

Terry L. Meyers, ed., *Uncollected Letters of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, 3 vols. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2005), £295, ISBN 18519 67745.

TERRY L. MEYERS BEGINS his introduction to this three-volume collection of Swinburne's hitherto uncollected letters by conceding that 'perhaps not everyone would agree with Henry James's claim that "everything about such a being as S. [Swinburne] becomes and remains interesting"' (vol. 1, p. xv); Meyers declares himself, however, to be very much of James's opinion. Students of William Morris ought also, I believe, to be interested in Swinburne, for Swinburne was, as Peter Faulkner has recently demonstrated in this journal, a lifelong friend of Morris, and also a friend of some other members of Morris's circle (*JWMS* 15: 3, Winter 2003, pp. 4–26). These volumes therefore include many letters to and from people whom Morris knew, and thus provide a valuable perspective on Morris's milieu, quite apart from the interest which attaches to Swinburne himself as a major poet and an intriguing character.

Meyers's work is intended as a supplement to Cecil Y. Lang's magisterial six-volume edition of *The Swinburne Letters* (1959–62). From one point of view, it might seem almost perverse that Meyers has chosen to spend, clearly, an enormous amount of time in further supplying one of the few areas of Swinburne scholarship in which we can already be said to be well-served. Almost half a century on from the publication of Lang's work, we still lack a definitive biography, and scholars continue to have to use the collected edition of the poems which Swinburne had the good sense to oversee before his death, since

the alternative texts, Edmund Gosse and T. J. Wise's *Complete Works* (1925–27), are riddled with errors and inaccuracies of the most elementary kind. (Morris scholars who remark on the limitations of May Morris's editions should be thankful for what they have.) Despite the considerable claims made for his poems by prominent North American scholars including Margot K. Louis, David Riede, and Jerome McGann, Swinburne remains very much a minority interest, and those who regard him, as does Meyers, as 'one of the great English poets' (vol. 1, p. xv), still run the risk of sounding slightly shrill.

In these circumstances, any serious scholarly work on Swinburne is to be welcomed, and Meyers has certainly added substantially to the canon of the poet's correspondence: there are over 550 letters from Swinburne here, nearly 450 of which have never been published in any form. Meyers's research has unearthed some finds which add significantly to our knowledge of Swinburne; yet it is perhaps true that half the collection's interest comes from his inclusion of hundreds of unpublished letters addressed to the poet. Foremost among these for readers of this journal is likely to be a new Morris letter, written to Swinburne in March 1874, and apparently relating to the wedding of William Rossetti and Lucy Madox Brown, which was to take place at the end of that month. (Coincidentally, this wedding and Morris's attitude towards it were referred to in my review in the last issue of this journal; see *JWMS* 16: 1, Winter 2004, p. 85).

26, Queen Square

Bloomsbury, London,

March 5th, 1874

My dear Swinburne

I don't think we have anything to sell that looks at once farfetched & dear-bought enough to be good for that Lady. So I propose if you please to look about for some pretty bit of old silver of the value you mention, which will be no trouble to me, as I shall have to go the errand myself for myself. I will take care that your gift was different enough from mine not to make a pair with it.

I am glad to hear news of the Bothwell.

Yrs very truly

William Morris

(Vol. I, p. 311. I am grateful to Pickering & Chatto for kindly granting permission to reprint this letter.)

Slight as it is, this letter clearly provides further testimony to the friendly though not intimate relationship between Morris and Swinburne, which Peter Faulkner has delineated. There is a further biographical significance, however, relating to the wedding concerned; for we know that neither bride nor groom was much beloved of Morris, and that, in fact, he attended the ceremony somewhat reluctantly. In this context, it is hard not to see an implied criticism of Lucy Brown behind the adjectives, 'farfetched' and 'dear-bought', which he identifies as necessary characteristics of a wedding gift for her; certainly neither of these terms has particularly positive connotations in the light of Morris's aesthetic beliefs. Morris is careful to be circumspect, though, for he knows that William Rossetti is a close friend of Swinburne.

In addition to this discovery, Meyers also publishes eight uncollected letters from Swinburne to Morris. Two of these, giving Swinburne's tactfully-worded refusal of Morris's invitation to join to Democratic Foundation, and his enthusiastic response to *The House of the Wolfings*, will already be familiar to Morrisians, having been printed by May Morris in her introductions to the *Collected Works* (making it rather surprising that they were missed by Lang). The rest are mostly brief notes thanking Morris for sending him his latest publications, especially the Kelmscott Press editions, of which Swinburne was a great admirer. One of these letters, however, Swinburne's acknowledgement of Morris's gift of the Kelmscott *Defence of Guenevere* (1892), includes some apposite remarks on Morris's early poetry. Swinburne laments the omission of a passage of 'Sir Peter Harpdon's End', which Morris cancelled prior to the poem's first publication 34 years earlier (Swinburne's memory for poetry was phenomenal), and goes on to regret that Morris 'left off dramatic writing – so often attempted by other poets without a tenth or a hundredth part of your glorious natural gift for it' (vol. III, p. 34). Swinburne's feeling that Morris may have taken a wrong turn, or at least neglected a remarkable talent, is one which has been shared by sympathetic readers ever since.

Swinburne's relationship with Burne-Jones was warmer and more spontaneous than his friendship with Morris, as is clear from their first

preserved piece of correspondence, in which Burne-Jones salutes Swinburne as 'Dear Little Carrots' (vol. 1, p. 7). Meyers prints a total of 15 items of correspondence between Swinburne and Burne-Jones, though all but two of these are from the latter. Their exchanges make for some of the liveliest reading in the edition. Burne-Jones reveals himself as highly responsive to the bawdy and profane humour which characterises Swinburne's letters to his friends. There is, for example, an intriguing letter of April 1861 in which Burne-Jones gleefully thanks Swinburne for the 'dreadful gift' of his last letter: 'To the Jewjube I read it all, & our enjoyment was such that we spent a whole morning in making pictures for you, such as Tiberius would have given provinces for' (vol. 1, p. 12). 'The Jewjube' is identified by Meyers as the libertine painter Simeon Solomon.) However, there are also some moving, later letters to Swinburne in which Burne-Jones laments his own old age and worries over Morris's declining health. Finally, in 1897, the painter asks for the poet's permission to dedicate his picture *Love and the Pilgrim* to him, and to quote on it the opening couplet of *Tristram of Lyonesse* as he (seemingly inaccurately) remembers it originally to have run. Swinburne's reply, printed in Lang's edition, graciously concedes that 'whichever reading of my humble verse you prefer is bound to be the best'. From the evidence presented here, it seems evident that a selected edition of Burne-Jones's correspondence would be a considerable service to Pre-Raphaelite scholarship.

I have been focusing on what seem to be the most interesting aspects of Meyers's volumes as they relate to Morris's circle; however, this edition also sheds significant light on other areas of Swinburne's life. Perhaps most importantly, it includes a substantial tranche of uncensored correspondence between Swinburne and Mary Gordon, later Mary Disney Leith, his cousin and the woman now believed to have been the 'lost love' who inspired his great personal poem 'The Triumph of Time'. (The only previously-known letters were those published in Leith's carefully edited memoir of 1917.) Although the new letters date not from the time of their romantic attachment in the 1860s (before she married another man) but rather from decades later, when they had re-established contact in late middle age, their playful, punning correspondence bristles with a sexuality which is cherished by both as a memory and also, it is fairly clear, as something more than a memory. On a less exalted note, there is also a brief glimpse into the

demi-monde in which Swinburne moved, in the form of a letter to John Thomson in 1870 asking about the whereabouts of 'a lot of unfinished burlesque verse about swishing'; he wonders whether Thompson had 'confiscated them for Lottie's use?' (vol. 1, p. 191). Lottie is unidentified, but may have been connected with a flagellation brothel at Regent's Park, which Swinburne and Thomson apparently frequented in the late 1860s. Swinburne's fondness for the birch, both in 'burlesque verse' (of which a substantial amount survives, much of it unpublished) and in actual fact, has undoubtedly hindered the recovery of his reputation; yet it remains an inescapable facet of his unique and many-sided character.

In spite of these discoveries, however, it seems to me that Meyers has been wise to make his edition a supplementary one, rather than attempting to supersede Lang's work. In another thirty years' time, it seems entirely likely that yet more letters from this voluminous writer will have come to light, and then may be the time for a new, comprehensive edition of the correspondence. Meanwhile, Meyers has indicated that he is contemplating an edition of Swinburne's complete poems. Such a venture would be highly ambitious, but is to be warmly encouraged, being without doubt what is most acutely needed if Swinburne is finally to be restored to his place at the heart of the nineteenth-century poetic tradition.

*Richard Frith*