Poetry, Painting, and Emotions: Synesthetics in Swinburne’s “Before the Mirror”

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Abstract

In this paper, I consider how Swinburne brings together the visual and verbal realms in his ekphrasis by focusing on his “Before the Mirror,” the poem inspired by Whistler’s *The Little White Girl* (later titled *Symphony in White, No. 2*); this poem combines the visionary realm of lyric poetry with the visual realm of art. I examine how Swinburne develops his aesthetic personality through his ekphrasis and argue that his ekphrastic writing shows a specific poetic vision, specifically related to “Victorian” or aesthetic poetry, denoting themes of female narcissism and passionate suffering. Although the concept most associated with Swinburne’s writing on art is that of the female body, his idiosyncratic representation of feminine power, portrayed through his lyrical patterns, makes his work extraordinary. Regardless of whether “Before the Mirror” reinforces female physical beauty or female power, Swinburne’s linking of aesthetic painting to passionate verse engenders a feeling of “words” as a means of containing strong emotions we associate with responses to “images.” The poem takes us back to where poetry starts—the idea of passion—and to the question of “influence,” as Swinburne allows and desires his writing to be affected by other arts. Passionately engaged with the relationship between the visual and verbal, Swinburne wrote with the intention of presenting the power of words through poetry. The effort to make language embody and interpret the visual by

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assimilating, not displacing, its effects may be impossible, but it gives Swinburne’s poetry much of its energy and value.

**Keywords:** Aesthetrcism, ekphrasis, Swinburne, Whistler
This paper discusses two themes—narcissism and passionate suffering—by considering the ways Swinburne brings together the realms of the visual and the verbal in his poetry. I will focus on the representation of a visionary realm that is specifically the province of lyric poetry and defined against the visual in Swinburne’s “Before the Mirror,” the text he wrote for Whistler’s *The Little White Girl* (later titled *Symphony in White, No. 2*) (See Figure 1). Swinburne’s celebration of female beauty and power has always been noted, but it is less known that his “writing for art” raises some important questions as to what extent this form of representation is the special domain of poetry related to aestheticism. “Before the Mirror” might be seen as a reflection of the circumstances in which the poem is written, that is its situation in an ekphrastic moment and Swinburne’s own affinity with Victorian art and poetry. In examining how Swinburne develops his aesthetic personality through ekphrasis, I argue that his ekphrastic writing shows a special poetic vision that is specifically the province of “Victorian” or aesthetic poetry, denoting important themes of female narcissism and passionate suffering.

![The Little White Girl](http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/whistler-symphony-in-white-no-2-the-little-white-girl-n03418)

**Figure 1** *The Little White Girl*¹

In his discussion of Swinburne, George Harry Ford asserts, “As in Shelley, the only colour which strikes us in Swinburne’s poetry is white.”² Ford does not provide a source for this remark; yet in light of Swinburne’s description in “Before the Mirror,” it is appropriate to see the poem as an example of whiteness in practice. Yet, more than a representation of whiteness, the poem presents itself as an inchoate expression of the aesthetic passion, embracing a variety of artistic concerns ranging from the aesthetics of colour to the patterning of lyric song. Swinburne turns the reading of Whistler’s painting into a synaesthetic experience, in which seeing, ekphrasis and lyric rhythm merge.³ As Valentine Cunningham indicates, “The musicality (symphony) of [Whistler’s] title, plays very well to the noise Swinburne has coming from the painting’s white silences;” the poem is “an explosion of synaesthetics, of sights and sound.”⁴

Whistler’s Symphony in White, No. 2 depicts a girl with incongruous images that make it difficult to tell what is going on in the painting—one girl dressed in white looks young before the mirror but appears surprisingly old in her reflected image. The woman, turning half away from the reader, evokes feelings of mystery, as the reader can see only one side of her face. One aspect of this confusion is the problem the reader faces in establishing to what degree the woman before the mirror is meant to be seen as an autonomous personification or as the passive currency of her agent—the male artist.⁵ It seems that the woman is depicted as hovering between activity and passivity. The sense of enigma and uncertainty evoked by Whistler’s painting, the suggestion it allows that the woman is only semi-personified, might stimulate a poet like Swinburne to write a poem analogous to his response to the painting. A bond is established between the painting and the poem: Swinburne probes the sense of indeterminacy that the white girl’s face can only hint at. “Before the Mirror” thus exemplifies one form of negotiation between the visual and the verbal.

The way Swinburne translates the visual into the verbal works in the structure of symmetry—there are three sections in the poem; each section has three stanzas. Swinburne projects himself

³ “Synaesthetics” in this context refers to the condition in which Swinburne sees and interprets Whistler’s painting through his own unusual way, by experiencing a color as a sound, or turning the painting into lyric rhythm. When Whistler’s painting The Little White Girl was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1865, “Before the Mirror,” printed on gold-paper, was pasted to the frame of the painting. Swinburne’s poem became a kind of aesthetic object in tandem with Whistler’s painting.
⁵ On the significance of Whistler’s white girl in Symphony in White, No. 2 as mediating between autonomous art and commodity culture, see Kathy A. Psomiades, Beauty’s Body: Femininity and Representation in British Aestheticism (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 108-113. All further references will be to this edition.
as an artist sensitive to the ideas of number and proportion in his ekphrasis: the proportion of the speaker to the voice of the white girl is two to one. With the Golden ratio (2:1), the poem is designed in two different voices: while the impersonal descriptive voice of the speaker is heard in section one and three, the girl’s voice is heard in the center of the poem. Accordingly, the pictorial analogy is applicable in “Before the Mirror”—like the physical frame of Whistler’s painting, the poem is framed around the image of the girl; what is framed around this image of subjectivity is this framing, interpreting voice of the speaker.

Though an American-born artist, Whistler was important in the Victorian art world; several art historians have noted his engagement with the Pre-Raphaelite circle. For instance, Lesley J. Higgins indicates, “Swinburne and Whistler were intimate friends from the early 1860s, when Dante Gabriel Rossetti introduced them.” Also, in her chapter on “James McNeill Whistler and the Religion of Art,” Kathleen Pyne suggests that Whistler’s idea about depicting the white girl’s ghostly image in the mirror demonstrates the way Whistler’s artistic thought is influenced by “the fashionable spiritualist discourse of the 1860s.” Pyne views the painting as Whistler’s “first attempt to construct an image of the soul,” suggesting that it is a contrivance that explains Whistler’s interest in spiritualism. Although art is grounded on material or visual signs, these are insufficient for Whistler to constitute his artistic vision. Whistler’s The Little White Girl makes the presence of a beautiful but mysterious woman the medium and substance of his aesthetic ideas. Yet, Whistler seems to suggest that the female body is ideal for artistic representation not only because it can serve as an image, but also because it is the source from which an image of the mysterious—the soul—originates. The Little White Girl is a tangible example of the way in which the representation of the soul is related to the elusive image of femininity; this aspect of Whistler’s artistic practice is clearly in tune with Swinburne and D. G. Rossetti’s preoccupations. Pyne suggests that Whistler’s close friendship with the Pre-Raphaelites has a significant impact on his work, arguing that the intangible image of the woman in the mirror is an obvious sign of Swinburne and Rossetti’s influence: “With the Symphony in White, No. 2 ... Whistler came close to realizing the elusive, inward image that was also being developed by his English friends Rossetti and Swinburne, as he edged further away from

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7 Kathleen Pyne, Art and the Higher Life: Painting and Evolutionary Thought in Late Nineteenth-Century America (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996), 99.
8 Ibid., 100.
the theatricality of Courbet’s brushwork.”

In addition, Robin Spencer particularly suggests that Whistler was not only a close friend of Swinburne but also collaborated closely with him in fashioning a distinctive type of painter-and-poet relationship that belongs to the nineteenth-century social context:

Before *The Little White Girl* was exhibited at the Salon des Refusés Whistler and Swinburne were already on intimate terms. When they were together in Paris in March 1863, they would have seen Manet’s *Lola de Valence*, for the frame of which Baudelaire had composed a quatrain, and two years later Swinburne, inspired by *The Little White Girl*, wrote “Before the Mirror,” verses from which Whistler similarly pasted to the frame of his picture for the Royal Academy in 1865. By making Swinburne his poet, as Manet had made Baudelaire his, Whistler demonstrated that painters could inspire writers, thus answering the charge implicitly made by *The Athenaeum* in 1862, that the painter’s task was merely one of illustration.

In claiming that Whistler and Swinburne’s creativity were fueled by Manet and Baudelaire’s productions, Spencer offers a perceptive account of how our understanding of Whistler’s painting and Swinburne’s poem may be illuminated by acknowledging the presence of “French model” lying behind them—as well as some indication of collaboration and reciprocity involved in establishing such a relationship between the painter and the poet. In a letter to Ruskin (11 August 1865), Swinburne suggested that he would like to introduce Whistler to Ruskin. Attaching a copy of “Before the Mirror,” Swinburne attempted to promote Whistler’s painting as well as his own poem: “whatever merit my song may have, it is not so complete in beauty, in tenderness and significance, in exquisite execution and delicate strength as Whistler’s picture. Whistler himself was the first critic who so far overpraised my verse as to rank it above his own painting.”

In 1902, when Whistler recalled Swinburne’s poem for his painting, he expressed his gratitude for Swinburne’s support, commenting that “Before the Mirror” is “a rare and graceful tribute from the poet to the painter—a noble recognition of work by the production of a nobler one.”

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9 Ibid., 94.
Legitimately, “Before the Mirror” is a poem by Whistler’s invitation; yet in defining his poem as against the visual, Swinburne turns this invitation into a kind of challenge. As my following reading would show, while Swinburne might be seen as supporting Whistler’s painting and giving further value to it, he was in fact wresting control from the painter. In a long letter written to Whistler (2 April, 1865), Swinburne offers his poem to Whistler, who had evidently requested something that might serve as a “motto” either in the exhibition catalogue or as a text accompanying the painting itself. Yet, in making this offer, Swinburne also expresses his need to translate Whistler’s pictorial presentation into verbal equivalent, as though the painting marked out a space that he is lured to fill:

I write a word to leave in case I find you gone out. Here are the verses, written the first thing after breakfast and brought off at once. I could not do anything prettier, but if you don’t find any serviceable as an Academy-Catalogue motto and don’t care to get all this printed under the picture, tell me at once that I may try my hand at it tomorrow again.

Gabriel praises them highly, and I think myself the idea is pretty: I know it was entirely and only suggested to me by the picture, where I found at once the metaphor of the rose and the notion of sad and glad mystery in the face languidly contemplative of its own phantom and all other things seen by their phantoms. I wanted to work this out more fully and clearly, and insert the reflection of the picture and the room; but Gabriel says it is full long for its purpose already, and there is nothing I can supplant.13

In transposing Whistler’s painting into a different medium, Swinburne ignores the objects that have been placed around the woman; he dismisses several details including the fireplace, the Japanese fan, the vase of blue-and-white china, and other decorative elements within the painting.14 Despite Swinburne’s affirmation that the idea of the poem was “entirely and only suggested to me by the picture,” “Before the Mirror” is not a literal translation, or a faithful rendition, of Whistler’s painting. Swinburne seeks to be independent of Whistler’s pictorial contextualization and looks at the painting through his own filter. For Swinburne, the white girl’s face is a haunting image emitting a series of contradictory signs at once “sad” and “glad,” showing a kind of bewildering

13 Algernon C. Swinburne, *the Swinburne Letters*, 118-120.
14 Lionel Lambourne offers a clearer observation of Swinburne’s departure from Whistler’s painting: “he does not describe the Japanese fan she holds, nor the blue and white jar, the red lacquer bowl nor the azaleas, which have been used to accent the spatial ambiguity of the mirrored image of Jo’s face.” See *The Aesthetic Movement* (London: Phaidon, 1996), 29.
capriciousness. Swinburne particularly draws the reader’s attention to two things he perceives in the painting: the feminine symbol of the rose and the mystery of the woman’s face “contemplative of its own phantom” in the mirror. The rose is a sign of passion; the phantom is a symbol of anachronism. Anachronism, as Peter Buse and Andrew Stott suggest, “might well be the defining feature of ghosts... because haunting, by its very structure, implies a deformation of linear temporality.”

The sense of deformation in Whistler’s painting takes the form of the white girl showing her “past” look in the mirror. As Whistler presents the sense of temporality by doubling the image of the white girl, Swinburne attempts to make the white girl such an anachronism, suggesting that she is misplaced in time, as having outlived her own lifetime. The ghostly being of the white girl suggests its own epistemological conditions of possibility.

As painting can be defined as a metaphor for representing temporality, Swinburne’s poem seeks to highlight the way in which the dimensions of time and temporal death are introduced into Whistler’s painting. The word “phantom” might be glossed as “ghost,” or else “a figment of the imagination (Oxford English Dictionary, OED).” If the latter is true, by implication, Swinburne is drawn into some kind of inchoate passion and ontological uncertainty in the realm of imagination. By foregrounding the way in which an aestheticized woman produces a copy of a ghostly image, Swinburne sees Whistler’s painting as a palimpsest of past and present; in doing so, Swinburne brings us, more generally, to a defining theme of nineteenth-century aestheticism. Swinburne’s view of a ghostly presence within Symphony in White, No. 2 suggests a self-conscious attempt to explain the emergence of aesthetic consciousness. Such consciousness, which denotes the significance of aesthetic passion perpetually embodied in a feminine form, is one important feature of aesthetic discourse, bringing to mind Walter Pater’s response to La Gioconda. Like the white girl, Mona Lisa is, in a figurative sense, an anachronism by virtue of her vampiric undeadness. Pater’s Mona Lisa, a metaphor for power and persistence, signifies the historical specificity of aestheticism. It is precisely this historical specificity that aesthetic artists must exploit, and becoming a kind of transmitter, expressing the sense of aesthetic “haunting” in their own writing and painting. By aligning the past with the present, aesthetic artists reveal the interpenetration of history and modernity.

As the ontology of the “phantom” is evoked by Whistler’s visual representation, Swinburne’s poem, episodic in structure, embodies some temporal effects. The first section of the poem considers

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15 Peter Buse and Andrew Stott, eds. Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1999), 1.

different types of whiteness (white rose and snowdrops) and their association with ghosts, which are representations that constantly efface themselves: “White rose in red rose-garden / Is not so white; / Snowdrops that plead for pardon / And pine for fright (I. 1-4).” Swinburne suggests that all images are conjured in the form of the “phantom” associated with the conversion of substances into “sorrow” or “delight”; as Hollander notes, the nature of the depicted white girl’s ghostliness concerns the way “sorrow” or “delight” are “hidden in the unreadability of the girl’s meditative mask.” Swinburne then points to the mysterious “veil” worn by the girl: “Behind the veil, forbidden, / Shut up from sight, / Love, is there sorrow hidden, / Is there delight? / Is joy thy dower or grief, / White rose of weary leaf, / Late rose whose life is brief, whose loves are light? (ll. 8-14).”

Swinburne’s reading of Whistler’s painting is concerned with the white girl’s incorporeal quality, but also allows for the possibility that the girl has an actual physical property. The significance of the white girl’s metaphoric identity becomes apparent in the second section of the poem, in which Swinburne suggests that the white girl is a living ghost, but not the one who lingers on the margins of existence, not a liminal being, but one whose potency is affirmed by her centrality in his poetic narrative. Here, in Swinburne’s translation of the visual into the verbal, the image is presented in a somewhat peculiar but nevertheless a powerful drama, staging a female narcissist gazing at her own image reflected in the mirror and appreciating her own beauty. Swinburne combines a keenly narcissistic nature with a powerfully felt sense of isolation, showing a kind of female beauty which is sexually self-involved—the girl’s “lips” are not for someone else’s kiss, but simply two lips kissing each other:

“Come snow, come wind or thunder
High up in air,
I watch my face, and wonder
At my bright hair;
Nought else exalts or grieves
The rose at heart, that heaves
With love of her own leaves and lips that pair.”

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17 “Before the Mirror” is quoted from Algernon C. Swinburne, Poems and Ballads & Atalanta in Calydon (London: Penguin, 2000), 103-105. All further quotations are cited by line in the text.
“She knows not loves that kissed her
She knows not where.
Art thou the ghost, my sister,
White sister there,
Am I the ghost, who knows?
My hand, a fallen rose,
Lies snow-white on white snows, and takes no care.”

“I cannot see what pleasures
Or what pains were;
What pale new loves and treasures
New years will bear;
What beam will fall, what shower,
What grief or joy for dower;
But one thing knows the flower; the flower is fair.”

Since Swinburne sees only one side of the girl’s face, he must reconstruct the other by conjecture: a process, as Swinburne shows, that paradoxically intensifies the sense of inaccessibility that the girl’s mysterious being grants her. The high point of this imaginative engagement follows a bridging between physical existence and metaphysical self-awareness, as Swinburne suggests that the white girl is experiencing a kind of psychic or ontological instability—“Am I the ghost, who knows?” Yet, here comes a shift of perspective: as Psomiades notes, Swinburne turns to highlight “the difficulty of discerning who is ghostly and who is real.” What really matters is nothing but the certainty of the girl’s beauty which resists scrutiny, as the girl herself concludes in affirmation: “But one thing knows the flower; the flower is fair.”

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19 The stanza beginning “I cannot see ...” has a faint allusion to the first line of the fifth stanza of Keats’s “Ode to the Nightingale”: “I cannot see what flowers are at my feet ...”
20 Kathy A. Psomiades, Beauty’s Body, 111.
girl herself, Swinburne transforms Whistler’s girl into a fully self-sufficient woman of independent subjectivity, showing her self-consciousness and her own charms. In a sense, Swinburne pictures a vision of femininity in which the woman’s power becomes gradually larger than the producer of her image. Swinburne thus makes up an ironic detachment from the subtitle of Whistler’s painting—*The Little White Girl*. The reader who intends to read “Before the Mirror” with its subtext “verses written under a picture” in mind would soon perceives a sense of irony.

As Swinburne’s poem seeks to honor the subjectivity of Whistler’s woman more fully than Whistler’s painting can do, it also evinces a kind of agonistic relation to Whistler’s painting that is typical of works of ekphrasis, which often stage a kind of imaginative competition between the powers of the word and those of the image. Yet, Swinburne’s greater interest, at this juncture, is less in the woman’s subjectivity and the *agon* of image and text than in the effort to show how this form of representation is the special domain of his poetry (or of the kind of poetry he writes, whether we designate that as “Victorian,” aesthetic, or any other). As Bernard Richards suggests, “as a subject of poetry,” many Victorian poets “were reluctant to acknowledge the debt they owed to the visual arts in forming their own visual habits of mind.” “Before the Mirror” is not organized around every visual element of the painting—what remain in Swinburne’s rearrangement are the mirror and the white girl herself. It evokes Tennyson’s often-quoted poem “The Lady of Shalott,” suggesting themes of art’s self-containment and the artist or the poet as a suffering isolated maiden. Nina Auerbach suggests that “The Lady of Shalott’ summarizes the type for the feminine nature of aestheticism: “We may allegorize her into the artist, the poet’s anima, a fragile divinity, and heretical anti-divinity ... but she carries a suggestive resonance beyond these classifications ...[a] mysterious amalgam of imprisonment and power.” As with the Lady of Shalott, Swinburne’s white girl is insubstantial, mysterious and self-contained, detached from the outside world; the mirror, that conventional attribute of female narcissism, is also here a source of suffering, and at the same time suggests her enigmatic power. It is to this cluster of ideas that Swinburne turns in the final section of the poem, in which the poet arrives at a conceptual antithesis—“the notion of sad and glad mystery”:

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22 The debate about subjectivity within feminist discourse is not the focus of this paper. This paper does not attempt to produce a new theoretical model of reading Swinburne’s poem. Though it inevitably evokes issues related to feminist concerns of identity and femininity, I am more interested in ways Swinburne used female imagery to reflect his own identity as an aesthetic poet.


Glad, but not flushed with gladness,
   Since joys go by;
Sad, but not bent with sadness,
   Since sorrows dies;
Deep in the gleaming glass
She sees all past things pass,
   And all sweet life that was lie down and lie.

There glowing ghosts of flowers
   Draw down, draw nigh;
And wings of swift spent hours
   Take flight and fly;
She sees by formless gleams,
She hears across cold streams,
   Dead mouths of many dreams that sing and sigh.

Face fallen and white throat lifted,
   With sleepless eye
She sees old loves that drifted,
   She knew not why,
Old loves and faded fears
Float down a stream that hears
   The flowing of all men’s tears beneath the sky.

(III. 43-63)

Here Swinburne focuses on the mirror itself which, as Hollander notes, “has become that of the seer of truths beyond the gazeer’s own beauty, like the mirror of the Lady of Shalott, like the glass of art itself.” Yet, as McGann suggests, the process of mirroring denotes the sense of grief, reflecting a universe where “all things remain mysterious and strangely mournful.” The reader sees through the mirror not the girl’s own person, but a reflection of her solipsistic concern with the passing of youth.

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and love; the reflection suggests that the source of her pain lies in the inchoate passion of the past. The tone of voice that Swinburne wants to catch is the sense of weariness and sadness. The sense of sadness is especially provided by the rhyme which takes effect between “fears” and “hears.” Taken together their derivative meanings “pain” and “sound” are revealed, and we are perhaps reminded that the lyric voice is associated with the emotional pain of the poet.

Hollander has noted the significance of the musical quality, particularly “the internal rhymes” of “Before the Mirror”: “The poet’s characteristic extravagant phonological patterning is never more effective.” Swinburne’s experimenting with meters and complicated rhyme scheme draws attention to the aesthetic aspect of his poem: each stanza has a particular metrical pattern with an internal rhyme in the last line, manifesting Swinburne’s own self-consciousness as an aesthetic poet. For Swinburne, the idea of “rhymes,” which denotes the meaning of repetition, serves well to transmit the significance of “doubling” suggested in Whistler’s painting. Each stanza has one couplet in it, but even the couplets are themselves mostly repeated. For instance, in the first section of the poem, the “garden pardon” rhyme in the first stanza is repeated twice, returning as “forbidden hidden” and “harden garden” in the second and third stanza.

The poem, which has seven lines in a stanza, presents itself as a very strict containment of the stanza form. For Swinburne, the function of the seventh line is to add another rhyme: the seventh line in each stanza has a rhyme, but inside the line appears a further rhyme. Although each stanza presents a couplet of simple repetition, Swinburne somehow endeavors not to leave a rhyme simply as a couplet. What happens inside this particular stanza form is a kind of excess in which the rhymes go beyond the couplets and flowers into the triplets. For instance, in the second stanza of the third section, Swinburne splits over within the very strict structure itself, inserting the internal rhyme—“gleams, streams, dreams”—making a couple a triplet.

“Before the Mirror” is concerned with doubleness, reflecting two distinct aspects of aestheticism: the narcissistic (gladness) and the passionate (sadness). J. Hillis Miller recognizes the centrality of the idea of doubling in Whistler’s painting and Swinburne’s poem:

Whistler’s painting, like Swinburne’s poem, and like the poem in its relation to the painting, is a provocative and enigmatic series of doublings. These vertiginous doubling and redoublings are neither of opposites nor of mirrored identities but of differential complementarities. Perhaps the most striking instance is the difference between the girl’s.

expression and that of her ghostly sister in the mirror. The girl looks calmly, meditatively, at the wedding ring on her left hand. The girl in the mirror, however, has a look of ineffable heavy-lidded sadness and suffering, whether of pain received or pain imposed it is not quite possible to tell.  

Miller’s analysis that Whistler and Swinburne present a composite view of “differential complementarities” is persuasive. By attending, in their different ways, to themes of doubling, narcissism and suffering, Swinburne and Whistler lead to a context in which self-contained indifference and emotional pain are opposed but interlinked. Swinburne’s poem in particular points towards the obvious question of whether the two modes of aesthetic vision interact. Swinburne suggests, as Tennyson has done in “The Lady of Shalott,” that the two modes are interactive, and that this interaction is particularly important in the formation of aesthetic poetry.

To sum up, whether “Before the Mirror” reinforces the female bodily beauty or female power, Swinburne’s linking of aesthetic painting to passionate verse engenders a feeling of words as a means of containing the kinds of strong emotion we associate with a response to images. Swinburne’s poem takes us right back to where poetry starts—the idea of passion—and also to the question of “influence,” as he allows and desires his writing to be affected by other arts. Passionately engaged with the relationship between the visual and the verbal, Swinburne wrote with intentions to present the power of words through poetry. The effort to make language embody and interpret the visual, not by displacing but by assimilating its effects, may constitute an impossible task, but it is one which gives Swinburne’s poetry much of its energy and value.

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Buse, Peter, and Andrew Stott, eds. Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1999).


談情說畫：論史雲朋「鏡前」詩中的聯覺美學

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摘要

這篇論文旨在探討詩人史雲朋如何在他的讀畫詩中，融合文字與視覺藝術；主要探討史雲朋的作品「鏡前」，那是他為惠斯勒的畫「白衣小女孩」（後來更名為「二號白色交響曲」）所撰寫的讀畫詩，並分析詩中的視覺呈現。雖然此作品為讀畫詩，主要內容卻以抒情詩歌的視角呈現，與畫作的內容不盡相同。從檢視史雲朋如何透過撰寫讀畫詩來發展他的美學素養，筆者發現史雲朋的讀畫詩作呈現出一個非常特殊的詩歌意象，此意象特別與「維多利亞」或「美學」詩歌有關，顯示出女性自戀和充滿激情痛苦的重要主題。雖然史雲朋關於藝術寫作的主題主要是呈現女性身體的概念，但也正是他特殊的觀點——陰性力量的展現為詩歌的主要呈現內容——使他的詩作獨特非凡。無論「鏡前」是否強化了女性肉體美或女性力量，史雲朋將美學繪畫與充滿熱情的詩歌聯繫在一起，讓文字裝載著觀看者對影像的情感反應。史雲朋的詩歌讓我們回到了詩歌的起源：熱情的概念，也讓我們瞭解「影響」的議題，因為他允許並希望他的作品受到其他藝術的影響。史雲朋熱情地參與了視覺與言語文字之間的關係，試圖通過詩歌來呈現文字的力量。使語言體現和解釋視覺影像，不是透過置換，而是透過其他媒介的影響、吸收與轉化，這可能是一個不可能的任務，但這也是使史雲朋的詩歌富有能量與價值的原因。

關鍵詞：美學、讀畫詩、史雲朋、惠斯勒

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