

SWINBURNE'S CONCEPTION OF SHELLEY

Although Swinburne wrote only three essays exclusively devoted to Shelley,¹ his comments on Shelley in his poetry, in his letters, and in the rest of his essays are all but innumerable. In the present study, I intend to examine those comments that are germane to understanding how Swinburne conceived of Shelley as an advocate of political and religious freedom. Such a focus must leave out many aspects of Shelley that Swinburne commented on but which are not central to understanding the importance of Shelley to Swinburne.²

In Swinburne's estimating the value of Shelley's political radicalism, we find a certain amount of complexity. On the one hand he thought little of Shelley's political and philosophical essays. On the other, he greatly admired Shelley's fervor for liberty as he revealed it in his poetry. To further complicate matters, he also felt that Shelley's political optimism was too sanguine. He respected Shelley's sympathy for the oppressed, but was skeptical of Shelley's actual effects in alleviating tyranny and oppression. As an examination of Songs before Sunrise would show, Swinburne's adopting a Shelleyan voice there was manifested by his incorporating Shelley's views as only one of several ways of achieving freedom.

Of Shelley's essays, Swinburne thought well only of "A Refutation of Deism," probably because he sympathized with its indictment of Christianity.³ Of the rest, Swinburne took a dim view. He would never, he says, "set up his [Shelley's] early philosophical or political essays as models of original or profound reflection, of untimely maturity in reasoning or subtle conclusiveness of combination in the recast and rearrangement of other men's positions."⁴ Shelley's idol, Godwin, Swinburne dismissed as "a teacher and preacher of political and religious philosophies long since forgotten and never much more than derivative from France" (Bonchurch, XV, 332).

The reason for Swinburne's disdain is one that explains his refusal in Songs before Sunrise, for instance, to make Shelley's voice more than one voice in a chorus. Swinburne described Shelley's "Address to the Irish People" as "characteristic," and noted that it "had no recorded effect or result beyond the comical effect of alarming the Government into notice of his not very dangerous or politically important existence" (Bonchurch, XV, 331-332). It was this lack of pragmatic effect in alleviating misery that stopped Swinburne from giving Shelley's doctrines his full endorsement. In William Blake, we can find this same skepticism about Shelley's ameliorative views. Swinburne wrote that