

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

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Our paper will discuss conceptual networks present in Victorian poet Algernon Charles Swinburne's mid-career collection *Songs of the Springtides* (1880) and how those networks may be represented in TEI P5 XML markup and graphic visualizations driven by the encoded text.

Swinburne's work is full of familiar signposts and nodes, such as his trademark binary oppositions and pairings: pain/pleasure, life/death, love/hate, hope/fear, sleep/death. An incredibly learned poet with an extensive range of form and allusion, Swinburne's poems are packed with often obscure references to the Bible, classical mythology, and Arthurian legend. He wrote a number of political poems addressing contemporary events. He wrote parodies of other contemporary poets, including Tennyson, Browning, and Rossetti. And as Jerome McGann has noted, “No English poet has composed more elegies than Swinburne” (McGann 293). These binary oppositions; the many biblical, mythical and legendary references; the historical and contemporary figures who are eulogized in the elegies and praised in the many tributes and dedications; the pervasive symbols of song and the sea: these elements of Swinburne's verse all serve as familiar, easily identifiable nodes of information, laden with meaning acquired through strategic repetition and structural

integration into the intellectual networks of Swinburne's work. We will examine these nodes, structures and architectonic forms in one of Swinburne's most artfully crafted and carefully designed collections, *Songs of the Springtides*.

The mid-career *Songs of the Springtides* is a particularly interesting volume in the context of inter- and intra-textual networks. For *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” (Swinburne *Uncollected Letters* 2:181). The three poems are: “Thalassius,” “On the Cliffs,” and “The Garden of Cymodoce.” To this “triad of sea-studies” Swinburne added the “Birthday Ode” to Victor Hugo. Unannounced but also present in the volume are three short poems: the fifteen-line “Dedication” to Edward John Trelawny, Swinburne's “old sea king” and a friend of Shelley's (Swinburne *Uncollected Letters* 2:181); an untitled sonnet, with the first line “Between two seas the sea-bird's wing makes halt;” and 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.”

This small volume is an artful example of a deliberately fashioned and architected whole connected by complex discourse networks of key concepts that operate within, across, and beyond the individual poems. Familiarity with the poems of *Songs of the Springtides* reveals a few key concepts, figures, or images of particular import and penetration: Swinburne's pantheon of literary heroes; song and music; the natural world, especially the sea; the poet; the text.

In many cases occurrences of these concepts may be identified algorithmically. However, one cannot rely on string pattern matching to find all words and phrases related to a particular concept. In the case of *song*, for instance, automated processes may be used to identify the many clear and obvious occurrences of this concept, phrases including words such as *song*, *songs*, *sing*, *singer*, *music*, etc. However, the poems also contain phrases such as the following: “lutes and lyres of milder and mightier strings,” which is obviously related to music, but less susceptible to automated identification. A combination of automated and manual markup then has been used to identify

and encode words and phrases related to the concepts of interest in the texts.

This notion of the text as a self-constituted network or as a part of a larger inter-textual network is found in influential writings of the major sages of poststructuralism and postmodernism. In *S/Z*, Roland Barthes writes about the text as "an entrance into a network with a thousand entrances; to take this entrance is to aim, ultimately, not at a legal structure of norms and departures, a narrative or poetic Law, but at a perspective (of fragments, of voices from other texts, other codes), whose vanishing point is nonetheless ceaselessly pushed back, mysteriously opened; each (single) text is the very theory (and not the mere example) of this vanishing, of this difference which indefinitely returns, insubmissive. (12)"

Michel Foucault, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* writes, "The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network. And this network of references is not the same in the case of a mathematical treatise, a textual commentary, a historical account, and an episode in a novel cycle; the unity of the book, even in the sense of a group of relations, cannot be regarded as identical in each case. The book is not simply the object that one holds in one's hands; and it cannot remain within the little parallelepiped that contains it: its unity is variable and relative. As soon as one questions that unity, it loses its self-evidence; it indicates itself, constructs itself, only on the basis of a complex field of discourse. (23)"

More recently, Friedrich Kittler in *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, building on and synthesizing the work of Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, and others, writes about literature as an information system supported and shaped by the available technologies of discourse: "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. (370)"

These theories of the text as constituting and constituted by information networks have obvious relevance and resonance for digital humanities scholarship, much of which is engaged in explicitly identifying, encoding, and otherwise representing the information structures in texts of all kinds.

By encoding the individual information nodes, one can generate new interfaces and mechanisms for reading and navigating the text and for visualizing the patterns and interactions of the information networks operating throughout Swinburne's volume.

The authors have been working on a specific web-based visualization to represent graphically the conceptual networks at play across a series of literary texts, in this case Swinburne's *Songs of the Springtides*, and to allow users to view and browse these networks from a distance and to zoom in and focus on local clusters and concentrations of the conceptual nodes.

Our presentation will include a detailed discussion of *Songs of the Springtides* as a carefully designed information system, supported by a framework of internal and external discourse networks. Following this more theoretical discussion of Swinburne's volume, we will review and illustrate the TEI P5 mechanisms used to encode the networks and demonstrate the web-based visualization of the text.

References

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