Victorian Poetry, Europe, and the Challenge of Cosmopolitanism

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BY JUST ABOUT any definition apart from extended residence or travel abroad, Swinburne probably ranks as the most recognizably cosmopolitan Victorian poet. Throughout his career, even up to the last volume of poetry published in his lifetime, *A Channel Passage* (1904), he consistently sought to cross boundaries of European culture and poetics. In addition, with *Songs before Sunrise* (1871), he assumed Barrett Browning’s mantle as the British poet-laureate of Italian nationhood and republican ideals. But it was the cultural eruption known simply as *Poems and Ballads* (1866) that earned Swinburne a lasting reputation for a more dangerous if not directly political kind of cosmopolitanism, one that helped to inspire later channel-crossing aesthetes and Decadents such as Arthur Symons and Oscar Wilde. As one of those early critics had written in the *London Review* shortly before Moxon decided to withdraw *Poems and Ballads* from publication, Swinburne had apparently “familiarized himself with the worst circles of Parisian life, and drenched himself in the worst creations of Parisian literature,” to the point that he could “see scarcely anything in the world, or beyond it, but lust, bitterness, and despair.” Perhaps Swinburne was French, he suspected.¹

A more balanced critical insight into the unique nature of Swinburne’s cross-channel poetics comes from the poet himself, although in a poem that
might appear to suffer from its own aversion to Anglo-French hybridity. In the spring of 1882, Swinburne lent his name to the same petition that Browning had, a petition aimed at stopping a proposed tunnel connecting England to France. Swinburne, however, took the added measure of writing a sonnet for the occasion, published later that year in *Tristram of Lyonesse and Other Poems*. While full of admiration for France, “The Channel Tunnel” mostly dwells on the kind of *mésalliance* that would result from a “suppression of the sea” between the two countries. Indeed, the poem seems addressed to two suitors contemplating a marriage for the wrong reasons:

Not for less love, all glorious France, to thee,
   “Sweet enemy” called in days long since at end,
Now found and hailed of England sweeter friend,
Bright sister of our freedom now, being free;
Not for less love or faith in friendship we
   Whose love burnt ever toward thee reprehend
The vile vain greed whose pursy dreams portend
Between our shores suppression of the sea.
Not by dull toil of blind mechanic art
Shall these be linked for no man’s force to part
Nor length of years and changes to divide,
But union only of trust and loving heart
   And perfect faith in freedom strong to abide
   And spirit at one with spirit on either side.3

As does so much of Swinburne’s work in verse and prose, “The Channel Tunnel” asks, in effect, what it means to be joined to France, always ground-zero for British cosmopolitanism. With the despised Louis Napoleon having been deposed some ten years earlier and now fading into history, France, Swinburne claims, can rank itself among free nations such as England. His unqualified characterization of England as “free,” however, is about all the poem shares with the patriotic fervor one might expect from the Tunnel’s opponents, many of whom were driven by fear of military invasion from the Continent. Swinburne’s opposition is based more on distrust of commercialism and its oversimplified vision of international brotherhood via free trade: one imagines Barrett Browning would have nodded approvingly as Swinburne decried the “vile vain greed” and “pursy dreams” of the tunnel’s promoters. Like *Casa Guidi Windows*, Swinburne’s poem hinges upon a tension between a materialistic empire of free trade and a more cultural, secular-spiritual fellowship, one spearheaded by poets.
What made Swinburne’s engagement with France so threatening earlier in his career—an obsession with the “body” of France, so to speak—at first glance seems to hold no place in this more platonic “union only of trust and loving heart.” A closer look, however, reveals that “The Channel Tunnel” does not restrict itself to an “intellectual and spiritual” conception of Europe alone. Swinburne hints that this spiritual union could be a prelude to a more intimate kind of consummation: as he had always insisted, his poetry was never about celebrating the body at the expense of the spirit but about exploring where the two intersected. In this regard, the poem mirrors the complexity and unpredictability that have historically characterized Anglo-French relations and thus reinforces Swinburne’s case for resisting the “normalization” of borders that would come with the tunnel. If the poem is not patently “fleshly” in the manner of *Poems and Ballads*, it does share that volume’s characteristic blurring of boundaries, twisting and turning desire beyond its more readily recognized guises: France is friend, sister, and lover in the same fourteen lines. To draw on a metaphor from Swinburne’s *Notes on Poems and Reviews*, “The Channel Tunnel” offers not a sterile kind of political hermaphrodite—lovers uniting at the expense of their own unique selves—but rather equal partners who retain a productive, creative antagonism that nourishes the other: “perfection once attained on all sides is a thing thenceforward barren of use or fruit; whereas the divided beauty of separate woman and man—a thing inferior and imperfect—can serve all turns of life.” England and France must remain separate bodies, separate sexes even, although which culture is the more masculine or feminine to Swinburne is seldom made clear.

Inhabiting the same cross-European, turbulent in-between space as the more obviously daring *Poems and Ballads*, “The Channel Tunnel” neatly captures the dynamics of Swinburne’s career-long engagement with France and his broader attempts to open English poetics to European sources and experimental trends. Despite the claims of his critics—and even some of his champions—Swinburne’s poetry was never about building a secret tunnel to France that would expose England to cultural invasion. Nor was it about a more modest “assimilation” or “importation” of France, Italy, and some of the less-wholesome aspects of ancient Greek and Roman literature—all efforts that his detractors tended to link together as symptoms of the same misguided, denationalized looking outward. The dominating impulse in Swinburne, as I suggest in the title of this chapter, is translation—not in the idealized sense of a closure of difference—but a translation that, in Lawrence Venuti’s terms, resists “suppressing the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text, assimilating it to dominant values in
the target-language culture, making it recognizable and therefore seemingly untranslated.” Poems and Ballads foregrounds and confronts difference as the necessary condition to establishing the common ground of translation between England and France or ancient Greece and the present. Thus John Morley, who wrote another of the early attacks on Poems and Ballads, may have been more astute than he realized when he charged that “there is an enormous difference between an attempt to revivify among us the grand old pagan conceptions of Joy, and an attempt to glorify all the bestial delights that the subtility of Greek depravity was able to contrive.” He added later, “It was too rashly said, when Atalanta in Calydon appeared, that Mr. Swinburne had drunk deep at the springs of Greek poetry, and had profoundly conceived and assimilated the divine spirit of Greek art.” This is indeed precisely the kind of assimilation Swinburne resists, what Venuti calls the “ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values.” Whether strolling the same Parisian back streets as Baudelaire, or parading the open secret of ancient Greek sexuality, Swinburne had crossed an unofficial boundary between civilization and “depravity,” between England and the rest of Europe. Swinburne’s was a cosmopolitanism of repulsion—bodily, sexual, “unnatural” to many of his contemporaries, and, as I will argue, absolutely true in a larger sense to the complex attractions between inhabitants of different cultures.

Poems and Ballads travels widely across Europe in its sources, forms, and settings. This geographical reach is complemented by a historical one that goes back to the Bible and pays special attention, as we will see, to intersections of medieval and classical Europe. Nor does Poems and Ballads lose sight of the present, with odes “To Victor Hugo” and “A Song in Time of Revolution. 1860.” European culture emerges from the volume as something always in flux and in debate with itself, something continuously adapting and readapting—continuously translating. Swinburne recognizes in turn that poetry, as a literary form, demands similar acts of translation. Varied and intricate plays on diction, meter, and structure reinforce the idea that the discourse of poetry, even to a native speaker, is itself a foreign language, requiring the reader to translate and interpret on multiple levels. The cosmopolitan prosody of Poems and Ballads thus constitutes one more significant “in between” space inhabited by the poem.

In keeping with the overall aims of this book, however, I am less interested in how Swinburne adapts specific non-British authors or forms than in how Poems and Ballads comments critically upon the challenge of cosmopolitanism even as it performs multiple forms of cross-cultural intermingling. Overall, there are three kinds of translation at work in Poems and Ballads:
The Fleshly School of Poetry and Other Phenomena of the Day (1872) indelibly linked Robert Buchanan’s name with Pre-Raphaelite and aesthetic poetry,
and while Dante Gabriel Rossetti is his primary target in the volume—an expanded version of an earlier piece he wrote for the *Contemporary Review*—it still offers perhaps the most extensive contemporary critique of Swinburne. Buchanan helped to amplify Swinburne's cultural impact even as he solidified objections many already had to him, including, as we have seen, Robert Browning, who echoes Buchanan's language closely in complaints about Swinburne and Rossetti.¹² Notwithstanding this impact, however, one might question the need to revisit Buchanan at all, who is about as dead, surely, as a critical dead horse can get. While it is true that Swinburne hardly needs to be defended from Buchanan at this point in literary history, to understand the unique nature of Swinburne’s cosmopolitanism, I think it is important to return to the question of just what made it so troubling to Buchanan, who otherwise was willing to reaffirm that England must not isolate itself from continental influences. If anything, as Gavin Budge has argued recently, *The Fleshly School* is worthy of more serious critical attention for the way it intervened in a lively contemporary debate about the relationship between morality and physical health: Buchanan was not simply recycling moralistic pieties but drawing on his grounding in Scottish Common Sense philosophy, which “regard[ed] as radically impoverished a life lived without transcendent intuitions of something beyond the material world.”¹³ This impoverishment also had political implications for Buchanan. To him, Swinburne was a gifted poet who had deliberately chosen to alienate himself from the sympathies of his readers, thereby abnegating the poet’s duty to champion democratic reform. Tellingly, Buchanan had little problem with the few openly political poems in *Poems and Ballads* and took *Songs before Sunrise* as evidence that Swinburne was moving in a more promising direction.¹⁴ The charge of elitism, in fact, would be repeated by one of Swinburne’s most articulate champions, William Michael Rossetti. As I discuss at the end of this section, these charges in some ways get to the heart of Swinburne’s cosmopolitanism, an ideal, one would assume, that demands just the kind of broad, egalitarian reach Buchanan calls for. The confrontation with Buchanan, then, goes beyond the question of obscenity and encompasses larger issues of translation and national identity—of determining what British poetry properly owed to European influences and what kind of cultural and ideological work it should perform at home.

The history of English poetry for Buchanan *is*, in fact, the history of its engagement with Europe. *The Fleshly School* opens with a capsule overview of English poetry since the Middle Ages that traces its triumphs and failures to the way it negotiated Italian and French influences, with Chaucer emerging as his hero of English poetic cosmopolitanism:
Chaucer and his contemporaries were, as all readers know, under deep obligations to the poets and romancists of medieval Italy; and it is a most significant token of Chaucer’s pre-eminent originality that, while Gower and the rest had only been inspired to imitate what was bad in the great models, he, on the contrary, merely derived inspiration and solace from their music, assimilated what was noble in it, and carefully prepared a breezier and healthier poetic form of his own. What is grandest and best in Chaucer is Chaucer’s exclusively. (8–9)

From here, Buchanan delivers a kind of literary weather report, contrasting the vigorous, clear atmosphere of England with a creeping miasma from Europe. Ideally, cosmopolitanism should not disrupt native culture but provide “inspiration and solace” from abroad: its negative opposite simply embraces all that is new and enticing without resisting what is fundamentally non-English. After Chaucer, according to Buchanan, English poetry fell into a long period of decline as the Italian miasma, “sucking up all that was most unwholesome from the soil of France” (10), settled over England. Riding this cloud were a class of cheap imitators of “what was absurd and unnatural in Dante” that in turn fostered a new “falsetto school” of English poetry, whose symptoms were inauthenticity, effeminacy, and a general obsession with the sounds and surfaces of poetry rather than its meaning and depth. The English poetic body would not recover fully, in fact, until Wordsworth and other Romantic poets who were more firmly grounded in the traditions and landscape of England emerged to redomesticate poetry.

Setting the stage for his attack on Swinburne, Buchanan remarks that English poetry might have continued to regain its health but for a “fresh importation of the obnoxious matter from France. The Scrofulous School of Literature had been distinguishing itself for many a long year in Paris, but it reached its final and most tremendous development in Charles Baudelaire” (15–16). With this possible nod to Browning’s depraved, scrofulous French novel-reading monk in “The Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister,” Buchanan segues into the next section of *The Fleshly School*, an extended examination of Swinburne’s chief French enabler. Like a modern-day John Gower, Swinburne could never “free himself from the style of the copyist,” whether in Baudelaire’s presence or among more ancient influences, a charge Buchanan first made in an earlier attack on *Poems and Ballads*. Buchanan highly over-dramatizes Swinburne’s debt to Baudelaire, as many have noted, but his primary aim is to deny Baudelaire any legitimate access to British poetic culture. Buchanan plays up a patently “French” orientation to Baudelaire’s poetry that restricts its ability to speak to English concerns and tastes: he commu-
nicates only with those already favorably predisposed toward the Continent, like Swinburne. Buchanan likewise *deliteralizes* Baudelaire, in some sense, cutting off lines from their contexts and redisplaying them as evidence of his perversity rather than as poetry.

Buchanan’s overview of Baudelaire mostly amounts to announcing what is objectionable in a passage and then leaving it to the reader to make the fuller translation. “It is quite impossible for me, without long quotation, to fully represent the unpleasantness of Baudelaire” (24), he writes, implying that there was no way to engage Baudelaire without “copying” him so that one could clearly recognize the Otherness of his verse. Buchanan’s use of italics for more damning key words further highlights the sense of difference. Detecting, for instance, the “Swinburnian female” in much of Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857), Buchanan, in a comically effective if unfair way, notes that

She “bites,” of course:—

“Pour exercer les dents à ce jeu singulier,
Il se faut chaque jour un cœur au râtelier!”

She has “cold eyelids that shut like a jewel”:—

“Tes yeux, où rien ne se révèle
De doux ni d’amér,
Sont *deux bijoux froids*!”

She is cold and “sterile”:—

“La froide majesté de la femme stérile!”

She is, necessarily, like “a snake”:—

. . . “un serpent qui danse,” &c, &c. (23–24)16

Buchanan’s efforts to “translate” Baudelaire for his readers here reveal something of the damage that can be done by disingenuous attempts at cross-cultural dialogue—damage caused not by actual “mistranslation” of specific phrases, but by his implication that the reader can know Baudelaire through the samples he quarantines here. Even the most accurate of translations, as David Simpson cautions, involve loss, “a making over into English of something foreign, something that must inevitably be familiarized and robbed of some of the challenge of the potentially alternative values therein offered.”17 In Buchanan’s case, that loss is perhaps best captured by the ampersands at the end of the passage, which serve to stereotype the rest of Baudelaire as so
much more sensual indulgence. Even the way Buchanan frames the text on the page—indentented, confined within his translations—imprisons Baudelaire and robs him of any transformative potential. *Les Fleurs du Mal* is made *familiarly* strange, a British idea of France that can only repel, not challenge or enlighten, the reader. There could be no productive dialogue with this aspect of French culture, Buchanan implies; it was simply foreign. All one needs to do to understand Baudelaire (and Swinburne) is to be offended by them. To continue to explore, to grant them the status of poetry or literature is to misread them in Buchanan’s eyes.

By denying Swinburne’s originality in dealing with his French and Greek models, Buchanan could also deny the legitimacy of the encounter between cultures Swinburne crafted. In this regard, Buchanan resembles some of Swinburne’s other most vocal detractors. Alfred Austin, for instance, insisted that Swinburne’s eroticized flirtations with ancient Greece underscored his tendency toward “sheer and mere imitation—imitation of the very best kind, no doubt, but still nothing more.” For Swinburne’s accusers, there was no middle space where the foreign and English could converse with each other, as the *London Review* also hopefully concluded in an unsigned review of *Poems and Ballads*: “This kind of writing is so alien to the spirit of our country that it can obtain no root in the national soil. Men may wonder at it for a time; they will cast it out and forget it in the end.” Buchanan likewise advised readers to take comfort in knowing “that our contemporary blasphemy, as well as so much of our contemporary bestiality, is no home-product, but an importation transplanted from the French Scrofulous School, and conveyed . . . at second hand” (28). Translation as practiced by these critics amounts to cultural border control, what Venuti calls the “violence of translation . . . the reconstitution of the foreign text in accordance with values, beliefs and representations that pre-exist in the target language.”

Buchanan indeed performs a kind of violence on Baudelaire, dismembering his text, like Swinburne’s, into so many lips, eyelids, necks,”&c.”

In decrying the kind of “domestic translation” one sees at work with Buchanan, Venuti arrives at an alternative very close to Swinburne, I would argue, “a theory and practice of translation that resists dominant target-language cultural values so as to signify the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text.” Translation in this sense also calls to mind Gloria Anzaldúa’s *mestiza* or border subject, someone whose very identity constitutes “a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war.” What mattered for Swinburne was this very clash, the continuous sense of disruption and uneasiness that defines the reading experience of *Poems and Ballads*. Cosmopolitanism brings cultures together not with the aim of assimilation but
rather in order to question assumptions about what is ‘natural’ and ‘national’ in the first place.

A comparison between Buchanan’s comments on Baudelaire’s “Femmes Damnées” and Swinburne’s defense of the poem in Under the Microscope highlights how the divide between unnatural/natural, and, relatedly, queer/heterosexual could hinge upon the broader issue of cultural translation. Like Swinburne’s “Anactoria,” which, again, Buchanan suggests, is simply “copied” from its French counterpart, Baudelaire dwells upon the “Sapphic passion,” the term itself employing a kind cultural distancing from England, “the vilest act conceivable in human debauchery . . . the theme and the treatment [of which] are too loathsome for description” (22). In taking up the defense of “Femmes Damnées,” however, Swinburne attempts to reveal something of the allusive richness of the poem—an essential dimension of its literary quality easily lost when the poem is reproduced piecemeal with an eye only to its offensiveness:

[T]hat side of their passion which would render them amenable to the notice of the nearest station is not what is kept before us throughout that condemned poem; it is an infinite perverse refinement, an infinite reverse aspiration, “the end of which things is death;” and from the barren places of unsexed desire the tragic lyrist points them at last along their downward way to the land of sleepless winds and scouring storms, where the shadows of things perverted shall toss and turn for ever in a Dantesque cycle and agony of changeless change; a lyric close of bitter tempest and deep wide music of lost souls.23

Swinburne subtly reminds the reader that the venerable Dante was not afraid to deal with sexual transgression, and that Baudelaire, rather than being a sick aberration in the tradition of European poetry, was in truth returning to long-standing concerns and questions. We should recall, of course, that Dante condemns same-sex desire in The Inferno and that Swinburne’s own remarks here do nothing explicit to challenge judgment against the “Sapphic passion.”24 But what Swinburne does do is recall some of the sympathy that Dante feels for Paolo and Francesca in the Second Circle of hell, where they are swept around by strong winds. Swinburne also alludes to the pelting cold rains endured by Sodomites in the Seventh Circle. While he makes no direct defense of lesbianism, Baudelaire, as Swinburne reveals, upends easy judgments. “Femmes Damnées” causes the reader to resee what for Buchanan was simply a crime, an “obtrusion of unnatural passion” into poetry (22).25 Swinburne emphasizes that to restrict poetry to what is “natural,” to close
off discussion of Baudelaire based on the subject of the poem, is simply to contain poetry and ultimately the mind of the reader. The way to get the reader to begin to question what is natural—or national for that matter—is to affront, to upend—but in a specifically literary way. Poetry takes what would otherwise be simply a matter for the “station” and reframes it for the reader, inviting a productive interrogation of borders. Poetry holds the potential to open up dialogue between diverse authors—Baudelaire, Dante, even Buchanan—and between literary periods.

This kind of literary cosmopolitanism nonetheless leaves itself open to charges of elitist isolationism—the concern that Swinburne’s readers, rather than broadening their horizons along with him, would retreat in the face of an onslaught that simply overwhelmed them with its allusive richness and unsettling choice of subject. For William Michael Rossetti, the “specially artistic or literary turn of his genius” prevented a broader, perhaps more politically significant engagement between author and reader: although sympathetic with democratic politics, Swinburne “is radically indifferent, and indeed hostile, to what most persons care for; and he poetizes, for the greater part, from a point of view which they will neither adopt nor understand.”

The charge is not unfair: Rossetti does not misread Swinburne here, although he does underestimate the transformative potential of poetic miscommunication, of challenging the reader’s instincts. If, as Rossetti indicates, *Poems and Ballads* is marked by the failure to connect, a “defect in sympathy—this want of a bond to unite him with his fellow-men such as they are,” it still invites readers to engage the wider world on a new level, to make them *more than* they were.

To say that the “literary”—the poem’s complex allusions, its interweaving of the cultural matter of Europe’s past—stands in the way of poetry’s impact misses its ability to activate the imagination. In some sense, Swinburne was working toward the same democratic ends as Percy Bysshe Shelley in *A Defence of Poetry*, although by different means. Shelley famously remarks, “The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause. Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination by replenishing it with thoughts of ever new delight, which have the power of attracting and assimilating to their own nature all other thoughts.”

The key word for Swinburne here, however, is no longer nature but poetry. Folding the body and sexuality into poetic discourse, Swinburne began to reach the reader on a more visceral level—engaging the intellect in ways that invited resistance and fashioning a more complex kind of empathy that shaded into bodily desire. I am thinking in part here of what Hazard Adams calls the “offense of poetry” in his study of the various attacks and apologies the form has inspired over the centuries,
an offense contingent not on choice of subject but on poetic discourse itself: “The ethical [work of poetry] arises in presentation, demanding imaginative involvement, a challenge to pass into the particularity of events, other minds, sympathetic identification, or active repulsion.”

Poems and Ballads couples cosmopolitanism with feelings of guilt, surprise, and uncertainty: it takes full advantage of the anxiety that comes with being lost in translation. Like “Femmes Damnées,” Poems and Ballads underscores the risks of cosmopolitanism, the fear that one will reemerge altered, contaminated, and unrecognizable following cross-cultural contact. For Swinburne, as far as cosmopolitanism was concerned, a ready recognition of oneself or one’s values in the poem was the problem, not the solution. The reader’s experience of the volume mirrors that of many of the speakers and protagonists in Poems and Ballads: interpretation registers uncomfortably, uncertainly along the body, but neither are these poems ever simply pornographic or rigidly doctrinaire or moralistic. Swinburne’s is very much a mediated, poeticized experience of the body: a complex interplay of textuality, sexuality, and translation that will always tempt some readers simply to turn away in frustration or seek refuge in the dismissive certainty of Buchanan or Austin. Turning now to Poems and Ballads, I wish to examine those modes of translation more closely.

Love or Confusion?
Translating Desire in Poems and Ballads

Many of the dramatic lyrics in Poems and Ballads feature speakers seeking affirmation of long-held sympathies—cultural warriors of a sort determined to reinstitute borders even as they crumble around them. As one might expect, the poem that opens the volume, “A Ballad of Life,” serves as a template for the kind of border-crossing that typifies the rest of the volume. Addressed to Lucrezia Borgia, the subject of Swinburne’s later unfinished prose “Chronicle,” the poem introduces Swinburne’s practice of mining European cultural history in search of the same disturbing sorts of attractions he discovered in Baudelaire, he who had “chosen to dwell mainly upon sad and strange things—the weariness of pain and the bitterness of pleasure—the perverse happiness and wayward sorrows of exceptional people.” Swinburne inhabits a poetic time zone that is clearly not the present but not obsessively historicized either: he speaks in the voice of a court poet of Borgia, although she is not mentioned by name and revealed as the addressee of the poem until close to the end. The poem’s national and cultural identity is
even more difficult to pinpoint. Borgia had been the subject of recent works by Alexandre Dumas and Victor Hugo, and, in fact, Swinburne modeled the poem in part after D. G. Rossetti’s rendition in *The Early Italian Poets* (1861)—thus, in effect, retranslating another translation. This Anglo-Italian, cross-European space is formally represented through Swinburne’s adaptation of the *canzone*, a verse type distinguished by a particularly complex and interwoven rhyme scheme that Swinburne observes closely (*abbaccdeed*, concluding with a sonnet envoi). The form was pioneered by Petrarch but rarely used in English and works to redouble the complex patternings and crossovers of the poem’s expression of powerfully unsettled desire.

In many ways, what “A Ballad of Life” does is simply confuse the question of love, introducing the sorts of conflicting emotions that will surface again in other poems of problematic desire in the volume such as “The Leper” and “Felice.” Borgia becomes the twin symbol of art and desire in the poem as Swinburne enumerates the seven strings of her cithern: “the first string charity, / The second tenderness, / The rest were pleasure, sorrow, sleep, and sin, / And loving-kindness, that is pity’s kin / And is most pitiless” (16–20). Continuing in this numerological vein, the poem complicates the equation still further, introducing three men with her who embody Lust, Shame, and “Fear, that is akin to Death; / He is Shame’s friend, and always as Shame saith / Fear answers him again” (38–40). In this manner, the poem juxtaposes different iconic representations of emotion in order to establish their kinship, stressing the intersections between art, lust, and the body: “Then Fear said: I am Pity that was dead. / And Shame said: I am Sorrow comforted. / And Lust said: I am Love” (48–50). Swinburne, perhaps, invites more questions than he answers with these overlapping identities, but this, in fact, is the poem’s aim.

What actual communication exists in “A Ballad of Life” comes more from bodily gestures than verbal expression. Mouths and lips proliferate, as early critics dutifully noted, but one seldom hears voices in *Poems and Ballads* and lovers rarely speak directly to each other. Swinburne, for instance, stresses the bodily nature of Borgia’s voice: “Thereat her hands began a lute-playing / And her sweet mouth a song in a strange tongue” (51–52). The passage spotlights Borgia’s hands rather than the music of the cithern, just as it draws our attention to her mouth rather than the song that emerges, which is in a strange “tongue” to begin with. “A Ballad of Life” invites one to look for meaning not simply in words and language but in their sensual effects on the reader. Borgia’s song “transfigureth / All sin and sorrow and death, / Making them fair as her own eyelids be, / Or lips wherein my whole soul’s life abides” (62–65). *Transfigure* has specific religious connota-
tions which Swinburne no doubt intends to invoke here. The transfiguration of Christ on the mountain is one of the few moments in the Bible before the crucifixion when his divinity is visibly encoded on his body, when the word becomes flesh in a new and sensational way. Jesus “was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light” (Matthew 17:2). Interpretation, essentially, becomes an act of transfiguration, a discursive process involving mind, body, and word. In the poem’s envoi, it is finally Poems and Ballads itself that emerges out of this tangled web of desire, that which will “transfigureth”: “Borgia, thy gold hair’s colour burns in me, / Thy mouth makes beat my blood in feverish rhymes” (76–77). Poetry fuses body and spirit as the poem ends in a kind of ecstasy of synesthesia: “And kiss thee with soft laughter on thine eyes, / Ballad, and on thy mouth” (84–85). The poem revels in its ability to transfigure, to blur boundaries of form and challenge established patterns of communication and understanding.32

Authentic, pure love can never be “liberated” or expressed freely in Poems and Ballads: love can only be translated or continuously re-presented. What is natural to love are these complications that seem to pervert or hinder its expression, and a good portion of Poems and Ballads consists of poems that probe these situations of problematized love. Especially in “Anactoria,” where Swinburne presumably would be at his most fleshly, he dwells instead on the frustrations of desire. Sappho’s will to control the object of her desire, and be controlled by her, inspires feelings of guilt that overwhelm the poem and consume all other aspects of life, including her poetry: “My life is bitter with thy love; thine eyes / Blind me, thy tresses burn me, the sharp sighs / Divide my flesh and spirit with soft sound” (1–3). Notably, the first explicit statement of lesbianism in the poem could apply just as easily to any heterosexual lover’s wish to possess the beloved for herself: “I charge thee keep thy lips from hers or his, / Sweetest, till theirs be sweeter than my kiss” (19–20). Like Baudelaire’s “Femmes Damnées,” the poem works to naturalize the unnatural, even more so, perhaps, since Sappho’s desire for Anactoria is not damned and seems categorically no different, other than in its intensity, from the other forms of problematic desire presented in Poems and Ballads. Hence also the poem’s remarkable ability to translate across different sexual orientations: Thaïs Morgan and Richard Dellamora have both commented that the poem is as much about sex between men as sex between women, providing a space where, as Dellamora puts it, Swinburne could explore “poetic fantasies of male-male genital activity.”33 I would add that Swinburne here draws on the ancient Greek setting not just to authorize same-sex desire but to reemphasize that Greek sexuality, in all of its variegations and orientations,
embodied a recognition that desire could be neither disciplined (made heteronormative) nor liberated (released from inhibitions). As with the incestuous desire revealed in “Phaedra,” another Greek poem in the volume that critics bemoaned for its “bestial delights,” all love, by its very nature, is “cast out of the bound of love” (74). It is transgressive and oversteps boundaries of self and morality. In “Anactoria,” Swinburne recognizes that there is no way of imagining love that does not involve a kind of reciprocal trespassing, even a killing of the desired, which accounts for the sado-masochistic quality of many of its sexual images. The longing to merge with the object of desire engenders a strange mix of empathy and assault, an irresistible longing to trust oneself to another with all of the risks that involves: “O that I / Durst crush thee out of life with love, and die, / Die of thy pain and my delight, and be / Mixed with thy blood and molten into thee!” (129–32).

In her despair, Sappho calls on the gods to help sort through the complications of desire, a move repeated across the various cultures and historical time periods that make up Poems and Ballads. Each time, the plea seems to fall on deaf ears: “Him would I reach, him smite, him desecrate, / Pierce the cold lips of God with human breath, / And mix his immortality with death. / Why hath he made us?” (182–85). Ironically, perhaps, the god she imagines seems remarkably close to the pale Galilean of the “Hymn to Proserpine,” a god of death and indifference to human erotic emotion, a creator who sets forces in motion that the individual cannot negotiate according to the ideals of divine justice. Sappho wishes to remove the borders between god and man, mortal and immortal, lover and self, but finally remains defined by these very borders. And love, like human existence, remains indeterminate, caught between, on the one hand, an intense will for life that fulfills itself in the expression of desire and, on the other, the self-destruction that also awaits one in the end. The gods are born out of a wish to end this frustrating uncertainty, and as Swinburne makes clear in other poems, attempts to employ religion to smooth out love’s rough edges seldom prevail (with one notable exception, as we will see). By and large, religion, like extreme forms of nationalism, mostly embodies the will not to have to translate.

“Anactoria” concludes with a kind of fantasy of poetic transcendence that substitutes itself in some ways for the fulfillment of the poem’s divine longing. Sappho hopes that her poem can negotiate the web of desire and power that her attraction gives birth to and that compelled her bitter,anguished prayer. Poetry itself comes the closest to transcending the boundaries of time and nature:
I Sappho shall be one with all these things,
With all high things for ever; and my face
Seen once, my songs once heard in a strange place,
Cleave to men’s lives, and waste the days thereof
With gladness and much sadness and long love. (276–80)

This is a strong statement of poetry’s cosmopolitan potential—that it can communicate across borders and “cleave to men’s lives.” At the same time, Sappho resists turning poetry into an idealized universal discourse: poetry starts the process of conversation, promising not to erase the difference between self and other but only to articulate the longing they have for each other in all of its sadness and gladness. Poetry is merely that which best mediates desire. Thus even Sappho, “the very greatest poet that ever lived,” according to Swinburne, bequeathed to posterity a love freighted with complications, “mutilated fragments fallen within our reach from the broken altar of her sacrifice of song.” These fragments, for Swinburne, compelled in him his strongest, perhaps most creative effort at translation and poetic archaeology.

“The Leper” would offer another complex take on how love inevitably invites feelings of apprehension, violation, and guilt. Although not explicitly about crossing national borders, the poem was perhaps the most distant from England culturally and to Swinburne’s critics recalled the worst transgressions of French decadence. Buchanan more than likely had “The Leper” in mind when he charged that Swinburne “attempted to surpass Baudelaire, and to excel even that frightful artist in the representation of abnormal types of diseased lust and lustful disease” (20). This may indeed be the most uncomfortably bodily poem in *Poems and Ballads,* if not for the necrophilia and leprosy, then for the speaker’s fetishization of his patroness’s feet and hair. Disease, love, and art cross paths here as they had in Baudelaire, for whom “the loathsomest bodily putrescence and decay,” Swinburne said, could be turned to “some noble use.”

“The body in turmoil, at the limits of the natural, becomes the ultimate site of aesthetic investigation. “The Leper” too would come into contact with foreign, diseased bodies, underscoring the complex attraction between self and other, and freighting cosmopolitanism with feelings of violation and sickness.

“The Leper” opens with the deceptively simple declaration, “Nothing is better, I well think, / Than love; the hidden well-water / Is not so delicate to drink: / this was well seen of me and her” (1–4). The repetition of “well” immediately gets the reader’s attention and seems strangely uncre-
ative, even inattentive for a poet of Swinburne’s craftsmanship. Buchanan, in fact, singled out these lines in an attempt to refute those who had praised Swinburne’s “careful choice of diction” (80), and he is right to suggest that the repetition of “well” betrays a mind unsure of itself: the mind in question, however, is not Swinburne’s but the speaker of the poem’s. Similarly, the poem’s quatrains of short, tetrameter lines make the rhymes more pronounced and add to the impression that we are dealing with a speaker prone to oversimplifying what it is frustratingly complex. The poem leaves us nonetheless with a hopelessly qualified and confusing vision of who loves whom and the kind of consummation the speaker of the poem is after. It is unclear, for instance, whether he’s motivated by love or by a longing to pay his liegelady back for the “scorn” she had shown him in his earlier role as “poor scribe” and liaison to her lovers (9–10). The speaker clearly takes some satisfaction in the reversal of power that has come with her demise, but he also notes sympathetically how her former lovers now have no use for her. As a leper, she is the ultimate outcast: “And they spat out and cursed at her / And cast her forth for a base thing” (51–52). He cares for her affectionately, nurturing her with his own “water and poor bread” (70), but also clearly lusts after her: “Her hair, half grey half ruined gold / Thrills me and burns me in kissing it” (103–4).

The speaker’s love and longing for companionship for her thus cannot be uncoupled from what might be baser motives, and that, in some sense, is Swinburne’s point: untainted, uncomplicated love is not love at all.” The “wells” and the uncertainty in the poem keep coming back: “I know not / If all were done well, all well said, / No word or tender deed forgot” (94–96). Right through to the end, death, decay, and disease adhere to love as the speaker continues to question whether or not he failed. “I am grown blind with all these things” (137), he says, and, like so many of the other lost lovers in *Poems and Ballads*, he asks, “Will not God do right?” (140). The poem ends in doubt and second-guessing, the speaker wondering, “It may be all my love went wrong— / A scribe’s work writ awry and blurred” (129–30). Hers, like his, is a “body broken up with love” (62), a line that also serves well as a metaphor for cosmopolitanism overall in Swinburne. He presents us once more not with sexual gratification as liberation but as something that is disorienting and threatens one with contamination. Love is unhealthy, perhaps, and seldom makes all things “well,” but it wouldn’t be worth much else otherwise. Similarly, a cosmopolitanism that remains at the level of Buchanan’s disembodied intellect fails to cross boundaries and threatens to leave the most rigid and uncompromising of cultural assumptions undisturbed.
Making the issue of translating desire across specific national or religious boundaries more explicit, Swinburne adds an endnote to the poem in invented, archaic French that traces its source to a 1505 *Grandes Chroniques de France*. The note reads in part,

Mesme dist-on que ce meschant homme et maudict clerc se remémourant de la grande beauté passée et gaustée de ceste femme se délectoyt maintes-fois à la baiser sur sa bouche orde et lépreuse et l’accoller doulcement de ses mains amoureuses. Aussi est-il mort de ceste mesme maladie abhominable. Cecy advint près Fontainebellant en Gastinois.

[People even say that this wicked man and cursed clerk, remembering this woman’s former great beauty, [now] ravaged, often delighted in kissing her foul and leprous mouth and in caressing her gently with his loving hands. Therefore, he died of this same abominable disease. This happened near Fontainebellant in Gastinois.]

The French “source” thus continues the awkward juxtaposition of devotion and lust in the poem and opts not to differentiate between the two, revealing only that “Et quand ouyt le roy Philippe ceste adventure moult en estoyt esmerveillé. (And when King Phillip heard the story he marveled greatly).” The endnote serves less to explain or interpret the poem than simply to highlight the unresolved conflicts it contains. More broadly, the French note begs the question of who is translating whom, and just where Swinburne is trying to locate the poem culturally and historically.

This is a trick of sorts that *Poems and Ballads* would repeat in its rendition of the Tannhäuser myth, itself an unusual combination of German folklore and Mediterranean sensualism. “Laus Veneris” adds yet another element of trans-European cultural migration to the poem with an epigraph citing a 1530 *Livre des grandes merveilles d’amour, escript en latin et en françoys par Maistre Antoine Gaget*. Even more so than “The Leper,” “Laus Veneris” dwells simultaneously in multiple cultures and historical moments: the poem is set in the early middle ages while its 1530 “translator” is someone who, like the reader, must make sense of a tale that travels between pagan and Christian sensibilities, between the North and South of Europe. This introduction, like the “Leper” endnote, underscores the difficulty of translating love in a way that synthesizes its differences. Venus and Tannhäuser “là vescut tristement en grand amour (lived sadly there in great love).” The poem figures cross-cultural and interreligious clash in terms of physical longing and desire, as Swinburne’s Tännhauser engages himself in a heroic act of diplo-
macy between cultural extremes. His efforts fail, ultimately, but he paves the way for the poem’s 1530 Renaissance translator, in a sense, by attempting to negotiate Europe’s dual pagan and Christian cultural heritage.

Swinburne’s French introduction to the poem immediately confronts the reader with overlapping, somewhat confusing borders. The poem then continues in this vein, foregrounding the knight’s efforts to sort between body and soul. The opening line—“Asleep or waking is it?”—begins in indecision and proceeds to weigh the relative benefits of Christianity and paganism as embodied in Christ and Venus. Although pulled in different directions, he touches on similarities that lie concealed by Christian dogma. Venus and Mary become sisters of a sort:

Lo, this is she that was the world’s delight;  
The old grey years were parcels of her might;  
The strewings of the ways wherein she trod  
Were the twain seasons of the day and night. (9–12)

The knight sees room for compromise by depicting Venus and Mary alike as bodily deities, defined by their beauty and fertility: “Nay, fair Lord Christ, lift up thine eyes and see; / Had now thy mother such a lip—like this? / Thou knowest how sweet a thing it is to me” (22–24).

Here the knight’s physical and spiritual desires overlap as he imagines some sort of elusive bridge between sin and redemption. He appears to address Jesus more as a fellow human being than as a divine presence, one who, like him, had once possessed physical longings but now stubbornly refuses to acknowledge them. “Thou knowest” becomes a refrain of sorts in the poem, a persistent rhetorical question that epitomizes the one-way nature of dialogue in the poem and the knight’s sense of frustrated communication: he cannot universalize and he cannot resolve. His prayer goes unanswered, and the proxy conversation he had earlier with the Pope after his pilgrimage to Rome offered little in the way of actual dialogue: “Then he spake some sweet word, / Giving me cheer; which thing availed me not” (363–64). This perfunctory exchange over, the Pope proceeds immediately to condemn Tannhauser: “Until this dry shred staff, that hath no whit / Of leaf nor bark, bear blossom and smell sweet, / Seek thou not any mercy in God’s sight, / For so long shalt thou be cast out from it” (369–72). The knight then retreats to seek refuge in the Horsel of Venus.

The knight’s relationship with Venus is likewise characterized by a frustrated longing to communicate. The comfort she offers him is one of total physicality and linguistic impasse; he must accept her on her own silent
terms or none at all. In a kind of anti-confession, he pleads, “let thy kiss
/ Seal my lips hard from speaking of my sin” (322–23). Paradoxically, the
knight must learn to speak a new language—one characterized by mouths
that seem to do everything but talk. Swinburne thus adds a new dimension
to the silence we would of course expect from the auditor in a dramatic
monologue. Venus’s silence becomes the dominating voice of the poem,
expressed by an otherwise very forceful and ubiquitous mouth—that “eager
enjoyment of the word bite,” as one Swinburne critic put it—which begins
to take control of the poem and of Tännhauser. The dilemma the knight
faces is that he must choose between the empty, sterile words of the Pope
and no words at all: that is, Venus—whose contact is thrilling but also
silently lacking. As Swinburne’s own commentary on the poem stresses,
“The tragic touch of the story is this: that the knight who has renounced
Christ believes in him; the lover who has embraced Venus disbelieves in her.
Vainly and in despair would he make the best of that which is the worst—
vainly remonstrate with God, and argue on the side he would fain desert.
Once accept or admit the least admixture of pagan worship, or of modern
thought, and the whole story collapses into froth and smoke.” The knight
nonetheless insists on finding some kind of resolution and communion of
body and soul: “For till the thunder in the trumpet be, / Soul may divide
from body, but not we / One from another” (417–20). The impending
day of judgment renders their embrace futile, and similarly, the miracu-
lous transformation of the Pope’s staff, which would appear to celebrate the
knight’s erotic desire, is not something that he himself witnesses. It is men-
tioned in the French introduction but not referred to in the poem itself;
Tannhäuser remains in doubt as to what he is actually recovering by return-
ing to Venus. Once again, there will be no deus ex machina for Swinburne’s
frustrated lover.

“Laus Veneris” finally advocates on behalf of translation as a productive
dwelling in doubt, a way out of more fixed assumptions and creeds. What is
more, Swinburne reveals that the engine driving this process lies at the heart
of European culture: in Arnold’s clash of the “Hebraic” and “Hellenic,” spirit
and body. The conflict between the two—the middle space of translation—
is where Swinburne sets up camp. Likewise, Swinburne’s ideal historical
moment is not classical but medieval, or more precisely, a medieval period
in transition, when classical heroes and Christian saints often shared the
same page—a period defined by artists such as Dante and Chaucer. Swin-
burne does not undercut the knight’s effort to smooth over cultural conflict
but does show that he lacks the aesthetic negative capability, in a sense, to
dwell productively in the clash between the two. With “St. Dorothy,” as we
will see, Swinburne would offer an alternative vision of translation between the medieval and the classical.

In terms of cosmopolitan engagement, what “Laus Veneris” manages to achieve is perhaps best understood when it is read in comparison to the “Hymn to Proserpine.” Where “Laus Veneris” has a Christian seeking dialogue between flesh and spirit, the “Hymn to Proserpine” features an unrepentant pagan who sees no possibility for such crossover. The poem dramatizes the retreat from translation, centering on a cultural paradigm shift that overlaps into religious and sexual questions. Beliefs collide rather than speak to each other in the “Hymn to Proserpine,” and the tone of the poem from the very start is one of frustration and resignation: the speaker has “lived long enough” (1) and anticipates no benefits in the crossing of these religions. As he proclaims in the poem’s famous anapestic lament, “Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean; the world has grown grey from thy breath; / We have drunken of things Lethean, and fed on the fulness of death” (35–36). Historically positioned at the start of the Middle Ages, the speaker indeed exists at a time when one way of thinking will triumph while the other will go into a long period of silence. The repetition of “they say” and “men say” in the poem creates the impression of someone who merely overhears others talking rather than engaging in dialogue. The distance between the two points of view seems nontraversable.

Unlike the knight in “Laus Veneris,” the speaker here sees little if any overlap in the worship of Mary and Venus. Mary has usurped the throne, and her worshipers drown out his own hymn: “Of the maiden thy mother men sing as a goddess with grace clad around; / Thou art throned where another was king; where another was queen she is crowned / Yea, once we had sight of another: but now she is queen, say these” (75–77). To the speaker, Mary and Venus present a series of either/or contrasts, each icon embodying the antithesis of the other: “For thine came weeping, a slave among slaves, and rejected; but she / Came flushed from the full-flushed wave, and imperial, her foot on the sea” (85–86). As much as these lines express Swinburne’s own Hellenism, we should also be careful not to miss how overdetermined they are: the speaker overlooks a vibrant if sadomasochistic dimension to the “deathliness” of Mary, one that Swinburne toys with later in “Dolores.” The tragedy of the poem is not simply that the speaker’s healthy, bodily religion is crushed by the “pale Galilean” but that he finds himself, like his Christian foes, unable even to begin to compromise, to translate between the two. His only gain is a kind of schadenfreude in contemplating the inevitable demise of the new religion, which seeks to deny the reality of the body and its senses: “Yet thy kingdom shall pass, Galilean, thy dead shall go down to thee dead”
Unlike “Laus Veneris,” which hinges upon a revealing if ultimately frustrating clash of body and spirit and Christian and pagan—a kind of heroic struggle with translation—the “Hymn to Proserpine” captures a more determinedly anti-cosmopolitan moment, the gateway into a long period of cultural contraction. Swinburne also notably chooses not to add a later historical mediating voice here of the kind embodied in his invented source document for “Laus Veneris.” Born too late for classical Europe and not late enough for its revival in the later Middle Ages and Renaissance, the speaker of the “Hymn to Proserpine” is simply left with nowhere to go and no one to turn to other than the fading image of Proserpine herself.

Poems and Ballads obviously does not seek to praise Christianity, but—less obviously—it does not seek to bury it either. Christianity’s struggle with the body becomes its defining essence for Swinburne, the source of its powerful contributions to art. Swinburne draws on the Bible itself to make this point, basing his poem “Aholibah” closely on the account given of her in Ezekiel 23, which conflates artistic sensibility with movement between cultures and sexual desire. Aholibah “doted upon the Assyrians her neighbours, captains and rulers clothed most gorgeously, horsemen riding upon horses, all of them desirable young men” (Ezekiel 23:12). So attracted is she, in fact, that she has them painted on the wall of her bedchamber. Throughout Swinburne’s poem, Aholibah remains a highly artistic figure, someone with a keen eye for exotic beauty: “God gave thee gracious ministers / And all their work who plait and weave: / The cunning of embroiderers / That sew the pillow to the sleeve, / and likeness of all things that live” (36–40). In the Bible, Aholibah invites Assyrian princes to her palace, where they “defiled her with their whoredom, and she was polluted with them” (23:17). Ultimately in the poem, as in Swinburne’s biblical source, cosmopolitanism and art both fall under the same axe, but Swinburne denies neither the creative mastery of Aholibah and her artisans nor the immense beauty bestowed upon her by God: “In the beginning God made thee / A woman well to look upon / Thy tender body as a tree” (1–3). Swinburne and his Biblical source are both highly attuned to the subversive potential of border-crossing art as a form of cultural “pollution” and defilement. Like Aholibah, overcome by the beauty of “the Assyrians her neighbours,” one either stays at home or contaminates oneself. The problem with Christianity in Poems and Ballads, however, is not that it seeks to impose questions of guilt and morality onto desire that in a reformed world would be free of them. Rather, the problem is that it provides no way out of the conflict except to squelch desire entirely, rendering it always perverse. By reducing border-crossing to a form of cultural and moral betrayal, religious dogma demands total allegiance, making
all that is outside of it false or heretical. There is no desire to translate except on its own terms.

Swinburne, in some sense, redeems Aholibah’s memory through his adaptation of the martyrdom of St. Dorothy, finding a compromise that leaves Christianity more open to the mediating potential of a sensualized aesthetic. At the same time, “St. Dorothy” stands out in Poems and Ballads as one of the only poems where sexual restraint and resistance are redeemed in the face of a selfish bodily overindulgence. As Swinburne joked in a letter, “I wanted to try my heathen hands at a Christian subject . . . and give a pat to the Papist interest.” Despite the self-mocking tone, Swinburne is attempting a curious admixture of the heathen and Christian in this poem, in some sense offering a new (mis)translation of each. Heathen and Christian will perhaps become unrecognizable from their original forms, but the offspring they produce ends up transcending the limits of both.

Like the “Hymn to Proserpine,” “St. Dorothy” is set at the historical intersection of Christianity and ancient Rome, covering the fourth-century martyrdom of St. Dorothy and her conversion of the pagan prince responsible for having her martyred in the first place. But the poem is medieval in another crucial sense in which the “Hymn to Proserpine” is not. The poem’s style and narrator are also medieval, with familiar echoes of the account of the martyrdom of St. Cecile in Chaucer’s Second Nun’s Tale. And, like Chaucer’s Legend of Good Women, which also mixes classical and Christian sources, “St. Dorothy” adheres closely to the irregular pauses and mostly open couplets of Chaucer, as opposed to the more familiar heroic couplet of later English verse. Looking ahead to the Renaissance, the poem’s late medieval narrator, like Chaucer, is open to cross-cultural fertilization and unapologetically drawn to the material, bodily dimension of Dorothy’s appeal as much as to her religious virtue. The poem does not desexualize Dorothy despite her saintliness: she is clearly attracted to her suitor, but her desire retains a degree of power and self-assertion. Her beliefs empower her against a series of men who would reduce her to a simple object of lust. Theophilus, in fact, is first attracted to her surface beauty. She becomes a beautiful picture in his eyes, one suffused with music that overwhels the senses:

Now as this lord came straying in Rome town
He saw a little lattice open down
And after it a press of maidens’ heads
That sat upon their cold small quiet beds
Talking, and played upon short-stringèd lutes;
And other some ground perfume out of roots
Gathered by marvellous moons in Asia;
Saffron and aloes and wild cassia,
Coloured all through and smelling of the sun;
And over all these was a certain one
Clothed softly, with sweet herbs about her hair
And bosom flowerful; her face more fair
Than sudden-singing April in soft lands. (35–47)

Theophilus’s struggle to satisfy his awakening desire while not simply over-mastering Dorothy parallels the narrator’s own cross-cultural, interreligious negotiation. The passage sets in motion the poem’s search for translation and compromise between soul and body and between men and women. The description foreshadows Dorothy’s later martyrdom, when she will prove the existence of God by delivering to Theophilus, after her death, a basket of fruit and roses—a blending of natural beauty with religious truth and understanding. Additionally, with its reference to these exotic, sensual goods imported from Asia, the passage depicts sexual desire in cross-cultural terms, thus also hinting at the narrator’s own expanded cultural horizons in the wake of increased European trade with the East. Swinburne’s “Chaucer” is a decidedly European poet, one ranging far beyond the breezy, chaste England to which Buchanan had confined him. Swinburne also recalls here the opening of Morris’s *Earthly Paradise*, which depicts the medieval poet primarily as a trader, one eager to handle new merchandise, whether cultural or material.⁵

Pagan and Christian, lust and a more platonic, spiritual desire continue to overlap at key points in the poem. To win Dorothy, Theophilus prays to Venus that she might make her “my lady without sin” (133), and Venus in fact appears to him and promises to grant his prayer: “Thou shalt have grace as thou art thrall of mine” (147). His actual proposal to Dorothy takes the form of a rather heavy-handed command, warning her that she must become his out of a sense of religious duty and not go “[a]gainst God’s ways” (154). While in effect he insists she marry him because it is the will of a goddess, Dorothy turns the tables on him, hinting that later it is indeed God’s will that he marry her but on her terms: “I that am Christ’s maid were loth / To do this thing that hath such bitter name” (172–73). Venus claims him, and Christ her, but both gods end up working together in a way not seen in either “Laus Veneris” or the “Hymn to Proserpine.” He indeed becomes hers later but in a way he cannot fully conceive of as yet. At first, Theophilus
is affronted by Dorothy’s demand and interprets it as an attempt to mock him. He complains to Gabalus, the emperor, who has her taken prisoner and denounced before the imperial court.

During the scene of her torture and humiliation, Swinburne draws greater attention to Dorothy as an artist figure, leaving the impression that she dies as much for a moral aesthetic that opens up both cultures as for her religious beliefs. Her self-defense is hardly a sermon at all: it is a word-picture of all that is colorful and beautiful in the world, all that is worth seeing. She speaks for instance of the “small bright herbs about the little hills, / And fruit pricked softly with birds’ tender bills, / And flight of foam about green fields of sea” (263–65). She concludes with words that recall Browning’s Fra Lippo Lippi, who performs a similar alliance of material and spiritual aims under the guise of art. Dorothy continues, “And all these things he gathers with his hands / And covers all their beauty with his wings; / The same, even God that governs all these things, / Hath set my feet to be upon his ways” (270–73).

Dorothy is much more than a sexualized Christian martyr redeployed within a colorful Pre-Raphaelite setting. Through her, Swinburne subtly links desire for the human body with openness to spiritual awakening. The opposite—a more unadulterated voyeurism and consuming lust—is embodied in the figure of Gabalus, a kind of grotesque, unrestrained sensualist. Tellingly, Dorothy’s presumptions of authority are what most infuriate Gabalus—the idea that she would seek to be anything more than the object of male desire—and he dismisses her address as being typical of “these women’s jaw-teeth clattering” (285). He adds, “I pray God deliver all us men / From all such noise of women and their heat” (290–91). Gabalus exists merely to indulge his senses; the more spiritually charged, beautiful rendition of the material world she gives falls on deaf ears in his case.

Theophilus, in contrast, seems moved on two levels—both by the strength of Dorothy’s faith and defiance and also by her words and their very sensuous and colorful depiction of life, a description that conjoins spiritual and bodily impulses. Forced to watch her torture and beating, he worries for her in an afterlife of the soul only, “going forth bodiless / . . . hurt with naked cold, and no man saith / If there be house or covering for death / To hide the soul that is discomforted” (360–63). In response to his concerns, she paints a portrait of heaven that surpasses her earlier depiction of the beauty of earth. It is one that richly appeals to the senses:

But on the other side is good and green
And hath soft flower of tender-coloured hair
Grown on his head, and a red mouth as fair
As may be kissed with lips; thereto his face
Is as God’s face, and in a perfect place
Full of all sun and colour. (368–73)

The “him” she describes in these lines is death given new life, death redeemed by the body and material world. Fittingly, Theophilus asks that after death she deliver a material sign of the existence of her god, and she sends, as according to the legend of her martyrdom, gifts of flowers miraculously appearing out of season: roses and “marigolds / That have the sun to kiss their lips of love; / The flower that Venus’ hair is woven of, / The colour of fair apples in the sun” (452–55). The invocation of Venus, along with the sensual personification of the flowers, again points to a “miraculous” transfiguration. Dorothy converts body and soul, Christian and pagan in a way that allows both to reach full bloom, so to speak, unlike the offstage flowering of the Pope’s staff in the more confrontational encounter of religions in “Laus Veneris.” Taking joy in their celestial reunion, the narrator remarks, “But in his face his lady’s face is sweet, / And through his lips her kissing lips are gone: / God send him peace, and joy of such an one” (474–76).

Swinburne again draws our attention to the productive mixing of the aesthetic and religious here, a kind of Hellenized Hebraism that he associates with an ideal of late medievalism, when the discovery of classical authors was breathing new life into poetry. Again, unlike Buchanan’s “Chaucer” in The Fleshly School, Swinburne’s Chaucerian prototype is excited—quite literally, it seems—by the possibilities afforded by this vision of the world’s material beauty. His narration concludes with a mix of erotic and religious desire that reaches beyond a more strictly Christian interpretation of her martyrdom: “This is the story of St. Dorothy. / I will you of your mercy pray for me / Because I wrote these sayings for your grace, / That I may one day see her in the face” (477–80). Her martyrdom is infused with a sensuality that seems out of place in a saint’s life: her religious lesson cannot be divorced from her physical attractiveness, which first initiates contact with Theophilus. Likewise, before his conversion, Theophilus is overwhelmed with his own desires, unable to truly love or connect with her. In some sense, she makes him a better consumer of art at the same time she makes him a better Christian—a “conversion” simultaneously taking place for the narrator of the poem, who uncovers a new material and spiritual aesthetic. The irony is that to experience consummation, Christianity still demands the death of the artist, but what dies at the same time in “St. Dorothy” is the Christian insistence that love be divorced from physical desire and art: dogma dies too and leaves the poet to conclude with a somewhat unchaste and unchristian desire to look
upon her face. Swinburne draws our attention to these historical moments when pagan and Christian achieve this odd cohabitation, when the aesthetic and literary win over against dogma and its enforcers. Featuring a Victorian poet speaking in the voice of a medieval one, “St. Dorothy” epitomizes the unique historical cross-dwelling of *Poems and Ballads*. Swinburne insists that European history—and much of the literature and art that has emerged from it—has been and continues to be defined by the conflict between body and spirit.

**Conclusion:**

**Translation, Culture, Anarchy**

Despite its subversive reputation, *Poems and Ballads* might best be understood as an effort to intervene in a cultural crisis that was already underway rather than an effort to precipitate one. Arnold sought to do the same with *Culture and Anarchy*, which appeared just three years after *Poems and Ballads* and also attempted a broad remapping of European culture and England’s place in it. Defined by the crossing of borders and the productive clash this engenders, Swinburne’s poetry was uniquely positioned to perform the same cultural work: if anything, it showed that poetry could do more, and do it more radically, to bring England to Europe than Arnold had laid out in his various mission statements for critics and poets. Recharging Arnold’s dream of a culturally receptive, cosmopolitan England, Swinburne’s trans-European, trans-historical poetics at the same time reveals that crossing national boundaries could productively interrogate other cultural boundaries, including those grounded in sexuality and gender, boundaries that were not high priorities for Arnold.

Translation in Swinburne, as we have seen, was something that went well beyond an exchange of influences or even being open to other voices. It was a complex readaptation and dialogue of the kind Wolfgang Iser suggests characterizes the most influential or disruptive cultural shifts outward, when “[t]ranslatability is motivated by the need to cope with a crisis that can no longer be alleviated by the mere assimilation or appropriation of other cultures.”\(^{46}\) By way of example, Iser points to Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* (1830–31) in terms that seem remarkably applicable to *Poems and Ballads*. Responding to the upheaval caused by the industrial revolution and the failure of its promise of progress, Carlyle adapted German transcendentalism in a mix of translation, travelogue, and spiritual autobiography that by and large rendered its sources unrecognizable. According to Iser, Carlyle’s style of
“cross-cultural discourse distinguishes itself from assimilation, incorporation, and appropriation, as it organizes an interchange between cultures in which the cultures concerned will not stay the same. A foreign culture is not just transposed onto a familiar one; instead, . . . a mutual patterning and repatterning is effected by such a discourse.”

Donning new clothes and changing identities become the hallmarks of a cosmopolitanism that disrupts and destabilizes, whether in *Sartor Resartus* or in the career-long poetic masquerade that was Swinburne’s. Thus his fondness for parody and disguise: writing as Chaucer or Sappho, adopting the mask of made-up French critics and scholars. France, ultimately, or being like the French or ancient Greeks, is not the object of his cosmopolitanism. These cultural engagements all seem part of a deeper, more fundamental transformative impulse to be outside England, outside the self, and outside of familiar patterns of thinking.

It is perhaps fitting, then, to conclude with one last example of Swinburnian cultural ventriloquism, one published a year after *Poems and Ballads*. In this instance, Swinburne assumes the disguise of a French critic of Arnold to diagnose the intellectual stalemate that English poetics had reached. The “critic” questions English poetry’s obsessive need to keep revisiting the Crisis of Faith:

On perd un objet aimé, on désire le revoir, on épreuve des émotions douloureuses à songer qu’on ne le reverra point. Après? La mort, la douleur, l’oubli, la misère, voilà sans doute des choses pénibles, et que l’on voudrait éviter; il est clair que nous ferions tous notre possible pour y échapper. Cela prouve-t-il que ces choses-là n’existent pas?

[You lose a beloved object, you long to see it again, you feel sorrowful in dreaming that you will never see it again. Afterwards? Death, grief, oblivion, distress—these are undoubtedly painful things that one would wish to avoid. Clearly, we would all do our best to escape them. Does that prove that these things do not exist?]\(^49\)

With a possible allusion to his Venerean knight caught between Christianity and paganism, Swinburne calls here for a poetics that would venture forth boldly, strengthened after the conflicts it had endured and ready to subsume them within a wider, outside perspective of itself:

Un poète enfermé chez lui peut être le meilleur chrétien du monde, ou bien le plus affreux païen; ce sont là des affaires de foyer où la critique n’a rien à voir; mais la poésie propre ne sera jamais ni ceci ni cela. Elle est
tout, elle n’est rien. . . . Toute émotion lui sert, celle de l’anachorète ni plus
ni moins que celle du blasphémateur. Pour la morale, elle est mauvaise et
bonne, chaste et libertine; pour la religion, elle est incrédule et fidèle, sou-
mise et rebelle.

[Closeted in his house a poet can be the best Christian in the world or the
wickedest pagan; those are domestic questions beside the point for critics;
poetry is nether this nor that. In fact poetry is everything and nothing. It
makes use of any emotion: the anchorite’s is no better than the blasphem-
er’s. For poetry, morality can be good or bad, chaste or libertine; religion
can be incredulous or faithful, rebellious or submissive.]50

It took an invented French critic to read English poetry correctly: Swin-
burne repeatedly insists that the self always needs to be viewed critically,
with self-distancing. This is of course a highly Arnoldian impulse to begin
with; Swinburne quite literally here takes up Arnold’s call in “The Function
of Criticism” to study at least one other language and literature intensely
as a means of better understanding one’s own, and “the more unlike one’s
own, the better” (3:284). Arnold appreciated the gesture and detected that
the “French Critic” was Swinburne himself. In response to a letter from
Arnold thanking him for the review, Swinburne again revealed something
of his own complex cultural geography: “I must confess to you that the
French critic quoted by me resides in a department of France abutting on
the province of Germany where MM. Teufelsdroeckh & Sauerteig are Pro-
fessors. I so often want French words for my meaning & find them easier &
fuller of expression that I indulge the preference, as I write prose (I know)
quicker & (I think) better in French than in English; with verse it is the
other way usually.”51 Swinburne was always translating—moving between
cultures, between voices, between genres—dwelling in difference. Like his
French critic of Arnold, he leaves poetry seemingly everywhere at once but
finally grounded in his own unique Anglo-European space.