible faculty of expression, and therefore drafts his poem in such a fashion that it may penetrate the finest fibers of the musical tissue, and the spoken thought entirely dissolve into the feeling" could fulfill the need in music. He further adds in his essay 'The Artwork of the Future' that "no other form of poetry can help us here, save that in which the poet no longer describes, but brings his subject into actual and convincing representation to the senses" (188). Quite contrary to Wagner's conception of music, Walter Pater finds no lack in music and instead calls music the "ideally consummate art" (106) or "perfected art" (109). He further adds that the lack is in other arts, poetry included, which can only be fulfilled by aspiring "towards the condition of music" (106) or "musical law" (109). But the conclusions drawn by both Wagner and Pater are the same. Both emphasize poetry in the condition of music. In Wagnerian terms, poetry is brought in contact with music when the poet arouses or determines feelings through the sound of the words rather than by a concrete reference to

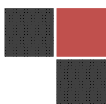


anything particular in the material world. For Pater too, poetry must “strive to be independent of the mere intelligence, to become a matter of pure perception, to get rid of its responsibilities to its subject or material” (108). One way that Swinburne achieves this condition (also suggested by Pater) is by fusing the overall form or the expression with the abstract ideas the poem engenders. Thus it is that literal movement in form is fused with the multifarious manifestations of movement in matter. These manifestations include a movement from one signification from another, from order to chaos and even the fusion of contraries which the poem achieves. All of these manifestations of movement as well as literal movement in form are discussed in detail a little later in the paper.

The fusion of form with intellectual content ultimately leads to the determining of feelings or the arousal of feelings which is emphasized by Wagner. Simply put, the expression of the idea tries to imitate the ‘flow’ of the subject matter thereby arousing the necessary feelings in the reader. Swinburne achieves this fusion so completely in this early fragment as well as in his other poems that even Eliot remarked, albeit in a negative sense, that in Swinburne the sound and the meaning are one and the same. The confounding line from the poem “lost in its own sound” refers precisely to the dissolving of spoken thoughts or at the very least the subordination of the spoken thoughts to the sounds of poetry in the condition of music.

Musicality in Swinburne is not always as abstract as the theories of Wagner and Pater suggest. There are concrete examples of the musical structure of “The Nightingale” that are quite easy to spot. For instance, repetition of rhyme words contributes to internal music within the poem since repeated phrases and words recall the repetitions we find in musical pieces. There are numerous repetitions of words such as ‘eddy,’ ‘delight’ and ‘passion’ that link the poem together into a whole and give it an impression of music. Sometimes, the change in the context in which the words recur or even slight variations in the use of these words could lead to different associations in the readers’ minds. The use of “[tempest] whirl [of melody]” (line 4) and “whirled [by a storm of love and indignation]” (line 33), for instance, could be differentiated on the basis of agency. While the first ‘whirl’ represents the force of the melody or song, the second is used to mean ‘causing or forcing’ as in death caused by a storm of love and indignation. The word storm too is used twice once as a verb and again as a noun; one represents the action of storming or forcing oneself and the other describes the force of love.

Music in the poem is also generated through the constant movement evoked by the use of words. I call this type of movement literal or linguistic movement. To be precise, the flow of language in Swinburne is the reflection of the constant flux in nature and stability that nature assumes in the flux. A perfect instance of the passing of “seasons” and emergence of order out of chaos could be found in the poem as it begins with half a dozen references to frenzied movement: gushed, a tempest whirl, rush’d, dash’d down which are then inevitably brought into harmony i.e. bringing the flux of nature into harmonious coexistence. One may take for instance, the nightingale’s song in line 2 that “struggling gush’d” at the beginning which is then transformed into a “harmonious breeze” in line 6. It then becomes uncontrollable, uninhibited as represented by the compound word “mad-stream” (line 11) and finally tastes “dim-delicious death” (line 9) which is again related to the phrase “fitful peace” mentioned in line number 18. Jerome McGann suggests that images of literal movement were central to the forward moving action poetry of Alfred Tennyson and Robert Browning while in



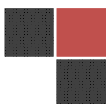
Swinburne the images moved in a circle as exemplified by the crucial phrase in the poem “hurried round and round” (line 16).

The poem, in its present form, could be structurally divided into 5 parts; lines 1-9, lines 10-18, lines 19-29, lines 30-36 and lines 37-45. Each part revolves around the symbol of the nightingale while the key motif is the nightingale’s song variously referred to as ‘song’, ‘music’ or ‘melody’. The symbol of the nightingale is the ‘center’ from which a bewildering variety of images spin off (McGann 41). The images that constantly move around are images of motion signifying the path of the song. The path of the individual images in each part taken separately are forward moving such as in the lines ‘rush’d thro’ the stirred boughs’ (4-5) and ‘thy wild strain wildly maddens down grief’s passion-river’ (line 24). But taken as a whole, as when all parts are connected together they have a circular/cyclical movement. In each part the song achieves a disruptive intensity then settles down towards the end which represents an ebb and flow movement. There is the intensity of the song followed by death in the first part; in the second part the ‘mad stream of song’ (line 11) ‘dropt down harmoniously’ (line 18); in the third part the ‘wild strain’ (line 24) of song meets a soft gentle breeze; the fourth part describes Sappho’s ‘burning song’ (line 35) and the eventual suicide of Sappho, in the final part the song of Philomela takes us back to ‘early crimes’ referring to the rape of Philomela and the death of Itylus. The chaos of images referring to motion achieve an order through this repeated pattern of the intensity of life, the inevitability of death and rebirth.

It must also be clarified that the Symbolic associations within the poem are extremely unstable so that the images of motion do not always revolve around fixed symbols or in this case one fixed symbol. The central figure of the nightingale in the poem and the correspondences that it elicits are not exclusive or consistent. Nightingales signify both death and immortality for Swinburne. In it the image of the nightingale itself goes through these shifts, the nightingale represents both Sappho of Lesbos whom he admired [as did Plato who refers to her as “the fair Sappho” (13) in *Phaedrus*] and Philomela who is transformed into a nightingale. He does this, I presume, in order to thwart any traditional understanding of the central figure of the Nightingale. It was the aim of Baudelaire, who was an important influence on Swinburne, to free poetry from all association with conventional meaning. Both identities are also explored several times in other poems of Swinburne for instance in ‘Itylus’ the Nightingale is Philomela while in “Anactoria” and “On the Cliffs” the figure of the nightingale refers to Sappho. Swinburne’s interest in Sappho and the Sapphic tradition signified his own “unsatisfied inspiration,” (Raymond 126) which he felt he shared with Sappho. Meredith B. Raymond in his article ‘Swinburne among the Nightingales’ also compares “The Nightingale” and “On the cliffs” on the basis of the significance of the central image of the nightingale:

Thus the relationship between the early fragment [i.e. “The Nightingale”] and “On the Cliffs” rests mainly on the identification of the bird with Sappho and Swinburne, and on the description of what is happening when the creative fire burns. (127)

It is also not clear who the figure of the nightingale represents in the first 30 lines of the poem. We can only speculate as to the identity of the nightingale in the first 3 parts. It is entirely possible, at least in the first part, that the nightingale refers to an actual flesh and blood nightingale while in the next two parts the nightingale might symbolize the Wagnerian poet himself, a poet who achieves in poetry the condition of music. Only



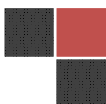
after the first three parts does the poem make explicit references to Sappho and Philomela. It is Philomela of “Itylus” who having been transformed into a nightingale reminds her sister swallow (Procne) at the end to:

Sing on! Thou singest as in early times  
To Thracian forests in the accursed shade;  
Sing on: thou singest as of early crimes.... (Lines 43-45)

Every image and each condition of life (death being an integral ‘part’ of it) in Swinburne has “a full range of possible “seasons,” and thus they, like all of Swinburne’s images, are forever threatening or actually accomplishing some radical transformation in their significance” (McGann, *Swinburne...* 141). And this if not anything else is a major source of Swinburne’s notorious vagueness, its “impenetrable mistiness” (Swinburne, *William Blake...* 11). Transformation and change, also the central theme of Keats’s “Hyperion,” is brought about here through the movement from one signification to another.

The twin symbols of Death and sleep in Swinburne are also indicative of movement. In Swinburne’s symbolism, sleep or rest is associated with “dream and vision” (McGann 141) and not with mere inaction while death is almost always associated with rebirth. One may take for instance the lines “as with full conscious beauty now content/ now shivered into dim delicious death” (lines 8-9). Contrary to what is normally expected the poem does not end there with the image of death for the sake of death, or even death as a sort of escapism which he is often accused of much like the image of death in Keats’s “Ode to the Nightingale.” For death in Swinburne signifies a new beginning and not the end. In “Anactoria” too, another Sapphic poem, Sappho speaks of how in death she and her song will become part of the music of the constantly changing natural world: “I Sappho shall be one with all these things,/ with all high things for ever” (lines 276-77). The poem goes on to identify Sappho with the earth; their pain is also identical. “The Nightingale” continues from the image of death from which still flow “a thousand gurgling eddies flew / of whirlwind sweetness, lost in its own sound” (lines 13-14) completing the full cycle of seasons. And then the tumultuous winds of autumn drop into “fitful peace” as soon as they attain the highest pitch of voice. Death or fitful peace is emblematic of the highest level of creative energy or the summit of creative energy where the words dissolve into mere sounds without any referential meaning as in the phrase “lost in its own sound”. It is also possible to interpret this line from the perspective of insatiable desire – desire that perhaps leads to the erasure of words containing referential meaning. It might also refer to that non-consciousness or non-conscious process which is a major source of “creative energy” in the poem of which paradoxically Swinburne seems to have been conscious of.

The concept of creative energy or revolutionary energy in Swinburne is derived from the symbols created by William Blake, a formative influence on Swinburne. *Los*, in the elaborate mythology of Blake, represents creative energy as opposed to the formless *Urizen* who represents rational thought or reason. In the mythology of Blake both *Los* and *Urizen* are in constant struggle with each other and often end up regulating each other. In *The First Book of Urizen* (also written as simply *The Book of Urizen*), for example, it is *Los* who regulates *Urizen* by providing him with a body. Likewise, in “The Nightingale,” the rational content is regulated by energy of the movement of sound. Although the creation of order out of chaos by *Urizen* is seen in a negative light in *The Book of Urizen*, here in the poem the reference to ‘harmonious breeze’ is both a

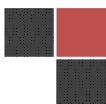


reference to the inner harmony of the song of the nightingale as well as of the harmony of the poem as a whole. In accordance with Jerome McGann's theory that inner harmony constitutes the essence of meaning in Swinburne (*Wagner...*620), an ultimate harmony is created out of the chaos represented by the stacking of a polyphony of images or sounds, self-contained with internal significance and meaning.

As regards the last two parts of the poem, the phrase "joy or grief" (line 22) and its variant "grief or joy" (line 30) are also used in different ways. In the first instance Swinburne is referring to the fusion of joy and grief which results in delight (this is a reference to Philomela's song) while in the second instance he is talking about joy and grief as separate entities not yet fused. The poem's ending is a Swinburnian imitation of John Keats's "Ode on Melancholy." He plucks the twin images of Joy and Sorrow from the ode and juxtaposes them not unlike what we find in the last stanza of "Ode on Melancholy." According to Rikky Rooksby, the rhythmic energy of Swinburne's poetry is kept in check precisely by the creation of an image of ultimate union, by "carefully balancing exquisitely contrasted images" (152). It signifies a movement from discreteness to fusion. The union of the contrasting emotions of joy and grief is also reminiscent of Blake's theory of contraries although Blake emphasizes the coexistence of these emotions rather than a juxtaposition or fusion of these contraries. In Blake's theory of contraries the fusion of these contraries is not only unacceptable but also disastrous. Both must co-exist but as separate entities regulating and balancing each other.

The constant shifting associations; transformations, amorphous forms, and a language that is fluid reinforce the already explicit intensity of desire that mark the poems of Swinburne. Swinburne constantly introduces what he calls "the perversion of love ; which having annihilated all else, falls at last to feed upon itself, to seek out strange things and barren ways, to invent new loves and invert the old, to fill the emptied heart and flush the subsiding veins with perverse passion" (Swinburne, *William Blake...* 178). The phrases "storm of love" (line 33) and "wild love" (line 35) refer to this extreme desire, intensified insatiated desire that transforms into pain, masochism or self-flagellation. Swinburne himself incidentally refers to motion and passion together in his analysis of one of William Blake's illustrations, *The Blasted Tree* from Thornton's *The Pastoral of Virgil* (67). The poem closely monitors the movement of an ever intensifying desire and its transformation.

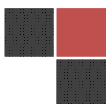
To conclude, Swinburne is a complex poet, and the years of neglect and misunderstandings have only helped to reinforce this fact. For Swinburne, life is characterized as a restless desiring, life is always about the consuming passion of desire, all else is merely an illusion. Although Swinburne believed in the cruelty of life and the pathos of men and women he also at the same time, celebrated the joy and happiness in life without which life was incomplete hence the phrases "fierce joy intoxicate" (line 25) and "A wild delight" (line 27). Men and women constantly triumph over sorrow and death. Life is hideous and cruel but at the same time it is grand and beautiful. Moreover, everything in "The Nightingale" is 'fluid,' always in perpetual motion, 'in a flux'. And it is not only that Swinburne is imitating nature but also that through his music "he rediscovers nature in its spiritual reality .... Nature becomes the consequence of art" (McGann, *Swinburne...* 116). For Swinburne, this perpetual vortex motion and the images of nature in a state of flux signified movement of life itself; constant movement from one state to another, from one signification to another is the essence of life.





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