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‘It’s bawdier in Greek’: A.C. Swinburne’s Subversions of the Hellenic Code

‘And now,’ said Mrs. Sinclair, with a little appealing dainty smile, ‘I want to ask you something about the Greek Anthology too. I can’t read much Greek myself: but a gentleman who used to be rather kind to me, translated me a good deal of Greek poetry, once upon a time—when my husband,’ she said, with a little shrug of the shoulders, ‘used to go to sleep after his dinner.’

Dr. Jenkinson here glanced suspiciously at Mrs. Sinclair. ‘Now, what I want you to tell me,’ she said, ‘is something about some little—ahem—little love songs, I think they were—ἔρωτικ—something or other—I really can’t pronounce the name.’

The Doctor started.

‘And, Dr. Jenkinson, please,’ Mrs. Sinclair went on in a voice of plaintive innocence, ‘not to think me a terrible blue-stocking, because I ask you these questions; for I really hardly know any Greek myself—except perhaps a verse or two of the New Testament; and that’s not very good Greek, I believe, is it? But the gentleman who translated so much to me, when he came to these little poems I speak of, was continually, though he was a very good scholar, quite unable to translate them. Now, why should that have been, I want to know? Are Greek love-poems very hard?’

‘Well,’ said the Doctor, stammering, yet re-assured by Mrs. Sinclair’s manner, ‘they were probably—your friend perhaps—well—they were a little obscure perhaps—much Greek is—or—’

‘Corrupt?’ suggested Mrs. Sinclair naively. (Mallock 1877, 79-80)

¹ This quotation is taken from W. H. Mallock’s *New Republic*, a satirical *roman à clef* published in 1877. The subject discussed is doubly transgressive as Mrs Sinclair¹ ‘naively’ questions Dr Jenkinson on the nature of poetic erotica in Greek antiquity which she explains having tried to read in the company of a ‘kind’ gentleman whilst her husband was safely dozing off. The humour of the passage relies on *double entendre* as Mrs Sinclair, who is worried Dr Jenkinson will take her for a blue stocking, does not seem to mind adopting what could easily be interpreted as the more subversive stance of the potentially adulterous wife. Her ingenuous interrogations about the ‘corrupt’ Greek of the mysterious erotic ‘little’ poems increase Jenkinson’s unease whose confident scholarly *logos* is reduced to a fragmented stammering as he knows he is treading on dangerous immoral ground. This exchange is all the more ironical as Dr. Jenkinson is meant to stand for Benjamin Jowett, the Oxford Regius Professor of Greek at the time, who strove all his life to separate Platonic idealism from gross physical desires. The ideal Hellenic sweetness and light celebrated by Matthew Arnold and prominent Oxonian Hellenists appears therefore threatened by this transgressive, feminine and nocturnal delving into ‘hard’ and ‘little obscure’ poems. The passage is indeed extremely gendered: the ‘Greats’ of the Oxford Syllabus (centered on the philosophers and historians of the Greek miracle of 5th century Athens and studied by a masculine elite which Jowett contributed to forming) are suddenly dis-placed and even re-placed by the more erotic poems of the *Greek Anthology*.²

² This exchange sheds light on the dual nature or ambivalence of Greek culture which most scholars deliberately ignored or rather concealed in order to preserve Hellas as an elitist masculine construct, safely aloof from the less refined desires of ignorant masses. Cultural consumption was indeed regulated at the time so as to fulfil the ‘function of legitimating social [and gendered] differences’ (Nead 222). This preservation was made possible thanks to the difficulty of ancient Greek which very few learned men could understand contrary to Latin, another culturally empowering *logos*, but more easily decipherable. The complexity of the Greek alphabet thus plays a crucial role in this passage which is meant to be apprehended visually rather than spoken out loud, as part of the ambiguity of Mrs Sinclair’s questions

comes from her difficulty in reading and understanding the Greek word ἔρωτικ (which is not transliterated here). The signifier is clearly divorced from the signified which acts as a veil or filter preventing Mrs Sinclair from gaining access to forbidden knowledge. I wish to argue here that for most Victorian Hellenists the complexity of the Greek alphabet not only functioned as a learned signifier but also as a convenient safeguard because it enabled them to maintain the understanding of Greek within an elitist sphere while preventing the profane from delving beyond a luminous and yet strikingly opaque surface.

3 Mallock was well aware of the numerous contradictions underlying Oxford Hellenism to which he had himself been exposed as a student at Balliol College. In her book on *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford*, Linda Dowling has convincingly shown how leading university reformers such as Benjamin Jowett had sought 'to establish in Hellenism, the systematic study of Greek history and literature and philosophy, a ground of transcendent value alternative to Christian theology' (Dowling 1994, xiii) which had paradoxically legitimized a 'homosexual counterdiscourse able to justify male love in ideal or transcendental terms' (Dowling 1994, xiii) while causing 'spiritual devastation' among other undergraduates such as Mallock by the 'harrowing of [their] religious faith' (Dowling 1994, 105). Mallock wanted to denounce this 'corruption' which he believed Jowett's liberal Hellenic discourse had helped foster.³ The irony here is of course that Mallock uses as many codes and veils as the writers he wishes to expose—also resorting to ancient Greek as the key to his own counterdiscourse.

4 Although Mallock's conservative homophobic stance has often been commented upon in relation to Walter Pater's works, it might be interesting to relate this discussion about Greek corruption with the work of another important Aesthete, the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne, whom Mallock knew personally as they both attended Balliol college as undergraduates (although not at the same period) and met on several occasions.⁴ Even if Mallock's attitude towards Swinburne's work would become more lenient in his later years, in the 1870s he was both fascinated and shocked by the poet's outrage on morals and decency, partly triggered off by his oxymoronic 'Greek depravity'.⁵ I will thus try and show that in the works of Swinburne as well Greek functions as a highly ambivalent code—both sanctioning officially the author's learned classicism in the eyes of his peers and of a wider (less knowledgeable) public while authorizing at the same time subversive incursions into Hellenico-Sadian erotica for the sake of a restricted circle of happy few.

'Winged words': Greek, the Language of the Greats

5 Like Mallock, Swinburne received a thorough classical education at Oxford, under the tutelage of Benjamin Jowett whose friendship the poet cherished long after the end of his undergraduate studies. Throughout the 1860s and 1870s, he maintained a regular correspondence with the Greek master and sometimes asked for his advice concerning his Greek verses. In his letters to other friends, Swinburne often mentions Jowett's approval of his poetry—notably of his Greek dedicatory verses to Landor for his play *Atalanta in Calydon*. As an aristocrat trained at the best institutions expounding high classical culture, from Eton to Oxford, Swinburne certainly shared his peers' view that only the learned should have access to the great Hellenic legacy. This sheds light on his 'arrogant'⁶ posture in two essays ('Notes on Poems and Reviews'⁷ and 'Under the Microscope') aimed at defending his Greek poems against accusations formulated by ignorant critics. In both texts the poet indeed resorts to untranslated Greek quotations in order to flaunt this superior knowledge.

6 Similarly, Swinburne frequently inserted Greek words in the paratext of his poems (thanks to epigraphs, dedicatory verses or footnotes) so as to ground his works within a glorious literary tradition. As Gérard Genette points out, the paratext (or in this instance the peritext) is a sort of 'threshold'⁸ which strategically informs the reader's reception of the text. Epigraphs are thus meant to influence the reading of the poem by placing it under the glorious aegis of a Greek authority. And even when the source of the quotation is not given, ancient Greek metonymically encodes cultural authority.

7 This strategy is quite striking in the case of *Atalanta in Calydon*, which is preceded by three separate peritexts, including two quotations from the great Attic playwrights: Euripides whose fragmentary play *Meleager* inspired the Victorian poet with the subject of his drama and Aeschylus whose style Swinburne favoured over his rival's. These two culturally empowering epigraphs not only open Swinburne's text but also frame his dedicatory verses to Walter Savage Landor which Swinburne chose to write in Greek as an apt tribute to his Hellenophile mentor. A few years later, in 1872, he would resort to the same device by contributing a Greek poem (alongside five other poems in Latin, English and French) to *the Tombeau* of another classically-trained model of his, Théophile Gautier. In both cases, Greek is chosen as the supreme language of praise as well as a powerful signifier of cultural supremacy which shines upon both the subject and the author of the Greek poem.

8 The idea of legacy, so central to what was then referred to as the classical tradition, also explains why Swinburne included footnotes in some of his poems. Although he claimed that such references 'disfigured' (Haynes 407) his poetry, Swinburne indicated for instance in a note to 'Phaedra' that a passage from his poem was directly inspired by a line in Aeschylus' fragmentary play *Niobe*, thus emphasizing the direct filiation between the Hellenic source text and its modern reception. The footnote enlightens and impresses the reader thanks to the articulation of scholarly and poetic discourses. Moreover, the reference draws the reader's attention to the unusual syntax of the English rendering of the fragment:

For of all gods Death only loves not gifts,
Nor with burnt-offering nor blood-sacrifice
Shalt thou do aught to get thee grace of him;⁹

Swinburne's Note: Æsch. Fr. Niobe: - μόνος θεῶν γὰρ Φάνατος οὐ δώρων ἐρύ, κ.τ.λ.

9 The fact that these lines *sound* foreign suggests another crucial form of Hellenic insertion which Swinburne was particularly fond of—Hellenism, but this time in the linguistic sense of the word, to describe the influence of Greek syntax and morphology on an English formulation. The most striking examples of such Swinburnian Hellenisms are to be found in *Atalanta in Calydon* throughout which the poet not only offers direct translations of Greek fragments of Homer or Aeschylus but consciously emulates Hellenic diction. Kenneth Haynes, in his notes to the play (Haynes 382), has underlined several of these Greek-sounding expressions, like the poet's extensive use of compound epithets ('full-flowered'), participles ('sin done', 'men born'...), prefixes such as dis- ('disfleshed', 'disallied', 'dispraised', 'disseated'), as well as his multiple syntactic inversions (for instance 'over the speed of thy feet'). Here Swinburne is not actually including foreign Greek words into his poetry but literally applying a Hellenic grid onto his text, as if he were trying to transpose rather than to translate the 'winged words'¹⁰ of Homer into English in order to pay homage to the supposed ideal 'euphony' (Winckelmann 154) of ancient Greek which Winckelmann and his Hellenophile followers¹¹ had set so high. This could also be Swinburne's response to the Oxford philologist F. M. Müller's¹² theories praising etymology and the study of phonetic 'roots' as the 'science of truth',¹³ which would later prompt decadent authors 'to employ English as a classical dialect, to bestow a belated and paradoxical vitality on a literary language that linguistic science had declared to be dead.' (Dowling 1986, xv).

10 Swinburne refers to these spontaneous 'winged words' in his poems on Sappho,¹⁴ Whitman¹⁵ and Baudelaire¹⁶ as the language of harmony. The expression conjures up a lofty Hellenic world of poetry thanks to the *literalized* image of poetic flight and inspiration which Swinburne applies to Sappho, the nightingale and 'lovely-voiced songstress'¹⁷ mentioned in the Greek epitaph of 'On the Cliffs':

Soar, as a bird soars

Newly fledged, her visible song, a marvel,
Made of perfect sound and exceeding passion,
Sweetly shapen, terrible, full of thunders,

Clothed with the wind's wings.¹⁸

- 11 In this poem, the rhythm is no longer that of Latin or English poetry. Swinburne bypasses these foreign and belated attempts at rendering Sapphic prosody in order to return to the original Sapphic meter as if he wished to appropriate the Muse’s Greek as a sort of new musical instrument for his own poetic endeavours. This is what he explains in a letter to E. C. Stedman in 1874:

I confess that I take delight in the metrical forms of any language of which I know nothing whatever, simply for the meter’s sake, as a new musical instrument; and as soon as I can am tempted to try my hand or my voice at a new mode of verse, like a child trying to sing before it can speak plain.¹⁹

- 12 This is also perceptible in *Atalanta in Calydon*. For instance, in the ‘Parodos’ of the play, Swinburne uses anapests and iambs in the manner of ancient Greek choral lyrics which similarly combined different metrical systems (Haynes 388). However Swinburne’s aim was not ‘to imitate Greek meters but rather to bring into English new rhythmical inventions inspired by Greek choral odes’ (Haynes 388). This comment by Haynes is extremely enlightening as it reveals that Swinburne cared very little for imitation and longed to reinvigorate his own English verse. In this Aeschylus play and his Sapphic poems, Swinburne was not translating Greek words either but casting his spirit ‘into the mould of’ his Hellenic models to quote the poet’s expression (Haynes 407). The image of moulding is of course particularly apt as it implicitly posits a comparison of Greek texts (however fragmentary) with the Hellenic art *par excellence*, sculpture. However, the process of moulding or imprinting may also be understood as a strategic counterpoint to the hierarchical and chronological model of imitation underlying the very idea of classical tradition. Indeed, as the art historian and philosopher G. Didi-Huberman explains: ‘form, in the imprinting process, is never ‘fore-seen’ (‘pre-visible’): it is always problematic, unexpected, unstable and open’ (Didi-Huberman 33). By refusing the more conventional device of imitation through translation (so successful in the Augustan age), Swinburne was somehow deliberately deflating his reader’s classical expectations: ‘As opposed to imitative figuration which introduces a hierarchy and chastely separates the optical copy from its model, the imprinting reproduction turns the result into a copy which is no longer a pale reflection of its model but rather the tactile, carnal child of its parental form’ (Didi-Huberman 53). This parallel with sexual reproduction suggested by Didi-Huberman may in turn shed light on the very erotic image Swinburne himself employs to claim that ‘no man can come close to’ (Haynes 407) Sappho and to her Lesbian body of texts.

From English Paraphrase to Hellenic Par-ody?

- 13 The reference to moulding, which focuses on the creative process rather than on its imitative result or copy, is therefore essential to understand the strategic displacements at work within Swinburne’s poetry.²⁰
- 14 Translation, although central to the classical tradition, was for Swinburne a dead end as he believed it necessarily entailed a form of treason of the source text. This is why he chose to use the Catullan Latin verb ‘traduced’ meaning to ‘misrepresent’ rather than ‘to translate’ in the essay vindicating his own Sapphic adaptations (Haynes 406 and 416). As an alternative mode of transmission, the poet introduced the notion of ‘paraphrase’ which he certainly borrowed from the ancient Greek rhetorical tradition of exegesis (Fuchs 37). But contrary to the sacred objects of such antique rhetorical exercises, the Sapphic poems Swinburne chose to paraphrase were not officially part of the founding Hellenic texts in the eyes of his contemporaries. This reveals a deliberate generic displacement away from the great epic and philosophical tradition of 5th century Athens, so central to Victorian Hellenomania. Moreover, by inserting within his own poems multiple variations and versions of the Sapphic text sometimes signalled through the use of italics (as in ‘On the Cliffs’), Swinburne favoured a form of polyphony which further challenged the very idea of Greek centrality and authority.
- 15 Sharing almost the same etymology as paraphrase, parody which comes from the conflation of the Greek preposition *παρά*, meaning ‘beside’ and the noun *ὄδή*, signifying ‘song’ equally signals a sub-version (i.e. a degraded version) of the classical canon because it implies a process of differentiation as much as of imitation. Swinburne happened to be particularly

fond of these stylistic subversions, which he attempted on his favourite authors, from Sappho to Sade and Baudelaire, probably to purge himself from the 'natural vice of idolatry and imitation'.²¹ The irreverence implicit in the term 'parody' (as opposed to the more neutral pastiche which Swinburne was equally keen on practicing) was however not aimed at his models but rather at his critics and his detractors whom he delighted in confusing:

I sent my *Greek Anthology* pastiches to Oxford for the opinion or revision of better scholars than myself, and was rather set up on hearing that they had been taken by such a one for the work of a later Greek poet.²²

16 Playing with the identification fantasies of most Victorian Hellenophiles, Swinburne flaunted his Greek pastiches as a convenient veil for his more subversive ends. No wonder therefore that his Greek poem on Gautier should be made up of five 'Epigrams after the Anthologic pattern'. These little Hellenic inscriptional poems compiled in the *Greek Anthology* were often words of praise²³ although many of them contained a satirical or erotic charge, like those mentioned by Mrs Sinclair, which Swinburne described as 'the most infamous poems in the world'.²⁴

17 This satirical and erotic content is perceptible in the fake sacrilegious Greek epigraph taken from the equally fake *Anthologica sacra* chosen to open Swinburne's satanic 'Litany' in *Poems and Ballads, First Series*. In spite of its hymnal form and its diction clearly indebted to the phraseology of the Old Testament and of the Book of Revelation (Haynes 338), this 'Litany' is both a parody of a sacred hymn and a pastiche of Baudelaire's 'Litanies de Satan'. The epigraph may be reminiscent of the sacred scriptures of the Septuagint but it strangely focuses on darkness rather than on God's heavenly light as the Greek reads: 'the shining lights in heaven I shall hide from you'. Once the reader has discovered that it is Swinburne's invention, this penitential supplication appears even more clearly as a flagellating fantasy.

18 This example reveals the strategic displacements Swinburne introduced to cover up the immoral contents of his poems on Hellenic themes thanks to his flawless Greek. The use of the winged words of Homer was indeed a means for the poet to tackle questionable subjects which were somehow made more palatable through 'the apparently neutral, 'distant' (and safe) medium of classical culture' (Hardwick 9). In a word, Greek granted a form of immunity²⁵ to Swinburne who toyed with his cultural superiority over his critics as a means to prevent them from interpreting his verse as obscene. In order to evade accusations that his poetry was immoral or effeminate,²⁶ he had to stress the perfection of his Hellenic inspiration reflected in his superior understanding of Greek text to which neither common journalists nor prudish young girls should have access.²⁷

19 Therefore Swinburne constantly defended his Greek poems by insisting on their formal flawlessness—as if 'corruption' could only be a linguistic issue.²⁸

I have not said, as Boileau and Phillips have, that the speaker sweats and swoons at the sight of her favourite by the side of a man. I have abstained from touching on such details, for this reason: that I felt myself incompetent to give adequate expression in English to the literal and absolute words of Sappho; and would not debase and degrade them into a viler form. . . . And if to translate or paraphrase Sappho be an offence, indict the heavier offenders who have handled and handled this matter in their wretched versions of the ode. (Haynes 407).

20 It is rather revealing that Swinburne should here mention Boileau²⁹ who was one of the poets who bowdlerized Sappho by changing the gender of pronouns and adjectives in order to turn Sapphic desire into a heterosexual, morally acceptable longing.

21 This emphasis on the need to preserve the linguistic purity of the Greek text also explains why Swinburne was so keen on getting his Greek accents right. The subject comes up quite frequently in his acrimonious correspondence with his careless publishers:

I write now to tell you that Mr. Jowett has just pointed out to me a frightful slip of the pen in the Greek verses at p.61 of my pamphlet (*Under the Microscope*). The very first word—πολλός—ought of course to be πολὺς. It is a slip for which a schoolboy would be flogged.³⁰

22 Swinburne indeed wished to be considered as the proud heir of an elitist and masculine classical tradition as opposed to blue stockings like Mrs Sinclair or Mrs Browning who were supposedly prompt to overlook the complexities of Greek accentuation.³¹ And yet here the fault

is eroticized through the reference to flogging which Swinburne had developed a longing for since his Eton days. This link between the poet’s use of Greek and his algolagnian fantasies is striking in his letters and in his private flagellating writings, a recurring fantasy of Swinburne’s being that of a schoolboy flogged for mistaking his Latin or Greek declensions.³²

‘Corrupt’ Desires: Swinburne’s Hellenic *ars erotica*

23 In contrast with his more official published texts, like his poems or essays, in which Greek sanctions a form of cultural authority, Swinburne’s correspondence—the privacy of which he constantly insisted on preserving³³—reveals a provocative understanding of the Hellenic heritage. Their contents would certainly have been considered as downright obscene had Lord Campbell³⁴ been allowed to peruse those documents. However, the poet knew that epistles (for private consumption only) were not within the reach of the recent anti-obscenity laws, as Lord Campbell himself admitted in a debate with Lord Lyndhurst.³⁵ Swinburne therefore openly described his wildest flagellating fantasies to correspondents in the know, including Lord Houghton (who introduced him to Sade’s works), W. M. Rossetti and S. Solomon, to name but a few. In these letters the use of Greek clearly plays a central role in heightening the erotic charge of certain flogging scenes. It is indeed as if flagellation had been invented in ancient Greece³⁶ and that Swinburne had to express in that ancient tongue his personal celebration of the rod. Hence his numerous inventions of punitive Greek deities, such as ‘Αφροδίτη Μαστιγόφορος ή Αθήνη Ραβδοῦχος’ (‘scourge-bearing Aphrodite or Minerva bearing the rod’)³⁷ or of pseudo Aristophanic compounds such as the ‘αντιπαιδοπυγομαστιγίας’³⁸ a Greek neologism signifying ‘anti-child-buttocks-whipping’ which he ironically applies to those calling for the abolition of physical chastisement in public schools.

24 In such instances, Greek is no longer a cultural veil granting the poet immunity but a catalyst of erotic desires—hence the title I chose for this paper ‘It’s bawdier in Greek’ which refers to a letter to W. M. Rossetti in which Swinburne discusses a controversial translation of a Greek line in Euripides’ satyr play *the Cyclops*, a parodic and burlesque rewriting of Book IX of the *Odyssey*. Whereas his contemporaries mainly favoured the luminous Apollonian pole of Greek culture, the imagery here is explicitly Dionysian as Swinburne gives a literal translation of the following words of Silenus in praise of wine as conducive to love making:

. . . It means literally . . .

‘And playing with paps (or ‘breasts’) and handling with your hands

The field prepared for love; ay, dancing too,

Ay, and forgetfulness of ills’, etc.

It is bawdier in Greek because the word ‘field’ is the received slang for what M. de Sade calls ‘ce villain con, temple où depuis tant de generations l’absurdité humaine court sacrifier en brûlant un pitoyable encens’: so that the real rendering would be:

‘The swept and garnished c—t’; but this I did *not* offer to Morley, which was mean and false of me—‘traduttore traditore’.³⁹

25 Although the incriminated Greek word λειμών (signifying ‘any moist, grassy place, meadow’), is not quoted here, the mock scholarly debate is nonetheless of great interest as most translations of that play bowdlerized ‘the handling of the field’ into a chaste caressing of locks⁴⁰ in spite of the discreet indication in the 1843 Greek-English lexicon of Middle and Liddell (which Swinburne would certainly have been using) that Euripides’ word referred to the *pudenda muliebria*. Here Latin appears as the equivalent of a sculpted fig-leaf hiding the genitalia of Greek or Roman statues (Nead 207). Such Latin veils were frequently employed by scholars when dealing with potentially arousing images or texts which needed to be concealed from the ignorant masses obviously less able than the refined connoisseur to control their physical reaction. The 8th volume of Louis Barré’s *Herculanum & Pompéi* (1861) compiling the explicit contents of the *Museum Secretum* in Naples is a telling example of this.⁴¹ But Latin was also used to the same ends by more scientific authors from Charles Darwin to Richard von Krafft-Ebing.⁴² In all these books the function of Latin—the language of the classical erudite—is clearly to preclude what Lynda Nead has analysed as ‘the transference of desire from the sight of the object to their written description’ (Nead 207).

In his letter to Rossetti, however, Swinburne bypasses this Latin rhetorical filter in order to translate the Greek word directly into English. To heighten the obscene, the ‘field’ is also stripped of its metaphoricity⁴³—hence the debasing into vulgar ‘slang’. The apologetic tone at the end of the epistle (‘mean and false’) is therefore highly ironic: Swinburne confesses his deliberate mistranslation is a crime prompted by his prudish publisher Morley. But in spite of this blasphemous sub-version of the glorious language of the Olympians, Swinburne does not go as far as to write the too explicit word ‘cunt’ which he leaves in its fragmented form as ‘c—t’. This also allows him a detour via the French ‘con’—a word which he nonetheless leaves in Greek in another letter to George Powell, written in reaction to an American journalist’s allegations that Emerson had called Swinburne ‘a perfect leper and a mere sodomite’:

If you don’t know what was Lord Dennam’s Greek quotation (which earned him not unnaturally the King’s un-dying hatred) it was this literally: ‘The αἰδῖον (oh, monsieur!) of my mistress is cleaner than your mouth!!!!’ This was quoted in open court.⁴⁴

26 Here the poet is alluding to the trial of Queen Caroline accused by King George IV of adulterous intercourse. The Greek quotation was used by Lord Denman, the Queen’s lawyer, to compare the case with Nero’s treatment of Octavia. Although he claims to give a ‘literal’ transcription of the quotation, Swinburne in fact paradoxically articulates openness (‘This was quoted in open court’) and concealment as he leaves the offensive word (meaning *vulva*) untranslated.

27 In both letters Swinburne also resorts to the same strategy of blending Greek with French and particularly with the French of Sade (‘oh, monsieur!’), that is the language of his flagellating fantasies. Such polyglot combinations are far more discreet in his poetry or in his essays⁴⁵ as French was perceived as the language of immorality by most of Swinburne’s detractors.⁴⁶ Throughout his correspondence, the poet therefore adopts the stance of the ‘polyglot freak’⁴⁷ an expression he uses to describe his contribution to Gautier’s *Tombeau*. This oxymoronic formulation is extremely revealing as it mingles the erudite (thanks to the Greek etymology of the word polyglot) and the monstrous with the term ‘freak’, as if erudition were more conducive to immorality than to normative cultural consumption. But the monstrosity of Swinburne’s polyglossia, which constantly lapses into the obscene in his letters, also points to another interesting tension, as the freak or monster needs to be both hidden and shown (*monstrare*) which is also the paradox of the Greek code. In spite of the recurring image of Homeric ‘winged words’, Greek pronunciation has always been a mystery which explains partly why most Hellenophiles apprehended the language in visual terms: ‘Having no clue to the antique pronunciation of the language and no correct sense of its accentual values, we feel their music with the eye rather than the ear’.⁴⁸ The different alphabet equally emphasizes this predominantly visual dimension of Greek. Even more so than Latin, Greek, like a *Museum Secretum* or the Secret Library of the British Museum (created in 1857), is made to function paradoxically as a ‘hidden display’ (Nead 206) which on the one hand calls for aesthetic contemplation (like κάλλος γράφειν praised by Pater (Pater 1885, 50) and yet on the other conveniently keeps ‘unspeakable things’ (to quote from ‘The Hymn to Proserpine’⁴⁹) from sight. This implicit equation between Greek inscriptions and Greek art works, frequently alluded to in J. A. Symonds’s essays,⁵⁰ explains why Greek words may elicit sexual desire, just like an erotic image. In another letter to Lord Houghton written on Christmas day 1867, Swinburne thus draws on the visual potentialities of one transliterated Greek word, *callipyge*, as an erotic stimulus. The letter relates the apocryphal medieval story of a schoolboy trying to escape from punishment in a church. He clings to a statue of the Blessed Virgin for protection but his angry master follows him into the church and tries to flog him. Miraculously the master’s arm is stricken with paralysis and the boy spared. Then Swinburne gives his own pagan version of the story: ‘Were I in that boy’s place, I should fly and cling to a living and fleshly statue of the Venus Callipyge (doubly appropriate)—which I think as competent *without a miracle*, to stiffen any man’s—arm.’⁵¹ Here the transgression not only lies in the poet’s substitution of the Virgin Mary by a pagan naked deity resembling those exposed in the *Museum Secretum*.⁵² The parenthesis points to the key significance of the transliterated

28 Greek epithet 'Callipyge', meaning beautiful buttocks, which the learned addressee would immediately have identified as an 'appropriate' name indeed for a story on flagellation. Swinburne's use of Greek was therefore complex and very much dependent on the nature of the texts in which such Greek insertions occurred. Whereas the winged words of Homer or Aeschylus were officially made to function metonymically as signifiers of classical authority in both his poetry and essays, discreet parodic sub-versions of canonic authors in those published texts suggest that the poet also considered Greek as a convenient cultural veil for more questionable desires to which he openly gave vent in his private correspondence. To this end, Swinburne successfully exploited the ambiguity of the Hellenic sign which most Victorians paradoxically perceived as both cryptic and luminously transparent. Untranslated Greek quotations thus enabled the poet to claim immunity and eventually to select his readership, ideally made up of refined connoisseurs of Hellenic culture, but a culture with as many shady Dionysian recesses as Apollonian heights.

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Notes

- 1 Mrs. Sinclair was the coded name of Violet Fane.
- 2 A whole section of the *Greek Anthology* is made up of erotic epigrams. Interestingly Mallock also chose a quotation from the *Anthology* for the epigraph of the *New Republic*.
- 3 The debate in the excerpt from the *New Republic* concerning the linguistic corruption of certain Greek poems could therefore be understood as an allusion to the scandals and various accusations of neo-Socratic corruption formulated against a certain number of Hellenophile Oxford dons in the 1870s, notably J. A. Symonds and W. Pater who is also satirized in the novel as the effeminate aesthete Mr. Rose.
- 4 See chapters 3 and 5 in W. H. Mallock's *Memoirs of Life and Literature*.
- 5 This expression was used by John Morley in his 1866 of *Poems and Ballads, First Series*. See Hyder 23.
- 6 Swinburne, 'Notes on Poems and Reviews' (1866) in Haynes (ed.), 404. Although Swinburne frequently praised and emulated Keats's poetry, in these 'Notes' his cultured models are Shelley and Byron who both knew ancient Greek, contrary to 'Cockney Keats'.
- 7 As noted by Haynes (416), the Greek quotation on page 406 is from the *Iliad*, IV, 43: 'Of mine own will, yet with reluctant mind'.
- 8 G. GENETTE indeed defines the paratext in the following terms (8): 'Zone indéfinie entre le dedans et le dehors, elle-même sans limite rigoureuse, ni vers l'intérieur (le texte) ni vers l'extérieur (le discours du monde sur le texte), lisère, ou comme disait Philippe Lejeune, « frange du texte imprimé qui, en réalité, commande toute lecture »'.
- 9 Swinburne, 'Phaedra', 1.97-99, in Haynes 26. The Greek quotation means 'Death alone of all gods does not love gifts'.
- 10 On Homer's winged words, see Vivante.
- 11 As shown by this comment by Symonds: 'Homer's phrase for human speech, 'pea pterøenta, 'winged words,' is peculiarly true of Greek, with its variety of liquids, vowels, diphthongs, its gliding flow and twitter as of swallows on their flight, its garrulous profusion of reiterated particles.' (Symonds 272)
- 12 F. M. Müller had been Swinburne's examiner at Oxford.
- 13 Müller's *Lectures on the Science of Language* 242. See also Müller's comment (245): 'before the Tribunal of the Science of Language, the difference between ancient and modern languages vanishes'.
- 14 'On the Cliffs' *Poems*, vol. 3, 313: 'Yea, what new cry is this, what note more bright/ Than their song's wing of words was dark of flight'

- 15 ‘To Walt Whitman in America’ *Poems*, vol. 2, 122 : ‘Let the flight of the wide-winged word/ Come over, come in and be heard’
- 16 ‘Ave Atque Vale’, *Poems*, vol. 3, 53: ‘Thou art far too far for wings of words to follow’.
- 17 ‘On the Cliffs’, *Poems*, vol. 3, 311.
- 18 ‘Sapphics’, Haynes 164-165.
- 19 Lang, vol. 2, 281-2.
- 20 For this section I am particularly indebted to the methodology of classical receptions studies which analyse the *migrations* of meaning from one text to another. This spatial and reciprocal model runs counter to the chronological notion of legacy on which the classical tradition is based.
- 21 « Le tout était surtout pour moi question d’hygiène ; il faut se purger du vice naturel d’idolâtrie et d’imitation ». Proust quoted by Pierre Clarac in his introduction to *Contre Sainte-Beuve* (690).
- 22 Lang, vol. 2, 203.
- 23 See Mackail’s definition of the epigram (4): ‘as a very short poem summing up as though in a memorial inscription what it is desired to make permanently memorable in any action or situation.’
- 24 Lang, vol. 2, 194.
- 25 ‘The prestige of Greece among educated middle-class Victorians . . . was so massive that invocation of Hellenism could cast a veil of respectability over a hitherto unmentionable vice or crime’ (Dowling 1994, 28).
- 26 See Robert Buchanan’s accusations in *Master-Spirits* (306): ‘England happens to be infested at present by a school of poetic thought which threatens frightfully to corrupt, demoralise, and render effeminate the rising generation; a plague from Italy and France; a school æsthetic without vitality, and beautiful without health; a school of falsettos innumerable.’
- 27 See Swinburne’s quotation from Théophile Gautier in his ‘Notes’:
J’en prévien les mères de familles,
Ce que j’écris n’est pas pour les petites filles
Dont on coupe le pain en tartines ; mes vers
Sont des vers de jeune homme.
- 28 This clearly anticipates Oscar Wilde’s preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890): ‘There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.’
- 29 See Gilles Boileau’s emended version of one of Sappho’s poems in his translation of Longinus’s *Treatise on the Sublime* (1674):
- 30 Letter from Swinburne to F. S. Ellis dated 18th July 1872 in *The Swinburne Letters*, vol. 2, 180. See also vol. 1, 121: ‘One birch-twig I hereby pull out of the bloody bundle. As to my quantities and meter and rule of rhythm and rhyme, I defy castigation. . . . The moral and religious question I give up at once. I let down my breeches, pull up my shirt, and kneel down (for the 100th time) on the flogging block, without a word. If you apply a rod soaked in brine for that offence I confess I deserve it. . . . Only don’t say with my old friend of the *Spectator* that it isn’t Greek—because it *is*. . . . I have been well flogged some four or five times already for the same fault. Tennyson and Jowett, the *Athenaeum* and the *Spectator* have each had their innings’.
- 31 ‘Lady’s Greek/without the accents’ is a quotation from E. B. Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (40).
- 32 See Yopie Prins’s analysis of Swinburne’s ‘Sapphic scene of instruction’ (121 & sq).
- 33 See the quotation from Heine chosen by Swinburne as the epigraph for his poem ‘In Sepulcretis’ (*Poems*, 6, 85): ‘To publish even one line of an author which he himself has not intended for the public at large—especially letters which are addressed to private persons—is to commit a despicable act of felony’.
- 34 Lord Campbell introduced the *Obscene Publications Act* in 1857.
- 35 On the objections of Lord Lyndhurst concerning the application of the *Obscene Publications Act* to works of ‘high culture’, see Nead 211.
- 36 Swinburne was certainly acquainted with the more subversive publications of his controversial publisher, John Camden Hotten, including William Cooper’s *Flagellation & the Flagellants: A History of the Rod* (1870) which evokes Greek flagellation practices.
- 37 Lang, vol. 1, 76. Swinburne may have had in mind Sophocles’ little known play *Ajax Scourgebearer*.
- 38 Lang, vol. 1, 71: ‘there’s an Aristophanic compound I hope—as thus—a fellow ought really to be let off his next swishing for that neat piece of scholarship.’
- 39 Lang, vol. 1, 62.
- 40 See for instance E. P. Coleridge’s translation in 1910 (9): ‘to caress well-tended locks’.

41 Louis Barré quoted by Nead (206): 'If we were treating another subject, we might be criticized for this extravagance of erudition; here however, we will no doubt be commended, just as sculptors are forgiven the overgrowth of foliage that sometimes screens the nudity of their human figures'.

42 See Krafft-Ebing's warning in the preface to the first edition of *Psychopathia Sexualis* (vii): 'A scientific title has been chosen and technical terms are used throughout the book in order to exclude the lay reader; for the same reason certain portions are written in Latin.'

43 See BAUDRILLARD's definition of pornography and obscenity (33-34): « Prenons le pornographique : il est clair qu'on a là le corps tout entier réalisé. Peut-être que la définition de l'obscénité serait-elle alors le devenir réel, absolument réel, de quelque chose qui, jusque-là, était métaphorisé ou avait une dimension métaphorique. [...] Dans l'obscénité, les corps, les organes sexuels, l'acte sexuel, sont brutalement non plus « mis en scène », mais immédiatement donnés à voir, c'est-à-dire à dévorer. »

44 Letter to George Powell dated 30 January 1874, Lang, vol. 2, 273.

45 Swinburne quotes Gautier and other French authors in his 'Notes on Poems and Reviews'. The poet was perfectly fluent in French and also wrote French pastiches, like the epigraph to his poem 'Laus Veneris'.

46 Although some critics admired Swinburne's flawless Greek, others claimed that he had found his inspiration among the 'worst circles of Parisian life' (Hyder 35). Rather than associating Swinburne's poems with classical high culture, Buchanan argued that 'he tosses to us this charming book of verses which bears some evidence of having been inspired in Holywell Street . . . and touched up in the Jardin Mabille'. Holywell Street in London was at the time associated with pornographic publications. The 'Bal Mabille' was a notorious meeting point for prostitutes in Paris (Hyder 31). On Swinburne's relations with France, see Ribeyrol and Evangelista.

47 Lang, vol. 2, 270.

48 Symonds 1890, 272. On the visual (and erotic) potential of Greek, see Winckelmann's revealing penetrative fantasies when commenting upon the words of Homer (155): 'It was chiefly owing to that abundance of vowels, that the Greek tongue was preferable to all others, for expressing by the sound and disposition of its words the forms and substances of things. The discharge, the rapidity, the diminution of strength in piercing, the slowness in gliding, and the stopping of an arrow, are better expressed by the sound of these three verses in Homer, *Iliad* . . . than even by the words themselves. You see it discharged, flying through the air and piercing the belt of Menelaus'.

49 Line 52 from Swinburne's 'Hymn to Proserpine' may refer to the Eleusinian mysteries ('rrhta) according to Haynes (334).

50 In his essays, Symonds refers to the Greek inscription as conjuring up homoerotic images. Metonymically the Greek inscription becomes the signifier of Greek love: 'Another attention of the same kind from a lover to a boy was to have a vase or drinking-cup of baked clay made with the portrait of the youth depicted on its surface, attended by winged *genii* of health and love. The word KALOS was inscribed beneath. . . . Nor must I here omit the custom which induced lovers of a literary turn to praise their friends in prose or verse' J. A. Symonds, 'A Problem in Greek Ethics' 214.

51 Lang, vol. 1, 283.

52 See Nead (208) on the Venus Callipyge kept in the *Museum Secretum* of Naples.

Pour citer cet article

Référence électronique

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À propos de l'auteur

Charlotte Ribeyrol

Charlotte Ribeyrol is Senior lecturer at the Sorbonne University in Paris where she teaches 19th century English literature and art history. Her main area of research is the influence of Ancient Greece on Victorian painting and literature, particularly in the works of A.C. Swinburne. She has published articles for the poet's centenary in the *Tombeau pour Swinburne* (Aden, Paris, 2010); *A.C. Swinburne and the Singing Word* (Ashgate, 2010), and *Swinburne: Unofficial Laureate* (Manchester UP, 2013). Her book on the Hellenism of Swinburne, Pater and Symonds entitled *Étrangeté, passion, couleur : L'Hellénisme de Swinburne, Pater et Symonds (1865-1880)* was published in 2013 by *Les ELLUG* (Éditions littéraires et linguistiques de l'Université de Grenoble).

Charlotte Ribeyrol est Maître de conférences à l'Université Paris-Sorbonne où elle enseigne la littérature et l'histoire de l'art britanniques du XIX^e siècle. Ses recherches portent sur l'hellénisme victorien, en poésie et en peinture, en particulier dans l'œuvre d'A.C. Swinburne. Elle a publié plusieurs articles sur ce poète à l'occasion du centenaire de sa mort dans Tombeau pour Swinburne (Aden, Paris, 2010), A. C. Swinburne and the Singing Word (Ashgate, 2010), et Swinburne: Unofficial Laureate (Manchester UP, 2013). Son ouvrage intitulé Étrangeté, passion, couleur : L'Hellénisme de Swinburne, Pater et Symonds (1865-1880) vient de paraître aux ELLUG (2013).

Droits d'auteur

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Résumés

'It's bawdier in Greek' : A.C. Swinburne et les subversions du code hellénique

Lorsque Algernon Charles Swinburne fut sollicité en 1872 pour participer au *Tombeau* de Théophile Gautier aux côtés de Mallarmé et Hugo, il surprit l'éditeur en ne proposant pas moins de six poèmes dont deux en anglais, deux en français, un en latin et un en grec. Cette contribution polyglotte, impressionnant hommage à son maître français également formé aux lettres classiques, permit au poète victorien d'asseoir outre-manche sa réputation d'auteur virtuose. L'usage du latin et du grec ancien était en effet à cette époque la chasse gardée d'une élite intellectuelle dont Swinburne aimait à rappeler à ses détracteurs moins cultivés qu'il était le fier représentant. Cet élitisme classique se donne à lire dans la plupart de ses écrits « officiels », comme ses essais ou ses poèmes, où il manie avec arrogance la référence et la langue helléniques alors même que sa correspondance privée laisse libre cours à des explorations bien plus subversives et sadiques d'une Hellade de l'ombre. C'est la dualité de ce *logos* grec, tiraillé entre l'érudit et l'érotique que cet article se propose d'analyser afin de révéler certaines des tensions qui traversent l'écriture à la fois éminemment classique et dangereusement obscène de ce poète hellénophile.

When Algernon Charles Swinburne was asked in 1872 to make a contribution to Théophile Gautier's *Tombeau*, he impressed his French friends, including Hugo or Mallarmé, by sending no fewer than six poems, two in English, two in French, one in Latin and one in Greek. This eloquent polyglossia was both an appropriate tribute to his classically-trained French poetic mentor, as well as a means for Swinburne to show off his multifaceted literary skills. In the 19th century, Latin and Greek were indeed powerful signifiers of elitism on both sides of the Channel, as shown by Swinburne's erudite use of untranslated Greek words or quotations in many of his essays and poems which were meant to baffle ignorant critics. And yet, this public or rather 'official' use of the Hellenic tongue to encode cultural excellence may be contrasted with the poet's subversive treatment of Greek in his correspondence exploring more personal Sadian fantasies. This dual *logos* reveals a subtle articulation of the erudite and the erotic—the mysterious 'corrupt' ἑρωτικὸν satirized in W. H. Mallock's *New Republic* (1877). This article therefore proposes to focus on the dichotomy of the Hellenic code, split between the learned and the obscene, between high and potentially *low* culture, in the writings of the hellenophile Victorian poet, who was equally drawn to the alluring calligraphy of Greek, the language of beauty and formal perfection, as well as to the more fleshly promises suggested by certain Hellenic words and images.

Entrées d'index

Mots-clés : Swinburne (Algernon Charles), Hellénisme victorien, grec ancien, sado-masochisme, parodie

Keywords : Swinburne (Algernon Charles), Victorian Hellenism, ancient Greek, sado-masochism, parody