“Quivering Web of Living Thought”: Conceptual Networks in Swinburne’s *Songs of the Springtides*

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Algernon Charles Swinburne, 1837-1909

- Algernon Charles Swinburne, 1837-1909
- Victorian poet, critic, and novelist
- Published the verse drama *Atalanta in Calydon* (1865), dedicated to Walter Savage Landor, in 1865
- Became enormously (in)famous in 1866 with the publication of *Poems and Ballads*, which challenged conventional tastes and included poems with anti-Christian sentiments and sexual imagery.
- Following *Poems and Ballads*, in 1871 Swinburne published *Songs Before Sunrise*, a volume, dedicated to Mazzini, full of hymns to republicanism and supporting the cause for Italian independence.
- Swinburne was an important critic, an early champion of Edgar Allen Poe, Whitman, Blake, and Baudelaire.
- Swinburne remained a prolific writer, regularly publishing new volumes of verse, long narrative poems, verse dramas, criticism, and a novel until his death in 1909.
- He was admired by friends and contemporaries, including Rossetti, Morris, Arnold, and Browning and influenced important writers from later generations, including Hardy, Wilde, Pater, Yeats, T.S. Eliot, and Pound.
The Swinburne Project is both:

- an online collection and scholarly edition
- a platform for experimenting with innovative applications of metadata technologies, e.g., XML Topic Maps, and data visualizations to provide new ways of reading and exploring the work of an important Victorian literary figure.
- New release of website will feature a new section, “Swinburne's Sandlot,” an undeveloped or underdeveloped space for showcasing experimental digital initiatives based on Swinburne Project texts.
- preview of new version available at: <http://brie.dlib.indiana.edu:8080/swinburne/>
Texts as Networks

• “an entrance into a network with a thousand entrances” (Barthes, S/Z 12)

• “The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut ... it is a node within a network.” (Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge 23)

• “An elementary datum is the fact that literature (whatever else it may mean to readers) processes, stores, and transmits data, and that such operations in the age-old medium of the alphabet have the same technical positivity as they do in computers.” (Kittler, Discourse Networks 1800/1900 370)
Swinburne’s Web

He [Robert. Browning] is something too much the reverse of obscure; he is too brilliant and subtle for the ready reader of a ready writer to follow with any certainty the track of an intelligence which moves with such incessant rapidity, or even to realize with what spider-like swiftness and sagacity his building spirit leaps and lightens to and fro and backward and forward as it lives along the animated line of its labour, springs from thread to thread and darts from centre to circumference of the glittering and quivering web of living thought woven from the inexhaustible stores of his perception and kindled from the inexhaustible fire of his imagination.


Swinburne is writing here about Robert Browning, but the network described here, a “quivering web of endless thought” that links a rapid onslaught of related ideas, may be found also in Swinburne’s own works.
Swinburne’s Indices: potential nodes in Swinburnian networks

On what themes and topics are Swinburne’s indices and structures based?:

• binary oppositions and pairings: pain/pleasure, life/death, love/hate, hope/fear, sleep/death.

• allusion, often obscure, to the Bible; classical history, literature, and mythology; Arthurian legend; and other European literature, ancient medieval, and modern.

• contemporary history and political and military events.

• repeated reference, in the form of parody, dedication, panegyric, or elegy to a host of contemporary cultural and literary figures.

• personal collection of symbolically charged figures, images, and concepts: the sea, sun, and wind; the femme fatale; the artist/poet; the passage of time in the months and the seasons; the preeminence of song and music.
Digital representations of Swinburne’s work, encoded in TEI/XML, facilitate the explicit identification, representation, and analysis of the architectonic structures in Swinburne’s compositions. Having identified the rudiments of these structures, a host of digital tools and strategies, such as the visualizations discussed later in this paper, may be brought to bear to suggest additional, more elusive structures in the text and to generate the indices and visualize the networks implicit in the deliberate designs of Swinburne’s poems.
Swinburne’s *Songs of the Springtides*

- Important transitional volume, published in 1880
- Swinburne was suffering ill health from alcoholism and deafness
- Through intervention of his mother and friend Theodore Watts (later Watts-Dunton), Swinburne was removed from the “bad influences” of London to live with Watts in Putney.
- Swinburne lived out his life, in relative tranquility, with Watts at the Pines in Putney.
- Many of the few but lengthy poems of *Songs of the Springtides* were composed during the turbulence of his final days in London, and the volume was the first published after Swinburne’s move to Putney.
Structure of *Songs of the Springtides*

- Swinburne originally planned “a little volume containing three poems upwards of 500 lines each in length, all of them in a sense sea-studies” (*Uncollected Letters* 2: 181).

- Considered, and later abandoned, the title “Epithalassion,” Greek for “upon the sea.”

- The “sea-studies”:
  - “Thalassius”
  - “On the Cliffs”
  - “The Garden of Cymodoce”
In the published volume, to the “triad of sea-studies”, Swinburne added the “Birthday Ode” to Victor Hugo.

These four poems are all long, roughly 500 lines each.

Unannounced in the Table of Contents but also present in the volume are three short poems:

- The fifteen-line “Dedication” to Edward John Trelawny

- The untitled sonnet, “Between two seas the sea-bird’s wing makes halt …”

- Another sonnet buried in the notes to the ode for Hugo: “On the proposed desecration of Westminster Abbey by the creation of a monument to the son of Napoleon III.”

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*Between two seas the sea-bird’s wing makes halt,*

*Wind-weary; while with lifting head he waits*

*For breath to reinspire him from the gates*

*That open still toward sunrise on the vault*

*High-domed of morning, and in flight’s default*

*With spreading sense of spirit anticipates*

*What new sea now may lure beyond the straits*

*His wings exulting that her winds exalt*

*And fill them full as sails to seaward spread,*

*Fulfilled with fair speed’s promise. Pass, my song,*

*Forth to the haven of thy desire and dread,*

*The presence of our lord, long loved and long*

*Far off above beholden, who to thee*

*Was as light kindling all a windy sea.*
Structure of *Songs of the Springtides*

BIRTHDAY ODE
FOR THE ANNIVERSARY FESTIVAL OF
VICTOR HUGO

FEBRUARY 26TH 1880
Thematic Networks in Songs of the Springtides

Literary Figures

• Sappho, Aeschylus, Landor, Shelley, and Hugo

Poetry, Music, Song

• “And lutes and lyres of milder and mightier strings” (Poems 3: 296)

• “child of song” (Poems 3: 309)

• “Being now no more a singer, but a song.” (Poems 3: 309)

• “Love’s priestess, mad with pain and joy of song, / Song’s priestess, mad with joy and pain of love,” (Poems 3: 317)
Thematic Networks in Songs of the Springtides

Time

• months: “the grey-green April sea”; “when July strewed fire on earth and sea” (Poems 3: 295)

• seasons: “And with that second moondawn of the spring’s” (Poems 3: 296); “That marries morn and even and winter and spring” (Poems 3: 301)

• hours: dawn, twilight, evening

Celestial Bodies: Sun, Moon, and Stars

• “one brighter than the sunbright sphere” (Poems 3: 295)

• “far / From past the moonrise and its guiding star, / Began a noise of tempest and a light” (Poems 3: 305)

• “heavenlier heavens with star for answering star” (Poems 3: 295)
The Sea

- “A sea-mew on a sea-king’s wrist alighting, As the north sea-wind caught and strained and curled” (Poems 3: 293)

- “Along the foam-flowered strand / Breeze-brightened, something nearer sea than land” (Poems 3: 295)

- “The wide sea’s immemorial song,—the sea / That sings and breathes in strange men’s ears of thee” (Poems 3: 320)

- “And midmost of the murderous water’s web / All round it stretched and spun, / Laughs, reckless of rough tide and raging ebb, / The loveliest thing that shines against the sun.” (Poems 3: 328)

- “O flower of all wind-flowers and sea-flowers” (Poems 3: 328)
Swinburne’s Schemata

Critics have commented upon and criticized the highly-structured qualities of *Songs of the Springtides*:

- “Talassius” is called “far too schematic and abstract” (McSweeney 54), with a “schematized account of his [Thalassius’] guardian’s teachings” (Louis 120).

- The “Birthday Ode” is called “a complete rhymed bibliography of the works of Victor Hugo” (Nicolson 168)


Careful structure and schematic design is not foreign to poetry; witness the regularity and repetition of epic formulas or the schematic qualities of the epic catalog. And such careful architecture and structure has affinities with the techniques and tools employed in digital humanities scholarship.
Keywords for encoding and visualization

- sea/water
- earth, air, fire
- time
- poet/artist
- song/music
- heavens (celestial bodies, e.g., sun, moon, stars)
- compass (i.e., direction, north, south, east, and west)
The `<taxonomy>` element, a descendant of `<encodingDesc>` in the `<teiHeader>` has been used to list the thematic categories that are being explicitly encoded in the text. The `@corresp` attribute of `<category>` (a child of `<taxonomy>`) is used to link individual categories to a corresponding entry in an XML topic map containing a fuller list of thematic categories, and other topics related to Swinburne and his works.
<encodingDesc>
  <classDecl>
    <taxonomy id='thematic_keywords'>
      <bibl>
        <title>Thematic Keywords</title>
      </bibl>
      <category id='kw-sea' corresp='swinburne.xtm#sea'>
        <catDesc>sea</catDesc>
      </category>
      <category id='kw-time' corresp='swinburne.xtm#time'>
        <catDesc>time</catDesc>
      </category>
      <category id='kw-poet' corresp='swinburne.xtm#poet'>
        <catDesc>poet</catDesc>
      </category>
      <category id='kw-song' corresp='swinburne.xtm#song'>
        <catDesc>song</catDesc>
      </category>
      <category id='kw-fire' corresp='swinburne.xtm#fire'>
        <catDesc>fire</catDesc>
      </category>
      <category id='kw-air' corresp='swinburne.xtm#air'>
        <catDesc>air</catDesc>
      </category>
      <category id='kw-heavens' corresp='swinburne.xtm#heavens'>
        <catDesc>celestial bodies, e.g., sun, moon, stars</catDesc>
      </category>
      <category id='kw-compass' corresp='swinburne.xtm#compass'>
        <catDesc>compass, i.e., north, south, east, and west</catDesc>
      </category>
    </taxonomy>
  </classDecl>
</encodingDesc>
Encoding Practices: Thematic references in the text

Words and phrases related to the thematic categories of interest within the text are encoded using the `<seg type="keyword">` tag. Each instance is also given a unique `@xml:id` and a `@corresp` attribute with one or more pointers to the related thematic categories from the `<taxonomy>` in the header. For example:

```xml
<seg type="keyword" corresp="#kw-song #kw-poet" xml:id="d1e13537">singer</seg>
```
For here of all thy waters, here of all thy windy ways the wildest, and beset As some beleaguered city's war-breached wall With deaths enmeshed all round it in deep net, Thick sown with rocks deadlier than steel, and fierce Thick sown with rocks deadlier than steel, and fierce

With cross-countering currents, where the ship

Flags, flickering like a wind-bewildered leaf,
The densest weft of waves that prow may pierce

Coils round the sharpest warp of shoals that dip Suddenly, scarce well under

Keen breathing-space between the streams adverse, Scarce showing the fanged edge of one hungering lip Or one tooth lipless of the ravening reef; And midstmost of the murderous water's web

All round it stretched and spun, Laughs, reckless of rough tide and raging ebb

The loveliest thing that shines against the sun.
Screen shot illustrating HTML rendition of TEI/XML text with a window listing thematic categories and links to references to those categories in the text.
Thematic Visualization v. 1

Songs of the Springtides
by Algernon Charles Swinburne

Instructions
Drag this Lens to the poem you wish to view

WARNING: Longer poems will take a while to load.
This project is part of SB37 Information Visualization.

Status message

Click to see all phrases linked to the following key terms:

- [ ] Sea
- [ ] Elements
- [ ] Water
- [ ] Time
- [ ] Fire
- [ ] Heavens
- [ ] Poet
- [ ] Earth
- [ ] Compass
- [ ] Song
- [ ] Air

Friday, July 9, 2010
Look the world song over, and we would love it all.
By may the story tell.
We place the world, we number the no worlds.
We witness the days of long gone heroes' songs.
The means of efficient states.
The means of announced songs.
To search out dead men's words, and works of lost men's hands.
Thank You. Questions?

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Visualizations

• <http://purl.oclc.org/swinburnearchive/vis/acsvis0001/>
• <http://purl.oclc.org/swinburnearchive/vis/acsvis0002/>
• <http://purl.oclc.org/swinburnearchive/vis/acsvis0003/>