

“FOR WHERE THOU FLIEST I SHALL NOT FOLLOW”:
MEMORY AND POETIC SONG IN
ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE’S “ITYLUS”

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The story of Philomela is a well-known mythological narrative of abuse, suffering, and the poetic song. The image of the “tongueless nightingale” has been frequently employed by poets, and it has come to signify creative experience arising out of loss, darkness, and solitude, where the meaning is to be found beyond words – in the tragic, soaring music of the nightingale. I wish to read Algernon Charles Swinburne’s dramatic monologue, “Itylus,” through the lens of trauma theory in both modern psychology and literary studies. Trauma has been described as “a wound inflicted not upon the body, but upon the mind”; “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events” in which the response to the event is often delayed, and appears “in uncontrolled, repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 3, 11). I argue that in Swinburne’s poem the two female characters – Philomela transformed into a nightingale and Procne into a swallow – embody two contrary ways of dealing with trauma and thus they produce two different kinds of song. While Procne’s response to her tragic past is denial, Philomela is the survivor who deals with the trauma by “acting it out,” by the repetitive and compulsive re-living of the experience. It is her mode of memory, nevertheless, that results in the creation of poetry which is powerful and meaningful, a heartfelt, fiery song.

In her book *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth concentrates on the seemingly unexplainable phenomenon which she calls “double wounding,” a repetitiveness of the experience of trauma in the life of a survivor, which happens unknowingly and against the person’s will (2). According to Caruth, trauma is always a “double wound” in the sense that it is “experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (4). Caruth explains this phenomenon by relating it to the myth of the Christian knight Tancred in Tasso’s sixteenth-century epic *Jerusalem Delivered*, which tells how Tancred first killed his beloved Clorinda, not knowing her identity beneath her disguise as a knight,