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New Light on the Swinburne-Leith Correspondence

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The relationship between Algernon Charles Swinburne and his first cousin Mary Gordon Leith holds a peculiar fascination for literary scholars. After John S. Mayfield proved Sir Edmund Gosse’s story of Swinburne’s romance with Jane Faulkner to be without foundation, Cecil Y. Lang suggested that Swinburne’s cousin Mary was the elusive, undeclared “lost love” of the poet’s youth.¹ The cousins’ close relationship was cut short by Mary’s marriage to Col. Disney Leith in 1865, and it was not until after Leith’s death in 1892 that she and Swinburne resumed any contact, formal or informal. Mrs. Leith denied that there was ever anything other than a family friendship between them, and the letters which survive show nothing of intimacy in the usual sense of the word.

In 1917, eight years after Swinburne died an elderly bachelor at The Pines, in Putney, Mrs. Leith published The Boyhood of Algernon Charles Swinburne: Personal Recollections by his Cousin, Mrs. Disney Leith, With Extracts From Some of his Private Letters. The fragments of his correspondence which she put forward were selected not only from the poet’s letters to her but also from those which he wrote to his mother and sisters throughout his life. “His youthful letters,” writes Lang in introducing The Swinburne Letters, “and those addressed to Mary Gordon (Mrs. Leith), as the few surviving fragments prove, so unself-conscious, so boyish, so enthusiastic, so topical, would be a treasure trove.”² It was Mrs. Leith’s wish, however, that all of the letters upon which she based her book be burned after her death—a wish to which her family, we are told, acceded.³ If this is indeed true, and nothing has since emerged to contradict it, the greatest portion of Swinburne’s family correspondence may now be irretrievably lost.

Randolph Hughes directed attention to the Swinburne-Leith correspondence in his “Commentary” on Lesbia Brandon in 1952.
His reaction to the fragments published in the *The Boyhood of Swinburne* was somewhat less sanguine than Lang’s later observation, for Hughes was troubled by Leith’s surprisingly candid treatment of certain phrases which hinted at the subject of corporal punishment. This was a topic which Sir Edmund Gosse and Thomas James Wise had taken great care to suppress in their editing of the poet’s works and letters. The evidence of Mrs. Leith’s handling of it, however, was sufficient for Hughes to declare that to her, “Swinburne addressed himself as to one who would not find the subject of flagellation distasteful. . . . one suspects that there must be even more revealing passages in the part of this correspondence which has been kept private.” Mrs. Leith, however, merely attributed her scrupulous selectivity to “the jokes and fictitious matter which bulk largely in our correspondence of many years.”

The opposite side of some of the withheld correspondence came to light in 1968 when Jean Overton Fuller published three letters, not by Swinburne but to him, from Mrs. Leith. (Gosse had left a note with them suggesting to Wise that they be destroyed.) The three letters, dated 1892, 1893 and 1895, are not from the cousins’ youth, however, but from their old age. Nevertheless, the content and method of these documents proved of extraordinary interest, for they were composed with initial letters of adjacent words transposed into a sort of cryptic code language. Thus, for example, the phrase “My dearest cousin” was rendered “Cy merest dozen.” Moreover, a recurring subject of the letters was, as Hughes had suspected, flogging.

After Fuller’s disclosures, F.A.C. Wilson pursued the relationship of Swinburne and Mary Leith in a series of papers exploring to a considerable extent their common interest in flagellation. Particularly in her novels, such as *The Children of the Chapel* and *Trusty in Flight*, Wilson found that Mrs. Leith made frequent reference to the practice of flogging young boys. By my own count, 54 of the 182 pages of the third edition of *The Children of the Chapel* show direct references to punishment, whipping, beating, flogging or the rod. Wilson pointed out that in *Trusty in Flight* the hero, Freddy Thorburn, is flagellated eighteen times in forty-three days on one page alone. Appropriately, it was to Mary Gordon that Swinburne dedicated the unpublished flagellatory parody of his *Eton: An Ode*, which he titled *Eton: Another Ode*. A further work written soon after Swinburne renewed his association with his
widowed cousin was *The Sisters*. Thomas Earle Welby fifty years ago detected the references to flagellation in this drama, supposed to be deeply influenced by the poet's recollections of his childhood.9

All of the hitherto available literary witnesses to the relationship between Swinburne and Mary Leith have been identified, noted and studied, but the correspondence of the two has until very recently remained a mystifying subject. No letters from Swinburne to his cousin, save those published in 1917 in *The Boyhood of Swinburne*, came to light until 1972, when the Huntington Library announced that it had acquired seventeen such letters written between 1899 and 1902, when Swinburne was in his sixties.10 From these, it becomes at least possible to determine what kind of "jokes and fictitious matter" Mary Leith chose not merely to exclude from publication but to order burned. None of the Huntington letters has been published, and publication of the group in its entirety must await a thorough process of satisfactorily identifying the various individuals, works and events to which Swinburne refers in the letters. Nevertheless, their importance is sufficient to justify a preliminary overview and an effort to summarize their significance in terms of past and future research.

The Swinburne letters at the Huntington provide a worthy counterpart to the Leith letters found by Fuller in the British Library. They verify what was already strongly suggested by the Leith letters, that one of the chief themes in the correspondence was flogging. The salutations of Swinburne's letters are unlike any of the two thousand and more published by Professor Lang in *The Swinburne Letters*. The cryptic language of the texts, analogous to the language in those by Mrs. Leith, again holds a position unique in all of Swinburne's known writings. In spite of the somewhat sensational tone which accompanied Miss Fuller's disclosures, however, there is a buoyant quality of freedom and whimsy in Swinburne's exchanges with his cousin. This prevailing mood disarms the onlooker and persuades him that while the most peculiar things are going on, nothing before him really is so sinister as to warrant the flames which may have already destroyed similar records. Nevertheless, they do make it clear that what Swinburne most vividly recalled out of his early days at Eton College was neither its distant spires nor antique towers, but its flogging block.

In 1867 Swinburne secured a photograph of this Etonian property. From the photograph he solicited drawings showing it in use, and he made it the subject of an "epic," *The Flogging Block,*
presumably by Rufus Rodworthy, Esq., on which he evidently worked far into the succeeding years of his life. In the same year Swinburne wrote from his parents' home to Lord Houghton to inform him that George Powell had promised some "newly budded blossoms of the block," as one may call the narratives of swished youth," and to Powell himself to express his anticipation over the chance to see and touch a used rod. "I don't think I ever more dreaded the entrance of the swishing room than I now desire a sight of it," he writes, and inquires about a relation of Powell's:

I should like to have seen your cousin and heard his account. How often has he been swished? In the words once addressed to me when at school by a younger cousin at home, 'please write again soon and tell me a lot more about a lott more swishings, it's such a joly spree [sic]. I did with a vengeance, and the seed fell on good ground."

The identity of Swinburne's cousin is not documented in his published letters, but a very close first cousin three years his junior obviously shared such a correspondence with him in old age, and her name, of course, was then Mary Gordon. It would seem plausible enough to speculate that the exchange Swinburne records here represents some of that "fictitious matter" to which Mary Gordon Leith alludes in her rationale for editing the letters which appear in her account of *The Boyhood of Swinburne.*

It is important to point out that the fixation on the flogging block and the rod which remained with Swinburne remained with others, as well. Lambert Ennis states, for example, that "the very mention of the word 'school' set Thackeray's mind to running on the subject of flagellation." He had attended Charterhouse where the headmaster, Dr. John Russell, actually wrote a Greek grammar beginning with the verb "I thrash." Robert Southey the Poet Laureate, was expelled from Westminster for contributing an essay against flogging to a surreptitious periodical called *The Flagellant.*

Swinburne's tutor at Eton was the Reverend James Leigh Joynes. Joynes was Number 382 in *Vanity Fair* 's "Men of the Day" series, and a lithograph of him by Leslie Ward ("Spy"), accompanied by a two-paragraph biographical note, was inserted in the issue of 16 July 1887. Here Rev. Joynes is depicted full length in academic regalia, poised near the dreaded block, right hand pointed as if to elect a victim and, in the left, the Etonian rod. *Vanity Fair* reports
James Leigh Joynes, Swinburne's Eton tutor (cartoon by Leslie Ward for Vanity Fair)
that Joynes could boast “a popularity such as has seldom been extended by boys to one whose mission has consisted in inflicting mental and corporal anguish upon them.” “He is old-fashioned in his notions,” continues the sketch, remarking that Joynes “has left a lasting impression on many generations of little boys.” Although at Eton Swinburne was an Oppidan, and lived in Joynes’s home, in later years Joynes professed to recall nothing of the poet. Once, in fact, when asked about Swinburne’s poetry, Joynes “changed the subject decisively, with obvious disapproval.”

A clergyman, it might be supposed, could hardly care to read of

The wealth of thy body made whiter
By the blushes of amorous blows,
And seamed with sharp lips and fierce fingers,
And branded by kisses that bruise.

But the traditions of the English public schools of Joynes’s day were brutal and their effects indelible. Swinburne entered Eton in 1849 with a vow to his pious mother, Lady Jane, not to read the poems of Byron. He left psychologically prepared to contribute to a pervasive British subliterature of flogging and even to identify love with pain in the poetry of Poems and Ballads. A week after the death of Joynes’s old student in 1909, the view was expressed from the pulpit of Canterbury Cathedral that “certainly much lustral water and the most precious of all precious blood were needed to do away with the pollution which Swinburne’s poetry introduced into English literature.”

Mary Leith’s letters at the British Library, very much in the subliterary tradition unwittingly fostered by Joynes, begin simply enough with the phrase “Cy merest dozen.” But the openings of Swinburne’s at the Huntington are elaborated in such a way that the “dozen” is clearly understood to be the number of strokes administered to a boy on the flogging block. “Cy merest dozen,” he begins on 20 February 1899, “that ever left a boy just able to stifle and swallow down his final and happily inaudible sob” (HM 36075); “Cy merest dozen,” he writes again on 9 April, “that ever hurt or seemed to hurt as much as twice or thrice as many cuts when ‘laid on over old or rather recent stripes—which really seemed almost a cruelty’ (do you remember that Etonian
rotation?)" (HM 36081); in a very late letter, 17 March 1902, he begins: "Cy merest dozen that ever made a little fellow wince at the first cut—flinch at the second—writhe in anguish at the third" (HM 36083).

The theme of whippings enters at every turn. "I am 'well,'" he writes, "and escaping the prevailing colds, as you kindly, not to say weetly, swish me (not the first time, by doors and scousins, I have been (?) 'kindly'—oh, ah!—swished)." 18 In the last letter he has come upon an article about Eton, his old public school, which leads inevitably to the subject of punishment. "I hope you will notice (if you have not ere now)," states Swinburne, "the very just objection that a war memorial at Eton ought not to be a building or a hall which 'will be used for disciplinary purposes more frequently than for anything else' (!) and 'will on that account accumulate unpopular associations with all classes of Etonians.' I should rather think so!" 19

The chief vehicle for flagellatory byplay, however, is the frequent interpolation of a fictional correspondence by or to Frank Dilston, Reginald Clavering, Freddy, Dick and Sig Thorburn and the Reverend E. Thorburn. Significantly, these figures have enjoyed a fictional existence in literature as characters in the published writings of Swinburne and his cousin. Reginald Clavering and Frank Dilston are both from Swinburne's play The Sisters, and Swinburne wrote to Edward Burne-Jones that Reginald was a dramatization of himself as a youth. 20 (In one of the Huntington letters Swinburne has playfully crossed out "Algie" to replace it with "Redgie."). 21 The Thorburns are from Mary Leith's novel Trusty in Flight. These characters are frequently mentioned in the text of the regular communications, but they have to themselves the whole of a dozen accompanying fictionalized letters. This portion of a letter from young Reginald Clavering to Fred and Dick Thorburn is representative:

I'm glad you like the fotoes I sunt you and had such a good time in Cheshire—that's near Norflock isn't it? I've been in Sufflock. I don't mind your brother's chalf a bit But what does he mean about my burning thoughts (my skin was rather burning (and so it is now) from the birch when I was writthing) not being corect and wanting to be 'done into English'? Does he mene I slept badly? I know I dont writhe like a writhing master but I rearily thuogt I slept all write
when I was writhing. My uncle did say wunce I seemed to think speling a matter of choyce or chanse and I supose nobody alwyas spells quight write in a hurry but I did think I slept as well as most fellows. Prapps this isnt all right but its late. I say till this mornung I hadn’t been swished for three whole days running. First time this half.22

The playfulness extends not only to the letters but to such enclosures as the autograph of Thomas Gyles, a fictional schoolmaster in Mary Leith’s *The Children of the Chapel*. “I hope you like the very rare and valuable 16th century autograph of good Thomas—which Envy itself must admit and Malice must acknowledge to be Gyles. It is the only feat of penmanship I ever accomplished: but I did think it good, and characteristic at once of the era and the man.” There are many references also to enclosures of as yet unidentified newspaper clippings which fell into the realm of Mrs. Leith’s or Swinburne’s particular interests. There are also whimsical fabrications, such as the following series of notices ostensibly copied from *The Times*.

**Births**

The Lady Mungo MacMullanmuck, daughter-in-law (ye’ll ken) to the Duke of Conkyleakie—of twins. No cards, by request.

**Marriages**

Admiral Sir Hector Hugshore to Lady Melinda Mucklereechie. No flowers. (The bride would be sure to suffer from violent vomiting. She has long been known to a select circle as “Our Invalid.”)

**Deaths**

The most noble the Marquis of Bonnybawbeeze and Pinchpennie. No condolences. Many thanks.23

In addition to the colorful names of the figures enumerated in *The Times*, there are occasional apostrophes couched in what Swinburne calls “bad Scots or mad Oirish.”24 Over a cancelled visit he exclaims: “Hoots ochone galore machree and auld lang syne!
weltered Lady Naegataeva' of that ilk, it's a sair ha'ir ye've gi'en yer puir kinsman the day. 25

Another theme which pervades the letters is Swinburne's love for children, especially Mrs. Leith's grandchildren.

Many thanks to you and Bay for your delightfully elistles. Did I send her Mother Goose? I think not till now. Anyhow I hope I may be allowed to lay the birthday book at her feet and The Baby's. The verses might be better—but what of that? I am very glad to hear of Binkie's improvement. What did I send Bay and The Baby? I forget, but I do hope it was not what I am sending now. 26

There are times also, when Swinburne's tender love for little children becomes completely accommodated to his mania about flogging:

Please tell Binkie, in Redgiesome phrase, it's moost awfly jolly of her to 'look forward to going again' on a visit to an elderly relative who is only too much flattered at the intimation that his humble cot or hermitage has any attractions for youth—but, if so, she has only had a taste of the pretty pictures and (may I hope?) abusing mooks which I should revoice and rejel in showing her—no more, if the comparison be permissible when addressed to a young lady, than a little boy just come to Eton (in our time) may be expected to get in his first week or so at school by way of a first taste of the birch—five or six cuts as a preparation for twelve or fourteen. 27

There are occasional literary discussions, such as Swinburne's remarks on his youthful enthusiasm for Cyril Tourneur, on the forthcoming performance of his play Locrine and on Mrs. Leith's translation of The Cavemen from the Icelandic. There are references, too, to Swinburne's housemate, the poet and critic Watts-Dunton, who evidently was often in ill-health. Although there are no references to Swinburne's flagellation poems, such as The Flogging Block, Frank Fane, Charlie Collingwood's Flogging or Will Drew and Phil Crewe, the poet does refer to an unrecovered work entitled First Fault for the Hundredth Time—A Tragedy. 28

The letters written by the fictional Thorburns and Reginald Clavering are interrupted from time to time by an editor. Although Swinburne wrote a novel, A Year's Letters, on an epistolary scheme, these boyish letters have neither the continuity nor the intensity to sustain serious critical interest. The mock letters, such as one headed "Eton, June 4," are patently juvenile exercises:

60
I've only gott a minit to writhe of corse Im going up with the botes I wish I hadn't been swished yesterday it make a dipherence to one's comfort in running don't it when its nine cuts sharp? [Don't it! O no! Ed.] But I was only swished twice last week.29

Although there is much new detail in the newfound Swinburne letters at the Huntington Library, their chief significance is that they confirm positively what has long been suspected about the relationship of Swinburne and his cousin Mary: they were both maniacally possessed by the subject of flagellation and dwelt on the matter in their personal correspondence. The theme is pervasive in the fiction of both, but the idea of physical punishment exercised a far more profound influence on Swinburne. His association of suffering and pain with a love relationship is paramount in the more explicit passages of Poems and Ballads and underlies in more subtle form such greater works as Atalanta in Calydon and Tristram of Lyonesse. There is still no direct evidence that the letters which Swinburne and Mary Leith exchanged before her marriage in 1865 were of the same character as those which were written after the death of then General Disney Leith in 1892, but Mary's reference to "jokes and fictitious matter" strongly suggests that it was so. The emergence of these seventeen documents, along with the discovery of the three "Cy merest dozen" letters in the British Library, gives hope that some further letters, perhaps from the cousins' youth, may make their appearance at some time in the future. The total of twenty letters which have come to light since 1968, with their uniquely engaging peculiarities and arcane wit, will make a singular addition to the seventh volume of The Swinburne Letters, and they will provide much interesting new detail for future Swinburne biographers.

NOTES


9 A Study of Swinburne (New York: George H. Doran, 1926), p. 139.


11 Swinburne Letters, I, 258, 260. See also I, 265 and II, 290; Fuller p. 257.


It may be of interest to add that in one of Mary Leith’s letters to Swinburne, probably written in 1893, she exclaims somewhat wistfully, “Cow, my nousin, do you meally rean to stand there, & tell me that the timehonoured & traditional pode of nunishment is disused at Eton? I am more upturbed & perset than you can imagine.” (Fuller, p. 272) For, as Swinburne has evidently intimated to Mary, it was at about this time that the authorities of Eton stored away, in a chamber of the Upper School reserved for historic relics, the fabled flogging block celebrated in his epic poem. With it were placed a few regulation switches. There these artifacts remained until the close of 1940, when a portion of the Upper School was toppled during a raid by the Luftwaffe. Among the debris were found a few of the remaining rods, but not a splinter of the block was recovered. “It is feared,” reported the Daily Telegraph, “it has been blown to pieces.” See Sir H. C. Maxwell Lyte, A History of Eton College (1440-1910), 4th ed. (London: Macmillan, 1911), p. 533.