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Abstract:

It is now generally accepted that the object of the young Swinburne's loving admiration was his cousin Mary Charlotte Julia Gordon (1840-1926) and that the break in their relationship on her marriage to Colonel Disney Leith was the occasion of some of his finest poetry. But what exactly was the nature of their relationship - in particular, was his love reciprocated? We examine the plot and language of Swinburne's epistolatory novel, A Year's Letters, to see what evidence they provide about the strength of the poet's feelings. Mary's poem "Questionings", written while she was bringing up a family, suggests that she was aware of his continued yearning for her.

Keywords: Swinburne; Mary Gordon; Mrs Disney Leith; cousins; love; epistolatory novel; anonymity

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Who was the object of Swinburne's love, whose marriage to someone else was the occasion of the despair that nurtured one of his greatest poems, *The Triumph of Time*? It is sixty years since John S. Mayfield pointed out that virtually all Swinburne’s previous biographers and commentators had been on the wrong track. They had assumed she was Jane Faulkner, the niece and adopted daughter of Dr (later, Sir) John Simon and his wife Jane. Edmund Gosse had first laid the trail in the first edition of his biography of Swinburne (1917, 82-3), where he writes of the poet openly declaring his love for Jane:

> He declared his passion, suddenly, and no doubt in a manner which seemed to her preposterous and violent. He was deeply chagrined, and, in a way which those who knew him well will easily imagine for themselves, he showed his displeasure, and they parted on the worst of terms.

Ten years later, in the revised fourth edition, Gosse (1927, 78) furnished some extra purportedly authenticating detail by inserting beforehand the sentence “She allowed him to call her by her pet name of ‘Boo,’” which was Jane Faulkner’s family nickname, and changing “young kinswoman” of Simon and his wife to “young daughter”.

Mayfield’s literary detective work revealed that T.J. Wise, for neither the first nor the last time, had mischievously encouraged Gosse in his errors, on this occasion by fabricating a story that there was a dedication “To ‘Boo’” at the head of an unpublished manuscript poem of Swinburne’s in the British Museum. Mayfield also pointed out that at the time Swinburne was supposed to have proposed marriage to Jane Faulkner and been rejected, she would have been ten years old.

It was Cecil Y. Lang who first correctly identified the object of the poet’s devotion. After running his rule over various possible (and some improbable) candidates - such as the American actress Adah Isaacs Menken, the poet Mathilde Blind and Lizzie Rossetti, wife of Swinburne’s close friend Dante Gabriel Rossetti - and finding good reasons to reject them all, he finally declared “I am persuaded that Swinburne was in love with his cousin Mary Gordon…” (Lang 1959, 128). In support, Lang cited biographical and family information about the two cousins. He also examined the nature of Swinburne’s love by analyzing the sense of loss in *The Triumph of Time*, published in the year following Mary Gordon’s marriage to Colonel Robert William Disney Leith, as well as *A Leave-taking* and the blank-verse tragedy, *The Sisters*.

Lang’s conclusion has been questioned by one of Swinburne’s biographical commentators, Donald Thomas, while Rikky Rooksby (1993) discovered a letter to Gosse from Lucy Clifford, who in her youth had known the Faulkner family, which seemed to throw the spotlight back on Jane Faulkner and which may have been the origin of Gosse’s false trail. However, it is now taken for granted by Swinburne’s biographers and commentators, including Richard Hutchings and Raymond Turley, Philip Henderson, David G. Riede, Terry Meyers, Catherine Maxwell and Rikky Rooksby in his biography (1997), that Mary Gordon was the object of Swinburne’s devotion. Uncertainties still remain, though, about the nature of Swinburne’s love, how it was interpreted and received by Mary, and whether there was any formal proposal of marriage that was rejected.

Swinburne’s novel *A Year’s Letters* was written when he and Mary were
spending a great deal of time together at Northcourt, her family home on the Isle of Wight. What does it tell us, if anything, about his relationship with Mary? The setting of grand country houses would be familiar to both the cousins. The leading characters are all members of a large, rambling aristocratic family, related by birth or marriage. In the novel, the lower orders do not exist, nor does the world outside relationships between members of the upper class. The dominant figure is Lady Midhurst, who in her correspondence manipulates the feelings and behavior of her junior relatives, encouraging here, restraining there, all the while ensuring that whatever tempestuous passions rage within, the norms of acceptable public conduct are not transgressed—“Married ladies in modern English society cannot fail in their duties to the conjugal relation…The other hypothesis is impossible to take into account” (Swinburne 63).

The setting is almost contemporary with the time when the novel was written. The thirty fictional letters that, with a Prologue, constitute the text are dated between January 1861 and February 1862, a couple of years or so before Swinburne wrote the book. The family relationships it embroiders, analyses and dissects are difficult to disentangle without constructing a genealogical chart along the lines of the one drawn by Nicole Fluhr (68) in her analysis of the novel. Indeed, in his Prologue, Swinburne (11) resorts to a mock citation of an entry in Burke’s Peerage to start his elaboration of the extended family’s structure:

‘Helena, born 1800, married in 1819 Sir Thomas Midhurst, Bart., by whom (deceased) she had one daughter, Amicia, born 1820, married in May, 1837, to Captain Philip Harewood, by whom she had issue Reginald Edward, born 7 April 1838. This marriage was dissolved in 1840 by Act of Parliament’.

While this critical event is not dealt with explicitly, it becomes clear that Lady Midhurst encouraged and connived at Amicia’s elopement with Frederick Stanford—the ground for divorce—having developed an extreme distaste for the way that Captain Harewood, a domineering martinet, treats his wife and son, her beloved grandson Redgie. As soon as she is free, Amicia loses no time in marrying her paramour, Frederick, and in the following year produces a daughter, named Amicia after herself, a half-brother to Redgie, though her two offspring live in different households.

That is only one line of this extended family. Lady Midhurst has two elder brothers. The more senior, ‘old’ Lord Cheyne, has a son, Edmund, born in 1830, who succeeds to the title in 1858 on the death of his father, and marries his first cousin once removed, the younger Amicia. (In a surprising lapse by someone so well versed in the intricacies of family relationships, Swinburne mis-describes them as second cousins).

The middle sibling, John Cheyne, marries a Miss Banks, who plays little part in the story apart from giving birth in 1836 to Clara and in 1840 to Frank, whereupon she conveniently dies. At the age of 19, Clara marries Ernest Radworth, portrayed by Swinburne as a bones-and-beetles laboratory plodder, a scientific Casaubon.

The two key relationships that are delicately revealed in the correspondence both involve pairs of cousins and the love of single men for married women. Frank is obsessed with his married cousin, the younger Amicia. Their passion is consummated during a family holiday at Portsmouth, brought to a bitter end when her husband
Edmund is drowned in an offshore sailing accident. It is the only event in the whole book that does not arise from the logic of the story. Nine months later, Amicia gives birth to a boy, known to the world as Edmund’s son, but in fact the outcome of her illicit relationship with Frank, finally fulfilled during the tragic coastal holiday. In a masterly stroke of aristocratic irony, Frank’s love-child assumes the Cheyne title that Frank would otherwise have retained.

Redgie in his turn worships his cousin Clara, whom he considers is wasted on Ernest, her dreary husband. Clara’s response wavers at first, then moves to refusal, and the pair are firmly steered back to more placid emotional waters by the all-seeing, all-knowing Lady Midhurst, who in the last letter writes: “And so our little bit of comedy slips off the stage without noise, and the curtain laps down over it. Lucky it never turned to the tearful style, as it once threatened to do” (Swinburne 164). The fireworks of the two love affairs have fizzled out. At the end of the year, on the surface, nothing has changed. All is much as it was before to the eyes of the world, though not to the characters involved. To Lady Midhurst’s satisfaction, there has been no public scandal, though her forecast for Clara is bleak:

The house is a grievous sort of place now and likely to stay so…It would not surprise me if she fell to philanthropic labor or took some devotional drug by way of stimulant…I prophesy she will turn a decent, worrying wife of the simpler Anglican breed; home-keeping, sharp-edged, earnestly petty and drily energetic. Negro-worship now, or foreign missions, will be about her mark; perhaps too a dash and sprinkle of religious feeling, with the chill just off; with a mild pinch of the old Platonic mixture now and then to flavor and leaven her dead lump of life… (Swinburne 160-1).

This complicated plot demands close attention, as it has baffled at least one of Swinburne’s biographers. Donald Thomas (102) mistakenly has Frank, rather than Redgie, laying siege to Clara, carrying the incest a degree further than Swinburne intended, as Clara is Frank’s sister. Moreover, in writing that “Neither affair ends in seduction”, he fails to understand a key element in the narrative – that Frank and the younger Amicia have indeed come together and that their illicit moment of bliss has resulted in the birth of a boy, with the ironic consequences mentioned two paragraphs above.

Swinburne’s treatment of his characters throughout this complex story is sympathetically detached, yet emotionally incisive. His use of language is varied, witty and rich in satire. Lady Midhurst’s letters are sprinkled with French proverbs and metaphors – not for effect, but for precision. The book is a wickedly ironic demolition of the public norms of a mid-Victorian society that, in Swinburne’s view, placed the appearance of morality above art and worthiness above beauty – “…the great days of a deep, smug, rich, drab, industrial complacency,” in Max Beerbohm’s words (68). As Fluhr (39) points out, scientific endeavor, low church Christianity and institutional philanthropy are among the public virtues to come under his sardonic scrutiny. Of course, Swinburne was not alone in attacking the conventional public virtues of his age, but compared with the blunt chopper wielded by James Thomson in his frontal attack on the evangelical earnestness of ‘Bumbleism’, he uses a scalpel to dissect the prevailing mid-century respectability. He gives us a foretaste of the assault on Victorian values launched by Lytton Strachey (a great admirer of Swinburne’s
The Victorian poetry) in *Eminent Victorians*, published in 1918 and conceived when Strachey was a Cambridge undergraduate, at a time when *A Year’s Letters* was first published in book form. Above all, Swinburne’s text displays that indefinable but instantly recognizable quality, a sense of style—“...style in the strictest and very highest sense of the word” in the words of Randolph Hughes, who considered the work a neglected masterpiece (Hughes “Commentary” 298). It is not difficult to agree with him.

The epistolatory novel with which *A Year’s Letters* may most obviously be compared is Choderlos de Laclos’ *Les liaisons dangereuses*, published in 1782, which Swinburne had certainly read (Lang *Letters* III 275). Indeed, *A Year’s Letters* has a sparkling, elegant, slightly cynical eighteenth century flavor to it, quite distinct from most mid-nineteenth century novels. As in *Les liaisons dangereuses*, all the characters are drawn from the aristocracy and their attitudes and behavior reflect their class. It is not that Swinburne was looking down on the middle class: he was writing about the upper class milieu from which he came, entirely without class-consciousness. Edmund Wilson’s (22) acute perception is that in *A Year’s Letters*:—

...no one has to worry about what the middle class will think or about the opinion of people above one. The characters have their own codes and standards, but many things go on among them that would horrify this middle-class public. We are brought into a world for which we have not been prepared...a world in which the eager enjoyment of a glorious out-of-door life of riding and swimming and boating is combined with adultery, incest, enthusiastic flagellation and quiet homosexuality.

This going-against-the-Victorian-grain disregard of dominant middle class values was almost certainly a factor contributing to the book’s stuttering publication history. Swinburne seems to have written it in or around 1862-3, referring in an 1866 letter to William Michael Rossetti to “my first attempt at serious prose work, perpetrated in ‘62” (Lang *Letters* I 158). In an 1877 letter to Theodore Watts Dunton, he wrote of his “maiden attempt (in 1862-3) at a study of contemporary life and manners” (Lang *Letters* III 277) and in a 1905 letter to Georgiana Burne-Jones of its being written “more than forty years ago” (Lang *Letters* IV 196).

Swinburne’s early attempts to find a publisher failed. Towards the end of 1865 or early in 1866 the manuscript was submitted anonymously to James Bertram Payne of Edward Moxon & Co. Payne’s rejection of it, after showing it to a reader as Swinburne’s work, provoked a furious response from the author, who accused the publisher of bad faith (Lang *Letters* I 155). It is not clear whether Payne’s rejection was due to uneasiness about the content of the book, or because he did not wish to commit the firm to publishing anonymously an author in whose public reputation Moxon & Co had already made a considerable investment; they had already published his *Atalanta in Calydon* and *Chastelard*. Swinburne enlisted the help of Joseph Knight, a drama critic and widely connected ‘man of letters’, in trying to find a publisher. Knight responded to the manuscript with enthusiasm, expressing surprise at Moxon’s “squeamishness” (Meyers I 55). Nevertheless, neither he nor William Michael Rossetti was able to place the book.

In the spring of 1868, Swinburne was hoping to revise the text (Lang *Letters* II 139).” Perhaps the revision was being undertaken to make the manuscript more acceptable to the American market. Publication in the US looked as if it was getting
off to a promising start. J.B. Lippincott of Philadelphia agreed to publish the book
providing he found nothing objectionable in it (Meyers I 132-3). The issue of
anonymity does not seem to have been pivotal, but the perceived ‘scandalous’ nature
of the book might well have been an even greater obstacle to publication on the other
side of the Atlantic than it was in London. The American poet George Boker, who
was acting as an intermediary, and who was evidently closely familiar with
Swinburne’s poetry, proffered some ironic counseling on making the book more
suitable:

…because I know my American public, which [Swinburne] may not…Let him
not make the mutual love of the hero and heroine the product of the ‘birch’
entirely. Let him plant the germ of it in the hearts of his two characters. This
will, I am sure, be more natural to some prejudiced people and will be
sufficiently satisfactory to all, even to philosophers.’ There should not be too
much ‘froth of kisses that taste of blood’; at all events, such kisses should not
pass between near relations, e.g. between father and daughter. The hero should
not copulate with the heroine in an unnatural manner… (Meyers III 337)-
and much more in a similarly ribald vein. At any rate, for whatever reason, this
transatlantic initiative came to nothing.

The manuscript lay fallow until 1877, when an opportunity presented itself in
the form of serial publication in a new fortnightly magazine, The Tatler (Meyers II
127). Swinburne followed up enthusiastically, accompanying the lightly revised
manuscript with laudatory comments by his friend John Nichol, Professor of English
at Glasgow University: “…an almost consummate piece of art…The surface is a
sparkling picture of a phase of society with which the writer is evidently familiar”
(Lang Letters III 274-5). Once again, though, Swinburne stipulated that publication
should be anonymous (or, rather, pseudonymous) over the name of “Mrs Horace
Manners”, thus demeaning his least favorite Latin poet – Horace - while engaging in a
typically Swinburneian play on words in relation to a text that might be read as a
comedy of manners.

While publication of A Year’s Letters in The Tatler went ahead, Swinburne
was vexed by open speculation about its authorship, identifying him as the real author
hiding behind the skirts of “Mrs Horace Manners”. He wrote an angry letter to Robert
Edward Francillon, the editor, accusing him of a breach of faith, citing a paragraph
that had appeared in The Athenaeum on 25 August 1877 – though this was also
printed in The Times of the same date, which must have given it much wider currency
(Sypher xxix). This elicited a courteous but firm reply, addressed to Theodore Watts-
Dunton, who was by now handling Swinburne’s business affairs, disclaiming any
responsibility for the leak and pointing out that “Scores of people already knew about
the novel long before I ever heard of it” (Meyers II 132).

It was not until twenty-four years later that A Year’s Letters was first
published over Swinburne’s name, in a transatlantic 1901 unauthorised edition by
Thomas B. Mosher, of Portland, Maine (Sypher xxx). Mosher already had a track
record in relation to non-copyright editions of Swinburne, having four years earlier
published a handsome little version of Atalanta in Calydon, claimed to be limited to
925 copies. After such a long lapse of time, this ‘outing’ of Swinburne as author of A
Year’s Letters passed without protest from The Pines: indeed, a marked up copy of

The Victorian
the Mosher edition was sent by Swinburne to his now regular London publishers, Chatto and Windus, as the basis for publication. The text finally achieved authorized publication in book form, over Swinburne’s name and retitled *Love’s Cross-Currents*, in 1905. Perhaps the Edwardian decade, at a time when the country was ruled by a king who, as Prince of Wales, had appeared as a witness in a case involving cheating at a card game at which illegal gambling was taking place, and had only narrowly avoided being cited as co-respondent in a divorce case, provided a more suitable climate for a proper appreciation of this *risqué* novella than the high Victorian era when it was written, more than forty years previously. Swinburne was delighted at its reception – “Nothing in all my literary life has ever so much astonished me as the reception of this little old book. The first (small) impression, I am told, was sold out on the day of publication: and the chorus of praise from reviewers has hardly been broken by more than one or two catcalls” (Lang *Letters* VI 19). In fact, it went to at least three impressions in the same year and was also published in New York by Harpers.

Why did Swinburne hold out for so long against being publicly identified with *A Year’s Letters*? He seems from the beginning to have been simultaneously proud and diffident about this early work. Writing to Joseph Knight on 20 March 1866 (Meyers I 58), he calls it “my poor little anonymous old book…” and on the same day to William Michael Rossetti “I think I threatened you with the infliction of my first serious attempt at prose work…It is a guileless book, the effusion or emission of ignorant innocence; but I find that even in its MS. form it has admirers…I shall be grateful for your verdict, whatever form it may assume” (Lang *Letters* I 158). To Joseph Knight again some six months later (Lang *Letters* I 169), the book is “my unmanageable offspring…”, but he cites George Meredith as praising it “more or less highly for different qualities…” in a later letter to his friend John Nichol (Lang *Letters* III 251) and in turn quotes John Nichol’s praise when writing to the publisher of *The Tatler* (see above). Even when it was finally published in book form as *Love’s Cross-Currents*, Swinburne’s correspondence with his sister Isabel and with Georgiana Burne-Jones emphasizes how much his friend Ned Burne-Jones (Sir Edward Burne-Jones, Georgiana’s deceased husband) had enjoyed it when he read it – presumably in manuscript – more than forty years before (Lang *Letters* VI 193 and 196).

Swinburne repeatedly sought – and earned – the good opinion of others about *A Year’s Letters*. What lay behind his lack of confidence and his insistence on anonymity, at the risk of it never seeing daylight? At the time he first tried to get it published, he had just burst on the literary scene as the new poetic genius. *Atalanta in Calydon* had been published in March 1865 and *Poems and Ballads* in July 1866, to astonishment and acclaim. Here, especially for the younger generation, was a new rising star, outshining Browning, even Tennyson. Even if *Poems and Ballads* scandalized the prurient, self-appointed guardians of public morality, Swinburne’s status as a major poet was not in dispute. However, he was untested as a writer of fiction. Did he, as David G. Riede (5) suggests, consider fiction a lesser literary form than poetry? What if *A Year’s Letters* was badly received by critics and the public? Would it reflect on his reputation as a poet?

There may well have been another reason for his emphasis on the importance
of anonymity, at least until forty years after he had conceived the novel. Perhaps some of the characters or the situations bore too close a resemblance to real life for him to want his name to be publicly associated with them. Redgie Harewood, one of the love-crossed cousins, is avowedly a self-portrait of Swinburne. Shortly after its publication in book form, he wrote to his friend William Michael Rossetti that: “…you may be reminded of a young fellow you once knew, and not see very much difference between Algie Harewood and Redgie Swinburne… Reginald Harewood [is] a coloured photograph of/ Yours/ A.C. Swinburne” (Lang Letters VI 195). In A Year’s Letters, Redgie is clever, lazy, vivacious, impulsive, strong-willed, rebellious against authority and physically brave, very much Swinburne’s perception of himself.

However, it would be a mistake to commit the vulgar error of assuming that every character in the book is based on a real-life original. Equating fictional characters with people is a hazardous business at the best of times. For example, in his study of a selection of Mary Gordon’s novels, F.A.C.Wilson goes to great lengths in attempting to deduce the author’s own appearance and character traits – even her subconscious desires - from the twists and turns of the plot lines and the appearance and speech of the characters. In contrast to “A pretty, slender, fair girl of about five feet ten…”, which Wilson suggests may be a self portrait reproduced in the heroines of some of her novels (250), Mary is described by one of her daughters as short, like her father, with dark hair (Earle, passim). This is confirmed by a number of photographs that survive. Moreover, far from Mary being “cold”, as Wilson infers from the character of these heroines, in real life she was “good and gay and witty and kind” and “the Wittiest of people” (Earle, passim). Nor is there any fragment of evidence that this devoted mother of six children (who called her “Dearest”) and partner in a very happy marriage was an incipient lesbian, as Wilson hints.

It would be wise to proceed cautiously, therefore, in equating the characters that Swinburne created in A Year’s Letters with his own relations and friends, especially as he delighted in setting literary traps for the unwary. However, there is little reason to doubt his specific disclaimer of any resemblance between the fictional Captain Philip Harewood and his own father: “nothing could possibly be more different than his [Redgie’s] parents and mine…” He also makes it clear that the magnificent Lady Midhurst: “…is entirely a creature of my own invention…” (Lang Letters VI 195). Indeed, he is proud of his realization of Lady Midhurst, the pivotal character in the book: “This book stands or falls by Lady Midhurst; if she gives satisfaction, it must be all right; if not, Chaos is come again” (Lang Letters I 158).

So far as the younger Amicia and Clara are concerned, answers to the question as to whether or not they reflect role models drawn from life should perhaps be more circumspect. Swinburne had a wealth of sisters and female cousins and friends. He could, if he had wished, adopt a pick-and-mix approach to their names, physical appearances and character traits to complement his own literary inventiveness. Swinburne probably borrowed the name Amicia, or Amy, from the elder daughter of his friend (and, improbably though it may seem, sometime suitor of Florence Nightingale) Richard Monckton Milnes, Baron Houghton, though not her appearance or character, as she was only seven years old when the book was being written. Marya Zaturenska (152) claims that “The physical portrait of the second Amicia has a Pre-Raphaelite touch. She seems to have been drawn from life – a
The Victorian portrait perhaps of Mrs. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, whom Swinburne had always admired…” F.A.C.Wilson (250) agrees with this and Philip Henderson (60) also takes a similar line, writing that Frank Cheyne’s description of the younger Amy in Letter XXIII could even be a close description of Rossetti’s 1855 pen-and-ink drawing of his wife Lizzie.

It is unlikely, however, that the younger Amicia’s character, as distinct from her appearance, is based on that of the model for the iconic image of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. Swinburne rated Lizzie Rossetti very highly: “Except Lady Trevelyan, I never knew so brilliant and appreciative a woman…” (Lang Letters VI 93). By contrast, the fictional Redgie Harewood, Swinburne’s alter ego, had a low opinion of young Amy, anxious, listless and woeful after her own infidelity with her cousin Frank and her husband’s almost simultaneous death by drowning. In Letter XXVII he writes of her: “That poor child…writes me piteous little letters, in the silliest helpless way, about the wrong of this and the right of that…It is pitiable enough, but too laughable as well…” (Swinburne 146). That is not the kind of language that Swinburne would have used about Lizzie Rossetti.

With the character of Clara, searching for a biographical model is even more hazardous than for Amy. Henderson (60) claims that: “…what Swinburne gives us is a portrait of Lizzie Rossetti” in relation to Clara as well as to the younger Amicia – in other words, that A Year’s Letters provides us with a double image of Lizzie Rossetti, in the faces of both Amy and Clara. Marya Zaturenska (15) speculates about Clara, whom Swinburne carefully depicts as just two years older than Redgie: “Was she a portrait of Lady Trevelyan, the first woman to encourage Swinburne’s writing, and who was obsessed with Swinburne to such an extent that she spoke of him on her deathbed?” This seems, to say the least, highly improbable. Pauline Trevelyan was twenty-one years older than Swinburne, who, devoted as he was to his Northumberland neighbor and soul mate, looked on her as his second mother.

However, there are many pointers to Swinburne having drawn on his own feelings for his cousin Mary Gordon when depicting Redgie’s love for Clara. For example, Mary’s account (Leith 16) of her rides with Swinburne when they were young: “…for years – all my unmarried life – we rode together constantly…We would gallop along wildly…” is mirrored by Redgie’s ecstatic description of going riding with Clara in Letter VII:

I rode with her yesterday…and we had a gallop over the sands…I never saw her look so magnificent; her hair was blown down and fell in heavy uncurling heaps to her waist; her face looked out of the frame of it, hot and bright, with the eyes lighted…I could hardly speak to her for pleasure, I confess…(Swinburne 59).

More cogently, the letters that Redgie writes to and about the married Clara are hymns of love. Letter XI starts:

You promised me a letter twice; none has come yet. I want the sight of your handwriting more than you know. Sometimes I lie all night thinking where you are, and sometimes I dare not lie down for the horror of the fancy (Swinburne 75).

In Letter XXVII Redgie explores the depths of his love:

I sit and make your face out between the words, and stop writing to look…I
wonder all men who ever saw you do not come to get you away from me – fight me for you at least…Because I was never the least worth it. Because you need not have been so good, when you were so beautiful that nothing you did could set you off. But you know I loved you ages first. When I was a boy and got sight of you, I knew stupidly somehow you were the best thing there was. You were very perfect as a child; I know the clear look of your temples under the hair; and the fresh delicious tender girl’s hair drawn off and made a crown with (Swinburne 145)

These spring off the page as authentic love letters, written by someone who is, or has very recently been, in love. You can almost smell the paper on which they were written, and the ink. It is surely Swinburne’s own voice speaking, the same voice that described, in a letter to his sister Alice written at the time he was writing his novella: “My greatest pleasure just now is when M[ary] practices Handel on the organ; but I can hardly behave for delight at some of the choruses” (Lang Letters I 93). In A Year’s Letters Swinburne puts down on the page through Redgie’s words the love he felt for Mary Gordon, something that he never did in real life. There is no evidence that she knew anything of A Year’s Letters until it was published in book form as Love’s Cross Currents in 1905: as Swinburne wrote to his sister Isabel on 21 June: “M[ary Gordon] has not seen anything of it: you are the only person whom I have sent or should think of sending the proofs to” (Lang Letters VI 194). Clara may not be a facsimile representation of the real Mary, but Redgie’s love for Clara is surely inspired by Swinburne’s youthful love for Mary.

It is not leaning too heavily on the text of A Year’s Letters to say that it discloses much about the strength and nature of Swinburne’s love for Mary. It does not, though, tell us anything about Mary’s feelings for Swinburne. Indeed, there is no biographical or literary evidence that Mary looked on Swinburne other than as an especially close kindred spirit with whom she had enjoyed extended literary and historical riffs when they were adolescents and young adults, at a time when they were working together on The Children of the Chapel and Trusty in Fight. Mary later wrote (Leith 4-5) that “…there was never in all our years of friendship, an ounce of sentiment between us. Any idea of the kind would have destroyed at once and for ever our unfettered intercourse and happy intimacy…” Interpreting ‘sentiment’ as romantic love, possibly leading to marriage, there is no reason to disbelieve that that was her view of their relationship.

Indeed, there were good reasons why Mary could never have allowed herself to think of Swinburne as a possible match. Their consanguinity was close and complex. As Mary herself wrote:

Our mothers (daughters of the third Earl of Ashburnham) were sisters; our fathers, first cousins – more alike in characters and tastes, more linked in closest friendship, than many brothers. Added to this, our paternal grandmothers – two sisters and co-heiresses – were first cousins to our common maternal grandmother; thus our fathers were also second cousins to their wives before marriage (Leith 3).

Marriage between cousins had long been a favored aristocratic gambit to ensure that inherited wealth stayed within the family, but the genetic links between Mary and Swinburne were unusually strong at a time when the possible consequences of
inbreeding were just becoming clear. Indeed, Mary’s family would almost certainly have been aware of current developments in the understanding of genetics. Her father, Sir Henry Percy Gordon, while steeped in the classics, the humanities and the law, was something of a polymath and could also be counted as a member of the scientific community. At Cambridge, he had been Senior Wrangler in 1827 (that is, he was the highest scoring student in the final examinations for the Mathematics Tripos) and was elected Fellow of the Royal Society in 1830. Moreover, he was certainly acquainted with Charles Darwin (193).

There were other impediments that may have influenced Mary consciously or subconsciously. Although the Oxford Movement as such had come to an end in 1845, the beliefs and practices of high church Anglo-Catholicism were permeating the Church of England throughout the land, spread by the younger generation of Oxford-educated clergymen who, as undergraduates, had been influenced by the sermons and lectures of Newman, Keble and Pusey. Mary herself, though hostile to Roman Catholicism, was a devout Anglo-Catholic. On her London visits later in life, she worshipped at the high church St Barnabas, Pimlico (Earle). With its incense, candles and elaborate liturgical ceremonies, this exemplar of Victorian Gothic architecture had halfway through the century been a focus for anti-ritualist riots. Mary’s commitment to High Church Anglicanism contrasts markedly with the avowed public hostility to God of the poet who had raised his fist to Jesus in Hymn to Proserpine:

“Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean; the world has grown grey from thy breath”.

Finally, Swinburne would hardly have appeared as a prepossessing spouse in the milieux of landed gentry and minor aristocracy in which Mary moved. Even his devoted admirer Clara Watts-Dunton (63) was moved to write that, while his features were remarkably good: “…his figure was against him…he was short and his shoulders were far too sloping”. Many of those who met him, from his Eton days onwards, commented on the way his hands, arms and feet were gripped by convulsive spasms when he became excited.

All this contrasted unhappily with the man Mary declared, in late 1864 or early 1865, that she would marry, her Aberdeenshire neighbor and devout Episcopalian, Colonel Robert William Disney Leith. He was an erect military figure, six feet six inches tall. Not only that, he was everything that Swinburne as a boy had wanted to be – a brave, gallant war hero. In the Second Sikh War against Diwan Mulraj he had led three companies of the 1st Bombay Fusiliers in a successful assault on the Khooni Burj, or Bloody Bastion, at Multan, being wounded severely. As well as being hit by a musket ball in his right shoulder, both his arms were badly slashed by saber cuts, the left arm so badly that it had to be amputated. He was ‘Mentioned in Dispatches’ and received the Punjab Medal, eventually retiring as a general. Whatever the strength of her relationship with Swinburne, Mary must have realized, subconsciously at least, that by comparison with the dashing colonel he was NGHM - Not Good Husband Material.

Mary’s marriage undoubtedly stunned Swinburne. Quite apart from the literary evidence of his sense of loss in The Triumph of Time, it was not until eight years later that he was able to contemplate returning to the Isle of Wight, where he had been so happy with Mary, writing to Edwin Harrison:

I think it is most likely that about the time you are in Scotland I shall be in the
Isle of Wight (at the risk of realizing the sensations of a damned ghost revisiting earth, before my natural date of damnation) with my family, to pass the better part of a summer at a place belonging to an uncle of mine [The Orchard, Niton, then owned by Sir Henry Percy Gordon, Mary’s father]. My mother wants me to go, and I think I may as well once for all break through all the sentiment of reluctance and association and tread out all sense of old pain and pleasure for ever, if I can, by coming back in this my old age [he was all of 36 years old] to where I was so happy and unhappy as a child and a youth (Lang Letters II 251).

Though there is no evidence that Swinburne attended his cousin’s wedding, not all contact had been broken off when Mary married in 1865. The two families were so inter-twined that this would scarcely have been possible. Swinburne was a trustee of Mary’s marriage settlement (U of Southampton). With other members of his family, he visited the Gordon family at their Knockespock estate in Aberdeenshire in 1871 (Lang II 157). While there is no trace of any direct exchange of letters between them while Mary’s husband was still alive, Swinburne’s correspondence with Mary’s mother (his own aunt), Lady Mary Gordon, shows that she was acting as a go-between for friendly messages between ‘Hadji’ and ‘Mun’, the family nicknames for the two cousins (Meyers I 292-3, II: 23-4, 162-7, 216-7, 217-9, 327-8, 381-2, III 13-14).

Direct correspondence between Mary and Swinburne seems to have been resumed after the death of Mary’s husband in June 1892. The letters, some of which were rediscovered by Jean Overton Fuller, are written in their childish cipher in which the initial letters of words and sometimes syllables are transposed: “My dearest cousin”, for example, becomes “Cy merest dozen”. The fantasy lives of the cast of characters in a longstanding family joke are explored and the text of the letters is generously strewn with amusing – to the correspondents - flagellatory episodes (Meyers III 317-20). Many of these same characters also feature in Mary’s novel Trusty in Fight. While Swinburne had helped her with an early version of this some thirty years earlier, Fuller’s attribution of authorship to Swinburne is mistaken and based on a misreading of their correspondence (273). It was only after her husband’s death that Mary felt able to return to this story and rework it for publication in 1893.

So, in later years, with the direct exchanges of letters replacing the messages sent via Mary’s mother, and Mary’s visits to the Swinburne and Watts-Dunton ménage at The Pines, the friendship between the two cousins was resumed. But exactly what had its nature been in the two years or so before Mary announced that she would marry the Scottish soldier who had recently returned from India? Fuller has Swinburne trying to persuade Mary to marry him (147) with Mary rejecting his sudden proposal (285). Other commentators have followed this idea of a marriage proposal that was rejected, but nothing whatsoever can be found to substantiate it. Moreover, Fuller’s notion that Mary’s poem “Rocket”, published in 1920, was evidence that she reciprocated Swinburne’s love was effectively torpedoed by Mildred Katherine Leith, Mary’s grand-daughter. In a letter to The Times (4 January 1965), she pointed out that Rocket was the name of Mary’s favourite horse, and not her sobriquet for Swinburne.

What has become increasingly clear is that the youthful Swinburne admired
and loved Mary intensely, a view that is supported by even a cautious interpretation of
the evidence from *A Year's Letters*. There seems no reason to question Mildred
Katherine Leith’s assertion that the poet had never openly declared his love for her
grandmother. Whether Swinburne thought that this love might lead to marriage, or
that it would somehow continue indefinitely into the future, will never be known. He
realized, though, that its ecstatic nature could not survive Mary’s marriage to
someone else. We come back, with one possibly significant variation, to Lang’s
conclusion more than half a century ago that Swinburne’s great romantic love was
undeclared and that Mary Gordon’s marriage to the handsome colonel was the
shattering of dreams that inspired some of his greatest poetry.

The possibly significant variation stems from an interpretation of Mary's poem
"Questionings", first published in *A Martyr Bishop and Other Verses* in 1878, thirteen
years after her marriage. Almost lost from sight among undemanding verses hymning
the delights of the Aberdeenshire countryside and extolling the heroic virtues of
Icelandic martyrs, it stands out on the page as coming straight from the author's heart.
Here, surely, is Mary putting questions into her cousin's mouth, with Swinburne
asking her if she remembers their times together and if she still car-
reply, she tells him in effect not to yearn after her, but to put his trust in God. This is
the Mary who never seemed to admit to herself Swinburne's hatred of God, or
misotheism to use Schweitzer's description of the poet's religious position (21, 83, 85,
99), and who maintained to Gosse that her cousin "...was in communion with the
Church of England all his life" (Lang *Letters* VI 237).

**Conclusion**

In Swinburne and Mary Gordon we have two cousins who have shared each
other's company from childhood and who have found in adolescence and young
adulthood a close and intellectually stimulating companionship. They have a spectrum
of shared interests, from riding across the Isle of Wight downs above Bonchurch to
music, painting and the Elizabethan drama. They have worked together in the library
of Mary's family home at Northcourt on *The Children of the Chapel* and an early draft
of *Trusty in Fight***. The evidence from the avowedly self-portrait of Redgie
Harewood in *A Year's Letters* is that Swinburne takes it for granted that this loving
friendship will somehow continue unchanged into the future. Mary, on the other hand,
knows that her future will follow a different path - a dynastic marriage and the
consequential obligations of family and property. When her handsome, well-endowed
colonel arrives on the scene, she realizes that she must detach herself from her cousin.
Swinburne, however, is plunged into despair at his loss, a despair that nurtures some
of his finest poetry. Mary is aware that he is still yearning after her and in her poem
"Questionings" she tells him to put his trust in God and, in effect, to get on with his
life.

It is only after the death of Mary's husband in 1892 that the two cousins pick
up a gentler, more mellow echo of their old relationship. They meet: Swinburne dotes
on Mary's grand-daughter, Mildred Katherine, whom she has brought up as her own
child. They resume their jokey correspondence, with its childish code and fanciful
characters. In 1900, Swinburne dedicates his *Rosamund, Queen of the Lombards* to

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Mary, with an accompanying poem. The reconciliation is complete. A year after Swinburne's death in 1909, the third edition of The Children of the Chapel acknowledges for the first time Swinburne as co-author and Mary sets the seal on their relationship with the publication in a literary magazine of the first version of "The Boyhood of Algernon Charles Swinburne", accompanied by "A Year's Mind", a poem in tribute to her devoted cousin.

QUESTIONINGS

“Is thy heart right, as my heart is with thine?
Through all the silence comes no answer back
And comes no sign.”
Ask not, faint heart: keep on thy Heavenward track.

“Dost thou remember yet the pleasant ways
We walk’d together? Do the echoes ring
Of those old days?”
Ask not, fond heart: lift up thy voice and sing.

“Dost thou bethink thee, when on bended knee,
Before the Altar, sometimes there to say
One prayer for me?”
Ask not, true heart: kneel down thyself and pray.

“Wilt thou walk on unswerving to the end,
Not faint thy faith, not cold thy love, not dim
Thy hope, O friend?”
Trust GOD, brave heart; and trust thy friend with Him.

\(^1\) As Randolph Hughes pointed out (Foreword viii), Gosse fell into another hole dug by Wise when writing his entry on Swinburne in the Second Supplement to the Dictionary of National Biography (1912, 457). Wise had noticed some poems over the initials A.C.S. in old copies of Fraser’s Magazine, the earliest dated 1848, when Swinburne was eleven. He then printed them over Swinburne’s name as two pamphlets, Juvenilia and The Arab Chief, in 1912, leading Gosse to write the rash words that back in 1848 Swinburne “…was, in fact, now writing verses, some of which his mother sent to Fraser’s Magazine, where they appeared, with his initials, in 1849 and again in 1851, but of this ‘false start’ he was not afterwards pleased to be reminded”. Having misattributed the feeble verses, Wise (575) subsequently had the
chutzpah to assert that it was he who had discovered that in this instance the initials A.C.S. in fact stood for Sir Anthony Coningham Sterling, K.C.B., brigade major of the Highland Brigade in the Crimea and author of two books about the Crimean war, rather than for Algernon Charles Swinburne. However, it was Gosse who fabricated the authenticating details that Swinburne’s mother had sent the poems to Fraser’s Magazine and that Swinburne didn’t like to be reminded of his early attempts at poetry. Neither Swinburne nor his mother was in a position to issue a denial, as by 1912 they were both dead. Gosse did not acknowledge or apologize for his gross error, but wrote a slippery letter to The Times (5 April 1913) … “It has become universal to attribute verses in Fraser to Swinburne…For some time past however I have had my doubts and it is now proved we have all been mistaken” (Thwaite 551). In any case, Gosse was quite capable of getting things wrong without Wise’s subversive help, being unable to master the fairly straightforward geography of the Isle of Wight. In the first edition of his biography of the poet he placed ‘The Orchard’, home of Mary Gordon’s grandfather, General Sir James Willoughby Gordon, five miles east of Swinburne’s childhood home at Bonchurch, instead of five miles west (1917, 7).

i Lang generously acknowledged that Paul F. Baum had reached the same conclusion independently.

ii The publishing history of this novella is dealt with below: the most complete text is to be found in the edition edited by F.J. Sypher (Swinburne 1974).

iii The hesitant date of 1871 given by Lang to the letter in which Swinburne declares this intention was corrected to 1868 by Sypher p.xxvii n.10.

iv Almost certainly a reference to the Marquis de Sade (1740-1814): for the influence of Sade on Swinburne’s poetry, see Berg, Ingham and Mitchell.

v Children of the Chapel was first published anonymously in 1864. A second edition, also anonymous, was published in 1875. The third edition was published in 1910, the year after Swinburne’s death. It was described as being by Mrs. Disney Leith (i.e. Mary Gordon) and “Including The Pilgrimage of Pleasure a Morality Play by Algernon Charles Swinburne”.

vi Mary’s Trusty in Fight, substantially reworked from the original text, was published anonymously in 1893, the year after the death of her husband, Robert William Disney Leith and some 30 years after she and Swinburne had first worked on it together.

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