

BOOK REVIEW

ROXANA PATRAȘ, *Cântece dinaintea decadenței. A.C. Swinburne și declinul Occidentului*. Iasi, Timpul, 2012, 302 p.

In a period marked by conflicting impulses, a deepening sense of doubt and the overwhelming experience of transition, as the nineteenth century came to be known, the lives of numerous literary and cultural figure-heads were tied to controversy and scandal, either through circumstance or by personal choice. Within the gallery of Victorian writers, Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909), described by many as the last of the romantics and a centrepiece among the decadents, is second perhaps only to Oscar Wilde when it comes to the magnitude of the waves created in the public sphere by the vagaries characterising flamboyant and non-conformist spirits. An almost inexorable source of speculations (did he, or did he not eat a monkey after all, as he once had claimed?) and a common target of elitist and puritan disdain, Swinburne is one of the artists whose reception and fame has inevitably been marked by the continuous blurring of the border between myth and reality, persona and person.

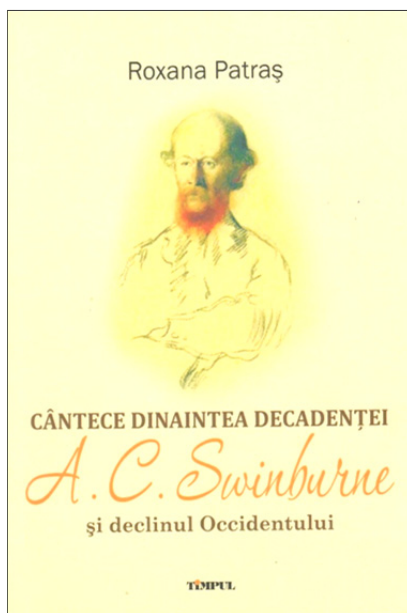
Unfolding along four chapters in which the detailed monographic approach is complemented by the interpretive insights of a fine literary critic, Roxana Patraș's book, *Songs*

before the Decadence. A.C. Swinburne and the Decline of the West, is at once a recuperatory and revelatory act, whose main ambition is

precisely that of casting a stronger light on the gray-area between fact and fiction traditionally associated with this major Victorian poet.

The opening chapter, "A Century of Swinburnean Exegesis", the most theoretical of the sections of the book, is intended to set up the appropriate contextual framework for the author's own study, providing the readers with a survey of the major scholarly contributions on the Victorian poet's critical writings, at the same time setting forth the reasons and the ob-

jectives of the current research. We are reminded that Swinburne, the *enfant terrible* of his time was not spoiled by his Victorian contemporaries, whose antipathy and scorn plagued him until his death. Already from these pages the image of an exceptional character emerges: a "plague of mankind" (as R. Rooksby described him), sarcastic and scary villain (13), Swinburne astonished his contemporaries through vitality and an extraordinary capacity to regenerate, and his biography is still read by some as a romantic myth. Yet, even in old age, this "last flower of a gal-



lant era" (16) was considered by many an adolescent *par excellence*. Rejection followed him into the twentieth century: T.S. Eliot and E. Pound felt obliged to "invent" for him a "more noble" and balanced ascendancy (14). The "most European" and at the same time "most American" of the Victorian poets (15) was relegated to a secondary position, but rediscovered and re-established as a representative, even canonical writer, especially by the later American critics. Thus, a century after his literary beginnings his reputation was restored, once the critical interest for him had resurfaced. The reason for this rather belated success, the author explains, has to be sought in the poet's histrionic personality. The documentary testimonials reveal him as an exceptional and genuine entertainer, one who would not shy away from amazing and seducing his public through the primarily "performative" nature of his creations (15). Such a dramatised and spectacular poetic formula (15-16), naturally connected to the personality of the actor-author, was intended to re-instate the ritualistic character of literature, as had been the case in former, golden ages (16). Nevertheless, as our author aptly points out, this ebullient and impulsive character was also the main stumbling block in the poet's path to respectability. On numerous occasions, Swinburne the actor subverts the authority of Swinburne the writer: the actor-character takes on, successively, a series of roles which deceive and bedazzle. It is only natural that the search for the "real Swinburne" carries the risk of the reader getting lost in a maze. For our scholar, this risk is, however, worth taking. We are therefore invited to embark on an investigative journey along which our steps will be guided by the magical yarn of a highly sophisticated and precise biographical and analytical examination.

The author's ambition, we find out over the following pages, transcends in fact the rather mundane limits of scope and method imposed by biographism, targeting

the much more demanding (and even more risk-laden) goal of critical recuperation. For such an enterprise to lie on solid foundations, it is inevitable for any informed investigator to know the lessons of the past and clearly identify the gaps to be filled. Roxana Patras dedicates the remainder of this chapter to providing us with an overview of the main corpus of academic expertise on Swinburne.

The first thing to note, we are told, is the prolonged absence of works which focus exclusively and precisely on Swinburne's plays, prose or criticism, as such creative expressions have generally been considered secondary products of a lyrical consciousness incapable of finding an adequate working medium in drama, prose or the realm of ideas (17). However, the author argues, such a fragmentary treatment or conscious ignorance of the Swinburne's ideological stance would shatter the coherent ideatic nucleus manifest in his dramatic pieces (18). Examples of this fragmentary view are numerous, one such case being that of the representatives of gender-studies (R. Dellamora, J.B. Bullen), who chose to focus on a classic body of Swinburne-an pieces, ignoring the tempting offering of novels, manuscripts or shorter dramatic texts (19). Nonetheless, a change of perspective can be observed in the literary histories published in the new millennium. Scholars such as James Eli Adams, David G. Riede or Jerome J. McGann drew attention on the necessity to take into consideration the previously ignored facets of the man (as, for instance, the period of his creative maturity) and a host of long-neglected works (the epic poems and novels). The post-McGann exegesis distinguishes itself through the effort to propose alternative interpretive routes and new hypotheses, focusing on unknown texts, and intent on bringing Swinburne closer to the Victorian canon. It is precisely in the lineage of such endeavours that our author's study should be placed: an exercise in re-cohering the disparate parts, fully observant of the spirit of a multi-faceted

personality and aimed at revealing the artist and his art in a *process* or performative movement, as an indivisible whole. As such, the author admits, the professed approach requires attacking the central issues from all directions, similar to an army's tactic of encircling the opposing forces. As departure point, it is tributary to the objective guiding Rooksby and Shrimpton's 1993 study, that of saving the content and meanings of Swinburne's oeuvre, rather than its forms.

What follows after this step is a formidable critique of criticism, the author exploring the merits and shortcomings of the research conducted by Anglo-Saxon and French scholars (Timothy Burnett, Terry L. Meyers, David G. Riede, Pascal Aquien, Dennis Bonne-casse, Charlotte Ribeyrol and others), ending with references made to critical texts as close to us as the year 2010. This exercise also serves as a very useful summary of the main periods in the reception of Swinburne's works, with emphasis on the major turning points. We learn that the 1930's were the first moment when the analytical studies started distancing themselves from biographism and psychologism, drawing attention upon the need to understand the poet's work globally and monographically. This stage was then followed by the publication of Swinburne's letters and private documents. A third, more recent change of perspective is represented by the initiative of the researchers involved in the virtual projects "The Swinburne Project" (Indiana University) and NINES, reliant on complex tools and methods, such as the study of conceptual networks and of hypertext, hyper-personality, the hyper-human or information nodes (32-33). The author's own work is indebted in fact to what she calls the "hermaphroditic dichotomy" —an analytical field punctuated by the triad theatricality - ideology - sexuality—transformational concepts which reflect both the idea of historical / aesthetic transition and creative / performative processuality. *Songs before the Decadence*, the author

clarifies, is rooted in historical-cultural investigation, rather than analysis (though, we should add, her work gives us ample proof of a significant amount of the latter as well). For such an investigation to succeed, Swinburne should be labelled Victorian rather than post-romantic or pre-modern. In fact, Swinburne's "Victorianism" is couched in the bourgeois-aristocratic reflex of a new stoicism, the paradoxically androgynous formula of his writing, the hybrid ideology of "conservative liberalism" and the oppressive consciousness of the new times (34). Within this scheme, the poet becomes a hard to isolate "conglomerate", an "uncontrollable identity", impossible to tackle in a comprehensive, exhaustive manner (35). In consequence, the critic must necessarily be an archaeologist, foraying deep and at several sites simultaneously, because Swinburne is a "virtual portal" and a "hyper-personality".

Since the task is further complicated by the difficulty of defining such key-terms as "Republic" and "democracy", as expected, an overview of the main perceptual angles on these concepts comes to complement our author's argumentation at this stage (36-41). Of greatest interest appears to be McGann's non-Euclidian perspective, whereby "Republic" is defined as the geometrical space of all possible transitions, and "Republicanism" as a "manifesto" for reviving the universal man as the "man-child", possessing a Republican or androgynous spirit. In effect, a central tenet of Swinburne's own critical texts is the "androgyny" of great creators, a characteristic which goes beyond the realm of myth and is re-signified ideologically (39). Within such a framework, Republicanism would imply, above all, a quintessential means to overcome animal subjectivity and self-centredness (ibid.). Within a Republican space, the imaginary of androgyny and incest testifies to an understanding of art as process, as a vacillating, flux-driven species. Similarly, Patraş explains, "democracy" / "democratism" carries a peculiar semantic load with Swinburne: it has

little to do with the “forced calculus” of egalitarianism, being in fact an expression of the natural or common-sensical, understood as the hierarchy of good people and a system in which each particular thing has its proper place, thus also illustrating the Victorian desire to *aim at* (rather than necessarily attain) “equality”—a dynamic process informing one’s desire for the betterment of all humankind (40). Consequently, the author argues at the end of the chapter, Swinburne’s art must be regarded as fundamentally political, an expression of the creed that art has to be not only pleasant but significant too (42).

The second chapter of the book, though primarily biographical in its observations, begins with another critique of criticism. The detective-like precision with which certain scholars have brought to the forefront of attention almost exclusively the anecdotal details of Swinburne’s life reflects a curiosity devoid of nobility, since it emphasises only the little man behind the text, while ignoring the spiritual existence and the complicated birth of the literary text itself (43-44). Though many have claimed that love and alcohol broke a destiny in two distinct chapters (a period of anarchic revolt, respectively, one of Bourgeois quietude), readers of Swinburne should not forget that the poet never displayed a persistent sense of the artificiality of his own existence. Instead, he nurtured an obsession for the artificiality of identity, manifest in dramatising one’s personality by multiplying the masks that conceal the self (45). Thus, as a corrective effort, the subchapters focus on the development of Swinburne’s personality from “Hadji’s Childhood” through the “Wanderings of the Pupil Reginald”, his period of literary “apprenticeship” and the emergence of a strong personality / sense of self, concluding with “The Voice of the Old Bard” (46-49). The highlights include references to little Algernon’s spiritual universe, announcing the later protean manifestations of the artist’s mature personality (52), the “fall from Paradise” after his enrol-

ment at Eton and the first manifestations of what many scholars have viewed as deviant, pathological behaviour (combated by the author on the grounds of the ostentatiously ludic-ironic predisposition of the poet, as revealed through the paratextual indications scattered through his texts), or his association with the Pre-Raphaelites and rising Republican idealism and the subsequent later rejection of the Pre-Raphaelite label in his mature period (61-73). A number of influential encounters are also taken into account, including Lord Houghton’s impact on creating a lasting image of Swinburne as both descendant of Tennyson and a cursed, infamous poet (79). We are also reminded, once again, of the critics’ mistakes, who have often fallen for the poet’s somewhat Bovaesque mention regarding the aesthetic supremacy of the volume “Songs Before Sunrise” to the detriment of the earlier tome “Poems and Ballads” (85-86). The final target of this biographical survey is the period of recuperation and “taming” under the watchful eye of Theodore Watts-Dunton, at Putney (still punctuated with clarifications regarding errors of critical appreciation, such as the wrong conclusion drawn by certain scholars regarding the harmful effects of this salvaging gesture).

The last three sections of the chapter focus more closely on Swinburne’s art, starting from the topical observation that the poet never allowed himself to be tempted by any of the dominant currents of his age, by some fashion or passing whim. Swinburne did not programmatically set out to be a thinker or an aspirant to a philosopher’s throne. His withdrawal into the realms of medieval spirituality represents the final, successful quest for inner peace (102). His art, the author opines, appears to distance itself from life precisely to endow it with an eventual higher sense, whereby it could transcend individual destiny and biography (106). Another pertinent note on Swinburne’s reception complements and completes this part of the exegesis. We learn

about the delicate and uneasy relationship between the poet and his contemporaries, who would relate to him either with condescension (the established, grand names) or excessive appraisal (the younger literary aspirants). We are offered a number of examples that testify to this: Tennyson's dismissal of certain Swinburnesque works and the subsequent polemic attitude of the latter regarding the Poet Laureate, Browning's description of Swinburne's verse as a "fuzz of words" or Arnold's ironic remarks on the excessive verbosity of his poems (106-111). We are also reminded, however, of some other names that at the time looked at Swinburne's creation with a more appreciative eye, such as Ruskin, Pater or Wilde (111-118). A summary of the most memorable polemical confrontations between Swinburne and figures of his time (Robert Buchanan, F. James Furnivall and R. Waldo Emerson) is a welcome addition to this segment of the investigation.

At this point, we might have the impression of having wandered off course, but once more, we are given proof of the author's rigorous exegetic skills. Thus, in the final pages of the chapter we return to the poet again, this time motivated by the curiosity to examine the echoes of the Swinburnean verse, in the form of parodic takes, which, as examples of the Genettian "hypertextuality", should be viewed as testimonials to the value of "Poems and Ballads": they strengthen the sense of a (literary-artistic) community indicating also the inclusion of one's work within a larger tradition. Paradoxically, Patraş suggests, it was the "unserious" parodists, not the pretentious academic spirits who best appreciated the worth and impact of Swinburne's works (self-parody being also invoked as a sign of the poet's awareness of his own unique position) (130).

Naturally, the remaining two chapters provide an in-depth analysis and illustration of Swinburne's endeavours as a critic. The first of these begins with a number of introductory

points on Swinburne's contributions to this field, which appear to be as extravagant in expression as his prose or theatre, challenging the readers' imagination in a manner similar to creative writing (132). Such texts, focusing on "chameleonic" personalities like himself, integrate contradictory tendencies and ideas in an anti-dogmatic formula intended to captivate the audience's attention, above all (134). His critical texts abound in exaggerations and digressions, since he rarely attempted to clarify the principles of his own exegetic judgement or creative choices. In fact, there are only three pieces in his entire oeuvre in which he exposes his views on literature and art, texts which will be, in their turn, inspected with an analytical-critical gaze by our author: "Notes on Poems and Reviews", "Under the Microscope" and "Dedicatory Epistle". In these profoundly "androgynous" texts one might still discover the rudiment of theory (138). Here, Swinburne is driven by the awareness of his role as educator of the masses, preferring a universalist stance over the anarchic-experimental one (142). As for the target of his critique, we witness again the same multifaceted personality. If the first of these pieces is mainly a response to the unfavourable reception of "Poems and Ballads" and an arrow cast in the direction of a part of the literary audience which had been over-courted by the English writers of the time, in the second, Swinburne's intention is to unmask the hidden games and ideological fluctuations in the literary field. In the last of them, a later piece, he renounces to the "tyrannical subjectivity", opting instead for a space of "fertile" and "relativising" dialogue (152). This change, the author explains, is indicative of the aged poet's more reserved attitude toward "experimentation" and his growing preference for classical forms, also visible in his lyrical pieces, which now express a desire to "annihilate the self".

The other Swinburnean critical pieces discussed in-depth at this point include those dedicated to various landmark literary fig-

ures, such as Baudelaire and Blake, who, we are told, exemplify a similar view on the authenticity and sincerity of art, arising from an essentially mystical spirit (a surrealist, respectively, an antinomical one) (173). For our author, however, of greater interest is the essay on Blake, and justifiably so. Returning to one of her earlier claims, Roxana Patraş informs us that Swinburne's interpretation of the English visionary poet is underpinned by a particular ideological formula of Republicanism, for which "freedom" and "religion" are expressions of the same temperament and are inextricably and indispensably connected (174). Furthermore, by attempting to destroy the myth of the discontinuous romantic spirit, which he replaces by a more coherent psychological formula (the "twofold vision"), Swinburne emerges as a pioneer of Blakean exegesis (175), being groundbreaking also in method (a markedly anti-allegorical reading) (181).

The remainder of this chapter discusses other foci of Swinburne's literary criticism. We are offered an overview and examination of the more scattered reading notes, found in the literary journals of his time and collected in sundry volumes ("Essays and Studies", "Miscellanies" and "Studies in Prose and Poetry"). We learn of Swinburne's views on a number of names of greater or lesser resonance, poets and novelists alike (e.g., Shelley, Wordsworth, Byron, Landor, Keats, Tennyson, Musset, Rossetti, Morris, Arnold, Collins, as well as Emily Brontë and Charles Reade). Most of Swinburne's commentaries (except those guided by his admiration for Hugo's impressive work) are centred on English poetry. In these, the critic demonstrates his rejection of the organicist-causal paradigm of the nineteenth century, professing instead a cyclical, anamorphic view on creative faculties, which, in his view, may resurface even at a distance of centuries in the texts of different but kindred personalities (193). A "critical optimist" (195), Swinburne is anchored in his explorations in a

somewhat Miltonic ideological frame of the nationalist-conservative type: instead of replacing the ossified forms by fresh ones, Swinburne chooses to turn to even older ones (197). He studies in detail the more obscure writers, giving lesser attention to the names of his time, in the conviction that novelty is merely a cliché and modernity a renewal of things past (198). Rossetti, Morris, Arnold, Wordsworth, Byron, Tennyson, Whitman and Musset, the Brontës or George Eliot are scrutinised by Swinburne from the vantage point of the "hermaphrodite creator" (198-224), as creative spirits conditioned by a dual androgynous sign which combines apparently incompatible elements and impulses, such as sexual energy, religious fervour, failure or imperfection—the latter two the true marks of genius (222). Within his views on this former set of personalities, Swinburne moves freely between honest admiration and sometimes unrestrained "ideologically-contaminated" remarks (the case of the Brontës vs. G. Eliot, for example) (222-223). His considerations of the romantics, the author notes, are more coherent, though (224). In these explorations, Swinburne's intention is to place himself at a critical pole opposed to that of Arnold's, fundamentally aestheticist one (227).

At the end of this chapter, we are reminded of Hugo, "the poet of the sacred terror", one of Swinburne's idols and formative models (232). The Victorian poet intersects with him as well as with Landor on an ideological level, sharing with them a "Republican" political creed. Like Blake, Hugo represents for Swinburne "the ideal balance between talent and character" (234), an artist who embodies the ideal of the "artistic hermaphrodite"—a purveyor of both feminine and masculine emotions, a liberator of humankind who worshipped the divine in every individual, despite the anarchic impulses (235).

The concluding chapter opens with an examination of what the author calls "a case of complicitous receptiveness"—

Swinburne's views on Elizabethan literature. His five volumes dedicated to the representatives of this age, Patraş explains, can be inscribed with the broader nineteenth century preoccupations for nationhood (238). They were, however, received with contempt, as mere examples of a readerly whim and extravagance of a spirit marked by a "diabolical passion". Nevertheless, we are instructed not to forget that Swinburne regarded himself mainly as a reader, not a critic by choice, relating to such efforts as to some entertaining chatter which could provide the interpreter with the opportunity to express his subjectivity freely (239). It should not be surprising, thus, that these Swinburnean exercises take on the form of the "conversational essay" or the "critical elegy" — constructions which are less constrained by the rigours of scientific method and, consequently, a copious target of scholarly sanction (242). And yet, the author insists, the merit of Swinburne's "methodless method" (a term coined by Samuel C. Chew), as acknowledged by later commentators of his work, resides in reflecting a subjective-creative dimension, with strong stylistic underpinnings (245). Swinburne moves toward "a performative-dynamic artistic concept" whereby he tries to capture the artist's personality in his "natural propensity to create worlds and beings", leaving the impression of an "almost dramatic composition of the critical discourse" (247). Swinburne's approach and expression is at once a mirror of his own subjectivity and a manifestation of the nineteenth century anti-rationalistic and anti-bourgeois responses. His work, the author argues, is indicative of a "mythopoeic" process similar to what M.H. Abrams has attributed to the romantics, which replaces religious mythology by a secular one (248).

Swinburne's idealisation of a golden age of literature is, in effect, perfectly aligned with the impulses of other distinguished nineteenth century thinkers (Ruskin, Carlyle,

Arnold, Pater), "sceptical rationalists" who chose to return to the past in order to discover the "mythopoeic eons" (250). For the poet, this "eon" is a "pantheon" of representative figures, rather than a collection of memorable literary works, since his primary interest, as had been the case with Coleridge before, is to underscore the mystery of the spontaneous creativity of a genius (the true mission of criticism). Therefore, Swinburne assumes a number of alter-egos, playing the roles of each of the analysed personalities as if his main intent were to dynamically and performatively re-create each particular artistic existence (*ibid.*). Inevitably, his critical explorations will lack unity or systematicity (251). Unlike Dryden, Swinburne does not respect the principles of classicist normative poetics (257), aligning himself more closely with a series of romantic commentators of the Elizabethan theatre (e.g., Richardson, Goethe or Coleridge) and identifying the essence of tragedy in the "conflictual dynamic of human passions" (*ibid.*). His aesthetic option is, above all, a psychologising one, aimed at revealing the mystery of the human psyche by an investigation which is fundamentally mythopoeic and visionary (258).

Illustrative, for the "methodless method" are the series of 21 sonnets included in the volume "Tristram of Lyonesse", in which Swinburne forces the limits of logic, subsuming largely heterogeneous experiences and interpretations to arbitrary critical theses, demonstrating at the same time that many of his ideas about the theatrical compositions under scrutiny had, in fact, originated in answers found when still an adolescent (258-259). One such source of "youthful admiration" was Marlowe, whom he regarded as reference point in the effort to formulate a theory of art as process or performance, wherein the creative act is primarily intended to support the artist's inner development and self-knowledge (262). In his views of Shakespeare, Swinburne is much

more consistent, however. For instance, in “A Study of Shakespeare”, he organises his thought along value-oriented criteria, rather than chronological ones, placing at the top of the Shakespearean creation texts like “Othello”, “Macbeth”, “Anthony and Cleopatra” or “King Lear”, and ranking the Elizabethan master as the most profound psychologist of all times, an artistic genius and “doctor of human passions” (270).

His other, less appreciative verse portraits are dedicated to figures like Ben Jonson, Beaumont, Fletcher, John Ford, Webster, Dekker or Thomas Middleton. Together with his particular observations and value-judgements of each, Swinburne also discloses his belief in the existence of a major man, exemplary for a certain age, suggesting various analogies between literary figures (e.g., Jonson-Dryden-Byron, Shakespeare-Milton-Shelley or Blake-Shelley-Coleridge), putting forward the view that the flux of creative energy becomes manifest in different personalities of different eras (288).

At this point, our author’s investigation ends abruptly, almost like a riddle, with the remark that the decadent Swinburne was not the one called-for to be the true harbinger of national renaissance. While some readers, caught-up in this finely-crafted maze of critical appreciations might consider themselves betrayed by the lack of a summative or conclusive chapter, we have the feeling that in the case of Roxana Patraş’s book this is by design. On the one hand, as the author herself has remarked elsewhere in her study, there are paths that have been left unexplored, and thus the door to further explorations should be left open by any cautious scholar. More importantly though, we think, such a choice of ending gives the already enlightened readership the gift of freedom—to enrich with their own reflective contributions the plethora of Swinburnean personas this study has attempted to reveal in all their splendour and glory.

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