

SWINBURNE'S POETRY AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY CRITICISM

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OSBERT SITWELL in *Noble Essences*, a personal chronicle of the Edwardian and Georgian society in which he moved as a young man, recalls sitting next to an old man who was telling him how much he had enjoyed his long life. Speaking of his youth, the old man said:

If a man—or a schoolboy for that matter—does not get on well, it's his own fault. I well remember, when I first went to Eton, the head boy called us together, and pointing to a little fellow with a mass of curly red hair, said, "If ever you see that boy, kick him—and if you are too far off to kick him, throw a stone. . . ." "He was a fellow named Swinburne," he added. "He used to write poetry for a time, I believe, but I don't know what became of him."¹

Of course, Swinburne finally left Eton and moved clear of the range of both kicks and stones. But the kicks and stones that he received there metamorphosed into literary judgments, and the schoolboys grew up to become literary critics. One can not be sure which Swinburne found to be more painful, the physical or the verbal attacks, but for his literary reputation the words have been far more detrimental. While it is true that many good poets have had to withstand the same barrage, usually the kicks and stones have been diminished by the passage of time and the distance of the critics from the poet. But for Swinburne, all that the passage of time has effected has been a re-directing of the kicks and the choosing of new and sometimes heavier rocks to throw.

One critic has described Swinburne as breaking "in on that rather agreeably tedious Victorian tea party with the effect of some pagan creature, at once impish and divine, leaping onto the sleek lawn, to deride with its screech of laughter the admirable decorum of the conversation."² And when we realize that this tea party often was less than decorous, as Steven Marcus' book *The Other Victorians* has observed, the impact that Swinburne made becomes less

simple to understand. We will probably never be able to understand the impact he made on the undergraduates at Oxford who used to walk around chanting with religious intonations passages from "Faustine" or *Atalanta in Calydon*, or on young Thomas Hardy, his eyes glued on Swinburne's volume of poetry, walking, as he later wrote, "along the crowded London streets at my imminent risk of being knocked down."³⁸ But it was not only the young who realized that an important figure had appeared on the Victorian scene and that his brilliance and temperament made it certain that things would never quite be the same.

Perhaps the most famous account of Swinburne's power to amaze and bewilder more mature men appears in *The Education of Henry Adams*, in which Adams describes his first encounter with Swinburne. Monckton Milnes, Adams, Swinburne, and two other men sat down to dinner at Adams's house, and conversation, we are told, followed the usual channels until Milnes thought "it time to bring Swinburne out." Here is Adams's description of Swinburne's debut:

Then, at last, if never before, Adams acquired education. . . . For the rest of the evening Swinburne figured alone; the end of the dinner only made the monologue freer. . . . That Swinburne was altogether new to the three types of men-of-the-world before him; that he seemed to them quite original, wildly eccentric, astonishingly gifted, and convulsingly droll, Adams could see; but what more he was, even Milnes hardly dared say. They could not believe his incredible memory and knowledge of literature, classic, medieval, and modern; his faculty of reciting a play of Sophocles or a play of Shakespeare, forward or backward, from end to beginning; or Dante, or Villon, or Victor Hugo.⁴

Cecil Y. Lang in the introduction to his edition of Swinburne's letters comments that Swinburne "in fact leaves the impression that he had read all of English and French literature and most of Greek, Latin, and Italian."⁵ In 1863, Swinburne wrote a courageous and perceptive review of Baudelaire's poem at a time when Baudelaire's name was as forbidden on English tongues as Swinburne's was to become. In 1868 he published a full-length study of William Blake, the first serious study of Blake's prophetic books. He mastered most of the major styles in English poetry until he was able to write with ease in each; and as a parodist and satirist he has no equal in the Victorian period, and few in the others. His gift of parody is, of course, most readily seen in *Heptalogia*, a group of seven poems in which he parodies the style and mannerisms of Tennyson, Browning, Patmore, Owen Meredith, Whitman, Rossetti,

and his own early verse. His parody of himself is so viciously true that one critic has referred to it as seeming almost "auto-erotic".⁵

A poet's reputation, however, must ultimately rest with his poetry, and not with his criticism, his translations, or his parodies. As Professor Lang has observed about Swinburne: "The central fact about Swinburne criticism is that he has never been judged solely by his best poems."⁵ To judge Swinburne only by his early poems is comparable to judging Tennyson solely on the basis of his early imitations of Keats; or to judging Wordsworth by *The Excursion*. The fact that most twentieth-century criticism of his poetry has been merely a reworking of comments made by two of his contemporaries would have appealed to Swinburne's wry sense of humor and to his fascination with those dim-eyed gods who control man's fate. George Meredith in 1861 said of Swinburne: "I don't see any internal centre from which springs anything that he does." Critics referring to the astuteness of this comment too often ignore the fact that in 1861 Swinburne still had four years to go before he published *Atalanta in Calydon* and five years before he published his first major book of poetry, *Poems and Ballads*. Meredith later described Swinburne as "the greatest lyrist England has had. . . ."⁶ The other comment that has had the tenacity of an oracular judgment is William Morris's statement that "Swinburne's work . . . always seemed to me founded upon literature, not on nature." It has been observed that this is a rather odd comment coming from the author of *The Earthly Paradise*; but it is as incorrect as it is odd.⁷ Swinburne's best poetry is definitely concerned with nature—with man's attempt to find an identity within a world from which he is alienated.

Twentieth-century criticism of Swinburne has been generally unfavourable, for the most part, no doubt, because of its dislike and misunderstanding of Romantic poetry. Irving Babbitt, for example, once said that "writing that is romantic . . . is best enjoyed while we are young. A person who is as much taken by Shelley at forty as he was at twenty has, one may surmise, failed to grow up."⁷ T. S. Eliot, to borrow Northrop Frye's metaphor, dumped Swinburne stock on the market in the 1920s, and until recently buyers have been rather reluctant to pick it up. Eliot, in his essays on both Byron and Swinburne echoes Babbitt's notion that one does (or should) outgrow Romantic poetry. In his essay on Swinburne, Eliot observes of "The Triumph of Time": "That so little material as appears to be employed . . . should release such an amazing number of words requires what there is no reason to call anything but genius."⁸ This same left-handed praise can be extended to Eliot's essay. Full of these ambiguous pronouncements that it is a sage's privilege to make,

his essay is somewhat like God's reply to Job—impressive, but not wholly convincing.

Eliot and the more influential shapers of earlier twentieth-century criticism—men such as Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, and John Crowe Ransom—were less than attracted to Romantic poetry. Richard Hart Fogle is a brilliant article entitled "Romantic Bards and Metaphysical Reviewers" suggests certain weaknesses in the prevailing critical approach of these men. He observes that they transformed "a set of interesting but essentially ungrounded and provisional insights, attitudes, and reactions into critical absolutes."⁹ The poetry that met with their strongest approval was urbane, social, and usually possessed what Eliot defined as "wit" or "a recognition, implicit in the expression of every experience, of other kinds of experience which are possible. . . ." They expected of poetry what Eliot expected when he announced that "we have come to expect poetry to be something very concentrated, something distilled. . . ."¹⁰ And indirectly lurking behind the statements of these men is I. A. Richards, who in *Principles of Literary Criticism* distinguished two kinds of poetry, "elusive" poetry and "synthetic" poetry.¹¹ Poems from the first groups are "unstable because they will not bear an ironical contemplation." The stability of the poems in the second group arises from "the extraordinary heterogeneity of the distinguishable impulses" (p. 250), or, in other words, poetry along the lines of the metaphysical school. Those poets whose poetry is unstable are figures, as might be guessed, such as Tennyson, Shelley, and Keats; poets from the other group include Donne and Marvell.

These "new critics", however, are no longer so new, and there has come about a realization that poetry may not fit the criteria established by them and still possibly be good poetry. Looking back upon the criticism and the critical methods prevailing in the 1920s and 1930s, we see a tendency on the part of these critics to rate highest that poetry most amenable to their critical methods; and in this respect, they resemble a physicist who would find it necessary to define all phenomena he did not understand as "unnatural".

Recent critical approaches such as those employed by Northrop Frye and Harold Bloom have opened new accesses to Romantic poetry. Just as irony is one mode of poetry, but is definitely not the only mode, so a study of verbal ambiguity and close *explication de texte* are ways of approaching a poem, but not the only ways. Romantic poetry does in fact withstand a close line-by-line reading, although it does not always yield the most understanding by this approach. For example, Swinburne's poetry if studied in terms of its recurrent imagery and symbols reveals patterns of imagery which are very carefully

structured and wholly consistent. These patterns provide a strong argument against those critics who have talked about poetry only in terms of its diffuseness. For not only do those details that were seen as the source of the diffuseness gain added significance as their relationship to the overall pattern becomes clearer, but—as in all good poetry—meaning is finally seen as the total functioning of all the parts becoming a unified whole. Thematic imagery in Swinburne's poetry is often dualistic; images of sun and moon, darkness and light, water and desert, lushness and barrenness. A certain tension or conflict is represented by these opposing images and, in his dramatic lyrics, this tension often provides a symbolic representation of the speaker's mind. Much of Swinburne's best poetry is dramatic in nature; in fact, Swinburne himself described his poems as "dramatic, many-faced, and multifarious. . . ."¹² Although his poems were so heavily attacked for their "erotic" nature by the Victorian press and public that his first publisher refused to continue publishing them, one sees that those poems which deal most thoroughly with eroticism, such as the Sappho poems of "Laus Veneris", are not defences of eroticism, but rather exposures, through the techniques of dramatic monologue, of eroticism's ultimate failure. Swinburne preceded Steven Marcus's recent study of *My Secret Life* by about a hundred years in showing that eroticism must produce frustrations which can be gratified only by destruction of others or by destruction of self. Eroticism for Swinburne is never the perpetual panacea that it is in pornography; on the contrary, it leads to physical suffering, to spiritual emptiness, and ultimately to either a literal or a metaphorical death.

The conflict in Swinburne's poetry, however, is by no means always caused by erotic frustration. Swinburne, like most of the later nineteenth-century poets, had lost faith in that transcendental vision the Romantics strove so hard to retain; and in such poems as "The Triumph of Time" and "Laus Veneris", we see the speaker trying to define those phenomena which surround him and attempting to reduce the conflict between nature and himself by creating a universe which is both explicable and desirable. The speaker moves towards what look like solutions, only to discover that they are ultimately illusions that must be destroyed by the same consciousness that created them. Swinburne often depicts man as living in a world governed by the oppressiveness of a time that has been stripped of religious significance. Such a recognition of time and its consequences explains both the Victorians' looking back towards the past, whether it be medieval or Greek, for an era when time was less oppressive (or so they believed), and their looking for ways to transcend this time, one of these ways being a sense of mission or destiny. Swinburne, however, although

he intensely loved and admired the Greek civilization, never believed that it could be resurrected in the nineteenth century. A poem such as the "Hymn to Proserpine", for example, shows the agonies of an individual caught between a world he loves but cannot have, and a world he lives in but cannot accept.

The attempt to rid oneself of time's oppressiveness makes up the quest of much nineteenth-century poetry; and Swinburne's poetry could be studied just in terms of how he variously confronts the problem of time. In his earlier poetry of 1865-1870, the most thorough treatment of time's relationship to a man who finds himself living in a wholly secular cosmos is the long poem, "The Triumph of Time". Each of the solutions towards which the Victorian poets reached, such as the redemptive quality of faith, of art, or the ability of love to allow one to transcend the agony of the moment, is confronted by the speaker and ultimately discarded. In the process of the poem, the speaker reaches for these solutions, but discovers that each is unsatisfactory. As the poem concludes, the only possible answer that he sees is one of a stoic endurance: "I shall go my ways, tread out my measures,/Fill the days of my daily breath." In the two longer poetic dramas, *Atalanta in Calydon* and *Erechtheus*, Swinburne works with mythic material which allows him to envision artistically a world in which time is the vanquished rather than the victor because events occur within a teleological rather than a fortuitous universe. Man, of course, is still vulnerable to time, but the agonies of the modern consciousness are lessened because the possibility of "experienced continuity", in George Poulet's term, is assured by man's ability to effect meaningful action.

Swinburne wrote all his poetry after Darwin's *Origin of the Species* appeared in 1859, and he not only accepted the implications of the theory of evolution but also incorporated it in his poetry.¹³ He found the theory to be not the frightening spectre that it is in the poetry of Tennyson, but rather saw in it a freedom from the old myths that had enslaved man. Thus, closer in thought to Blake and Shelley than to Tennyson and Browning, Swinburne both repudiated the dualism implicit in Tennyson and Browning and condemned man's imprisoning of his senses and potentialities by creating the fiction of a supernatural being and the institutions that perpetuated this fiction. Many of his later poems focus upon the theme of freedom from political and religious tyranny. And in his poetry of freedom as well as in his poetry of humanity, we see an effort still to transcend or escape the oppressiveness of existence removed from duration. For if man is seen not only as an isolated being whose identity can be assured solely by a consciousness of those intense moments of experience which are always fleeing (the type of consciousness that created both

the agony and the ecstasy of such men as Walter Pater), but also as a man who contains within himself that God who is the culmination rather than the origin of man's spiritual growth, then the sense of duration can be experienced because man is then united to all men, past, present, and future.

But this vision of hope is only a part, a later part, of Swinburne's poetry. Until he reached it, and even after he reached it, he confronts in his poems those powers of darkness and chaos which he can only describe, not alleviate. This latter aspect, this darker vision of his poetry, is one of the reasons for the stylized structure and form of his poems. Beneath the deceptively smooth surface of many of his poems is a vision as dark as Baudelaire's or Dostoevsky's. The aesthetes, or the "stylists" as Morse Peckham more accurately calls them, found it necessary to impose a stylistic barrier between their vision and the communication of this vision. This barrier existed both in their poetry and in their lives, and was not restricted only to the later poets; for as Lionel Trilling reminds us in his study of Matthew Arnold, "when dandyism was at work, Arnold produced poetry but when dandyism failed, poetry failed too."¹⁴ This stylistic barrier also made possible a more thorough communication of experience. At the same time that Swinburne was attacking virtually every sacred cow of the Victorian age, Thomas Hardy was being required by his publishers to delete a scene in which he had depicted Alec d'Urberville carrying Tess in his arms. Swinburne's poetry, then, is a method of communicating experience while attempting to protect oneself from the full effects of that experience. And at the same time, it is an attempt to impose upon a world without meaning or intrinsic value the order and control that art can provide.¹⁵ Poets of the nineteenth century were not only unable to make that compromise with prose which William Van O'Connor sees as one of the primary characteristics of modern poetry; but they were also unable to subscribe to what might be called the imitative fallacy of some twentieth-century writers—trying to depict chaos by writing chaotically.¹⁶

I would like to conclude by observing that I have few illusions about Swinburne's present reputation suddenly soaring. There are indications of a revived interest in him, but the major book to come out in the last five years was not on his poetry, but rather on his literary and art criticism. It will require a more flexible base of critical standards than has existed in the past. However, such a base is already being established by approaches, to name just a few, such as those taken by Northrop Frye and Harold Bloom, the studies in human time by Georges Poulet, and the phenomenological approach of a writer such as Bachelard. The time has now passed when persons became ill

at ease, embarrassed, or vexed when they found it necessary to talk about Romantic poetry. Once I thought Eliot and his group were correct and that I would outgrow Romantic poetry; but then I read Coleridge, where, in *Biographia Literaria*, he talks about that state in which "custom had bedimmed all the lustre, had dried up the sparkle and the dew drops," and decided that perhaps the predominantly ironic view of twentieth-century criticism and some of its poetry had effected the same loss for us that age, not maturity, had so often done for the Romantics.¹⁷ Swinburne could be extremely ironic when he wished, but felt that something more than irony must make up man's vision.

NOTES

1. Osbert Sitwell, *Noble Essences* (New York, 1950), p. 128.
2. T. E. Welby, *A Study of Swinburne* (London, 1926), p. 30.
3. Quoted by William Rutland in *Swinburne: A Nineteenth Century Hellene* (Oxford, 1951), p. 289.
4. Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (New York: Modern Library, n.d.), p. 140.
5. *The Swinburne Letters*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang (New Haven, 1959), I, xv-xix.
6. Clyde Kenneth Hyder, *Swinburne's Literary Career and Fame* (New York, 1963), p. 99.
7. Irving Babbitt, "The Present Outlook" from *Rousseau and Romanticism*. Reprinted in *Romanticism: Points of View*, ed. Robert F. Gleckner and Gerald E. Enscoe (Englewood Cliffs, 1962), p. 18.
8. T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood* (London, 1960), p. 145.
9. Richard Hart Fogle, "Romantic Bards and Metaphysical Reviewers," *ELH*, XII, (1945), 221-250.
10. T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (New York, 1961), p. 224.
11. I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (New York: Harvest, n.d.) pp. 249-253.
12. *The Complete Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, ed. Sir Edmund Gosse and Thomas Wise (New York, 1926), XVI, 364.
13. I am indebted here to the discussion of Swinburne's poetry and the theory of evolution of Joseph Warren Beach's *Concept of Nature in Nineteenth-Century English Poetry* (New York, 1956).
14. Lionel Trilling, *Matthew Arnold* (New York, 1949), p. 22.
15. Morse Peckham's section on "stylism" in his *Beyond the Tragic Vision* (New York, 1962), pp. 305ff., treats this aspect of nineteenth-century art.
16. William Van O'Connor, *Sense and Sensibility in Modern Poetry* (New York, 1948), ch. 4.
17. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross (Oxford, 1907), I, 59.