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ALS: SWINBURNE TO WILLIAM MICHAEL ROSSETTI

BY CECIL LANG

DR. CECIL LANG, a graduate of Duke University with a doctorate from Harvard, where he did special research on the Rossettis, is now an Instructor in English at Yale. He is currently preparing an edition of Swinburne's letters authorized by William Heinemann, Ltd., owners of the Swinburne copyright. In this article he has indicated some of the high lights of the unpublished Swinburne letters in the Symington Collection of the Rutgers Library.

WILLIAM MICHAEL ROSSETTI was born eight years before Victoria ascended the throne and died, a nonagenarian, in 1919. Eclipsed from childhood by a brother one year his senior and a sister one year his junior, both of them poets of a high order and therefore surpassing him in genius, he never questioned the superiority of their talents, and it was entirely characteristic that he should find his niche as Secretary of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, in 1848, at the outset of his career. William Rossetti's own creative gifts were modest, even meager, a limitation perceived by no one more steadily than by himself. Within certain bounds he was content to defer to genius where he found it. "I always had a passion for intellect, and my wish was that my husband should be distinguished for intellect, and my children too," his mother once confessed. "I have had my wish; and I now wish there were a little less intellect in the family so as to allow for a little more common sense." That particular virtue in that extraordinary family seems indeed to have been in short supply. But however deficient in genius, William Michael was blessed with common sense almost to a fault. He was always at hand to advise, comfort, or nurse his brother, accepting



ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE
DRAWING BY CARLO PELLEGRINI, 1874.

without censure what he could not alter; to counsel his sister, assist his mother, oblige his father-in-law (Ford Madox Brown)—in some ways, in fact, to function as a sort of harbor in which the others could always find safe moorings.

Rossetti's galaxy of literary acquaintances included most of the great names of the century, and when his journals, carefully ordered over many years, are finally published, a project now at last under way, it will be possible to see him as the remarkable man he was. With many of his friends he held a position similar to the one he held in his family—to some of them he was Nestor. Perhaps the most impressive of his friendships was with Algernon Charles Swinburne, to whom he was bound by affectionate ties for more than half a century, and to whom he showed the same steadiness and sobriety (Swinburne in his springtime possessed the latter quality in neither a literal nor a metaphorical sense), the same self-effacing good will and efficiency that doubtless brought down William Morris's sobriquet "bloody fool" upon his head.

The Library was fortunate in acquiring, among other treasures in the Symington Collection, a sterling set of three volumes of Swinburne's letters to Rossetti, spanning the period from 1862 to 1908, the year before Swinburne's death. This set consists of ninety-five autograph letters from Swinburne, of which ninety are addressed to William Rossetti. (Seventeen of the ninety were added to the Gosse and Wise revised edition of the letters published in 1927 as Volume XVIII of the Bonchurch Edition of Swinburne's *Complete Works*.) An almost random sampling of these letters will reveal a good deal about Rossetti's character, and though in quoting from them one can scarcely avoid spotlighting the writer at the expense of the recipient, it is to be hoped that the reflection of the gentle William will not go unobserved.

For it was William who, together with his painter-poet brother, planted the seeds or nurtured the growth of many of Swinburne's most lyrical enthusiasms, and it was in William alone that Swinburne found genuine sympathy for his republican ideals. The letters contain much business talk involving Swinburne's affairs with John Camden Hotten, the publisher to whom he turned after being jettisoned by Moxon, a good deal about Blake, on whom both Swinburne and the Rossettis were working in the sixties, and, in addition, a moderate amount of inoffensive bawdry. They are frank (up to a point) and

colloquial in tone, as letters to a close friend ought to be. "I have written to Milnes to let me hear from him at my present direction," he said (in the second letter of this series) in November, 1862:

He was to let me know when he came to town, as we meant to go northward together, before the end of this week. I suppose the hoary villain is still speechifying among the clods, & blandly deprecating intervention or Southern sympathies. Last year I know he disgraced himself by colloquing with Northern envoys, & went into mourning after the auspicious day of Bull's Run.

Neither Monckton Milnes (as we see) nor Rossetti shared Swinburne's "Southern sympathies" in the American Civil War, but, as the following extract from a letter written later in the same month will show, neither discountenanced a far more errant passion. In fact, it is clear that the Rossetti brothers at least tolerated in Swinburne whatever part of his devotion to the Marquis de Sade was merely facetious, and it is generally assumed, whether accurately or not I do not know, that Milnes (later Lord Houghton) actually fanned the coals. "Have just been assisting him [Milnes] to decipher a *priceless* autograph letter of the marquis de Sade," Swinburne wrote, "announcing (in the most incredible spelling) 'des comedys (sic) très dangereux (sic) aux moeurs.' Further on the Arch-Unmentionable spells 'crains' *crim!* Conceive the compositor's work in correcting *Justine*." This levity concerning the marquis pervades his letters to the Rossettis, and one letter, dated September, 1906, when Swinburne was a puffy septuagenarian, actually begins "S'il existe!" a blasphemous tag lifted from *Justine ou les malheurs de la vertu* and made part of Swinburne's workaday vocabulary. And, as everyone knows, there was an aspect of Swinburne's preoccupation with the marquis which imports more than mere levity but which has no bearing on his connection with William Rossetti.

Swinburne's relations with Ruskin never fail to amuse those who are interested in the circle, and one of the letters to Rossetti provides a perfect epitome of this very temperate friendship. The total impression one gets is of Ruskin, like an especially officious mother hen, clucking busily and making ready to cosset a helpless and rather drab chick that is suddenly seen to be (in Gosse's phrase) a gorgeous scarlet and azure macaw. If Swinburne in his later years was in fact as susceptible to the influence of Watts-Dunton as many reputable critics think, one's imagination is staggered to contemplate what would have been the probable result if Ruskin, who got there first and seems to

have had intentions similar to those attributed to Watts, had succeeded in tucking Swinburne under his capacious wing. Ruskin ogled some of the *Poems and Ballads* in manuscript before publication, and his reactions, which ought to have been predictable, may be read in T. J. Wise's *Ashley Library Catalogue* (IV, 182). To Rossetti Swinburne described this *contretemps* in language somewhat less sedate than that used to Ruskin. "My other letter was from Ruskin returning some MSS of mine that I don't at all want unpacked," he wrote in August, 1863,—

A very amiable & rather singular letter, which I fell to & answered at once & at length. I cannot understand his combining philanthropic morality with such exquisite sense of what is right & good in things far higher than any matter of right & wrong selon les reveurs. Yet I refrained from citing Justine—"La vertu, ma chère J., est une chose essentiellement stérile, impuissante, bornée, tandis que le vice fait germer & fleurir &c. &c." appropriate as that citation, a pearl of priceless wisdom for artist or moralist, would have been; admire my chaste forbearance.

R. actually intimates that "genius ought to devote itself" to the help of humanity & "to overthrowing its idols," in a word to justify the ways of Urizen to the sons of Enitharmon. Quelle horreur! Yet again I abstained from replying that when a man of genius did devote himself to the benefit of humanity & the upsetting of its idols (notamment "cette chimère méprisable qu'on appelle la Vertu, et cette chimère exécrationnable qu'on appelle Dieu") & to guiding it in the pleasant paths of wisdom & Ste Marie des Bois, humanity rewards these supreme benefactors with a madhouse or a gaol. Could he have answered that? but I keep this crushing argument in reserve. . . .

En attendant with love to Gabriel & Fanny (also to Ned if you see him). . . .

The matter-of-fact allusion to Dante Rossetti's mistress, Fanny Cornforth (or Cox or Hughes or Schott), though it is precisely the sort of thing that the "monitory blue pencil" of Victorian propriety leapt to purge from biography, memoir, and letter, gives us a revelatory flash of insight into character and values and is well worth preserving for what it tells us of the earthy side of our forbears. The Victorians could scarcely have been so exclusively concerned with art and decorum as the first generation of their chroniclers would have us believe. From Gosse's *Life* of Swinburne, for example, we learn that the poet was "asked to resign" from the Arts Club in 1870, and Lafourcade, a later biographer, has revealed that when a similar affair erupted in March, 1866, William Rossetti "smoothed matters over." It seems worth while, then, to quote part of the letter from which Lafourcade gleaned his information, not only for what it tells us about

Swinburne and about the sort of letter that has *not* been printed but also for its tribute to Rossetti. "I hope you cannot doubt that I am & must be sincerely grateful for an act of such real friendship as yours," the letter begins:

You are among the one or two friends I have from whom I cannot say that it *surprises* me. From you I should expect no less friendliness & confidence.

This is the first I have heard of the matter. I have certainly objurgated more than one waiter, & remember bending double one fork in an energetic mood at dinner. I had already thought of withdrawing at or before the end of my present year of subscription. As to freedom of voice or tone I am stunned daily by more noise at that place than I ever heard (or, you may suggest, made) in my life. If I damaged a valuable article belonging to them, why did they not send in a bill? If again there is any animus against me I should prefer to withdraw. I have remained in order more frequently to meet a few intimates, who relieve if they cannot redeem the moral squalor of the place. I know but few members, & never knowingly cut or "ignored" any.

Another bond between the two men was their early admiration for Whitman, an ardor not specially shared by Dante Rossetti, who once dismissed him as "sublimated Tupper." Gosse thought that George Howard first introduced Swinburne to the work of the American poet, but Lafourcade seems to award those laurels to William Michael. In any case, it was assuredly Rossetti, the editor in 1868 of the first volume of selections from Whitman in England, who nursed if he did not beget Swinburne's enthusiasm, and who, in fact, quoted in his preface to *Poems by Walt Whitman* a long paragraph of Swinburne's own criticism. "I send you a little book on Whitman which an American friend has sent me," Swinburne wrote in September, 1867:

I think it will interest you, presuming as I do that you have not seen it, for it seems quite new there. The extracts from his (Whitman's) letters on the hospital work of the war are beautiful; I think of noticing the book in print, to get a chance of demanding that the whole should be collected & published; so I shall in time—say a month or two—want this book back: but in no haste. . . .

Gosse regarded Swinburne's essay "Whitmania," published in 1887, as a warty consequence of the "slow tyranny exercised on Swinburne's judgment by the will of Watts," but the general view nowadays (thanks mostly to Lafourcade) is that the essay was not a recantation but a mere shift in emphasis and tone. Swinburne—nor indeed Rossetti himself—was never blindly uncritical of Whitman's poetry. "You will see there is some awful rot—des chimères révoltantes comme Dieu et sa fille la vertu—in this book at p. 69&c. about poetry

as an art," he added in the letter quoted above, "such as and worse than Whitman allows himself here and there—de la merde, enfin: 'oh monsieur! Ça me soulève le coeur'—but, like 'suffering virtue,' one has to swallow it, & on the whole the tone of the book is good." These comments, in a colloquial way, are stronger than any of the crude bludgeonings of 1887. Of Rossetti's proposal to quote from his letter in order to "slur over" Whitman's defects, Swinburne wrote in October:

I am glad you agree with what I said of Whitman in my last & flattered by your making use of it—glad too that it should be softened as one would not like even to seem unfriendly, or unenthusiastic even, towards such a man. I was confident we should be found agreed upon the particular poems in question. I wail over the "Sleep" but I suppose it must be. Aussi c'est bien un peu sa faute à lui.

And in December, reading what Rossetti described as "a most friendly and indeed affectionate letter from Whitman," Swinburne wrote that it was "so thoroughly noble & *stimulating* that instead of going to bed as I might & ought I sit down by a dead fire to thank you for a sight of it & send it back at once for fear of accident."

Much information of great interest emerges from these letters that hardly concerns William Michael at all. Here, for instance, is the source of Lafourcade's story of Swinburne's being taken "seriously ill" in Cheyne Walk and nursed to health by Dante Rossetti and Fanny Schott—a bit of scandal that provoked curiosity in all his readers and disbelief in none. "I hope you have forgiven me for breaking my appointment last week," Swinburne wrote in June, 1870, "I was very ill that day & all the week—couldn't write or do any work or business. Gabriel & Fanny have nursed me up again. I am staying here in Cheyne Walk for a few days."

In writing to William Rossetti, Swinburne always alluded to business affairs with that impulsive freedom and unbruised casualness possible only between close friends of long standing. He knew that William could be depended on for perspective if advice was needed, for efficiency if help, and, what is more important, for understanding and a willingness to listen at all times. "I have today," he wrote in May, 1868,

received a very civil & friendly note from J. Morley (ed. of Fortn: Rev:) setting things hitherto square "& hoping" that I will yet allow them to print my notes on Florentine drawings, *if* I will reconsider the demand of a pound

per page—I must say, that demand seems to me very reasonable as things go—& yet, for reasons which you know & which *I* know that you sympathize with me in respecting—I should like to do what lies in me to prop the apparently decadent Fortnightly. . . . My impulse is to “kiss & be friends like children being chid” (A. Tennyson)—i.e., to leave the MS. with him & give him what I think seriously my best detached or detachable poems for the F. R. (the Republican canzoni).

It was doubtless a common faith in republicanism that did much to mortise the friendship of two men so different temperamentally as Swinburne and Rossetti. Certainly Swinburne found in no other friend of equal, or nearly equal, standing a zeal that matched the intensity of his own. Rossetti, on the other hand, has made it clear that while they agreed in generalities they differed in particulars, pointing out that he disagreed with Swinburne about Napoleon, the American Civil War, the Russo-Turkish War, Home Rule, and the Transvaal conflict. (“Neither,” he added, “can I fall in with Swinburnian diatribes against Carlyle, Emerson, and Walt Whitman.”) Together, however, they drafted a letter of sympathy to the Anti-Catholic Council held in Naples at the same time as the Ecumenical Council in Rome in December, 1869. (A copy of the letter, in Rossetti’s writing but signed by both men, is included, along with an Italian translation in Rossetti’s hand, in the first volume.) “I want some such expression of opinion as that I have drawn up to appear in the letter,” Swinburne wrote in October, when they were drafting the declaration,

because I wish to be understood as professing myself not merely a freethinker but a democrat, not merely a democrat but a freethinker. I wish this, because you sometimes find the two unhappily (& still more, illogically) separated. I feel it my mission as an evangelist & apostle (whenever necessary) to atheize the republicans and republicanize the atheists of my acquaintance.

I have in my head a sort of Hymn for the Congress—as it were a “Te Hominem Laudamus,” to sing the human triumph over “things”—the opposing forces of life & nature—& over the God of his own creation, till he attain health, self-sufficiency, & freedom. It might end somehow thus with a cry of triumph over the decadence of a receding Deity;

“And the love-song of earth as thou diest sounds over the graves of
her Kings;

Glory to Man in the highest! for man is the master of things.”

After a certain lapse of time a friendship becomes misted over with a sort of aura of prescription that defies analysis. It can no longer be accounted for by republicanism or by common literary enthusiasms

or by complementary personalities. Swinburne and Rossetti became a kind of habit to each other: not a daily habit, for Rossetti had his family, and Swinburne had his Watts-Dunton. "I have at last begun to tackle the tremendous & magnificent subject of Caesar Borgia—which I dreamt of when I was a schoolboy," Swinburne wrote in 1902. "Watts Dunton says great & most kind things of my attempt. I should like much to read the first act to you." Both outlived most of their contemporaries, whose deaths they marked year by year, Swinburne sluicing memorial sonnets from an apparently inexhaustible reservoir. (One wonders if these sonnets, together with the appalling number of poems he wrote on babies, could have been in any way an anodyne.) After the deaths of Dante Rossetti and of Christina, of Ford Madox Brown, William Bell Scott, Ruskin, Morris, and Burne-Jones, Swinburne and Rossetti must have gained comfort from each other in the very fact of their continued existence. "I do wish we were neighbours," Swinburne wrote in 1902. "I want to read you a new scene in my play which Watts-Dunton speaks of in such terms as I really do not like to repeat. I loathe mock-modesty, but I draw the line at writing down such praise as his."

On April 10, 1909, at ten o'clock in the morning, Swinburne died of double pneumonia. William Michael, accompanied by one of his daughters, hurried to Putney that afternoon. He was one of the very few who would have been welcome at the time, and Mrs. Watts-Dunton has recorded that the "sight of this dear and devoted comrade at such a moment" moved her husband to tears. Swinburne's death must have seemed like the next to the last chapter to Rossetti, who, three years earlier, had dedicated *Some Reminiscences* to his daughter-in-law and his grandchildren, and to "the now few survivors among my old friends." The strength of their bond is perhaps best seen in Rossetti's inscription in a copy of his brother's *Poems*, 1904 (one of the books later auctioned at Sotheby's Swinburne sale in 1916), though posterity rejects the literary judgment as emphatically as it respects the devotion that prompted it: "To Gabriel's contemporary the greater Poet of the two, who honours me with his friendship, Algernon Charles Swinburne, offered with entire love by Wm. M. Rossetti, June, 1905."