

UNCOMMON GENTLEMEN  
AND  
OUTSTANDING LADIES:  
The J.A. Symington Collection  
in  
Rutgers' Special Collections and Archives

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In 1947 Leslie Marchand, a professor from the English Department at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, found out that James Alexander Symington, a librarian from Leeds University in Yorkshire, England, had amassed a large and fascinating collection of materials about English literature. He decided to mediate the purchase of that collection for his home institution.

With that purchase, Rutgers' Special Collections and Archives acquired letters and manuscripts by the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne and his circle, as well as an exquisite Branwell Bronte manuscript, not to mention papers of many other figures from the late nineteenth century. Most of them, like Swinburne, were unconventional in their attitudes: George Borrow, a missionary and polyglot of thirty languages, liked to wander with gypsies; Harriet Martineau was one of the most ardent social critics who ever lived and an early exponent of feminism and of the abolition of slavery in the United States. Another thing that made Mr. Symington's collection interesting in addition to the manuscripts it contained was the professional connections he had enjoyed.

DEALERS, EDITORS AND FORGERS

J.A. Symington (1887-1964) had been an associate of the most distinguished antiquarian in the English-speaking world, Thomas James Wise (1859-1937). There is no record in the collection of when the two became friends, but Wise undoubtedly helped obtain access for Symington to some of the manuscripts now at Rutgers. He had personally known Swinburne's companion in old age, Walter Theodore Watts Dunton, from whom he had



“J.A. Symington in his library.” Credit: Department of Special Collections, Rutgers University Libraries.

acquired the Swinburne papers in 1909, and he was the leading authority on the publications of the Pre-Raphaelites, with whom Swinburne had been so closely associated in the 1860s. He had also been the first owner of all extant Bronte manuscripts after they had left the hands of Charlotte Bronte’s widower in the 1890’s. Wise was clearly a valuable connection for Symington to have cultivated in the antiquarian business.

Wise was also a fruitful scholarly connection for Symington. Together they edited the nineteen-volume monument of Bronte scholarship known as the Shakespeare Head Bronte, published by Blackwell’s in the 1930s. In the correspondence connected with this work, Symington plays the role of the much younger associate, bowing to the wisdom of his elder, but he was the prime mover in some of the work that had to be done. Wise was too old and infirm to have had much to do with the publication of the juvenilia, for instance, which were issued in two volumes in 1936 as *The Miscellaneous and Unpublished Writings of Charlotte and Patrick Branwell Bronte*.

At the time of their collaborative work on the Brontes, both were active in the affairs of the Bronte Society, where, in fact, they had probably become friends. There are group photos of Bronte Society get-togethers in the *Transactions of the Bronte Society* from the late 1920s and early 1930s which

show the familiar figures of both Wise and Symington in their midst. For a time Wise was president, and Symington served as bibliographic secretary. In 1929 Symington completed a catalogue of the holdings of the Bronte Museum at Haworth which was annotated by C.W. Hatfield, a Bronte scholar still esteemed today. Both Wise and Symington added some excitement to the Bronte legend and put new pressure on the Bronte industry in the areas of collecting and scholarship.

In the 1890s Wise, an essential oil merchant by profession, had the enterprising spirit of the business world in his favor, as well as the bank account to back up his plans. He turned to a journalist friend named Clement K. Shorter, who was on the editorial board of *The Illustrated London News* and was later to found and edit the noted literary paper called *The Sphere*. At Wise's behest Shorter went to Ireland with a pocket full of money to buy Bronte papers from Arthur Bell Nichols. Charlotte's widower had left his career as a clergyman in England, returning to Ireland to take up farming, and had remarried. Getting Charlotte's friend Ellen Nussey to part with her Bronte treasures was not as easy, apparently. The Symington Collection contains transcripts of Ellen's letters, complaining about the "ungentlemanly behavior" of Mr. Shorter and Mr. Wise. Eventually, however, Wise acquired Charlotte's letters from her.

In *The Brontes' Life and Letters* Shorter published a complete inventory of the papers he had bought in Ireland, and Wise inventoried them again in his *Bronte Library*. They thus jointly declared bibliographic and physical control over the authoritative Bronte texts and the market for them. Shorter, it should be mentioned, retained the copyrights to the Bronte manuscripts he had bought for Wise. That was how he was repaid for his troubles in the field.

The centerpiece of the Symington Collection, Symington's Branwell manuscript, "The History of Angria, I," was published in facsimile in the 1936 edition of the juvenilia. It is a gem of a manuscript which can only be read with a magnifying glass because it contains over one thousand words to the page in tiny handwriting on each of its nine pages of text. It tells the story of Captain Henry Hastings, a military hero of the imaginary country of Angria, but it is also both autobiographical and very much indebted to contemporary French and English history, as Winifred Guerin has shown in her Branwell biography.<sup>1</sup> It is now accompanied by a transcript completed by the author of this report in 1989 at Rutgers.

<sup>1</sup> Guerin, Winifred. *Branwell Bronte* (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, Ltd., 1961), p. 87f. ("Angrian politics").

We know from clippings Symington saved from the local Yorkshire newspapers upon the publication of the Shakespeare Head Bronte that he regarded his role in Bronte scholarship as that of Branwell Bronte's champion. Branwell's failure to become a great writer like his sisters, his inability to succeed as a portrait painter (as had been his independent dream), and his disgraces as both a tutor and a railway clerk, had established his reputation as a drunken good-for-nothing.

Clearly, Symington felt that once the world had had a chance to read what Branwell had written as a teenager—including the hundreds of pages in which he populated and chronicled Angria between 1829 and 1840, not to mention his translations of the first book of Horace's odes—his image would be redeemed. Symington was even interested in the theory, propounded by Branwell friends such as the Leyland brothers, that he had had a hand in the composition of *Wuthering Heights*. Symington and Wise published a limited edition of his late novel fragment, "And the weary are at rest," a work which because of its depiction of low life can be used to argue that Branwell collaborated on such scenes in Emily's masterpiece.<sup>2</sup> Symington is remembered with great respect by some for his efforts to institute a Branwell revival. Daphne Du Maurier, for instance, dedicates her Branwell biography of 1962, *The Infernal World of Patrick Branwell Bronte*, to Symington as the Branwell expert and devotee par excellence.<sup>3</sup>

We now know how Wise was able to afford the purchase of such great treasures as the Bronte papers when he did, not to mention the many beautiful first editions of nineteenth century literature which became a part of his library. In 1934 he was exposed as a forger of about one hundred "first edition" pamphlets which had appeared on the rare book market within a thirty-year period, stretching from the 1880s to just before the First World War. A confrontation was threatened which he never acknowledged, but which effectively ostracized him from the professional realm of which he had been king.

Symington, unlike so many other colleagues, decided to attend his funeral and to remain in touch with his widow. He may thus have inherited, or simply purchased, some of Wise's personal papers, especially letters, but also proofs and odd copies of the many legitimate privately printed limited

<sup>2</sup> This manuscript is in the Robert Taylor collection at Princeton University. Rutgers owns a copy of a private printing of this story done in London in 1924 which is sixty-seven pages long, edited by Clement K. Shorter with an introduction by C.W. Hatfield.

<sup>3</sup> DuMaurier, Daphne. *The Infernal World of Branwell Bronte* (London: Victor Gollancy, Ltd., 1960).

editions, like the Branwell fragment mentioned above, for which Wise had become deservedly famous. Unfortunately, the Symington Collection contains none of the forged pamphlets, but its examples of the legitimate ones give some idea of the craftsmanship that enabled their maker to pull the wool over the eyes of connoisseurs for so long.

There are proofs, for instance, with corrections in Sir Edmund Gosse's hand, of a lovely posthumous edition of three Swinburne essays, including the epoch-making review for *The Spectator* in 1862 of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*. There are also several copies of the private printing of 1921 of Swinburne's poem "Cleopatra." This poem was first legitimately published in *Cornhill Magazine* in 1866, and then (!) forged by Wise himself into a "first edition" pamphlet, misleadingly dated with the same year. The 1921 version is a lavishly illustrated remake of that forgery.

On the lighter side of the legitimate printings there is to be found a copy of the so-called "Juvenilia" of Swinburne, which aroused indignation from surviving members of the Swinburne family who declared that the "A.C.S." who had signed these callow verses in the 1840s journal where they first appeared was not their genial relative.

Symington also saved key clippings from the London *Times*, documenting Wise's death, funeral, and the sale of his library to the British Museum, clippings still in the collection at Rutgers. The obituary included there emphasizes Wise's guilt, despite the fact that he never confessed. It remarks that such extensive blindness to the true nature of so many "first editions" by an alleged expert was too great for anyone to go on believing that Jove had simply nodded. Wise had been among the top experts in exposing the piracies and forgeries of others. His correspondence bristles with evidence of and allusions to this role. How could he have overlooked so many fakes, unless they had been fakes of his own creation?

The collection Rutgers acquired includes letters to T.J. Wise from about five hundred different correspondents up to the year 1933, that is, one year before the two bright young men from Cambridge named Carter and Pollard revealed their damning evidence against him in *An Enquiry into the Nature of Certain Nineteenth Century Pamphlets*, a three-hundred-page accumulation of incontrovertible evidence, regarding paper chemistry, typography, collations, and auction records, as well as simple common sense.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Carter, John and Graham Pollard. *An Enquiry into the Nature of Certain Nineteenth Century Pamphlets*, 2nd ed., ed. Nicholas Barker & John Collins (Berkeley: Scolar Press, 1983).

Many of the letters to Wise have to do with his books and manuscripts and come from researchers in England and abroad, eager to see unpublished or rare materials. Some come from libraries, acknowledging receipt of the famous bibliographies he published on figures such as Pope, Dryden, Byron, and Swinburne. Many others have to do with the book market and come not just from professional dealers such as Quaritch, but also from private owners, desperate for money and hoping for help from a true authority in the field.

The most intriguing letters of all afford a peek into the skeleton in Wise's closet. Some of the earliest letters in this part of the Symington Collection, in fact, are from Harry Buxton Forman, a fellow Shelley Society member with whom Wise edited major Shelley manuscripts.<sup>5</sup> Barker and Collins wrote a sequel to Carter and Pollard's inquiry in which they reveal his complicity in the forgeries. Their evidence is partly based upon his correspondence with Wise.<sup>6</sup> In a letter of May 1897, now at Rutgers, Buxton Forman writes to Wise, identifying the location of three different William Morris poems which the two later reissued in a "first-edition" pamphlet forgery. In other letters in the collection there are indirect references to the technical problems involved in preparing certain pamphlets for print!

Even more interesting is a letter from one Harriet Gaylord in 1933, requesting more information about the identity of the "friend" who had, according to accounts by both Wise and his friend Sir Edmund Gosse, helped to corroborate the authenticity of the "Reading Edition" of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sonnets of 1847. This pamphlet was the forgery upon which Carter and Pollard made their breakthrough, using analysis of paper chemistry to show that it could not possibly have been produced earlier than 1874.<sup>7</sup> One would love to have seen Wise's reply to this inquiry.

Of yet further appeal to the historian of these matters is the set of letters of the late 1920s and early 1930s from Arundel Esdaile, librarian at the British Museum, who had become Wise's personal friend. He agreed later to write the account of Wise's life and work for *The Dictionary of National Biography*. Esdaile's perspective is strikingly low-key and forgiving, in con-

<sup>5</sup> Forman wrote about the political background and Wise the bibliographic context of Shelley's "The Masque of Anarchy."

<sup>6</sup> Cf. epilogue to Carter & Pollard as well as the sequel to their book, *The Forgeries of H. Buxton Forman & T.J. Wise Reexamined*, by Nicholas Barker and John Collins (Berkeley: Scholar Press, 1983).

<sup>7</sup> Carter and Pollard, pp. 42-55 ("The analysis of the paper").

trast to the wry portrait drawn by the American Wilfred Partington in his biography of 1939 called *Forging Ahead*.<sup>8</sup> Esdaile argues that Wise deceived others for so many years out of a love of beautiful things. Rather than high living, the dishonestly earned money went toward more books for his great library, and one has to admit that that library ultimately went to his country after all, when it was acquired by the British Museum in 1937 for sixty thousand pounds. Thus, Esdaile makes a great patriot out of a shameless criminal.

Unfortunately, Wise's notoriety has only worsened since it was discovered how he treated the books he used in the reading room of the British Museum, excising pages for the less complete copies he had at home. It challenges his alleged love of beautiful things even more when one learns of how he handled the precious manuscripts he acquired as a part of the business to which he was supposedly so devoted. Swinburne's three-hundred-page study of William Blake, for instance, is thought to be one of the greatest pieces of critical prose he ever wrote. Even his detractors admire its intellectual acuteness.<sup>9</sup> Wise, however, tore its manuscript into separate pages which he then inserted into miscellaneous books he had placed on sale, hoping to raise their market value. One of the clippings Symington saved remarks that Wise did the same with manuscripts of the Bronte juvenilia, thus hopelessly scattering pages of the tiny stories now so treasured by readers everywhere.

An associate who preceded Symington in Wise's life, and one of the most successful literary historians of any age, Sir Edmund Gosse, died in 1928, that is, before his friend T.J. Wise had been exposed.<sup>10</sup> Together the two had edited the beautiful twenty-volume Bonchurch edition of Swinburne's poetry and prose, as well as another edition of selected letters, within the decade after Swinburne died.<sup>11</sup> The Symington Collection includes transcripts of their correspondence, very revealing of the values shared by upper-middle-class Englishmen in the early years of the new century, i.e.,

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Esdaile's article, pp. 915-917, in *The Dictionary of National Biography*, 1931-1940, ed. L.G. Wickham Legg (London: Oxford University Press, 1949). The well-known American biography is Wilfred Partington's *Forging Ahead* (New York: Putnam, 1939).

<sup>9</sup> A.C. Bradley (*Shakespearean Tragedy*, St. Martin's Press, 1905) writes in such a vein to Gosse in 1917, upon reading his new life of Swinburne, a letter to be found in the Symington Collection.

<sup>10</sup> Woolf, James D. *Sir Edmund Gosse* (New York: Twayne, 1972).

<sup>11</sup> *The Complete Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, ed. Sir Edmund Gosse and T.J. Wise (London: W. Heinemann; New York: G. Wells, 1925-1927) in twenty volumes.

good taste marred by xenophobia, snobbery, and anti-semitism. There are also original letters in the collection from Wise to Symington written upon the break-up of Gosse's estate. There Wise counsels Symington to buy the Gosse papers. Although Lord Brotherton outbid him for many of those papers, later leaving them to Leeds University, Symington did obtain some outstanding material, including fifty-one letters from novelist André Gide, which are now in the collection at Rutgers.<sup>12</sup>

Gosse and Gide first met at a public reception in 1904 during one of Gosse's many trips to France. That year Gosse had been appointed Librarian to the House of Lords. Ever a great Francophile, Gosse was eventually also awarded an honorary degree at the Sorbonne for his effort to promote cultural cooperation between the two countries. Although Gide first wrote to Gosse in 1904, their correspondence began in earnest in 1909 when they began reading one another's works. In Gide's novel *La Porte Etroite* Gosse recognized his own struggle to liberate himself from the narrow Protestant upbringing which was also the theme of his novel *Father and Son*. Gide's correspondence about Gosse's novel reveals equally sympathetic vibrations. Liberation was to become the motif of a correspondence that lasted until Gosse's death. Although separated by a generation in age from his French friend, Gosse was not prevented by his Victorian background from appreciating Gide's moral candour, even supporting his coming out in the 1920s. Their correspondence falls into three groups, the last of which, the post-war period, is the most searching.

The two also visited one another regularly, beginning with Gide's trip to London in 1911, followed by Gosse's first stay at Gide's house in Pontigny that same year, and ending with Gosse's last trip to Paris in April 1928, a month before his death. In the "Supplement" to the Symington Collection acquired by Rutgers in 1959 there are photographs of one of the visits at Pontigny. Their friendship was cemented by Gosse's efforts to champion Gide's work at a time when it was little known in England. He first brought Gide to the attention of English readers in an article in *The Contemporary Review* in 1909, then really enhanced his reputation with the famous concluding essay of *Portraits and Sketches*, published in 1912.

Gosse's eye for literary portraiture, while not always as charitable as in Gide's case, nevertheless enabled him to write successful biographies of Sir Thomas Gray, William Congreve, John Donne, Coventry Patmore, Henrik

<sup>12</sup> Translated, edited, and published by Linette F. Brugmans in *The Correspondence of Andre Gide and Edmund Gosse* (New York: New York University Press 1959).

Ibsen, and, of course, Swinburne, as well as many shorter sketches of contemporaries. The Symington Collection contains drafts of sketches of Ruskin, Christina Rossetti, Browning, Tennyson, Meredith, and Swinburne, all of whom he knew personally. The account of his dinner party with Tennyson on April 13, 1877, is especially memorable. There Tennyson pronounces cantankerous aesthetic judgments on many things, including Whitman and Swinburne, then jokes in his cups about the amount of money he would accept for walking down the street stark naked. Sir Edmund Gosse and his wife indeed knew "everybody." They were famous for their Sunday "at homes," and the copy Symington saved of their guest book, which spans the years from 1875 to 1920, is almost four hundred pages long.<sup>13</sup>

#### CHARLES ALGERNON SWINBURNE ANTI-VICTORIAN POET AND GENTLEMAN

While in the throes of writing his life of Swinburne, Gosse queried many people for information about the poet, and the collection contains some of the letters written in reply to these queries. Lord Redesdale, for instance, who had known Swinburne at Eton, writes to dispel rumors that, like Shelley, the poet had been picked on by his classmates for being gifted. Redesdale remembers Swinburne as a sturdy loner who diverted himself with swimming and horseback riding when he was not sitting in a window seat with the sunlight on his fiery hair, reading the Elizabethan dramatists he loved so much. The Symington Collection contains, by the way, pages from the Eton library register which show that Swinburne borrowed the works of the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists at an early age.

Swinburne himself puts down the stereotype Redesdale creates in wonderfully sarcastic remarks about his own physical virtues in a letter to William Michael Rossetti, the painter's brother, on August 8, 1863. He writes from East Dene in Cornwall:

<sup>13</sup> Some of Gosse's famous friendships are documented by letters in the collection by contemporary writers including William Dean Howells (cf. the article in the *Rutgers University Library Journal*, 22/2, pp. 1-25), Robert Louis Stevenson (*Rutgers University Library Journal*, 20/2, pp. 33-41), and Henry James (*Rutgers University Library Journal*, 12/1, pp. 54-58). One of the Henry James letters is especially amusing because it refers to the three Bronte sister-novelists as "the fatal sisters," a touch of satire unusual in the climate of adulation in which the Bronte name persisted.



Portrait of Swinburne in a Design by D. Gabriel Rossetti for a Frontispiece to *The Early Italian Poets*. Engraved by J.D. Cooper.

I am half living in the sea, here, rough or smooth; and generally swimming, riding and croquetting myself into a rampant state of muscular Christianity.

May Morris writes to Gosse on February 9, 1916, of her childhood memories of Swinburne's visits to Red House. She says that life must have laughed with them when she and her sister sprinkled the poet with rose petals as he lay in the grass with his "gold hair" spread out around him in her father's orchard. Along with Morris's wife Jane, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's own wife Lizzie, Swinburne was, of course, a favorite model of the Pre-Raphaelite painters. In addition to Rossetti's famous portrait of him, Swinburne figures in such well-known pictures as the cover illustration to Rossetti's translation of Dante and other Italian poetry.

R.W. Draper, a classmate from Balliol College, writes to Gosse of seeing

Swinburne on a visit to the home of Professor Jowett, the distinguished Oxford classical scholar who remained a mentor figure even after Swinburne had dropped out of the university without completing his degree. The discussion, he says, turned inevitably to poetic technique, and Swinburne declared two of the most perfect lines in English poetry to be:

Fretted by the sallies of his mother's kisses  
With light upon him from his father's eyes. . .

from Wordsworth's immortality ode.

Swinburne once wrote to a friend that he regretted not having lived and sung in times of "unwritten and purely oral poetry."<sup>14</sup> True to the most basic prejudice of Western metaphysics, and Jowett's Plato, he hated writing. He was particularly fascinated by what he called the measurement of prosody by ear and devoted years to the study of the development of Shakespeare's prosody, a project which brought him into rancorous conflict with F.J. Furnivall, director of the New Shakespeare Society.<sup>15</sup> Insults were exchanged out of all proportion to the issues at hand, Furnivall playing with the name "Pigsbrook" as a false etymology of "Swinburne" and Swinburne replying in kind with "Brothelsdyke." The Wise correspondence includes letters from Samuel Chew, who gives transcripts of the controversy's exchanges. Those who took sides with that "poetaster" Swinburne were dropped from membership in the society. Such societies were of tremendous importance to England's literary elite and a true seismograph of the state of literary studies in their time.

Swinburne was indeed never admired without controversy in his day and lost in reputation after the excitement surrounding his publications in the '60s and '70s had died down. His later poetry was criticized for its alliterative redundancy, in contrast to the flawless verses of *Atalanta in Calydon* and the unparalleled workmanship of poems such as "Ave atque vale." Even a friend like Gosse, who sought to preserve the Swinburne myth in his 1917 biography, only banishes him to greater obscurity by the patronizing tone he adopts towards the poet's eccentricities, instead of noting what was in some ways his startling modernity. Gosse won the confidence of the greatest artistic geniuses of his time, and he helped to popularize their works with

<sup>14</sup> Cf. a letter to E.C. Stedman of February 20, 1875.

<sup>15</sup> Gosse, Sir Edmund. *The Life of Algernon Charles Swinburne* (New York: MacMillan, 1917), p. 227.

the fluency and charm of his commentaries, but his viewpoint tends to be superficial.<sup>16</sup>

The greatest single boost to Swinburne scholarship in recent times has no doubt been Cecil Lang's six-volume edition of the letters, which came out between 1959 and 1962. The introduction puts the received ideas about Swinburne's character beautifully in perspective.<sup>17</sup> There have also been some remarkable book-length studies as well, devoted to smashing Swinburne stereotypes, such as Jerome McGann's brilliant 1972 argument in dialogue form, entitled *Swinburne, an Experiment in Criticism*.<sup>18</sup> Swinburne's affinity for Jacobean wit and Augustan satire, as well as the "enchanted boat" of Shelleyan diction, makes him a difficult and fascinating voice to understand. Ironically, in spite of his complex response to the "burden of the past," Swinburne has never enjoyed a full-length study by Harold Bloom, although there are useful articles on the early Swinburne by four Bloom disciples in the collection of essays Bloom edited on the Pre-Raphaelite poets in 1986.<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, it would be a mistake to underestimate Swinburne's success. He was sufficiently respected as a craftsman in his day to be considered for the laureateship when Tennyson died. He was probably turned down on an *ad hominem* basis for being so different from the image expected of a Victorian poet in his artistic inclinations, his political views, and his sexual preferences. In fact, one could regard it as ironic that practically his entire life was encompassed by Victoria's reign. She came to the throne the year he was born, 1839. He outlived her by only seven years, dying in 1909.

Swinburne was one of the "other Victorians," if a Victorian at all, in his affinity, for instance, for erotic sado-masochistic arcana, a sign to scholars now of proto-Freudian insight into human nature.<sup>20</sup> In the early 1860s he

<sup>16</sup> Consider, for instance, his accounts of the social occasions he shared with Swinburne during the poet's London bachelorhood.

<sup>17</sup> Lang, Cecil. "Introduction," *The Swinburne Letters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), vol. 1, pp. xiii-xlix.

<sup>18</sup> McGann, Jerome. *Swinburne, an Experiment in Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972).

<sup>19</sup> *The Pre-Raphaelite Poets*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986). Cf. articles by Dan Fletcher (pp. 179-183), Leslie Brisman (pp. 205-218), Camille S. Paglia (pp. 219-237) and Peter M. Sachs (pp. 239-260).

<sup>20</sup> Marcus, Steven. *The Other Victorians: a Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth Century England* (New York: Basic Books, 1964). A recent issue of *Diacritics* relates Sade not just to Lacan and Freud but to Kant!

was befriended by Richard Monckton Milnes, Lord Houghton, a biographer of Keats and a poet in his own right, who knew the literary elite of his time and could afford expensive parties at his estate at Fryston to bring them together.<sup>21</sup> At one such party Swinburne met one of the other great non-conformists of the Victorian era, Sir Richard Burton, the translator of *The Arabian Nights*.<sup>22</sup> Milnes is also said to have introduced Swinburne to the writings of the Marquis de Sade, whom the poet delighted in alluding to in his letters for the next four decades. The Symington Collection contains copies in Gosse's hand of Swinburne's letters to Milnes, dating from the early 1860s and documenting his discovery of this other world of feeling.

Swinburne failed to conform to prevailing artistic tastes in other ways as well. In the same period of his life as his acquaintance with Milnes, Swinburne discovered the works of Baudelaire and published his famous review in *The Spectator*. Baudelaire had been subjected to an obscenity trial in Paris on account of some of the poems in that volume, and the average Victorian was probably shocked at Swinburne's audacity in championing such risqué material. To Baudelaire, of course, his advocacy was still all too conventional. He wrote to his English supporter on October 10, 1863, chiding him for assigning too explicit a morality to his poetry:

Permettez-moi, cependant, de vous dire que vous avez poussée un peu loin ma defense. Je ne suis pas si moraliste que vous feignez obligeamment de le croire. Je crois simplement "comme vous sans doute" que tout poème, tout objet d'art bien fait suggere naturellement et forcément une morale. C'est l'affaire du lecteur. J'ai même une haine tres decidée contre toute intention morale exclusive dans un poème.

[Allow me, nevertheless, to tell you that you have carried my defense a little too far. I am not as much of a moralist as you pretend so obligingly to believe. I simply believe "as you yourself no doubt" that each poem, each work of art that is well crafted naturally and of necessity suggests a moral point. That is, however, to be left up to the reader. As a matter of fact, I feel quite a decided hatred towards every exclusively moralistic intention in a poem.]

<sup>21</sup> For an account of his fascinating life cf. Richard James Arthur Pope-Hennessy's biography of Milnes, the second volume of which includes an account of the Swinburne friendship, *The Flight of Youth, 1851-1885* (London: Constable, 1949).

<sup>22</sup> Gosse, pp. 121-22. Burton and Swinburne were favorite drinking companions despite their differing levels of alcohol tolerance.

Swinburne's own "flowers of evil," *Poems and Ballads*, published four years later in 1866, provoked a controversy by now famous, vanguarded by Robert Buchanan, who dubbed the poet and his Pre-Raphaelite friends "the Fleshly School of Poetry." The burden of the past which Swinburne is usually said to have inherited from the High Romantics is indeed so qualified by his admiration for the father of French symbolism and decadence, that in his most Keatsian mode, the fragments in which he allegedly attempted to complete "Hyperion," Swinburne speaks rather in the voice of a Miltonic Baudelaire. The Symington Collection contains some of these fragments in a bound volume entitled *Song*.<sup>23</sup>

Symington also preserved several manuscript pages of verse about flogging, representing only a fraction of the large quantity of material Swinburne wrote on this topic. Even this material has its research value, however, for now that criticism has turned more openly to a consideration of Swinburne's divine bitches in poems like "Faustine" and "Anactoria," and to Swinburne's "anti-theism" in general, the constructs and syndromes of flagellation literature can be revealing of the gender and authority relationships which the poet was questioning in the "more serious" poetry such as the two poems just named.<sup>24</sup>

Swinburne was so far from cherishing the Victorian principles of duty and virtue, in fact, as to tell his doctor's wife Alice Bird that he had often dreamed of his own seven-story tower in which the seven deadly sins could be acted out on a daily basis.<sup>25</sup> However, despite the youthful nonconformity that made his presence in the Victorian Era seem so ironic a fate, the last thirty years of his life were spent in the at least outwardly conventional role of a retired gentleman scholar. During that time he lived at the Pines, a secluded estate about an hour outside of London, rented by the solicitor Walter Theodore Watts Dunton for the two of them.

Indeed, by the time Victoria concluded her reign in 1902, Swinburne had become as much of a relic as she, not just because of his advancing age, but because he had been living for the past two decades, or since 1879, on a

<sup>23</sup> Swinburne's French biographer Georges Lafourcade has compiled a 175-page rare edition of Swinburne's "Hyperion" fragments to be found in Rutgers' Special Collections under the title, *Swinburne's "Hyperion" and other Poems, with an essay on Swinburne and Keats by G. Lafourcade* (London: Faber & Gwyer, 1927).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. the articles by Brisman and Paglia in the Bloom anthology mentioned above.

<sup>25</sup> Alice Bird recounts this in a letter to Gosse while he was working on the Swinburne biography, a letter to be found in the Symington Collection.

strict regimen of one beer a day, long walks, and early to bed under the vigilant eye of his friend and attorney. Watts had a genius for befriending high-strung artists. He had become intimate with Dante Gabriel Rossetti in his declining years, a friendship commemorated in Watts's immensely successful novel *Alywin* in 1898. In 1879 he rescued Swinburne from the alcoholism and self-neglect of his London bachelorhood and brought him home to stay at the Pines, much to the relief of Lady Jane Swinburne, the poet's mother. The collection contains transcripts of her extensive correspondence with the solicitor about her son's welfare, expressing again and again her gratitude for the success of the rescue operation.

The reader who has seen the unforgettable account by Max Beerbohm entitled "No. 2 The Pines" in his book *And Even Now* will be disappointed to browse through the eighteen hundred pages of the seven volumes of the original letterbooks of Watts Dunton in the Symington Collection in search of details about the poet's life at the Pines. The solicitor evidently regarded their arrangements as daringly unconventional. He describes himself in at least one instance in the letterbooks as "bohemian to the core," but his gentlemanly sense of duty and restraint prevent him from making any but the vaguest and most general allusions there to what life with Swinburne was really like. The famous photograph of the two, dressed in their Sunday best, sitting in his garden, perhaps, after all, says it all. However unconventional their frame of reference might have been, they were still gentleman to the core.

While living with Watts, Swinburne entertained an occasional pilgrim, allowed by his friend to enter the shrine, with exhibitions of his outstanding library. He owned many rare and first editions of the drama of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras, as well as valuable reprint editions edited by his clergyman friend A.B. Grosaart (whose original letters about these matters have been preserved in the Symington Collection). Swinburne also recited to his visitors from his phenomenal poetic memory—he had read all that had been written in several languages, including classical Greek, and knew it all by heart.

Otherwise the poet satisfied himself with what looked from the outside like scholarly quietude. He rose late, walked to the bookstore or the nearby park to dote upon the many babies being aired in prams by their nannies, before returning home for lunch, a nap and a period of study. Evenings were spent reading aloud, usually from writers such as Arthur Conan Doyle or Dickens.

Within such a routine he continued to write poetry. When, in 1882, he completed his long poem *Tristram of Lyonesse*, Watts Dunton persuaded him to publish it, couched in a collection of the notorious “baby poems.” The erotically fevered diction of this nine-part romantic epic no doubt worried him. He may have feared a repetition of the furor that greeted *Poems and Ballads*. Perhaps the prelude’s pagan invocation of literature’s romantic heroines in the name of Love, projecting them into the heavens like constellations, reminded him of the fervour with which Swinburne had replaced the Virgin Mary with Venus in his earlier visions.

The Symington Collection contains both examples of those guardian verses about “infant joy”—perhaps inspired by Blake—and a one-hundred-six-line fragment of an early draft of the fifth part of *Tristram*, the part entitled “Iseult at Tintagel.” Swinburne worked on this poem for many years, and it is usually regarded as unevenly successful, if at its best sublimely beautiful. It is remarkably difficult to read, partly because of its contorted grammar, partly because of a synesthetic perfume indebted to Baudelaire,<sup>26</sup> suggesting that he had never relinquished his hold on modernity, despite an outwardly conservative lifestyle.

Gosse complains in his biography that one of the reasons for the imputed failure of *Tristram* lay in Swinburne’s inability as a story-teller.<sup>27</sup> The fate of Swinburne’s two novels, *Lesbia Brandon* and *A Year’s Letters*, is no doubt indicative of the prejudices established by this type of judgment. *Lesbia Brandon* is to be sure a loose baggy monster, loaded with what to the Victorian temper were no doubt the most unsavory erotic inclinations, ranging from flagellation to brother-sister incest. The novel was suppressed during the poet’s lifetime by his friends.<sup>28</sup> Swinburne felt compelled to publish *A Year’s Letters* under the pseudonym of Mrs. Horace Manners in the 1860s because he feared reprisals from his family.

The Symington Collection includes three items relevant to the publishing history of this latter text. One is a friend’s handwritten copy of the manuscript with corrections in the author’s handwriting. The other two are the proofs with corrections of the 1901 and 1905 editions, renamed *Love’s Cross Currents* at Watts’s suggestion. Edmund Wilson has argued that *A Year’s*

<sup>26</sup> Kristeva, Julia. *Tales of Love*, translated by Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 334f.

<sup>27</sup> Gosse, p. 262f.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. the forward to the Falcon Press edition (London, 1952) by Randolph Hughes, pp. iii-xxxv.



Swinburne was notorious for his republicanism. That is why he was not chosen to succeed Tennyson at Poet Laureate. He admired Victor Hugo and Mazzini; and Orsini, who tried to kill Napoleon III, was another hero. He was a worry to his family and generally behaved as a reckless eccentric during the early years of his life. Much of his poetry was of a questionable character.

The Symington Collection contains two manuscript poems from the poet's celebrated anthology of political verses published in 1871 as *Songs before Sunrise*, namely, "The Halt before Rome" and "The Ride to Milan."

The balladic technique of these two poems is spectacular, and for further evidence of Swinburne's mastery of this tradition in English poetry no researcher will want to overlook another manuscript in the collection, an early draft of "Burd Margaret." Many people were fooled into taking it for a genuinely ancient example of that form. It gives itself away perhaps only by the too sophisticated use of archaisms. One begins to realize, in reading these manuscripts, that Swinburne could do anything with words, place himself into any poetic context as if it were his own.

Another enhancement to Swinburne's role as a poet "exquisitely vexatious to the Christian Britannic mind"<sup>30</sup> was his admiration for Blake. Blake provided the young poet with the mythology of Los and Urizen, weapons with which to put his resistance to institutionalized religion into words. Raised to be an ardent Catholic, he left Oxford an avowed atheist and found a vocabulary for this rebellion in Blake's iconoclastic sexual and social visions. One of the greatest treasures of the Symington Collection is the bound two-volume set of Swinburne's ninety odd letters to William Michael Rossetti, dating from the early 1860s when he and the Rossetti brothers did their epoch-making work on Blake. These letters are rich in allusions to that activity.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti completed the manuscript of Alexander Gilchrist's biography, which Gilchrist had left fragmentary at his death in 1862. William Michael Rossetti, the painter's brother, compiled a catalogue of Blake's works as an appendix to that volume, a catalogue which is still respected by Blake scholars today. Swinburne undertook a critical commentary which was to appear in a second volume meant to accompany the biography and the catalogue, but it turned into an independently published study instead. It became the first serious book-length analysis of Blake's

<sup>30</sup> Cf. the letter to Rossetti of October 13, 1866.

work ever to have appeared in print. In a letter to William of January 31, 1864, he describes his efforts to present a sympathetic understanding of a poet regarded by most of the world as insane:

I have for once taken the same pains in arranging and designing the parts of this essay as if I had been dealing with a poem. It is about as good a memorial now as I can make it; I have worked into it with real care, and sometimes not without much labour, all the elucidations and expressions of thought and of feeling on the matter that I could put into reasonable form or coherent shape. Durable or not, anything altered or displaced in it will not be in the way of improvement. My own main object has been to give the whole a certain dramatic order by taking each part from the point of view, and examining each detail in the light given by the personal character of Blake: in a way not yet attempted.

Clearly, he would resist any attempt on Rossetti's part to edit his essay down to size for publication with the Gilchrist biography.

Swinburne's work on Blake was only part of a rich association with the Rossettis and the entire Pre-Raphaelite circle which had begun in 1857 when the poet was still just an undergraduate at Oxford.<sup>31</sup> He first made the acquaintance of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris, when they were working on the ill-fated Oxford Union murals. The Symington Collection contains a bound volume of manuscripts, entitled "*My Lady*" and other *Pre-Raphaelite Poems*, probably written in the late 1850s, when Swinburne was experimenting with the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic for the first time. Its imagery reflects the idealized and inaccessible beauty of Morris's Queen Guenevere and Rossetti's "stunners."

As mentioned earlier, Rossetti's wife Eleanor Elizabeth Siddall was one of his favorite models. Symington preserved some poignant documentation of her legend in the form of the genealogical records gathered and lecture notes drafted by an amateur named W.T. Freemantle, a man who became the acknowledged expert on Mrs. Rossetti with a lecture he gave on her life to an audience in her home town of Sheffield in 1912. He presented this lecture, he says, to demystify her name, but the story of her fate will always be a romantic one, beginning with her reputation as a great beauty and excellent artist in her own right and ending with her untimely death from an overdose of opium in 1862, just two years after her marriage. Everyone

<sup>31</sup> For a wonderful account of their meeting and friendship consult Evelyn Waugh's biography of Rossetti, *Rossetti: His Life and Works* (London: Duckworth, 1928).

knows the haunting anecdote about Rossetti burying his manuscript poems in the coffin with her, then having them exhumed seven years later for publication when he had become desperate for money. These moments are closely intertwined with Swinburne's life, because he was jokingly called Mrs. Rossetti's brother, they looked so much alike.<sup>32</sup> He testified at the inquest and soon afterwards moved into Tudor House along with George Meredith to become Rossetti's tenant in a famous, if short-lived, menage.

### OTHER COLLECTIONS

The Symington Collection contains other material which bears only an indirect relationship to Swinburne and his circle. The best example of this type of small collection is the group of five letters and two manuscript poems of American poet Ella Wheeler Wilcox (1885-1919). These long and interesting letters deal with the artistic aspirations and struggles of this daughter of a Wisconsin music teacher turned farmer when Mrs. Wilcox was still just Ella Wheeler, young and single. All five are addressed to Arthur O'Shaughnessy, a much older poet (he died in 1881) who was a close associate of Mallarmé and the Pre-Raphaelites.

Wilcox was attacked by the American press for challenging Victorian reserve about sex in her use of such explicit terms as "kiss" in her poetry. She was eventually identified with the so-called "Erotic School" of poetry. She was also compared to both Swinburne and Whitman for her renegade views. Perhaps because Wilcox was so devoted to her husband—she repeatedly tried to contact him through spiritualists after his death—her biography of 1918 *The World and I* deals primarily with her life after marriage. This fact makes the five letters to O'Shaughnessy that much more valuable to researchers.

Marital devotion is the touchstone of another gem in the collection, a bound volume of forty-four letters written to his wife Jane between 1812 and 1844 by the minor Romantic poet from Scotland, John Wilson, better known as Christopher North. His letters have the added interest of mentioning visits with his friends Thomas De Quincey, William Wordsworth, Charles Lamb, and Laetitia Landon.

With the rest of the Symington Collection, Rutgers acquired a bound volume of Landon's papers. A child prodigy who first published at the age of sixteen, Laetitia Elizabeth Landon, or L.E.L., as she was usually called,

<sup>32</sup> Gosse, p. 84.

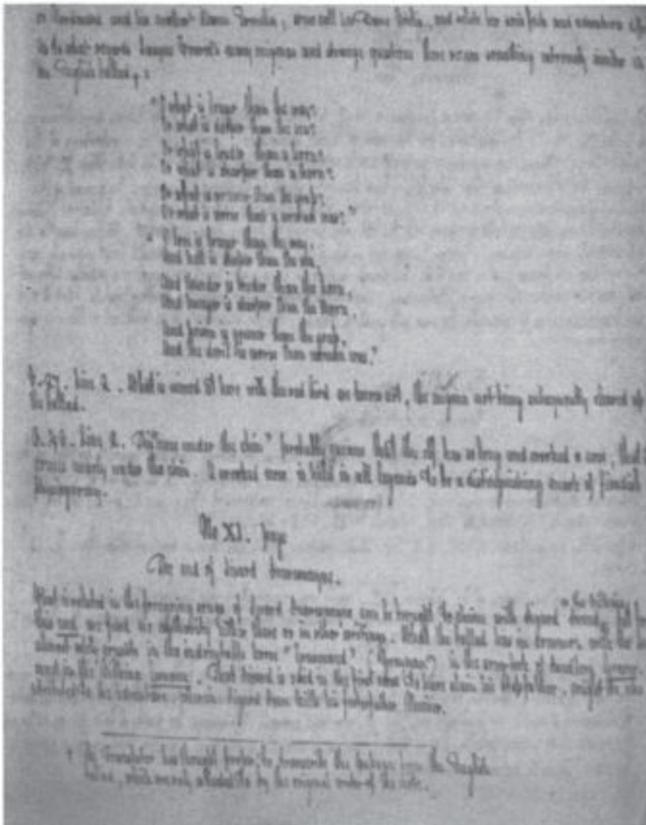
was popular in the 1820s and 30s for the long poems she published in such well known serials as W. Jerdan's *Literary Gazette*. The papers at Rutgers include the proofs of her poem "Zenana," published posthumously in Robert Fisher's *Drawing Room Scrapbook*, an annual Landon had edited for him herself for several years. In 1838 she surprised the London literary elite by marrying George MacLean, governor of Capetown, and moving to South Africa, where she died shortly thereafter. A passage from her well-known poem "The Improvisatrice" exemplifies the Romantic longing and melancholy which link her with the early Wordsworth or the German Romantic poet Heinrich Heine, author of "Die Loreley:"

It seemed to soothe my troubled breast  
to drink the quiet evening air.  
And it was all hope and harmony.  
Afar I could see the Arno's stream  
glorying in the clear moonbeam;  
and the shadowy city met my gaze,  
like the dim memory of other days;  
and the distant wood's black coronal  
was like oblivion, that covereth all.  
I know not why my soul felt sad;  
I touch'd my lute, – it would not waken,  
Save to old songs of sorrowing –  
of hope betrayed – of hearts forsaken –  
Each lay of lighter feeling slept,  
I sang, but, as I sang, I wept.<sup>33</sup>

Landon's letters are almost all addressed to the man she regarded as her literary advisor, an Irish antiquary, and an illustrator and author in his own right, T. Crofton Croker (1798-1854) who worked as a clerk at the Admiralty in London. The annotations interleaved with the manuscripts and poems in this volume are probably in his hand. Symington edited some of Scott's letters among his other editorial activities and may have run across Croker's collection of the Landon papers in the course of his research for that project.

Another friend of Scott represented in the Symington Collection is Robert Southey. There are about ten letters written to Southey from his

<sup>33</sup> Landon, Laetitia Elizabeth. *Poetical Works*, vol. 2, p. 19 (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1850).



“A page from the manuscript of George Borrow’s translation from the Danish.” Credit: Department of Special Collections, Rutgers University Libraries.

good friend Grosvenor Bedford between February 1798, and April 1799. Bedford was a writer and a civil servant whom the poet had befriended while they were pupils at Westminster School, the other most prestigious “public” school in England at the time along with Eton. Together Bedford and Southey had authored an article against the practice of birching in public schools, a piece for which Southey was expelled. The two friends corresponded for over forty years, and their letters are rich in allusions to the literary and social concerns of their day, as well as the humor and nuance of two people who understood one another well.

Today almost no one remembers the name of George Borrow (1803-1881), but in Swinburne’s time he was as popular a figure as Lord



"A Drawing of Harriet Martineau, nineteenth-century feminist reformer. Credit: Department of Special Collections, Rutgers University Libraries.

Byron had been for previous generations. Watts Dunton edited his autobiographical works, *Lavengro* and *Romany Rye*, first published in the 1850s, and Gosse reviewed Borrow's translations from the Danish, extolling his ability to bring the treasures of the Scandinavian Romantics to the English reader. A strapping six-footer with a black beard and an invincible physique, Borrow must have cut an appealing figure to the English public, especially when he took up wandering with gypsies. Before marrying late in life and settling on a country estate in England, he travelled everywhere from Spain to Russia and learned enough of thirty languages to publish translations from their literatures in a book called *Targum* in 1835. He also worked on a translation of *The New Testament* into Mandarin Chinese. The Symington

Collection contains over sixty Borrow poems, poetic fragments, transcripts and translations of poems, including extracts in Persian, German, and French, as well as over seventy prose pieces, including portions of *Lavengro* and of a travelogue called *Wild Wales* (1862).

Another tireless English traveller of the early nineteenth century represented in the Symington Collection, one who visited America as well as Egypt and the Middle East, is the social critic and feminist reformer Harriet Martineau (1802-1876). This daughter of a Norwich manufacturer of Huguenot origin who was raised a Unitarian wrote on religion, political economy, social history, mesmerism, and education, as well as women's rights and the abolition of slavery. The six autograph letters, including one just purchased in 1989 as a Symington Collection "Supplement," are testimony to her tireless editorial and literary activity. In contrast to the newly purchased letter to Marianne Finch of March 27, 1853, concerning the liberalization of divorce laws in England and America, the researcher will find it interesting to look at a manuscript in the collection entitled "Conservative Women and the Vote," by Mary Russell Mitford, friend of Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

Yet one more jewel in the mosaic of the Symington Collection deserves special mention, namely, the more than sixty original letters, spanning the years from 1884 to 1900, from English dramatist Henry Arthur Jones to the theater critic Clement Scott. Although written early in Jones's career, which extended into the 1920s, they are interesting testimony to the theater revival taking place in the British Isles at the turn of the century. Jones created a stir among theater-goers by attacking Victorian prudery, even showing a clergyman guilty of adultery in one of his plays. Once drawn to socialism by his early association with William Morris, he later drifted to the opposite extreme with material success and was often at odds with the more radical ideological goals of his Irish counterpart, George Bernard Shaw. The collection includes a caricature of the two parrying with swords, as they must often have done with words.

### THE AUTOGRAPH COLLECTION

In addition to these larger series of original materials in the Symington Collection there are many single items—a document, a letter, a manuscript—which are eclectic as to topic and date. They represent painters, noblemen, politicians, writers, editors, book-collectors, doctors, farmers, inventors, businessmen, scientists, and ministers in several languages, dating from the seventeenth century to the twentieth.

Some of these items are easily explained, such as the two Commonwealth documents from the 1650s, but there are others which are shrouded in mystery, such as a piece of a document from the year 1668, regarding power of attorney for a woman named Elizabeth Hubbard. Why did she need an attorney? What was her social status, her education, her financial situation? Another fragment has been identified as an invitation from a friend of Marie Antoinette named Mlle. de Pontignac. It looks as if it were written in gold ink. One wonders what became of this woman. How is it that this item survived, if those of her rank and station were guillotined? Yet another fragment is part of a coroner's report from the year 1778, relating to an aging squire named Sir Thomas Gerard, who evidently shot and killed a man servant in the middle of the night, thinking a robber was about to break into his bedroom. It reads as if it could have come straight from a novel by Smollett, but the rest of the story has been lost.

In addition to a beautiful letter from John Ruskin to George Boyce, written in 1854, critiquing the use of light in his sketches of Venice, there are several other letters of interest pertaining to art history. There is one by Alfred Crowquill, the Victorian caricaturist, and another by Fred Barnard, an early illustrator of Charles Dickens in the Hogarth tradition, who apparently burned himself to death, smoking in bed. A real oddity in this category is a letter of 1827 from an architect named Henry Wyattville, regarding the design of the clocks at Windsor Castle.

Among the most tantalizing for amateurs in the field of antiquarianism is a letter written in the 1920s by Humphrey Rolleston, a member of the Royal College of Medicine, who was a bibliophile obsessed with trying to diagnose the ailments of great writers from indirect evidence in their works. In this particular letter he discusses the heart troubles which Dr. Johnson must have had.

Historians of science will find a surprising number of names associated with the pursuit of geological studies in the British Isles. Accompanying one of these letters written by a certain Caleb Burrell Rose is a broadside for his lecture of 1854, given at the Mechanics Institute in Downham, on "The Eye of Man and Animals." One wonders if he was a determinist in the spirit of Darwin, whose *Origin of Species* was to appear five years later, or a Bible-waver. Many of the geologists' letters are addressed to a man named Jabez Hogg, an ophthalmic surgeon who was also on the editorial board of the *Illustrated London News*. He must have been a respected generalist in the world of science who could serve as a clearing house for the latest science news in any field.

There is no apparent rhyme or reason to the presence of these and other antiquities in the "autograph collection." They range in topic from obstetrics to the purchase of violas to the maintenance of phaetons to the matters mentioned above. Perhaps they are there because of their inherent interest as the production of human beings from another time than our own. In this regard the one relic in the Symington Collection should be mentioned, in closing, namely, a lock of Swinburne's hair. It is not, of course, the fiery color for which he became famous, but a silvery gray. Such a relic reminds one of a passage from his elegy for Baudelaire, the eleventh stanza of "Ave atque Vale:"

I among these, I also in such station  
As when the pyre was charred, and piled the sods,  
And offering to the dead made, and their gods,  
The old mourners had, standing to make libation,  
I stand, and to the gods and to the dead  
Do reverence without prayer or praise, and shed  
Offering to these unknown, the gods of gloom,  
And what of honey and spice my seedlands bear,  
And what I may of fruits in this chilled air,  
And lay, Orestes-like, across the tomb  
A curl of severed hair.