FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 35 | 2024

Title	“Couldst thou not watch with me?”: Queer Orientation and Unresponse in Swinburne’s ‘A Wasted Vigil’
Author	VJ René
Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts
Issue Number	35
Publication Date	October 2024

"Couldst thou not watch with me?": Queer Orientation and Unresponse in Swinburne's 'A Wasted Vigil'

VJ René
University of East Anglia

In his 1866 review of A.C. Swinburne's Poems and Ballads, John Morley expresses anxieties regarding the poet's capacity for queer reorientation – his ability to bring transgressive erotic desires within his reader's field of vision. The following year Swinburne published 'A Wasted Vigil', a lyric address to a beloved incapable of "watching with" the poem's speaker. How does Swinburne address queer reorientation and the affective community between himself and his reader in his poetry? Using a phenomenological approach, this essay brings Swinburne into dialogue with Sara Ahmed's work on affect studies and queer theory in order to examine the way in which 'A Wasted Vigil' articulates compulsory heterosexuality and queer possibility.

The controversial themes of Algernon Charles Swinburne's 1866 *Poems and Ballads* "struck Victorian poetry with the force of a tidal wave and sent ripples of sexual and religious rebellion far and wide" (Rooksby 135). Unsurprisingly, the collection also inspired a variety of censorious reviews from conservative critics. Among the most reactionary was John Morley's 'Swinburne's Poems and Ballads', published in *The Saturday Review* in August 1866. To call Morley's position uncharacteristic is an understatement. In 1867, less than a year after publishing this review, he would assume editorship of *The Fortnightly Review*, a position that he held until 1882. During this time Morley consolidated the magazine's reputation as a partisan liberal publication, featuring the works of William Morris, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and George Meredith among other reformist thinkers. How did one of Swinburne's most reactionary reviewers become one of the greatest liberal tastemakers of the next decade's literary scene? Morley begins his review by stating that the poet

> deserves credit for the audacious courage with which he has revealed to the world a mind all aflame with the feverish carnality of a schoolboy [...] he would scorn to throw any veil over pictures which kindle, as these do, all the fires of his imagination in their intensest heat and glow (22-23).

In describing the indecent pictures of Swinburne's work as entirely unveiled, Morley suggests that the collection is overtly and transparently carnal. Shortly after making this point, however, he argues that the indecencies of *Poem and Ballads* are anything but apparent:

> The only comfort about the present volume is that such a piece as 'Anactoria' will be unintelligible to many people, and so will the fevered folly of 'Hermaphroditus'[...] If Mr. Swinburne can a second and a third time find a respectable publisher willing to issue a volume of the same stamp [...] English readers will gradually acquire a truly delightful familiarity with these unspeakable foulnesses (23).

Morley's review articulates anxieties surrounding orientation – where Swinburne's readers stand in relation to his work, and how they might reorient themselves in response to encountering it. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed writes:

> Orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitance, as well as "who" or "what" we direct our energy and attention toward. A queer phenomenology, perhaps, might start by redirecting our attention toward different objects, those that are "less proximate" or even those that deviate or are deviant (QP 3).

Many scholars seeking to bring Swinburne into dialogue with queer theory have focused upon representations of femininity, masculinity and epicenity in his work, the degree to which figures who embody these gendered characteristics are eroticised, and in what manner. Morley's perspective suggests that a phenomenological perspective might prove equally fruitful, focusing on a queer approach, rather than queer characters. Despite his disapproval, Morley credits Swinburne with the capacity for cultivating intimacy with his readers in spite of the alienatingly transgressive ideas with which he engages, in bringing himself within their reach and persuading them to turn towards him. Catherine Maxwell calls this Swinburne's "perverse poetics of sympathy" (*Swinburne* 53), the means by which his writing seduces us into complicity with characters, ideas and sensations that might ordinarily repel. Maxwell's criticism amply addresses Swinburne's methods of education and reorientation, transforming the reluctant reader into one "excitedly responsive" (52) to his work. Morley himself succumbed; as editor of *The Fortnightly Review*, he began almost immediately to publish Swinburne's poetry. My purpose is not to examine the ways in which Swinburne's reach

extends to those readers who might otherwise have been unreachable, but to ask the question: how did Swinburne himself address this process of reorientation in his verse? In Swinburne's ballad 'A Wasted Vigil', selected by Morley and originally published as 'A Lost Vigil' in *The Fortnightly Review* in September 1867, the speaker addresses a beloved who resists community with him, remaining painfully angled away – the polar opposite of the "delightful familiarity" (23) feared and anticipated by Morley. Building upon Maxwell's work on Swinburne's perverse poetics, and bringing Morley's critique into dialogue with queer phenomenology, I will be examining the way in which 'A Wasted Vigil' articulates alienation – the condition of being "out of line with affective community" (Ahmed, PoH 41). How does Swinburne engage with the failure of his perverse poetics of sympathy? How does he articulate in verse the pain of reaching out to those who prove unreachable?

I have selected 'A Wasted Vigil' to examine orientation in Swinburne precisely because it is not a poem which scholars have chosen to "gather around". Just as Morley's use of language suggests, the first *Poems and Ballads* has become a site of critical familiarity, a collection towards which many have chosen to direct their lines of intellectual inquiry. The abundance of work on *Poems and Ballads* has created pockets of unresponse, unoccupied spaces elsewhere in Swinburne scholarship. Stephanie Kuduk-Weiner addresses the tendency to approach Swinburne through his more (in)famous early lyric and its consequences: "To a large degree, for both his first readers and for more recent scholars, *Poems and Ballads: First Series* has set the terms for interpreting, evaluating, and assessing the significance of all of [Swinburne's] poetry" (13). In resisting the temptation to orient my analysis in this essay towards *Poems*, I am purposefully out of line with the angle of scholarly arrival Kuduk-Weiner describes. By allowing a poem from *Second Series* to set the terms of our encounter with Swinburne, I hope to acquire a different kind of familiarity with him. In his review of the first *Poems*, Morley speculates as to what "unspeakable foulnesses" Swinburne might address in further collections, and what "familiarity" a reader might acquire with him by engaging with them. 'A Wasted Vigil' is a poem from one of these – the 1878 *Poems and Ballads: Second Series,* which attracted less notoriety than its predecessor and which is often treated by scholars (even those favourably disposed to it) as a work of secondary importance. Even in critical work which focuses on *Second Series*, 'A Wasted Vigil' is typically overlooked in favour of the collection's more well-known poems, including 'A Vision of Spring in Winter' and 'Ave

atque Vale'. It is both ironic and fitting that many Swinburneians have chosen not to respond critically to a poem preoccupied, agonisingly, by unresponse. It is almost as if they are acting in complicity with the beloved described by its alienated speaker, whose vigil seems doubly wasted in light of the poem's neglect. Directing energy, attention and enthusiasm towards 'A Wasted Vigil' feels like a gesture of resistance to the conventional geneology Ahmed describes; the beloved in the poem may be out of reach, but I am not.

Before discussing how 'A Wasted Vigil' depicts failed reorientation, we must first examine what a successful reorientation looks like in Swinburne's writing, particularly works contemporaneous with the poem. A close reading of Morley's 1866 review reveals how persistently he employs the language of heat and fire to describe the experience of reading *Poems and Ballads*. Swinburne's verses "kindle […] all the fires of [...] imagination in their intensest heat and glow," and by virtue of being "aflame," they have the power to *in*flame others – an act of "feverish" transmission. Ahmed, in *The Promise of Happiness*, refers to this as "affective contagion" (39). By describing the way one might "blush" to encounter *Poems and Ballads*, Morley imagines an embodied readerly response – Swinburne's affective extension is registered as warmth, spreading over the surface of the skin and sinking into it. Ahmed writes: "A queer object [...] makes contact possible. Or, to be more precise, [has] a surface that supports such contact. The contact is bodily" (QP 169). The heat emanating from Swinburne's poetry is understood by the face oriented towards it, which demonstrates its understanding by radiating a reciprocal heat. Swinburne, in Morley's opinion, is not someone that we should warm up to. In comparing his work and its effect on the reader to fire, Morley also invites us to contemplate Swinburne's spatiality. Fire represents not only a source of power, sexual heat and possible danger, it is also a locus of sociality and cohesion. In *Queer Phenemenology*, Ahmed discusses the role of the kitchen table as a kinship object, "something 'tangible' that makes a sense of relatedness possible" (81). In addition to its incendiary properties, fire also functions in the home environment as a shared point of orientation, something to "gather around". The domesticity of Morley's choice of metaphor suggests not only fears that the individual reader will be erotically "inflamed," but worse – that *Poems and Ballads* might serve as the bad kinship object which enables a deviant "sense of relatedness". Implicit in Morley's essay is a sense of deixis, an us-ness which connects the reader not only to Swinburne, but to other readers of Swinburne – the "English readers... acquiring a truly

delightful familiarity" (Morley 23) with his work, gathering around "the fires of his imagination" (ibid). A degree of anxiety underlies the sarcasm – what if some readers *do* in fact find this familiarity "truly delightful" (ibid)? Morley is not just concerned that Swinburne might turn his readers *on*, but also what he might turn them *towards*.

The contagious model of affect described by Morley resonates with Swinburne's own depiction of a crucial moment of reorientation in his experimental work *Lesbia Brandon.* Although *Lesbia* was never finished and remained unpublished until 1952, T.A.J. Burnett suggests that Swinburne wrote the cited passage in 1864, rougly the same time period during which he was working on his original draft of 'A Wasted Vigil' (778). Here is the first moment of contact between the novel's adolescent protagonist Bertie and his tutor Denham:

> As [Denham's] eyes fell on Herbert, the boy felt a sudden tingling in his flesh; his skin was aware of danger, and his nerves winced. He blushed again at his blushes, and gave his small wet hand shyly into the wide hard grasp. (Swinburne, Lesbia 16)

Bertie's reaction to Denham captures the mood of the "excitedly responsive" (52) readers of Swinburne imagined by Maxwell; this is both a pedagogical moment and an erotic one. Denham's tutelage, intended to prepare Bertie for Eton, also facilitates his incipient queer proclivities. Notably the encounter begins with one character watching another. Denham's eye "falls on" Bertie as his birch will shortly do, and the boy's response is a characteristically Swinburneian "wince". Bertie's skin, by tingling and wincing, demonstrates its understanding of the flogging it will later receive and enjoy; in this moment he realises that he has a bodily surface that supports queer contact. This embodied knowledge is followed by the heat of inflammation. Bertie's first blush signals Denham's transmission of affect, his second an awareness of its transmission. He has learned his first lesson, and his response is to "give," to reciprocate Denham's extension by holding out his own hand. This moment of reorientation is one in which *eye contact* (to behold) becomes *I contact* (to be held) in its socially sanctioned form – the handshake. Touch is facilitated by the anticipation of touch; Denham is able to reach out to Bertie because he knows (thanks to the blushing) that Bertie is within reach; he is the "queer object [which] makes contact possible" (Ahmed, QP 169). By directing his gaze towards Denham as an object of desire, Bertie signals his queer (re)orientation. The moment of watching is therefore also a *watching-with*; by facing one another they confirm that they

are facing in the same direction, that their orientation is shared. Bertie's contact with Denham is not without a sense of "danger," as Swinburne puts it; this is, after all, a form of erotic proximity which "crosses the straight line" (Ahmed, QP 169). But their encounter is also one which creates new lines, a moment of queer possibility.

If we interpret Denham's contact with Bertie as a successful queer reorientation, how does this inform the way we approach 'A Wasted Vigil'? The moment of turning in *Lesbia* begins with a shift in the direction of looking, so we are not surprised when Swinburne opens the poem by foregrounding the importance of beholding, and being held: "Couldst thou not watch with me one hour? Behold" (1). From the very first line, the speaker seeks contact and transmission of affect with his beloved. After its inclusion in the opening line, the refrain "Couldst thou not watch with me?" (4) is repeated with minor variations in every stanza, culminating in the poem's final line: "Thou couldst not watch with me" (56). Despite the regularity with which the speaker makes his plaintive request, it is never heeded, and the poem ends on a note of tragic resignation – a far cry from the nervous excitement of Bertie's encounter with Denham. Also notable is the manner in which the beloved's refusal to watch renders them and the speaker imperceptible to others: "One would say, seeking us and passing here/Where is she? and one answering, Where is he?" (34-5). Unresponse both dooms the relationship between beloved and speaker and consigns it to inconceivability. It – and they – are out of reach.

In order for 'A Wasted Vigil' to follow the same trajectory of reorientation depicted in *Lesbia,* the poem requires a moment of sympathetic understanding and embodied knowledge that prefigures physical contact between speaker and beloved, corresponding to the tingling wince of nerves Bertie feels when Denham's eye falls on him. We need an indication that the beloved's surface is one which supports queer contact. Although a charged sense of responsiveness does permeate the opening stanzas of the poem, it is not attributed directly to the beloved's body but is instead evoked through natural phenomena: "wave to wave answers, tree responds to tree" (11), wistfully evisaged rather than actually felt. The actual moment of touch is likewise imagined by the speaker as a glancing moment of contact in the natural world that surrounds him: "Dawn skims the sea with flying feet of gold/With sudden feet that graze the gradual sea" (2-3). The fraught language with which Swinburne describes touch is conspicuous and significant. This contact in 'A Wasted Vigil' is a far cry from the

"grasp" with which Bertie's hand meets Denham's, with all the connotations of firmness and resolution the word suggests. Instead, the poem depicts the bare minimum of connection – a "skim," a "graze," and not even between beloved and speaker. The sense of mutal extention present in *Lesbia* is absent; here we have one object glancing off another. The word "skim," simultaneously evoking contact and loss, is a highly charged one in this context. To skim something is at once to brush across its surface, to remove part of it, and to pay it insufficient attention. Swinburne's word choice conveys not only the insubstantial transience of the moment, but also its pain, articulated in very corporeal terms. Ahmed describes the way in which failed orientation creates "points of social and physical pressure that can be experienced as a physical press on the surface of the skin" (QP 160). The abrasion of the speaker's contact with the beloved is not the invigorating, erotic sensation foreshadowed by Bertie's wince – flagellation is, after all, a definite touch despite its soreness; a firm impact that affirms the connection between flogger and recipient. The speaker of 'A Wasted Vigil' instead articulates the bodily pain of extension towards an object not within reach; the suffering caused by this touch is a symptom of disorientation. The beloved's refusal to watch marks the speaker as the "object which 'points' somewhere else" (QP, 160). After all this we are not surprised by the "dead hands" (29) which appear towards the end of the poem, signalling that contact is truly impossible.

Of the early poem 'August' (published in the first *Poems and Ballads*) Catherine Maxwell writes that "Swinburne works an almost seamless correspondence between the natural world and world of human desire so that sexual desire is [...] made to seem at one with other natural energies" (Female Sublime, 198). Here, however, we are confronted with quite the opposite – a speaker whose desires are out of line with the natural energies surrounding him. The poem is charged with a typically Swinburneian sense of counter-tendency, in which "extreme vitality and intense stimulus inducing a thematic of motion and energy" are juxtaposed with the "contrary drive [...] towards quiescence and inertia" (Maxwell, Female Sublime 196). The inertia in 'A Wasted Vigil' is not presented, however, as a peaceful respite or sensuous languor. Instead, contrasting with the euphoric dynamism of sunbeam and foam is the suggestion of something more sinister. A sense of entrapment or restriction appears to emanate from the natural world around the lovers, fuelling the urgency of the speaker's request. This idea is made most explicit in the poem's fourth stanza:

Sunbeam by sunbeam creeps from line to line,

Foam by foam quickens on the brightening brine;

Sail by sail passes, flower by flower gets free;

Couldst thou not watch with me? (13-16)

Swinburne's use of pathetic fallacy does not associate the imagined union between speaker and beloved with feelings of harmony or completion, but rather, with evasion and escape. The progression of verbs – "creep", "quicken", "pass", "get free" – suggests that the speaker envisages reorientation as the opportunity to be released from a keenly felt constraint or *compulsion*. This possibility of release is imagistically present throughout the poem – the "web of night" which is "undone" (9) the wind changing direction in a "sea-drift blown from windward back to lee" (27) – as if lurking on the horizon, visible but unreachable. The sense of entrapment in the fourth stanza is communicated not only through imagery, however, but also through sound patterning; spoken aloud, it communicates a subtle, unsatisfying dissonance. Due to Swinburne's stacking of consonants our movement through the stanza is slow and inhibited, phonetically obstructed. Only gradually, facilitated by the contraction of phrase in the third line, does momentum increase as if we are accelerating towards the longed-for moment of emancipation. It is no coincidence that the final phrase "flower by flower gets free" (15) is the most smoothly euphonous of the stanza. Its verbal release is then immediately negated by the refrain; the possibility of change thwarted by the beloved's continued refusal to watch. Also notable is the way in which the refrain positions the act of turning and watching as something that theyis *incapable* of doing – "couldst thou not" (1) – rather than deliberately refusing to do. This suggestion is made explicit in the poem's final stanza:

Since thou art not as these are, go thy ways;

Thou hast no part in all my nights and days.

Lie still, sleep on, be glad — as such things be;

Thou couldst not watch with me (53-56).

Although reorientation is visualised by the speaker as liberation from an imposed constraint, he nonetheless acknowledges that the beloved's inability to watch with him may represent

an easier and more peaceful course of action for them – "lie still, sleep on, be glad". Reorientation, as Swinburne notes in *Lesbia*, represents danger as well as potential. Although the speaker's grief and frustration are apparent, he does not wholly blame his beloved. This sets 'A Wasted Vigil' apart from many works in Swinburne's lyric oeuvre. In 'Felise', the speaker wryly reflects on the fickleness of the eponymous character now that they have parted; in 'The Triumph of Time', the beloved is reproached for choosing a lover who cares less for them than the poem's speaker does. Here the beloved's unresponse is not depicted as deliberate or even fully conscious; they are sleeping, their eyes are closed to him and the possibility of freedom that their watching-with him represents. The sense of entrapment communicated by the poem naturalises the beloved's unresponse, presenting it as usual and in some repects desirable, if not truly compulsory.

The association of waking from sleep with queer reorientation is found throughout Swinburne's oeuvre, and is particularly apparent in his depictions of ambiguously sexed bodies. The liminality of *Sleeping Hermaphroditus* is expressed not only in the statue's wedding of male and female sexual characteristics but also by its recumbent pose, as if it is emerging into consciousness. The speaker of Swinburne's ekphrastic poem 'Hermaphroditus' from the first *Poems and Ballads* addresses the statue caught "between sleep and life" (15) and urges it to "turn round, look back for love" (1). Love, however, will not reciprocate; "blind" to queer possibility, he "turned himself and would not enter in" (28). Natalie Prizel, addressing intersex aestheticism in Swinburne's ekphrastic works, comments on this: "Unlike Love, who turns away, the sculpture is told to turn and look at the speaker, face to face in a moment that might suggest some sort of recognition" (498). Swinburne revisits this image in another ekphrastic work from his second collection – 'In San Lorenzo', addressed to another sleeping hermaphrodite statue, Michelangelo's *Night.* While the poem's speaker acknowledges to a greater degree than in 'Hermaphroditus' the "sorrow and shame" (6) that might accompany such an awakening, the statue's emergence from slumber nonetheless remains a possibility hopefully reiterated in the final line: "But will not yet thine Angel bid thee wake?" (14).

Prizel suggests that in depicting such moments of recognition between speaker and statue, Swinburne imagines how his readership might respond to his own queer works: "Swinburne's poetic act is not so much a descriptive gesture but rather an event of encounter – his own, as he recounts his experience in the Louvre, and ours reading the poem" (498).

Through the mediating gesture of ekphrasis the encounter between reader and work of art becomes charged with queer possibility. Prizel's analysis provides insight into the deictic function of Swinburne's lyric, addressing "a community of like-minded viewers... a coterie of nonnormative figures drawn into sympathy with one another" (502) – an optimistic gesture in the late Victorian period. If ekphrasis is the act of reaching which facilates touch between poet and reader, its absence in 'A Wasted Vigil' is key to understanding why the poem does not share the cautious hopefulness of 'Hermaphroditus' and 'In San Lorenzo' in its treatment of queercoded awakenings. By the poem's conclusion, the speaker of 'A Wasted Vigil' has resigned themselves to unresponse, to the fact that their beloved will "sleep on" (55). This conclusion expresses a powerful anxiety that the beloved's refusal to watch may extend to the reader, and their shared refusal precludes the community Swinburne's poetic extension could have created. Given the critical hostility which greeted the first *Poems and Ballads*, it is perhaps unsurprising that 'A Wasted Vigil', written and published in its aftermath, should address loneliness and rejection, as though the text of *Poems* had itself been a vigil wasted.

The moment of reorientation depicted in *Lesbia Brandon* renders the novel's queerness visible to the reader, not only within the context of Bertie's relationship with Denham, but also in the scene in which, as a young adult, Bertie dresses as a woman and falls in love with the sapphist Lesbia. In turning to face Denham and all that he represents, the adolescent Bertie turns his back on the possibility of union with an ideal heterosexual object. What is in the background of 'A Wasted Vigil'? We have already observed the sense of entrapment and frustration that permeates the natural world perceived by the poem's speaker. Ahmed discusses the way in which heterosexuality becomes compulsory "by the requirement that the subject 'give up' the possibility of other love objects" (QP 87). With non-heterosexual possibilities closed down, "heterosexuality functions as a background, as that which is behind actions that are repeated over time and with force, and that insofar as it is behind does not come into view" (Ahmed, QP 89). We could read the beloved's inability to watch-with the speaker as an expression of compulsory heterosexuality – their sleeping eyes are closed to the possibility of a queer object, and the heterosexual background is not within their field of vision despite being "in front" of them; rather, they are orientated *around* it.

"To be orientated around something is... to be taken up by something, such that one might even become what it is that is 'around' [...] Indeed, 'around' refers us to 'round' and

suggests a circling movement" (Ahmed, QP 116). A closer look at the formal properties of the poem show how deeply embedded this circling is. 'A Wasted Vigil' is a ballad, comprised of four-line stanzas of rhyming couplets in which the final line ("Couldst thou not watch with me?") serves as a refrain. "World by world take flight" (6) writes Swinburne in the second stanza, and accordingly the reader's thoughts are encouraged to move in orbit as the poem rotates incessantly around the pole of the refrain line, interfering with the capacity for reorientation. The natural imagery with which Swinburne opens the poem accentuates this effect; his description of the interchange of day and night, the seasons and the tidal pull of the sea and the phases of the moon, naturalises the cyclical motion of the poem's form. This intense saturation of repetition in the early stanzas creates micro-refrains that echo the large-scale repetition of the core refrain line, as the exchange of night and day echoes the grander changes of the seasonal cycle. The happenings of the natural world do not occur in a straightforwardly sequential progression, with beginning and end; instead, they are presented as infinitely reiterative. The refrain itself, Christ's reproach to Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane, situates the Resurrection within this cyclical framework. Christ's return to life, far from an event which contradicts the laws of nature, is as natural as darkness becoming dawn – "They die and day survives" (7). The apparently one-way progression of birth to death is in fact another circle. The most salient characteristic of a circle is that it has no end. Ahmed describes the manner in which "sexual orientation is framed as […] a matter of […] biology (where the 'biological' is read as a line that is already drawn, as a line of nature)" (QP 79). The "natural" or straight line Swinburne depicts in 'A Wasted Vigil' is clearly delinated and there is no logical point of departure; it is presented as smoothly inexorable. Even the attempt to turn from the line represented by the refrain becomes cruelly ironic as the beloved time and again does not respond; a series of infinite negations in which every repetition only serves to affirm the line's existence and entrench its inescapability. Ahmed writes: "Understanding the processes of 'becoming straight' would be to appreciate how sexual orientations feel as if they are intrinsic to being in the world, and how bodies 'extend' into space by being directed in this way and that" (QP 80). In 'A Wasted Vigil' this extension of heterosexual bodies extends to natural phenomena; sunbeams, sea-foam and flowers as celestial, oceanic and floral bodies, all oriented in the same direction. In the first four stanzas of the poem alone we have star and star, world and world, wave and wave, tree and tree, sunbeam and sunbeam, foam

and foam, flower and flower. There is something violent about these coupled words. Encountering them, I am reminded of Ahmed's anecdote of entering the dining room of a holiday resort and seeing seated before her "table after table, couple after couple, taking the same form [...] shocked by the sheer force of [their] regularity" (QP 82). These "couples" of words are oriented both towards one another as objects and around the straight line; to use Ahmed's formulation, their orientation *around* straightness is precisely what orientates them *towards* one another; their "ideal coupledom" facilitates their movement in unobstructed cycles. The space into which heterosexually-directed bodies extend takes on cosmic properties within the poem; whole "worlds" move along this same uninterrupted trajectory. Everything in nature faces the same way, moves in the same direction, is oriented endlessly towards the same goal. 'A Wasted Vigil' confronts us with a nightmarish vision of compulsory heterosexuality, its narrative endlessly reproduced.

Swinburne's use of repetition as a poetic technique is significant, given the importance of repetition to compulsory heterosexuality. Ahmed defines it as "the accumulative effect of the reptition of the narrative of heterosexuality as an ideal coupling [...] The work of repetition involves the concealment of labour under the sign of nature" (CPoE 145). By presenting the natural phenomena surrounding the speaker as a series of homogenous pairs, like the animals in Noah's ark, Swinburne depicts "the work of repetition" (ibid) in a strikingly literal sense. But though it takes place "under the sign of nature" (ibid), this work is anything but concealed within the poem. Here as elsewhere in his verse, excess is integral to Swinburne's aesthetic and the accumulative effect of these homogenous pairings is overwhelm. In 'A Wasted Vigil' repetition is a poetic device *which calls attention to itself as such*, and in doing so denaturalises its own work within the poem. By using repetition so purposefully and excessively that the reader can scarcely fail to be conscious of its artifice, Swinburne "brings what is 'behind' to the front" (Ahmed, QP 4); compulsory heterosexuality becomes apparent when its labour is rendered perceptible. Though its compulsive power reverberates through the poem in the evocation of entrapment and inevitability, the heterosexual narrative is not permitted to remain concealed, in the background, and is instead placed in front of the reader as an "action repeated over time and with force" (Ahmed, QP 89). "Sexual orientation involves bodies that leak into worlds" (Ahmed, CPoE 145), and Swinburne makes this leakage visible throughout the poem. In doing so, he shows that queer departures from the straight line are

conceivable; it is possible to refuse to be compelled. The beloved may not be capable of watching-with, but the poem dares to hope that the reader is. The poem's final natural image is not one which suggests coupledom or cyclical movement, but resilience and defiance in the face of a storm – "Yet some endure, and bow not head nor knee" ('A Wasted Vigil' 50-51).

Swinburne's affective transmission, then, is not necessarily one of "feverish carnality" (Morley 22). Yet Morley is nonetheless correct in fearing that books can be queer objects which make contact possible. The act is bodily; I place my copy of *Poems and Ballads: Second Series* in front of me; my (sur)face is turned towards it as I read. By facing it, I affirm that we are facing in the same direction. In directing my gaze towards his words, I signal that our orientation is shared. Swinburne extends towards me in writing, and I reciprocate by writing this.

Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion.* Edinburgh University Press, 2004.

——. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others.* Duke University Press, 2006.

——. *The Promise of Happiness.* Duke University Press, 2010.

Burnett, T.A.J. "Some Reflections on the Text of Swinburne's Unfinished Novel, the so-Called 'Lesbia Brandon'." *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 47, no. 4, 2009: pp. 777–86. www.jstor.org/stable/40601013. Accessed 13 March, 2024.

Kuduk-Weiner, Stephanie. "Knowledge and Sense Experience in Swinburne's Late Poetry." *A.C. Swinburne and the Singing Word: New Perspectives on the Mature Work,* edited by Yisrael Levin. Routledge, 2016.

Maxwell, Catherine. *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne: Bearing Blindness*. Manchester University Press, 2001.

——. *Swinburne.* Northcote House Publishers, 2006.

Morley, John. "Swinburne's Poems and Ballads". *Saturday Review*. 4 August 1866, pp 145-7. Rpt. in *Algernon Swinburne: The Critical Heritage*, edited by Clyde K. Hyder. Taylor & Francis, 2012, pp. 22-9.

Prizel, Natalie. "Intersex Aestheticism and Transgenre Mediation: Swinburne's Ekphrastic Androgynes." *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 57, no. 4, 2019, pp. 489-509. doi.org/10.1353/vp.2019.0029. Accessed 12 July, 2024.

Rooksby, Rikky. *A.C. Swinburne: A Poet's Life.* Scolar Press, 1997.

Swinburne, A.C. "A Wasted Vigil." *Poems and Ballads: Second Series*. Chatto and Windus, 1878.

——. "Hermaphroditus." *Poems and Ballads.* John Camden Hotten, 1873.

——. "In San Lorenzo." *Songs Before Sunrise.* F.S. Ellis, 1871

——. *Lesbia Brandon*. Ed. Randolph Hughes. Falcon Press, 1952.