

SWINBURNE AND COWARDICE:  
RUNNING AWAY AND *POEMS AND BALLADS* (1866)

Francis O’Gorman

There are various unlikely tales about Algernon Charles Swinburne. One of them is his own – or at least, it might be his own. Mrs. Disney Leith (Mary Gordon) was Swinburne’s cousin and he might once have thought that they had a future together. But she married another man and only came back into Swinburne’s life as a widow. In *The Childhood of Algernon Charles Swinburne* (1917), Leith reprints what she claims is a letter from him (undated), in which Swinburne spoke of himself in the third person. “After leaving Eton,” he says,

near the end of his seventeenth year he wanted to go into the army. Didn’t he, poor chap! The Balaklava [sic] Charge eclipsed all other visions. To be prepared for such a chance as that, instead of being prepared for Oxford, was the one dream of his life. (*Swinburne Letters* 6:251)

Conscious of the fact that he was “little, slightly built,” the young Swinburne was not sure that his father would approve of this ambition. And his father, a successful sailor who served in the Royal Navy between 1810 and 1836 and ended his career a Rear Admiral, did not. So, by way of compensation, the disappointed Swinburne climbed, he said, the whole of Culver Cliff, on the Isle of Wight, as “a chance of testing my nerve in face of death which could not be surpassed” (6:251). The cliff is 341 feet high. Although Culver is not vertical, it is a steep chalk-cliff climb and it seems inconceivably dangerous for a small, physically tremulous, sixteen-year-old boy who was always thought more to glide than to walk, unroped, and assisted by no climbing equipment. His mother, Swinburne’s letter recalled, wanted, when her son had returned triumphantly home, “to know why I had done such a thing”:

and when I told her she laughed a short sweet laugh most satisfactory to the young ear, and said “Nobody ever thought you were a coward, my boy.” I said that was all very well: but how could I tell till I tried? “But you won’t do it again?” she said. I replied, of course not. (6:253)