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Author(s)	Uemura, Morito
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# SWINBURNE'S VIEW OF THE WORLD SEEN THROUGH HIS SEA-IMAGERY

Morito Uemura

In the beginning parapet scene of *Ulysses*, James Joyce makes Buck Mulligan say gazing out over Dublin bay, "Isn't the sea what Algy calls it: a grey sweet mother? ..... She is our great sweet mother. Come and look."<sup>(1)</sup> In this way Algy (Algernon Charles Swinburne) has been generally regarded as one of the typical sea-poets. In fact Swinburne uses quite a lot of sea-imagery in his numerous poems. What does he mean by referring so often to the sea in various situations? Swinburne's sea seems to me to play a very important role when we consider about his view of the world. In this paper I would like to study and examine Swinburne's sea.

In a letter to E. C. Stedman (February 20, 1875), the poet says, "As for the sea, its salt *must* have been in my blood before I was born. .... I remember being afraid of other things but never of the sea. But this is enough of infancy: only it shows the *truth* of my endless passionate returns to the sea in all my verse."<sup>(2)</sup> Swinburne has been, no doubt, fond of the sea, and a very good swimmer since his childhood.

As one that ere a June day rise

Makes seaward for the dawn, and tries

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The water with delighted limbs  
That taste the sweet dark sea, and swims  
Right eastward under strengthening skies,  
And sees the gradual rippling rims  
Of waves whence day breaks blossom-wise  
Take fire ere light peer well above,  
And laughs from all his heart with love;

And softlier swimming with raised head  
Feels the full flower of morning shed  
And fluent sunrise round him rolled  
That laps and laves his body bold  
With fluctuant heaven in water's stead,  
And urgent through the growing gold  
Strikes, and sees all the spray flash red,  
And his soul takes the sun, and yearns  
For joy wherewith the sea's heart burns;

("Epilogue," 11. 289-306.)

In these passages, Swinburne's own experience of swimming in the dawning sea is undoubtedly interwoven with its glorious and vivid expression.

In describing William Blake at Felpham, Swinburne seems to be stating his own experience in place of Blake's:

Probably too in some measure, could we trace the perfect relation of flesh with spirit and blood with brain, we should find that this first daily communion with the sea wrought upon him [Blake] at once within and without; that the sharp sweetness of the salted air was not without swift and pungent effect; that the hourly physical delight lavished upon every sense by all tunes and odours and changes and colours of the sea—the delight of every breath or sound or shadow or whisper passing upon it—may have served at first to satiate as well as to stimulate, before the pressure of enjoyment grew too intense and the sting of enjoyment too keen.<sup>(3)</sup>

In the case of Swinburne, too, since his childhood, he was in daily

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communion with the sea of the Isle of Wight and the sea of North-umberland where his grandfather lived.

As is shown in the passages I have quoted above from "Epilogue," the sea is depicted as a symbol of freedom, and that will be understood more clearly in the following lines:

A little time that we may fill  
Or with such good works or such ill  
As loose the bonds or make them strong  
Wherein all manhood suffers wrong.  
By rose-hung river and light-foot rill  
There are who rest not; who think long  
Till they discern as from a hill  
At the sun's hour of morning song,  
Known of souls only, and those souls free,  
The sacred spaces of the sea.

("Prelude," 11. 181-190.)

That the sea is a symbol of freedom we will understand easily, because the sea is quite free from all restrictions of man-inhabited land. All there is about the sea is water, wind or the sun,—everything that is free and ubiquitous. Therefore the sea-poet feels more comfort and at home in the sea than on land:

A purer passion, a lordlier leisure,  
A peace more happy than lives on land,  
Fulfils with pulse of diviner pleasure  
The dreaming head and the steering hand.  
I lean my cheek to the cold grey pillow,  
The deep soft swell of the full broad billow,  
And close mine eyes for delight past measure,  
And wish the wheel of the world would stand.

("A Swimmer's Dream," 11. 99-106.)

On some other occasions, however, the sea is compared to love which is in Swinburne's poetry almost always unsuccessful or barren,

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or to lust:

Love is a barren sea, bitter and deep;  
And though she saw all heaven in flower above,  
She would not love.

("A Leave-Taking," 11. 26-28.)

R. L. Peters says of the sea of "Laus Veneris" as follows:

The sea in "Laus Veneris" (stanza 10)<sup>(4)</sup> is barely significant as a real sea; it is a magnificent symbol of lust, a "panting mouth of dry desire" which suggests and intensifies Tannhäuser's tortured erotic state.<sup>(5)</sup>

When the violent love turns out to be unsuccessful and impotent, the poet expresses a desire to be drawn deep in the sea and washed away by the tides or by drowning himself:

Ah yet would God this flesh of mine might be  
Where air might wash and long leaves cover me,  
Where tides of grass break with foam of flowers,  
Or where the wind's feet shine along the sea.

.....  
Ah God, that I were as all souls that be,  
As any herb or leaf of any tree,  
As men that toil through hours of labouring night,  
As bones of men under the deep sharp sea.

("Laus Veneris," 11. 53-56, 77-80.)

In this situation, the sea is represented as a kind of graveyard of the world. As a matter of fact, the sea gathers and drags everything into its deep bottom; a lot of wastes deposited on the shore are drawn away by the tides and a lot of waifs floating on the surface of rivers are carried into the sea. And in India, from ancient time, the deceased's bones are scattered into the sacred Ganges which carries them into the "deep sharp sea":

— And these men shall forget you. — Yea, but we

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Shall be a part of the earth and the ancient sea,  
And heaven-high air august, and awful fire,  
And all things good;

("The Pilgrims," 11. 41-44.)

As to this "primordial return" to the sea, John D. Rosenberg explains as follows:

That paradise held many pleasures, among them the pleasure of death—that primordial return to "the great sweet mother," whose rocking rhythms Swinburne captures in lines that, like some fluid lullaby, mix the image of love-making with the image of drowning: "My lips will feast on the foam of thy lips, / I shall rise with thy rising, with thee subside."<sup>(6)</sup> The passage is animistic in its primitiveness of emotion. The decadent, verbally sophisticated Swinburne was in another part of his being pre-civilized, a wind-worshiper and a sea-worshiper whose poetry springs from sources more antique than words.<sup>(7)</sup>

As graveyard of the world or haven after death, the sea is a resting place of the soul, and consequently such sea is likely to be represented as a quiet and peaceful place. But Swinburne sometimes describes it in a horribly desolate touch:

Death, and change, and darkness everlasting,  
Deaf, that hears not what the daystar saith,  
Blind, past all remembrance and forecasting,  
Dead, past memory that it once drew breath;  
These, above the washing tides and wasting,  
Reign, and rule this land of utter death.

.....  
Naked, shamed, cast out of consecration,  
Corpse and coffin, yea the very graves,  
Scoffed at, scattered, shaken from their station,  
Spurned and scourged of wind and sea like slaves,  
Desolate beyond man's desolation,  
Shrink and sink into the waste of waves.

("By the North Sea," vi, stanzas 1 and 13.)

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Far from the genial sea, this aspect of the sea shows a terrible devouring force. In this phase, the sea involves, devours and shatters everything with its destructive power.

In "Hymn to Proserpine," there is an imagistic passage that is most wonderful in its extremely awe-inspiring descriptions of the sea:

All delicate days and pleasant, all spirits and sorrows are cast  
Far out with the foam of the present that sweeps to the surf of the past:  
Where beyond the extreme sea-wall, and between the remote sea-gates,  
Waste water washes, and tall ships founder, and deep death waits:  
Where, mighty with deepening sides, clad about with the seas as with wings,  
And impelled of invisible tides, and fulfilled of unspeakable things,  
White-eyed and poisonous-finned, shark-toothed and serpentine-curved,  
Rolls, under the whitening wind of the future, the wave of the world.  
The depths stand naked in sunder behind it, the storms flee away;  
In the hollow before it the thunder is taken and snared as a prey;  
In its sides is the north-wind bound; and its salt is of all men's tears;  
With light of ruin, and sound of changes, and pulse of years:  
With travail of day after day, and with trouble of hour upon hour;  
And bitter as blood is the spray; and the crests are as fangs that devour;  
And its vapour and storm of its steam as the sighing of spirits to be;  
And its noise as the noise in a dream; and its depth as the roots of the sea:  
And the height of its heads as the height of the utmost stars of the air;  
And the ends of the earth at the might thereof tremble, and time is made  
bare.  
Will ye bridle the deep sea with reins, will ye chasten the high sea with  
rods?

("Hymn to Proserpine," 11. 47-65.)

Of these lines Lafcadio Hearn explains as follows:

For although the old Roman (Swinburne) has studied too much philosophy to believe in all that his fathers believed, he believes in a power that is greater than man and gods and the universe itself, in the unknown power which gives life and death, and makes perpetual change, and sweeps away everything that man foolishly believes to be permanent. He gives to this law of impermanency the name of the goddess of death, but the name.

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makes little difference; he has recognized the eternal law. Time will sweep away Christianity itself, and his description of this mighty wave of time is one of the finest passages in all his poetry.<sup>(8)</sup>

As Hearn says, the sea of this poem symbolizes "the mighty wave of time," or the "white-eyed and poisonous-finned, shark-toothed and serpentine-curved wave of the world."

The sea is also the sacred mother and lover of the poet. It is sacred, because it reminds Swinburne of Sappho, his supreme goddess and poetess,<sup>(9)</sup> who in ancient days hurled herself into the sea of Leucadia:

..... — the sea  
That sings and breathes in strange men's ears of thee [Sappho]  
How in her barren bride-bed, void and vast,  
Even thy soul sang itself to sleep at last.

("On the Cliffs," 11. 289-292.)

As I have mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Swinburne is well-known for his words in his "The Triumph of Time":

I will go back to the great sweet mother,  
Mother and lover of men, the sea.  
I will go down to her, I and none other,  
Close with her, kiss her and mix her with me;  
Cling to her, strive with her, hold her fast:  
O fair white mother, in days long past  
Born without sister, born without brother,  
Set free my soul as thy soul is free.

("The Triumph of Time," 11. 257-264.)

The sea is the mother of the poet, and he was born out of the sea. Sometimes in his poems he dramatizes himself that he is a sea-born poet, not earth-born:

Not earth's for spring and fall,  
Nor earth's at heart, not all



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Earth's making, though men call  
Earth only mother,  
Not hers at heart she bare  
Me but thy child, O fair  
Sea, and thy brother's care,  
The wind thy brother.

Yours was I born, and ye,  
The sea-wind and the sea,  
Made all my soul in me  
A song for ever,  
A harp to string and smite  
For love's sake of the bright  
Wind and the sea's delight,  
To fail them never:

(“Ex-voto,” 11. 25-40.)

And in his important autobiographical poem, “Thalassius” (the word itself means “out of the sea” in Greek), the poet is depicted as the spiritual child of Apollo (the sun) and Cymothoe (the sea):

“Child of my sunlight and the sea, from birth  
A fosterling and fugitive on earth;

(“Thalassius,” 11. 483-484.)

What does the poet intend to mean by telling us that he is the child of the sun and the sea? What is the relationship between the sun and the sea? Before answering these questions, let me quote two lines from Swinburne's poem:

But thou [the sun] art the God, and thy kingdom is heaven,  
And thy shrine is the sea.

(“Off Shore,” 11. 204-205.)

Apollo is the god of light and poetry. The sun is always so brightly shining that we cannot stare at it long and discern its shape clearly. Similarly, for Swinburne, Apollo is a deified symbol of gloriously

sacred, poetic inspiration which the poet can hardly recognize and seize except for a moment or in an ambiguous way. According to the above-quoted poem, the sea is the holy shrine of such sacred Apollo. Then what is the marriage of the sun and the sea? Probably it is the moment when the sun and the sea merge and become one—the time of sunrise and that of sunset. Swinburne is particularly interested in these delicate moments when two different forces—the light and the darkness—seem to be ineffably blended while they are striving with each other. In such ambiguously delicate moments the poet seems to have found his ideal beauty or the source of poetic inspiration.

The child was born out of the sea. Being the spiritual son of Apollo, Swinburne tells us all through "Thalassius," he is destined to be a poet from the time of his birth. As a future poet, the child is initiated in the sea to sing. He comes to realize the sense of beauty in nature in the various aspects of the sea. Therefore he sees not only that the sea is divine but also that poetry is but the rhythm of natural beauty translated into words. That is why, Lafourcade explains, the sounds, winds and motions of the sea never fail to prompt Herbert to shout whatever fragment of poetry he may happen to know, "throwing at it [the sea] all the scraps of song that came upon his lips."<sup>(11)</sup>

Now we have seen various symbolic aspects of Swinburne's sea. Indeed, the sea is at one time calm, free, genial and lovable, but at another time it can be violent, raging and cruel. "It was the habit of the Swinburnes," writes Edmund Gosse in his *Life of Swinburne*, "to spend the late summer and early autumn in the north, so as to escape the sultry heats of Bonchurch and Niton, exposed in August to the full glare of the sea. All through his life, his idea of a southern scene was of looking from the ferny dells of Bonchurch out over gardens to

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the Channel; a northern one, of looking eastward over the great lion-coloured sands of Bamborough towards a grey and storm-shaken Northumbrian<sup>(12)</sup> ocean." Of this contrast of south and north, Lafourcade tells us as follows:

One has to realize that Northumberland and the Isle of Wight gradually became the poles round which the child's sensibility learned to revolve with something like astronomic regularity.....

.....  
Cruelty thus becomes an attribute almost inseparable from beauty; the gods<sup>(13)</sup> of nature are beautiful and cruel, and it is right that they should be so...

As we have seen, the mutable sea has various aspects which the poet shows by writing so many symbolic meanings of the sea in his poetry. However, in spite of its mutability and changeability, the sea is still one and the same. In the midst of this seeming confusion between the raging violence and peaceful calmness of the sea, some unknown power, I should say, controls the sea making it change almost permanently.

In this changeable sea, Swinburne seems to have recognized something like a cosmos, or a model of almost inexpressible eternal law which governs the universe. This eternal law of Swinburne's is almost unknowable as well as irrepresentable, but the poet must have found in the sea something very near to the eternal law. Indeed, the sea in his poetry reflects his view of the world very well with its symbolic use. So the multifarious sea-images in Swinburne's poetry have a kind of totality, though they may seem, at a glance, disorderly and confusing.

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**Notes**

(1) James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1971), p. 11.

(2) Cecil Y. Lang, *The Swinburne Letters* (6 vols., New Haven: Yale University

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Press, 1959), vol. 3, p. 12.

- (8) A. C. Swinburne *William Blake, a Critical Essay*, ed. Hugh J. Luke (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), p. 34.

This essay was originally published in 1868, now also included in *The Complete Works of A. C. Swinburne*, ed. Sir Edmund Gosse and Thomas J. Wise (20 vols., London and New York, 1925-1927, known as the "Bonchurch Edition"), vol. 16, (pp. 51-350).

- (4) Hot as the brackish waifs of yellow spume

That shift and steam—loose clots of arid fume

From the sea's panting mouth of dry desire;

There stands he, like one labouring at a loom.

("Laus Veneris," 11. 37-40.)

- (5) R. L. Peters, *The Crowns of Apollo* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1965), p. 79.

- (6) "The Triumph of Time," 11. 275-276.

- (7) John D. Rosenberg, "Introduction" to his *Swinburne: Selected Poetry and Prose* (New York: The Modern Library, 1968), pp. xxv-xxvi.

- (8) Lafcadio Hearn, "Studies in Swinburne," included in *On Poets* (Tokyo: The Hokuseido Press, 1941), pp. 123-124.

- (9) In his difficult but beautiful poem "On the Cliffs," Sappho is apostrophized as follows:

Love's priestess, mad with pain and joy of song,

Song's priestess, mad with joy and pain of love,

Name above all names that are lights above,

We have loved, praised, pitied, crowned and done thee wrong,

O thou past praise and pity; thou the sole

Utterly deathless, perfect only and whole

Immortal, body and soul.

("On the Cliffs," 11. 192-198.)

- (10) The name of the chief character in Swinburne's autobiographical novel, *Lesbia Brandon*.

- (11) Georges Lafourcade, *Swinburne: a Literary Biography* (1st published in 1932, reissued New York: Russell & Russell, 1967), p. 26.

- (12) Edmund Gosse, *The Life of Algernon Charles Swinburne* (London: Macmillan, 1917), pp. 9-10.

- (13) Lafourcade, *op. cit.*, pp. 18 and 27.