

SWINBURNE: STYLE, SYMPATHY, AND SADOMASOCHISM

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In 1897 the American critic William Morton Payne, reflecting on the unprecedented sensation caused by the publication of Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* in 1866, recognized that Swinburne had broken open the old boundaries of decorum:

Poems and Ballads not only showed that a new poet had arisen with a voice of his own, and possessed of an absolutely unexampled command of the resources of English rhythm, but they also showed that the author deemed fit for poetical treatment certain passional aspects of human life concerning which the best English tradition had hitherto been one of reticence. (Payne 208)

Payne importantly links together Swinburne's innovative style with his innovative subject-matter, and indeed it was the complicity of the one with the other which rendered his poetry so problematic to Victorian critics. His treatment of the "passional aspects of human life," a topic till then deemed the province of pornography, proved particularly disturbing in that it assumed for expression a brilliant new mastery of poetic form. Without this achievement it would have been easy to reject Swinburne's verse as worthless obscenity; as it was, critics were obliged to acknowledge the poet's literary talent at the same time as they censured him for his impropriety.

Swinburne was consciously following the principle of art for art's sake that he had inherited from Théophile Gautier and Charles Baudelaire, which makes the aesthetic aspect of the work of art of the highest if not the only importance, and allows the artist legitimately to tackle any topic he chooses, regardless of how shocking or reprehensible it may be, so long as he produces something artistically beautiful. Thus, as Swinburne says of Baudelaire in an 1862 review of *Les Fleurs du mal*, "even of the loathsome bodily putrescence and decay, he can make some noble use; pluck out its meaning and secret, even its beauty