

Uncollected Letters of Algernon Charles Swinburne edited by Terry L. Meyers. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2005. 3 vols. ISBN 1-851-96774-5. \$475.00; £295.

Terry Meyers's long-awaited edition is much more than an essential contribution to Swinburne studies; it is an important resource for any Victorianist. Containing 1,079 numbered items, over half of which are letters by Swinburne (the rest are letters to him, or letters and articles about him), these three volumes provide vivid information about the many literary, political, and social circles which Swinburne traversed in his brilliant and erratic career. The information is generally new: by my own random sampling of 150 items, approximately 80% of the letters by Swinburne himself (and most of the letters by others) were previously unpublished. We find also an early sonnet of Swinburne's, previously unknown (1:6-7); three flagellant limericks (3:49n1); four complete poems by his putative lost-love Mary Gordon Leith (3:163-67nn4-7); the full text of the coded "Cy merest dozen" letters exchanged by Leith and Swinburne from 1893 to 1902; and excerpts from hitherto unnoticed reviews of the 1866 *Poems and Ballads* (1:76n6; 1:91n2). All the letters are richly and lovingly annotated.

The editor humbly presents his opus as an adjunct to Cecil Y. Lang's monumental six-volume collection, *The Swinburne Letters* (1959-62); he numbers the items in relation to Lang's numbering, and declares, "I cannot conceive of a student using the present work without Cecil Lang's *The Swinburne Letters* immediately to hand." Yet Meyers here does himself less than justice; while serious students of Swinburne and of the period must certainly make themselves familiar with both works, I found that *Uncollected Letters* can be read separately with profit and pleasure. More swiftly if less richly than Lang's, this edition enables us to sweep through the various phases of Swinburne's life: his fervent interactions with the Pre-Raphaelite circle and with freethinkers throughout England and Europe; his dismay and anger at the furore over *Poems and Ballads, First Series*; his engagement with the circle of Mazzini, Emilie Venturi, and Whistler, depicted through a series of fascinating letters from Venturi; the shutdown of his social energies after the collapse of 1879 and through his first few years in Putney; the diverse interests of his alert old age. These letters should modify our perception of Swinburne's life, and of the complexities of his personality; most significantly, perhaps, they dramatically enhance our understanding of his impact on readers in Britain and abroad.

The letters illuminate much of Swinburne's approach to literature: his metrical training (3:30-31), his uneasiness about writing in prose – "working in a strange soil instead of my natural ground," as he puts it (1:237; see also 3:214) – and his strikingly Romantic experience of poetic inspiration: *Erechtheus* was written, he states, "under the influence of the equinoctial gales