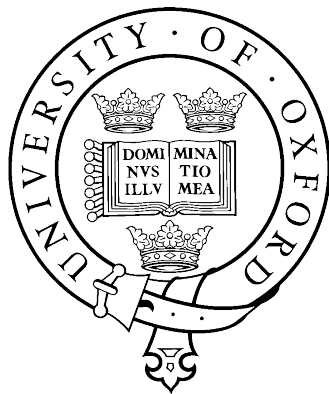


Swinburne and the Novel



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A thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Michaelmas 2014

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D.Phil. in English
Michaelmas 2013

Abstract

This study examines Algernon Charles Swinburne's work as a critic and creator of prose fiction, arguing that it deserves to play a larger role than it has done hitherto in our understanding of him as a writer. It considers a wide range of Swinburne's prose, situating it in the intellectual movements of his time, and identifying recurrent themes and interests. Finally, it makes a case for a broader view of Swinburne that includes his literary criticism and imaginative prose.

The first chapter discusses Swinburne's prescient criticism of the Brontës and his suggestion that the novel ought to aspire to the status of high art. The second chapter reviews Swinburne's assessment of Wilkie Collins, which uses the language of the stage to draw comparisons between sensation fiction and drama. Turning to Swinburne's continental European influences, the third chapter establishes Baudelaire and Hugo as inspirations for Swinburne's theory of aesthetic practice, though neither directly shaped his serious prose fiction. Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, which had a much more direct impact through its promotion of sexual and aesthetic autonomy, is discussed in Chapter Four. The fifth chapter studies Boccaccio and *The Decameron* as a significant source for Swinburne's proposed *Triameron* and its surviving short stories. The sixth and seventh chapters focus on Laclos and Balzac, arguably the greatest influences on Swinburne's novels. Laclos's epistolary fiction and Balzac's cycle of interlocking tales are immensely important for Swinburne's theory of the novel and for his novels themselves. Chapter Eight is an extended study of Swinburne's novel *A Year's Letters*, which displays innovative epistolary form and incisive character studies. Chapter Nine

interrogates *Lesbia Brandon* as a meditation on the youth of a poet and an avant-garde example of Swinburne's hybrid, poetic prose.

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Word Count (excluding Bibliography): 96,335

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Note on Text and Common Abbreviations

Citations of Swinburne's verse are from the last lifetime edition, *The Poems of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, London, Chatto & Windus, 6 volumes, 1904. With all its imperfections, the Bonchurch edition (*The Complete Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne* (20 vols), ed. by Sir Edmund Gosse and Thomas James Wise, London and New York: William Heinemann and Gabriel Wells, 1925-7) remains the closest approach to a complete edition of Swinburne's writings. For ease of reference, I have cited much of Swinburne's non-fictional prose from Clyde K. Hyder, ed., *Swinburne as Critic*, but have provided simultaneous references to the Bonchurch edition where applicable. I have also provided Bonchurch references for some of his shorter fictional texts. Material put into print since the completion of the Bonchurch edition is cited from Randolph Hughes, ed., *Lucretia Borgia: The Chronicle of Tebaldeo Tebaldei* by Algernon Charles Swinburne (London, The Golden Cockerel Press, 1942), and from Cecil Lang, *New Writings by Swinburne* (Syracuse University Press, 1964). For the three novels which Swinburne, respectively, published, contributed to, or left unfinished in manuscript, I use texts established by modern editors: Francis Jacques Sypher, ed., *A Year's Letters* (New York University Press, 1974), Robert E. Lougy, ed., *The Children of the Chapel* by Mary Gordon and Algernon Charles Swinburne (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1982), and Randolph Hughes, ed., *Lesbia Brandon* by Algernon Charles Swinburne (London, The Falcon Press, 1952), though in practice I cite the last of these from its reissue (without Hughes's sometimes distracting notes) in *The Novels of A.C. Swinburne, with a Critical Study* by Edmund Wilson (New York, Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1962). Short titles used for frequently cited works are as follows:

AYL

Algernon Charles Swinburne, *A Year's Letters*, ed. by Francis Jacques Sypher (New York: New York University Press, 1974).

<i>Bonchurch</i>	Algernon Charles Swinburne, <i>The Complete Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne</i> (20 vols), ed. by Sir Edmund Gosse and Thomas James Wise (London and New York: William Heinemann and Gabriel Wells, 1925-7, Rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1968).
'Essay Title', <i>SaC</i>	Essays reprinted in Algernon Charles Swinburne, <i>Swinburne as Critic</i> , ed. by Clyde K. Hyder (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972).
Lafourcade	<i>La Jeunesse de Swinburne (1837-1867)</i> (2 vols), (Paris: Société D'Édition: Les Belles Lettres and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928).
<i>LB</i>	Algernon Charles Swinburne, <i>Lesbia Brandon</i> , in <i>The Novels of A.C. Swinburne</i> , ed. by Edmund Wilson (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1962).
<i>Letters</i>	Algernon Charles Swinburne, <i>The Swinburne Letters</i> (6 vols), ed. by Cecil Y. Lang (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959-1962).
<i>Major Poems</i>	Algernon Charles Swinburne, <i>Major Poems and Selected Prose</i> , ed. by Jerome McGann and Charles L. Sligh (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).
<i>New Writings</i>	Algernon Charles Swinburne, <i>New Writings by Swinburne</i> , ed. by Cecil Y. Lang (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1964).
<i>Poems</i>	Algernon Charles Swinburne, <i>The Poems of Algernon Charles Swinburne</i> (6 vols), London: Chatto & Windus, 1904).

Introduction

The year 2009 marked the centenary of Swinburne's death, and produced a flowering of scholarly interest in his writings. Most of that interest was, very naturally, in Swinburne's verse, rather than in his drama, literary criticism, or prose fiction:

Swinburne's poetry was, and remains, the most considerable part of his achievement. But he also produced texts of high quality in other fields. This thesis re-examines his work as a critic and creator of prose fiction, and seeks to argue that it deserves to play a larger role than it has done hitherto in our understanding of him as a writer. Here we find a subtly different version of the Swinburne with whom we are already familiar: an author with great lyrical power but also economy and restraint; an intellectual whose theories of art developed over a lifetime of cosmopolitan reading and thinking, and a formal innovator of ingenuity and radical spirit.

In my attempt to understand this particular Swinburne, I am grateful for the work of many previous scholars. I have made extensive use of the biographies by Georges Lafourcade (*Swinburne: A Literary Biography*) and Rikky Rooksby (*A.C. Swinburne: A Poet's Life*) as well as T. Earle Welby's *A Study of Swinburne*. My thesis would have been impossible without Lafourcade's *La Jeunesse de Swinburne*, which has an enduring importance for Swinburne scholarship, and whose sections on the *Triameron* and on Swinburne's French influences were particularly useful. Cecil Y. Lang's Introduction to his *Swinburne Letters* and the letters themselves, along with Terry Meyers' edition of the *Uncollected Letters*, were instrumental in shaping my approach because, as Lang notes, much of Swinburne's most important criticism appears in his correspondence.¹ I am also grateful to Professor Lang for his collection of *New Writings by Swinburne*, which made

¹ Lang, 'Introduction', p. xviii.

accessible key unpublished material including poetry, hoaxes and burlesques, and criticism. Any critic of Swinburne's novels must acknowledge the work of Randolph Hughes. I am doubly indebted: not only for his edition of *Lesbia Brandon*, but also for his edition of and commentary on *Lucretia Borgia (The Chronicle of Tebaldeo Tebaldei)*. Readers of Swinburne's novels are similarly indebted to F.J. Sypher's Introduction to *A Year's Letters* (which he also edited) and Edmund Wilson's 'Swinburne of Capheaton and Eaton' (reprinted as an introduction to *The Novels of A.C. Swinburne*). I have returned to both essays often; together they provide some of the most insightful commentary on Swinburne and the novel.

My thinking about Swinburne's literary criticism has been guided by Clyde K. Hyder's *Swinburne as Critic*, while valuable insights into Swinburne as an aesthetic thinker can also be found in Jerome McGann's *Swinburne: An Experiment in Criticism* (University of Chicago Press, 1972) and his Introduction to the McGann and Sligh edition of Swinburne's *Major Poems and Selected Prose*. Robert L. Peters's *The Crowns of Apollo: Swinburne's Principles of Literature and Art* (Wayne State University Press, 1965) is an key reference for anyone attempting to contextualise Swinburne as a critic and essayist. David Riede's article, 'Bard and Lady Novelist: Swinburne and the Novel of (Mrs.) Manners' (1986) is an important early analysis of *A Year's Letters*. I have been guided and stimulated by the essays collected in Rikky Rooksby and Nicholas Shrimpton's *The Whole Music of Passion: New Essays on Swinburne* (Scolar Press, 1993), and in Catherine Maxwell and Stefano Evangelista's *Algernon Charles Swinburne: Unofficial Laureate* (Manchester University Press, 2013), and must also mention my gratitude to the online *Swinburne Project* at Indiana University, which has performed a crucial service for Swinburne scholars by providing an extensive database with reproductions of many important texts.

In my own particular field, there has been some excellent work, in recent years, on Swinburne's prose fiction: Nicole Fluhr has written compellingly on *A Year's Letters* in 'The Artist as Critic: Swinburne's *A Year's Letters* and Victorian Fiction' (2006). Two excellent recent studies of *Lesbia Brandon* are John Vincent's scrutinising look at its flogging and rhythms of sadomasochism in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction* (ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 1997) and Christopher Lane's examination of its erotic relationships and suppressed desires in *The Burdens of Intimacy: Psychoanalysis and Victorian Masculinity* (1999). Catherine Maxwell's 2009 article on 'Swinburne and Thackeray's *The Newcomes*' reflects the growing interest in his relationship to the genre, and provides a fascinating account of Swinburne's thoughts on the contemporary English novel. T.A.J. Burnett's 'Some Reflections on the Text of Swinburne's Unfinished Novel, the so-called "Lesbia Brandon,"' reviews the bibliographic history of Swinburne's novels and makes a strong case for a new authoritative edition of *Lesbia Brandon*. *A.C. Swinburne and the Singing Word*, edited by Yisrael Levin, was also useful for its essays on the mature work as a context for the development of Swinburne's thought. In that collection, I have made especial use of Charlotte Ribeyrol's essay on Swinburne and France as well as Catherine Maxwell's 'Swinburne's Friendships with Women Writers'. There have been other interesting developments on the connection between Swinburne and France: Catherine Maxwell's monograph on *Swinburne* (2006) examines his critical work on Baudelaire. I have also read with interest Stefano Evangelista's examination of 'Swinburne's French Voice' in *Swinburne: Unofficial Laureate*. Sébastien Scarpa and Denis Bonnet's volume, *Swinburne and France* (Houdiard, 2012) provides valuable context for the trans-Channel relationship. It has been stimulating and gratifying to read these recent studies and sense a growing interest in Swinburne's output as a writer apart from his verse. Though all this work has been valuable, relatively little of it has been

concerned exclusively with Swinburne as a critic and writer of prose fiction. This thesis seeks to contribute to the process of filling that gap.

I became interested in Swinburne as a prose writer for many reasons, not the least of which is suggested by Cecil Lang when he says that Swinburne ‘leaves the impression that he had read *all* of English and French literature and most of Greek, Latin, and Italian’.² It was this very European quality of Swinburne that attracted me, and made me wonder what his reading of English, French, even Italian authors taught him about aesthetics. As I explored his prose writings, I found a vast spectrum that included correspondence (his letters are, many of them, brief critical masterworks), burlesque, hoax, pastiche, traditional essays, and — most strikingly — original stories and novels. What was the relationship between these works and his verse? How did Swinburne, traditionally regarded as a poet, view prose? Edmund Wilson wrote of Swinburne that ‘here is a life lived entirely for literature, in which nothing else is really important – and since literature is inexhaustible, a life that is immensely enjoyed’.³ In this thesis, it is the prose side of this ‘life lived entirely for literature’ that is chiefly considered.

This thesis will attempt to make a case for Swinburne as a European, rather than strictly British, author: a critic and writer of prose fiction whose efforts follow the grain of the continental, quite as much as the English, tradition. Remarking upon Swinburne’s many guises, that of critic, mimic, pseudonymous novelist, and ‘surgically incisive’ parodist, Cecil Lang jests that ‘neither Stendhal, with his hundred-odd pseudonyms’ nor ‘such voluptuous votaries of their own egos as Rousseau and Gide’, is ‘a stranger case in point’. ‘The biographer and critic of Swinburne’ he continues, ‘will have to recognize the pattern in all this and deal with its relation to the recurrent themes, in both the poetry and

² Lang, ‘Introduction’, xvii.

³ Wilson, ‘Introduction’, 9.

prose’.⁴ This thesis will take a comprehensive approach that recognises the many ‘patterns’ and genres of Swinburne’s experimentation while incorporating his ‘recurrent themes’, what I will call the ‘composite’ of Swinburnian thought. The very strangeness of Swinburne has become all too familiar. We must make him strange again, examine him from all angles, and understand that he borders and bestrides many literary fields.

To this end, this thesis will ask several questions and attempt to accomplish several things. It will ask what Swinburne’s work as a critic of the novel and a writer of fiction consists of. It will ask about the nature of his criticism — what he deems valuable, important, meaningful — and how this reflects his aesthetic philosophy. It will then examine his own short stories and novels, seeking to situate them in the context of his critical writing, and examining other novels and novelists he seems to have admired and taken as models. In a larger attempt to frame his philosophy of literature, it will trace connections with his verse. It will also try to contextualise Swinburne’s prose fiction in the cultural and intellectual movements of his time and consider how typical he is of English critics of his generation. Finally, it will attempt to make a case for a more ample view of Swinburne that includes his literary criticism and imaginative prose.

The first two chapters will discuss Swinburne’s critical writing about English fiction, especially his studies of the Brontës and Wilkie Collins. Swinburne also wrote two substantial essays on Charles Dickens (one of them published in the *Quarterly Review*, in July 1902, which Theodore Watts-Dunton later combined with an unpublished introduction to *Oliver Twist* to produce a book called *Charles Dickens*, in 1913). Though I mention Swinburne’s love of Dickens in passing, I do not discuss the essays on him in this thesis, partly for reasons of length, but also because these very late pieces tell us less

⁴ Lang, ‘Preface’, *New Writings*, xii-xiii.

about Swinburne's own work as a novelist (in the 1860s) than the earlier studies of the Brontës and Collins.

These 'English fiction' chapters will be followed by a series of chapters on Swinburne's admiration and imitation of continental European writers: Charles Baudelaire, Victor Hugo, Théophile Gautier, Giovanni Boccaccio, Choderlos de Laclos, the Marquis de Sade, and Honoré de Balzac. Swinburne's short stories and 'chronicles' will be discussed in the chapter on Boccaccio. The thesis will conclude with two chapters on his own work as a novelist, in light of these interests and influences: *A Year's Letters* and *Lesbia Brandon*. In this section, I briefly mention the novel *The Children of the Chapel*, Swinburne's collaboration with his cousin Mary Gordon, though the focus is on the two, more major works that he wrote by himself.

1. Swinburne and the Brontës: The Element of Living Storm*

I had grown pure as the dawn and the dew,
 You had grown strong as the sun or the sea.
 But none shall triumph a whole life through:
 For death is one, and the fates are three.
 At the door of life, by the gate of breath,
 There are worse things waiting for men than death;
 Death could not sever my soul and you,
 As these have severed your soul from me.

- A.C. Swinburne, 'The Triumph of Time' (*Poems* 1, 34-47, ll. 153-160).

That Algernon Charles Swinburne loved the Brontës is well known, and his interest in them well documented. His admiration for Charlotte and Emily, in particular, prompted two studies, a short book and an article,¹ which were instrumental in establishing their critical reputation as it exists today. 'Those great twin sisters in genius',² as he wrote in 1877, held a powerful sway over Swinburne's imagination. As natives of Yorkshire, he considered them his kinswomen, bred in the wild borderlands of the North (although Swinburne was born in London and spent most of his life in southern England, his family was based in Northumberland, and he never lost his allegiance to the county, calling himself a 'Borderer' to the very end).³ He sensed in their work — Emily's especially — the haunting, poetic influence of the moors, a passionate, romantic spirit that saturated his own verse and prose. More, they were his novelistic predecessors, and his essays on them shed considerable light on his own fictional practice. In framing

*A version of this chapter appeared as Lakshmi Krishnan, 'The Element of Living Storm: Swinburne and the Brontës', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 41:3 (September 2013), 463-85.

¹ *A Note on Charlotte Brontë* (1877) initially intended as an article reviewing T. Wemyss Reid's *Charlotte Brontë: A Monograph* (1877), but published as a book (Sept. 1877), reissued 1894. 'Emily Brontë' was published in the *Athenaeum* (1883) as a review of A. M. F. Robinson's biography, and collected in *Miscellanies* (1886), pp. 260-70.

² Algernon Charles Swinburne, *A Note on Charlotte Brontë*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1877). Rpt. as 'The Brontës', in *Swinburne as Critic*, ed. by Clyde K. Hyder (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), pp. 188-200.

³ Swinburne wrote, 'we [the Brontës and himself] all belong, you know, to the old kingdom of Northumbria.' See 'Algernon Charles Swinburne to A. B. Grosart', *Letters* 4, 15-16. For more on this, see Rikky Rooksby, *Swinburne: A Poet's Life*, (Brookfield: Scolar, 1997) or the correspondence on this topic between T. Watts-Dunton, T. J. Wise, and E. Gosse who, after Swinburne's death, published a collection of his Border Ballads. MSS in the British Library, Ashley Collection.

himself as the Brontës' apologist, Swinburne was 'far ahead of his time',⁴ shaping Victorian criticism. His praise of *Wuthering Heights* (1847) is considered 'by some literary historians to be epochmaking' and altered the way in which novels were discussed, analysed, and ultimately evaluated.⁵ There are also striking features that suggest Swinburne's own novel *Lesbia Brandon* — in its trans-genre form and unique milieu — was conceived as an exercise in the manner of *Wuthering Heights*.

Swinburne's fascination with the Brontës greatly pre-dates his critical writing. He could almost never review authors about whom he did not hold a strong opinion, a foible that gives his essays their chequered quality: heights of fervent enthusiasm juxtaposed with shamelessly prejudiced vitriol. Most often, however, he restricted himself to the 'noble pleasure of praising' (Hyder, 17). We know that 'Swinburne formed his most intense literary attachments while he was young' (Hyder, 4) — the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists, Percy Shelley, Victor Hugo, Charles Dickens, and Walter Savage Landor, amongst others – and one of those childhood passions was the Brontës. This continued at Oxford, where in 1857 'as an undergraduate member of Balliol's literary and debating society Old Mortality, Swinburne gave a paper on *Wuthering Heights*'.⁶ This youthful zeal would find more sophisticated, measured form in his adult critical work. 'From the first hour when as a schoolboy I read 'Jane Eyre' and 'Wuthering Heights,' he wrote T. Wemyss Reid in 1877, 'I have always retained the first intense desire I felt then to know all that I might or ought to know about the two women who wrote them' (*Letters* 4, 21). This 'intense desire' to *understand* the Brontës, their background and the powers that moulded their prose, would prove important subsequently, as Swinburne's study of the sisters is more explicitly biographical than his other criticism.

⁴ Clyde K. Hyder, 'Introduction', in *Swinburne as Critic* (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), pp. 1-23 (pp. 15-16).

⁵ Melvin R. Watson, 'Wuthering Heights and the Critics', *Trollopian*, 3 (1949), 243-63 (p. 247).

⁶ Rikky Rooksby, 'Swinburne and the Brontës,' *Brontë Society Transactions* 22 (1997), 86-95 (p. 86). This article serves as an excellent introduction to Swinburne's critical work on the Brontës.

Swinburne is keenly aware of landscape and setting in the Brontës' work, considering their novels as products of a unique place and specific circumstances. This approach is perhaps due to the affinity he felt for his countrywomen. The Brontës lay closer to him than many of his other subjects. Although their humble upbringing and modest circumstances differed greatly from his own, patrician background, they shared a bond, the spiritual heritage that he believed was the birthright of every Northerner. Later, in his defence of Charlotte Brontë, he was to disparage George Eliot as (among other things) 'the now more popular Warwickshire woman' (*Letters* 3, 261). Couching his critique in overtly regional terms, Swinburne establishes himself alongside the Brontës as a Northern voice amidst the clamour and dominance of Southern letters.

Swinburne's regional bias bears further scrutiny, but it is important to realise that his early interest in the Brontës was almost purely biographical. In a letter, he relates an anecdote from his youth:

Many years ago I lent a copy of that book [*Wuthering Heights*] to a lady of the class described in it — daughter of a Westmoreland 'statesman' or small gentleman-farmer living on his own land, — warning her that though I liked it very much I knew that people in general called it 'terrible' etc. etc. She returned it to me, after reading it through, with the remark that (so far from the incidents being impossible — as the cockney critics said — and say) she had known wilder instances of lawless and law-defying passion and tyranny, far more horrible than any cruelty of Heathcliff's, in her own immediate neighbourhood.

Swinburne then relates this 'wilder instance,' telling the tale of a gentleman farmer, 'who having bullied his wife to death was left alone in the farm with a beautiful daughter, whom he used with horrible brutality.' He concludes that 'seeing that Emily Brontë was a *tragic poet*, and reared in the same degree of latitude which bred this humbler version of the 'Cenci,'⁷ I cannot think that anything in her book is as at all excessive or

⁷Although there are major cultural and class differences between *Wuthering Heights* and *The Cenci*, Swinburne conflates the two, one a novel and the other a verse drama. This suggests a kinship between himself, his idol Shelley, and Emily Brontë, not just as poets, but also as innovators in various literary forms.

unjustifiable' (*Letters* 4, 21-22, my emphasis). He affirms that the 'law-defying passion and tyranny' so negatively remarked by Brontë's early critics is not quite so shocking for those raised in wilder, hardier regions. Further, he argues that there is a certain genius, such as that possessed by Emily Brontë or Shelley, which can transfigure such tyranny and brutality through 'tragic poetry' into something lofty and passionate. But Swinburne's most salient point is not that such 'tragic poets' simply exist, but that, when 'reared' in environments providing a certain 'degree of latitude,' the subject matter they choose appears more 'excessive' than it truly is. The interaction of circumstance and a naturally tragic spirit yields, especially in the case of Emily Brontë, scenes of magnetic, startling power. Swinburne characterises the events of *Wuthering Heights* — which offended milder sensibilities — as not uncommon in certain 'neighbourhoods.' It is through Brontë's visionary writing, he argues, that the tale transcends its circumstances, otherwise merely a catalogue of brutal incidents.

This suggests a parallel with Swinburne himself. He, too, had come under attack for the 'excessive' characteristics of his verse, for being the 'libidinous laureate of a pack of satyrs,'⁸ and depicting individuals and behaviours that often repulsed his readers. His 'Dolores' offended as much as Emily's Heathcliff or Anne's 'coarse' and 'brutal'⁹ Arthur Huntingdon. His critics were unaware, of course, that he was concurrently writing two novels, the second of which still represents his most incendiary effort.¹⁰ The characters of *Lesbia Brandon* are wild, passionate, and extreme: violence, incest, and flagellation thread through the novel. Like *Wuthering Heights*, *Lesbia Brandon* is peopled with bizarre, often-brutal individuals who behave in strange, terrible ways. Such passionate

⁸ John Morley, 'Mr. Swinburne's New Poems: *Poems and Ballads*', *Saturday Review* (4 Aug. 1866). Rpt. in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Miriam Allott (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), pp. 145-47. All future contemporary reviews reprinted in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage* unless otherwise noted.

⁹ 'The Tenant of Wildfell Hall,' *Spectator* (8 Jul. 1848, 662-63). Rpt. in ed. Allott, pp. 249-50.

¹⁰ *Lesbia Brandon*, begun 1864.

perversity is central to Swinburne's aesthetics of cruelty and beauty, pain and desire. For him, the novel transcends all through its innovative, genre-bending structure, and like his poetry, lyrical power. In deflecting criticism levelled against *Wuthering Heights*, he indirectly comments on his own detractors and defends his aesthetic. Something about the Brontës compelled Swinburne, a connection beyond their common background or regional proximity. Their themes and subjects, conveyed in fresh, untrammelled style, compelled him. With Emily he felt a close literary kinship. He believed her misunderstood by her early readers. She, too, wrote unflinchingly of the heights and nadirs of human experience and possessed the sort of transformative lyrical power that ennobled what many termed a 'dreadful book.' He of course knew and liked her poetry, but affords her the highest praise when he calls her a poet of the novel. And in averring that 'with all its horrors, it is so beautiful!' Swinburne shifts from a youthful fascination with *Wuthering Heights* and its gripping 'horrors' toward a mature appreciation of its literary merits (*Letters* 4, 22).

Swinburne was not alone in his admiration of the Brontës. Many members of his immediate circle found their work impressive. The Pre-Raphaelites read *Wuthering Heights* with interest, as reflected in D. G. Rossetti's well-known description:

I've been greatly interested in *Wuthering Heights*, the first novel I've read for an age, and the best (as regards power and sound style) for two ages, except *Sidonia*. But it is a fiend of a book, an incredible monster, combining all the stronger female tendencies from Mrs Browning to Mrs Brownrigg.¹¹ The action is laid in Hell — only it seems places and people have English names there.¹²

¹¹ A well-known murderess, who was executed in 1767 for torturing her female apprentices to death.

¹² Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti to William Allingham, 19 Sept 1854', in *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (9 vols.), ed. by W.E. Fredeman (Cambridge: D.H. Brewer, 2010). 'Sidonia' is J. W. Meinhold's novel *Sidonie von Bork, die Klosterhexe* (1847), published in an anonymous English translation (by Jane Francesca Elgee, Lady Wilde) as *Sidonia the Sorceress* in 1849; the enthusiasm for this book in the Rossetti circle is reflected in its republication by William Morris's Kelmscott Press in 1893.

Rossetti ‘responded ardently’ to Emily’s ‘poetic power’,¹³ while acutely aware of its brutality (‘a fiend of a book, an incredible monster’), a sensation that critics — even friendly ones — could never quite shed. He remarks that the novel is the ‘first I’ve read for an age’; Rossetti’s evaluative criteria, then, are slightly different from those of other reviewers, who inevitably compare *Wuthering Heights* to other works within the genre. As a novel, *Wuthering Heights* faced significant opposition; as a work of elemental power and sound, however, it received high praise. Critics who compared it to the comic realism of Dickens or the later, high realism of Eliot were disappointed, not just by its extreme plot, but also its evasive style and odd, framed narrative structure. Those, however, who regarded it as different — a hybrid that might revise genre conventions — exulted in its lyrical intensity. Such dichotomy is especially significant when we consider that Swinburne referred to his own novel, *Lesbia Brandon*, as a ‘hybrid book’ (*Letters* 1, 158) and a ‘scheme of mixed verse and prose’ (*Letters* 1, 224).

The Brontës and Mid-Victorian Criticism

Swinburne’s criticism of the Brontës is especially important in light of its context: the publication history and reception of the ‘Brothers Bell.’ General opinion was mixed: *Jane Eyre* (1847) was almost immediately a success, while *Wuthering Heights* inspired both perturbation and grudging praise. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) was lauded, if not for its artistry, as a solid moral and didactic tale. Though Victorian critics were often less sanctimonious and more discerning than is assumed, the Brontës’ reception was certainly patchy. *Wuthering Heights*, in particular, suffered strong censure on the grounds of immorality, lack of artistry, and subject matter that was deemed revolting and repellent. This is where Swinburne’s efforts would have greatest force. For Emily and her

¹³ Miriam Allott, ‘Introduction’ in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Miriam Allott (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), pp. 1-56 (p. 33).

novel he was a staunch, passionate, and prescient advocate. Where others were negative, he was not only positive but positively rhapsodic. He praised her novel for its tragic arc, dramatic value (landscape, setting, characters, and language), and poetic power. In comparing Brontë to Shakespeare, he initiated a trend in *Wuthering Heights* criticism that remains important today. He helped to ‘contextualize the uneven and often negative reception of *Wuthering Heights*’ and of the other Brontës’ works by ‘considering the role of and expectations for the novel in Victorian England’.¹⁴ To better understand these prevailing expectations for the genre and the ways in which Swinburne revised them, one can turn to contemporary reviews. As we will see, the Brontës ran little risk of foundering in critical oblivion without Swinburne’s spirited defence. His work, however, was instrumental in cementing the Brontës’ reputation far into the future and foregrounding Emily as the greatest of them. These essays reshaped late Victorian theories of prose fiction, influencing critical discourse on the Brontës and the novel until the present time.

The story of how the Brontës published their first novels is now a familiar one. Mythologized by Elizabeth Gaskell in her *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857),¹⁵ anecdotes of their literary struggles, choice to write under pseudonyms, and ultimate success fill the archives of Brontëana. 1846 saw the publication of *Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell*, followed by *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Agnes Grey* in 1847. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* emerged in 1848, shortly before Branwell and Emily died. Anne succumbed to tuberculosis in 1849, the same year that Charlotte’s *Shirley* appeared. The 1850 memorial edition of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* contained Charlotte’s famous Preface, which provided hitherto unknown information about her two sisters. *Villette* appeared in 1853 and finally, in 1857, Charlotte’s first novel, *The Professor* (initially

¹⁴ Harold Bloom, ‘Algernon Charles Swinburne: Emily Brontë’, *Bloom’s Classic Critical Views: The Brontës* (New York: Infobase, 2008), p. 143.

¹⁵ See Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. by Alan Shelston (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975).

rejected) was posthumously published. Over this very brief span of time (Swinburne was nine when *Poems* appeared, and thirteen when Charlotte's Preface eulogising her sisters was published), the Brontës produced work that has stimulated an exceptional number of critical responses. Considering the sheer quantity of Brontë reviews, monographs, and essays, we often forget how little primary material is extant. It is a testament, not only to their provocative writing, but also the compelling nature of the Brontë myth. The enigmatic sisters still draw attention, but this is not merely a recent fascination. As Allott indicates, Brontë criticism 'has grown enormously, but interest in the Brontës on the part of the general reading public was already thriving by the turn of the century' (Allott, 1). Thus, during Swinburne's adolescence, heated discussion of the Brontës, their lives, and work was already underway. As an adult, he was able to contribute to still-lively discourses.

The biographies that appeared soon after the Brontës' deaths contributed much to this ever-expanding family mythology and sustained public interest. Elizabeth Gaskell's *Life* is, of course, the most famous example. It was followed by A. M. F. Robinson's *Emily Brontë* (1883), the first full-length biography of the younger sister. In the meantime, several posthumous articles kindled critical enthusiasm. T. Wemyss Reid's *Charlotte Brontë: A Monograph* was published in 1877; Swinburne's *Note on Charlotte Brontë* was originally planned as a review of it. Shortly thereafter, Leslie Stephen replied to Swinburne's monograph with one of his own. Finally, Swinburne's essay on Emily Brontë, written in response to Robinson's biography, was published in the *Athenæum* in 1883.

Even before this surge of posthumous writing, there was a mass of critical work written about the Brontës during their lifetimes. As the work that met with the most immediate success, it is fair to begin with *Jane Eyre*. In late 1847, the *Athenæum* praised

it for 'exciting strong interest' and serving 'the novel-reader who prefers story to philosophy, pedantry, or Puseyite controversy.' At the same time, the novel was criticised for its improbable latter half, where the convergence of serendipitous events seems forced, where 'obstacles fall down like the battlements of *Castle Melodrame*, in the closing scene'.¹⁶ The *Spectator*, however, took issue with its central characters: 'There is a low tone of behaviour (rather than of morality) in the book; and, what is worse than all, neither the heroine nor hero attracts sympathy. The reader cannot see anything loveable in Mr. Rochester, nor why he should be so deeply in love with Jane Eyre.' It did, however, commend its 'considerable skill in the plan'¹⁷ and vigorous intensity. G. H. Lewes, in *Fraser's Magazine*, offered almost unmitigated praise. 'No such book has gladdened our eyes in a long while,' he effuses, 'Reality — deep, significant reality — is the great characteristic of the book. It is an autobiography, — not, perhaps, in the naked facts and circumstances, but in the actual suffering and experience.' Lewes concludes with an injunction to the author, 'keep reality distinctly before you, and paint it as accurately as you can, invention will never equal the effect of truth'.¹⁸ George Eliot, however, was slightly less complimentary. She wrote to Charles Bray, 'I have read *Jane Eyre*, mon ami, and shall be glad to know what you admire in it . . . I wish the characters would talk a little less like the heroes and heroines of police reports'.¹⁹ Thackeray enjoyed it immensely, claiming that 'it interested me so much that I have lost (or won if you like) a whole day in reading it at the busiest period'.²⁰ The *Critic* affirmed that Currer Bell 'has fertile invention, great power of description, and a happy faculty for conceiving and

¹⁶ Hugh F. Chorley, 'Jane Eyre', *Athenaeum* (23 Oct. 1847, 1100-01). Rpt. in ed. Allott, pp. 71-73.

¹⁷ 'Jane Eyre', *Spectator* (6 Nov. 1847, 1074-75). Rpt. in ed. Allott, pp. 74.

¹⁸ George Henry Lewes, 'Jane Eyre', *Fraser's Magazine* (Dec 1847, 686-95). Rpt. in ed. Allott, pp. 83-87 (pp. 84-87).

¹⁹ George Eliot, 'George Eliot to Charles Bray', in *The George Eliot Letters* (9 vols), ed. by Gordon S. Haight (New Haven: Yale University, 1954), I, p. 268.

²⁰ William Thackeray, *The Letters and Private Papers of W. M. Thackeray*, ed. by Gordon N. Ray (London: Oxford UP, 1945), pp. 318-319.

sketching character. *Jane Eyre* is a remarkable novel'.²¹ Albany Fonblanque called it a 'very clever book,' a 'book of decided power . . . it is anything but a fashionable novel.' Later, he judges it lacking as a 'history of events,' finding merit in its 'analysis of a single mind,' its 'earnest human purpose'.²² In contrast, Elizabeth Rigby, of *The Quarterly Review*, labelled *Jane Eyre* 'pre-eminently an anti-Christian composition,' its eponym 'a being totally uncongenial to our feelings from beginning to end.' Although Rigby grudgingly admits Jane's 'firmness' and 'determination,' 'the impression she leaves on our mind is that of a decidedly vulgar-minded woman — one whom we should not care for as an acquaintance, whom we should not seek as a friend, whom we should not desire for a relation, and whom we should scrupulously avoid for a governess'.²³

This quick sketch of reviews highlights several major trends in the nature of Victorian critical discourse. The responses to *Jane Eyre* were largely positive, tinged with slight reservation. Critics primarily appreciated its impassioned heroine, not because she is a supreme fictional creation, but because of the sympathetic response she evokes. Several remarked that *Jane Eyre* makes no pretensions of intellectualism; it is not concerned with the weightiness of philosophy or history, but rather with telling of an individual's struggle and development. It is for these very qualities that *Jane Eyre* has regained and maintained academic attention over the past century: the psychological characterisation at which Brontë excels has proven intriguing for scholars of many persuasions. Her habit of directly addressing her reader, combined with the interiority of the text, has been a fruitful field for feminist, psychoanalytical, and even deconstructionist interpretations.

²¹ 'Jane Eyre', *Critic* (30 Oct. 1847, 277-78). Rpt. in ed. Miriam Allott, pp. 71-73 (p. 73).

²² Albany Fonblanque, 'Jane Eyre', *Examiner* (27 Nov. 1847, 756-57). Rpt. in ed. Miriam Allott, pp. 76-82 (pp. 76-82).

²³ Elizabeth Rigby, 'Jane Eyre', *Quarterly Review* (Dec. 1848, 153-85). Rpt. in ed. Miriam Allott, pp. 105-13 (pp. 105-13).

Noteworthy is the number of Victorian critics who responded to Jane's personality, whether positively or negatively. Very few focused on the novel's structural or even aesthetic attributes; there is an 'absence of detailed attention to particular narrative procedures' (Allott 16-17). It is Brontë's ability to evoke vivid, lively characterisation that compelled her reviewers. They asked common questions: are these individuals true to life? Do they reflect 'deep, significant reality'? For some, she demonstrated 'considerable skill' in portraying her atypical, plain heroine and a surly, yet charismatic anti-hero. For others, like George Eliot, her characters talk 'like the heroes and heroines of police reports,' in flat, excessive language. Elizabeth Rigby condemned Jane by claiming that 'we should not care [for her] as an acquaintance'. This tendency, of imagining fictional creations as living people, was accompanied either by praise for Brontë's honesty or moral censure for her 'vulgar-minded' heroine and the plain, rough language in which her characters converse.

Such censure was much more pronounced against *Wuthering Heights*. The *Spectator* called it 'an attempt to give novelty and interest to fiction, by resorting to those singular "characters" that used to exist everywhere, but especially in retired and remote country places.' Its incidents, it claims, 'are too coarse and disagreeable to be attractive, the very best being improbable, with a moral taint about them.' It nonetheless praises the writer for a 'delineation [that] is forcible and truthful'.²⁴ H.F. Chorley in the *Athenæum* asserted that, 'in spite of much power and cleverness; in spite of its truth to life in the remote nooks and corners of England *Wuthering Heights* is a disagreeable story'. He suggests that Brontë's artistry and truthfulness, taken alone, do not redeem the unpleasantness of her tale, as there is 'enough of what is mean and bitterly painful and degrading gather[ing] round every one of us during the course of his pilgrimage through

²⁴ 'The Novels of Ellis and Acton Bell, *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*', *Spectator* (18 Dec. 1847, 1217). Rpt. in ed. Miriam Allott, pp. 217-227 (p. 217).

this vale of tears' 'to absolve the Artist from choosing his incidents and characters out of such a dismal catalogue'.²⁵ The *Examiner* adjudged the 'strange book' as 'not without evidences of considerable power: but, as a whole, it is wild, confused, disjointed, and improbable; and the people who make up the drama, which is tragic enough in its consequences, are savages ruder than those who lived before the days of Homer.' It proceeds to applaud 'an author who goes at once fearlessly into the moors and desolate places,' with the caveat that 'he shall not drag into light all that he discovers, of coarse and loathsome, in his wanderings'.²⁶ A subsequent critic described that 'the reader is shocked, disgusted, almost sickened by details of cruelty, inhumanity, and the most diabolical hate and vengeance, and anon come passages of powerful testimony to the supreme power of love',²⁷ while yet another calls it 'a book that seizes upon us with an iron grasp, and makes us read its story of passions and wrongs whether we will or no'.²⁸ A final, scathing review came from G. W. Peck in the *American Review*: '*that originality which is conscious to the writer, is not genuine, and is soon found out and disliked. . . .* His [Ellis Bell's] book has the air rather of an *exposé* of his life-suffering, to use a Germanism, than a purely ideal composition'.²⁹

In contrast to *Jane Eyre*, whose protagonists most critics found sympathetic, the characters of *Wuthering Heights* evoked almost universally disgusted responses. They are 'savages,' representing the most 'coarse and loathsome' in human behaviour. Significantly (one exception apart) Brontë's reviewers do not critique her tale because it is 'improbable,' but rather because it is one that should not be told. The very qualities for

²⁵ [Hugh F. Chorley (most likely)], 'Wuthering Heights', *Athenaeum* (25 Dec. 1847, 1324-25). Rpt. in ed. Allott, pp. 218-19 (pp. 218-19).

²⁶ 'Wuthering Heights,' *Examiner* (Jan. 1848, 21-22). Rpt. in ed. Allott, pp. 220-24 (pp. 220-24).

²⁷ 'Wuthering Heights', *Douglas Jerrold's Weekly Newspaper* (15 Jan. 1848, 77). Rpt. in ed. Allott, p. 227 (p. 227).

²⁸ 'Wuthering Heights', *Literary World* (29 April 1848, 243). Rpt. in ed. Allott, p. 233 (p. 233).

²⁹ [Peck, George W.], 'Wuthering Heights', *American Review* (Jun. 1848, 572-85). Rpt. in ed. Allott, pp. 233-42 (pp. 233-42).

which *Jane Eyre* was praised — firm attachment to reality, the resoluteness of its language, its depiction of individuals as they are — equipped critics with their strongest arguments against *Wuthering Heights*. The author was denounced for perversely ‘dragging into light’ the worst ‘cruelty, inhumanity, and most diabolical hate and vengeance.’ The choice to portray such a story is, reviewers argued, a conscious one, and one that lends a forced quality to the narrative. Peck claimed that the author is ‘consciously original,’ writing an ‘*exposé*’ out of ghoulish pleasure in revealing all that is morbid and horrific, rather than creating a ‘purely ideal composition.’ The same criticism that was levelled against the Ann Radcliffe and ‘Monk’ Lewis schools of Gothic fiction is here employed against Brontë. The momentum of the text comes, he states, not from any aesthetic merit, but from the steady accumulation of horror upon horror. An *exposé*, the novel describes with unflinching accuracy, but provides no normative worldview.

The prevailing early view of *Wuthering Heights* was simply that it was too much: extreme, excessive, and intense. While *Jane Eyre* carefully treads the line of what can and should be written, keeping an overarching moral in sight, *Wuthering Heights* evades such summation. Even detractors acknowledged, however, its merits. Some phrased their compliments in very hesitant terms, stating that *Wuthering Heights* ‘makes us read its story . . . whether we will or no.’ Its ‘power’ is widely noted. Ellis Bell’s ‘work is strangely original. It bears a resemblance to some of those irregular German tales.’ This sense of compulsion is prevalent. It is, Lewes writes in an 1853 review, ‘a momentum which propels the mind into regions inaccessible to calculation, unsuspected in our calmer moods’,³⁰ that forces the author to write with such violence and the readers to be drawn against their better judgements. For Lewes, ‘such inspiration might be tolerated if it were no more uncontrolled than in *Jane Eyre*, but in *Wuthering Heights* it was too

³⁰ [George Henry Lewes], ‘Villette’, *Leader* (12 Feb. 1853, 163-64). Rpt. in ed. Allott, p. 184 (p. 184).

wild'.³¹ It possesses, too, a foreignness that many critics remark. This might simply be an effort to distance *Wuthering Heights* from British letters. Perhaps, however, it reflects an understanding that the novel belongs to a different literary tradition. Her reviewers were quite perspicacious in noting Brontë's German influences.

Victorian critics did not quite express what Melvin Watson describes as 'complete disapproval' of *Wuthering Heights* (244). In general, however, they often stumbled over language sufficient to describe it. They edge around issues of narrative and style, and often attribute the work's power to the story's 'impetuous force.' Some even wrote that 'it is in parts very unskilfully constructed . . . many passages in it display neither the grace of art nor the truth of nature, but only the vigour of one positive idea'.³² Its content and theme, they imply, overwhelm *Wuthering Heights*, rendering its construction and language rushed and scattered. While *Jane Eyre* was critiqued for its over-tidy conclusion, the neat tying-up of Jane and Rochester's relationship, and the happy relegation of St. John Rivers to faith and martyrdom in India, *Wuthering Heights* is disparaged for just the opposite. For its contemporary reviewers, it was a work of great native power, lacking artistry and cohesion; most importantly, it lacked a central protagonist who could evoke empathy and compassion.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, Anne Brontë's second publication, was inevitably compared to her sisters' earlier efforts. The *Spectator*'s critique of the novel echoes much that was written about *Wuthering Heights*: 'there seems in the writer a morbid love for the coarse . . . he might reply, that such things are in life . . . mere existence, however, as we have often had occasion to remark, is not a sufficient reason for a choice of subject'.³³

The *Examiner*, however, noticed Anne's moral bent, writing that *Tenant* shows 'distinct

³¹ Allan R. Brick, 'Lewes's Review of *Wuthering Heights*', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 14 (1960), 355-59 (p. 358).

³² 'Wuthering Heights', *Britannia* (15 Jan. 1848, 42-43). Rpt. in ed. Allott, p. 224 (p. 224).

³³ 'The Tenant of Wildfell Hall', *Spectator* (8 Jul. 1848, 662-63). Rpt. in ed. Allott, pp. 249-50 (pp. 249-50).

markings of character'.³⁴ *Literary World* identified it as one 'of novels of a new class, which will be strung on . . . to the popular work *Jane Eyre*.' Although 'inferior to' Curren, Acton possesses the happy ability to 'convey the scene he (or she) describes to the mind's eye, so as not only to impress it with the mere view, but to speak, as it were, to the imagination, to the inner sense, as is ever the case with the Poetry as the Painting of real genius'.³⁵ But E. P. Whipple (like many other American critics of the Brontës) was a good deal harsher, writing that 'the reader of Acton Bell gains no enlarged view of mankind . . . but is confined to a narrow space of life, and held down, as it were, by main force, to witness the wolfish side of his nature literally and logically set forth'.³⁶ Others thought Anne's didactic message went sadly awry. 'We cannot but express our deep regret,' claimed *Sharpe's London Magazine*, 'that a book in many respects eminently calculated to advance the cause of religion and right feeling, the moral of which is unimpeachable and most powerfully wrought out, should be rendered unfit for the perusal of the very class of persons to whom it would be most useful, (namely, imaginative girls likely to risk their happiness on the forlorn hope of marrying and reforming a captivating rake)'.³⁷

Scholars have observed that Anne was soon 'settled in her familiar shaded place beside her more famous sisters' (Allott, 16), a remark substantiated by this brief overview of *Tenant's* critical fortunes. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was only lauded for the same qualities that won *Jane Eyre* acclaim. Many reviewers actually call it a paler version of Currer Bell's work, lacking that impassioned spark that vivifies Charlotte's protagonists. Even Anne's facility for imagination and description, which in *Tenant* is not slight, was

³⁴ 'The Tenant of Wildfell Hall', *Examiner* (29 Jul, 1848, 483-84). Rpt. in ed. Allott, p. 254 (p. 254).

³⁵ 'The Tenant of Wildfell Hall', *Literary World* (12 Aug. 1848, 544-47). Rpt. in ed. Allott, p. 257 (p. 257).

³⁶ Edwin P. Whipple, 'Novels of the Season', *North American Review* (Oct. 1848, 354-69). Rpt. in ed. Allott, pp. 247-49 (pp. 247-49).

³⁷ 'The Tenant of Wildfell Hall', *Sharpe's London Magazine* (Aug. 1848, 181-84). Rpt. in ed. Allott, pp. 263-66 (pp. 263-66).

under-appreciated, being considered more a family trait than anything else. Most readers noted Acton Bell's moral purpose (which certainly sets her apart from Ellis), but either found that *Tenant* was only mitigated by touches of 'character' or, at worst, actually unfit to read. While *Wuthering Heights* was considered the vigorous work of an *enfant terrible*, a powerful writer who did not yet have control over his (her) own skills, whose unswerving determination led him to narrate brutal people and events, and whose startling amorality was both compelling and horrifying, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was chastised for being a moral tale told wrong. For many critics, Acton Bell's ends did not justify their means. This critique of supposedly inappropriate, 'excessive' subject matter is a common one for all the Brontës, and one to which Swinburne would return in his defence. But he, too, disliked *Tenant*, albeit for different reasons. Calling it 'ludicrously weak, palpably unreal, and apparently imitative,' he argued that it is useful as a 'study of flaccid and invertebrate immorality,' a 'faithful transcription from life'³⁸ of Branwell Brontë. Its themes, which earlier reviewers found abhorrent, interested Swinburne as a didactic lesson and realistic dissection of weak character.

Of Charlotte Brontë's next two novels, *Villette* fared rather better than *Shirley*. Neither, however, received the effusive praise of *Jane Eyre*. With *Villette*, however, we do see Victorian criticism come into maturity, a change that anticipates the essays of the latter half-century. Of *Shirley*, *Atlas* expresses, 'the new has not come too soon to supersede the old, even if the new work were another *Jane Eyre*. But it is not another *Jane Eyre*.' By 1849, *Jane Eyre* had attained an almost unimpeachable status; it became the standard against which all Brontë novels — and, indeed, many novels in general — were measured. 'Now *Jane Eyre* has taken a high, a very high, place among English

³⁸ Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'Emily Brontë', *Athenaeum* (16 June 1883, 438-44, 440). Rpt. as 'Emily Brontë' in *Swinburne As Critic*, ed. by Clyde K. Hyder, pp. 201-08 (p. 203). Further references in footnotes as 'Emily Brontë, SaC'.

novels,' writes the reviewer, 'but whether Currer Bell could take a high place among English novelists remained to be proved'.³⁹ Could the reputation of a novelist rest on one dazzling success? Critics began to explore these questions with Charlotte's later output. Currer Bell's ambiguous gender, which in the initial flush of publication had been largely circumvented, also becomes a more pressing concern. For most critics, *Shirley* eliminated any previous doubt: 'It sets at rest now and for ever all question of the sex of the writer.' A 'more womanly book than *Jane Eyre*,' *Shirley* was also less 'irresistible' (*Atlas*, 120-21). Readers conflate style and gender, suggesting that Brontë's earlier, more androgynous writing boasts a vigour that her later, 'womanly' prose lacks. The *Athenæum* similarly points to *Shirley*'s 'languid' and 'cumbrous' pace, noting that 'we do not think that *Shirley* is an advance upon *Jane Eyre*'.⁴⁰ Albany Fonblanque, whose admiration for *Jane Eyre* has already been discussed, enjoyed *Shirley*, but damns with faint praise, writing that 'the writer works upon a very limited range of rather homely materials, yet inspires them with a power of exciting, elevating, pleasing, and instructing'.⁴¹

By calling Charlotte master of her 'limited range of rather homely materials,' Fonblanque returns her to the gendered analysis that the (undiscovered) persona of Currer Bell helped to avoid. Her work is compared, not to novelistic efforts in general, but to the endeavours of the female novelist. Within this constricted sphere, her tiny manoeuvres and delicate touches are appreciated, their 'elevating' and didactic purposes commended. Yet we see very little comment on her narrative style or structure, little attention to her role in developing the genre. The study of Currer Bell as a woman novelist reached its peak with G. H. Lewes's notorious piece in the *Edinburgh Review*. Lewes, who was still a proponent of *Jane Eyre*, writes that 'it is certain that, for many years, there had been no

³⁹ 'Shirley', *Atlas* (3 Nov. 1849, 696-97). Rpt. in ed. Allott, p. 119-121(p. 119).

⁴⁰ 'Shirley', *Athenæum* (3 Nov. 1849, 1107-09). Rpt. in ed. Miriam Allott, pp. 122-124 (p. 124).

⁴¹ Albany Fonblanque, 'Shirley', *Examiner* (3 Nov. 1849, 692-94). Rpt. in ed. Allott, pp. 125-29 (p. 129).

work of such power, piquancy, and originality. Its very faults were faults on the side of vigour . . . a more masculine book, in the sense of vigour, was never written.’ But Lewes disagrees with his fellow-critics, asserting that ‘this same over-masculine vigour is even more prominent in *Shirley* and does not increase the pleasantness of the book.’ *Shirley*, he writes, lacks ‘unity,’ the ‘passionate link’ that connects disparate elements in *Jane Eyre*. Currer Bell ‘has much yet to learn,’ namely ‘the discipline of her own tumultuous energies.’ Lewes closes with the example of Madame de Staël, quoting Schiller’s comment, ‘This person wants every thing that is graceful in a woman; and, nevertheless, the faults of her book are altogether womanly faults. She steps out of her sex — without elevating herself above it’.⁴² This rather harsh evaluation, which Charlotte Brontë found devastating, might perhaps explain Swinburne’s later, virulent antipathy to Lewes as a critic. Womanly vices without her virtues — such is Lewes’s essential claim about Brontë’s writing — coarse vigour without balancing refinement; undisciplined feeling without logical cohesion. When Lewes seeks to praise (as when he calls *Jane Eyre* a vigorous book), he describes Currer Bell as masculine. Yet his rejection of *Shirley* is that it is ‘over-vigorous,’ that it takes masculine traits to an extreme and hence renders them feminine. In the hands of a woman, masculine strength becomes coarseness, energetic drive the undisciplined emotion of the hysteric. He pathologises the female novelist when she steps out of her sphere. And it was precisely such narrowness that Brontë sought to avoid.

Villette, which still garners praise as Brontë’s most sophisticated novel, was appreciated by her contemporary critics as well. In 1853, Harriet Martineau draws an extended comparison between Brontë and Balzac⁴³ (high praise, indeed), stating that ‘an

⁴² [George H. Lewes], ‘*Shirley*’, *Edinburgh Review* (Jan. 1850, 153-73). Rpt. in ed. Allott, pp. 160-70 (p. 169).

⁴³ Swinburne was passionate about Balzac and ‘among his friends evangelized tirelessly’ for the author. (Lang, ‘Introduction’ in *Letters* 1, xviii.).

atmosphere of pain hangs about the whole . . . in this pervading pain, the book reminds us of Balzac.’ Martineau’s primary reservation is that Brontë’s women — Lucy Snowe in particular — are too needy, too desperately empty without love. The ‘writer’s tendency to describe the need of being loved’ grates on readers ‘whose reason and taste will reject the assumption that events and characters are to be regarded through the medium of one passion only’.⁴⁴ Martineau reacts against Brontë’s singular introspection, her tendency to write of events through the transformative lens of one individual’s consciousness. While readers of *Wuthering Heights* are impelled forward by a wide, tumultuous energy, those who approach *Villette* are irresistibly drawn into the claustrophobic, repetitive confines of a single mind, emotion, and perspective. Plurality, as almost all of her reviewers remark, is not Charlotte Brontë’s strength. *Shirley* is criticised for being a poorly-delineated panorama, a weak attempt at presenting multiple characters and viewpoints. For her contemporary readers, Brontë is at her best when sharply and realistically sketching the interiority of an individual. At the same time, however, that talent which defines her also limits her capabilities as a novelist.

The *Examiner* argued that ‘the men, women, and children who figure throughout [*Villette*] have flesh and blood in them.’ Like Martineau, it applauds Brontë’s faculty for lively description; unlike Martineau, it does not find the filtering of the narrative through a single impulse problematic. Its sole critique lies in the ‘needlessly tragical’ character of Lucy Snowe. The critic is frustrated that, ‘when happiness is placed within her reach . . . she daubs her brush across it, and upon the last page spoils it all for no artistic purpose whatsoever’.⁴⁵ Ironically, it is *Villette*’s notoriously ambiguous conclusion that has attracted so much positive, recent attention. In contrast to *Jane Eyre*, whose tidy ‘Reader,

⁴⁴ Harriet Martineau, ‘Villette’, *Daily News* (3 Feb. 1853, 2). Rpt. in ed. Allott, pp. 171-174 (p. 173).

⁴⁵ ‘Villette’, *Examiner* (5 Feb. 1853, 84-85). Rpt. in ed. Allott, p. 175 (p. 175).

I married him' has often proven frustrating for the post-modern eye (382; ch. 38), *Villette's* poetic 'pause; pause at once' strikes a note both momentous and aesthetic (474; ch. 42). Rather than 'daubing [a] brush across' the conclusion, smearing a well-constructed tale, the subjective ending of *Villette* poises the novel on a brink, an artistic choice that demarcates it from Brontë's earlier work. Let the reader interpret, Lucy Snowe writes, 'There is enough said' (474; ch. 42). The reviewer's unease points to a striking dissimilarity between contemporary opinion and the movement of later criticism. Conceiving of her characters as real people, many of Brontë's critics are profoundly unsettled when they imagine for them unhappy, unfulfilled lives, or worse, death. But, as the Victorian novel comes into its own, literary opinion alters with the influence of writers such as George Eliot, not to mention Swinburne himself. The novel becomes not so much a forum where brisk, vibrant characters realise happy lives, but rather a space where the ambiguities and tensions of art, philosophy, and psychology interact with life. From this perspective, we can understand why *Villette* has steadily moved up the ranks, becoming more acclaimed even than *Jane Eyre*.

Lewes, whose comments on *Shirley* so deeply offended its author, revised his opinion yet again upon reading *Villette*. He remarks (as others did) that *Villette* contains very little by way of plot: 'it is a less interesting story than even *Shirley*. It wants the unity and progression of interest which made *Jane Eyre* so fascinating.' But he is drawn, he writes, by the very faults that he earlier condemned. Complaining that Currer Bell is coarse while applauding her power and intensity is, he claims, like wandering 'delighted among the craggy clefts and snowy solitudes of the Alps, complaining at the want of verdure and of flowers'.⁴⁶ To expect the delicacy of Jane Austen with the violent individualism of Charlotte Brontë is almost as improbable as the above metaphor. Even

⁴⁶ [George Henry Lewes], 'Villette', *Leader* (12 Feb. 1853, 163-64). Rpt. in ed. Allott, p. 184 (p. 184).

more important than Lewes's praise, however, is that of George Eliot. Although her approbation of *Villette* was not made public, she wrote about it to her friend, Mrs. Bray: 'I am only just returned to a sense of the real world about me, for I have been reading *Villette* ... there is something almost preternatural in its power' (*Eliot Letters*, 287). Brontë's power, which in *Jane Eyre* failed to impress Eliot, receives high acclaim in *Villette*.

Before turning to Swinburne's work on the Brontës, it is useful to consider contemporary arguments about art and morality in their novels. The debate around art for art's sake would of course assume great importance toward the end of the century. Swinburne, in particular, offered the (hitherto) most explicit articulation of Aestheticism in English in his seminal *William Blake*.⁴⁷ The notion of *l'art pour l'art*, which Gautier made widespread, had been circulating since early in the century, and would channel through Swinburne to be adopted by Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, and other British successors. G. H. Lewes, in yet another review of *Villette*, asks the question, 'Should a work of Art have a moral?' He continues:

In other words, must the Artist, during creation, keep the wandering caprices of his fancy within the limits of some didactic formula? . . . It has been seen, on the one hand, that the merely didactic tale frustrates, in a great measure, its own objects: the reader resents having his pill gilded — resents having the leaves of a religious tract slipped in between the pages of a novel; and in the spirit of reaction, it has been said that the Artist has nothing to do with morality.⁴⁸

Lewes first considers that an overtly 'didactic formula' cramps enjoyment of art. One's pleasure in reading a novel is significantly lessened when one realises its edifying purpose. If we turn to art for entertainment, then a moral lesson makes art a utility rather than an amusement. He then outlines George Sand's critique of morals in art on the following grounds, 'readers have always wished to see vice punished and virtue rewarded

⁴⁷ Published in 1868. Though 'William Blake' is the clearest example, Swinburne's thoughts on *l'art pour l'art* also appear in his essay on Hugo's 'L'Année Terrible' (1872), among other works.

⁴⁸ [George H. Lewes], 'Ruth and Villette', *Westminster Review* (Apr. 1853, 485-91). Rpt. in ed. Allott, pp. 208-17 (pp.208-09).

. . . but poetical justice proves nothing . . . when vice is not punished on the stage or in a book — as it very often is not in life — this does not prove that vice is unhateful and unworthy of punishment; for a narrative can prove nothing’ (Lewes, *Westminster*, 209). Here a common conflict – one very evident in differing opinions on the Brontës — emerges. Opinions on the artist’s duty vary: for some, like Sand (and, to a certain extent, Lewes), it is to depict reality; for others, like Chorley, it is to keep ‘within the limits of some didactic formula,’ to shy away from portraying all that is true to life, for life contains much that is hateful, horrible, and unjust. For Sand, morality has no place in art, not because it does not exist, but because dramas and novels cannot adequately confirm or refute it. For example, she suggests, a novel’s villain may escape unpunished. This is not because his vice is *not* immoral, but rather because an accurate depiction of life must necessarily include traditionally immoral situations or individuals. Thus, for Sand, the portrayal of a character like Heathcliff, whose behaviour is, by conventional standards, blasphemous, should not itself be considered immoral. Such persons exist.

But Sand’s argument for faithful representation does not wholly convince Lewes, who argues that, although ‘in the strict sense of the word, Art proves nothing; yet it is . . . an exhortation, if you like, not a demonstration’ (209). The feelings and thoughts evoked lead, Lewes suggests, to some consequence outside of the novel or drama or verse. In this he is not radically different from earlier Victorian critics, particularly those who took issue with *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* for their subject matter. Even within these readers, however, there exist several schools of thought. Those, like Chorley, who believe such conditions should simply not be described, worry about the potential moral corruption of readers. Others, like Anne Brontë herself, believe that through realistically presenting the most brutal circumstances important lessons can be learned, thus warning impressionable readers and serving a preventive function. Thus, the

purposes of the novel — as entertainment, accurate representation of reality, moral guide, or social instigator — are explored through various strands of Victorian criticism, which at this juncture was preoccupied with the novel's 'moral function in society' and 'its claims to intellectual and imaginative profundity'.⁴⁹ It would require more time, however, before 'the aesthetic principles of its form' (Graham, 1) and such elements as Gautier's concept of art *without* a moral purpose, *l'art pour l'art*, joined such discourses.

Swinburne: *A Note on Charlotte Brontë* (1877) and 'Emily Brontë' (1883)

Swinburne wrote to Theodore Watts in late 1876: 'I presume you have read with as much interest as I the last instalment of Charlotte Brontë's correspondence. If I have time and spirits for the work, I think of taking it as the text for some brief discourse on her' (*Letters* 3, 219). This 'last instalment' was T. Wemyss Reid's 'Charlotte Brontë: A Monograph,' which appeared in *Macmillan's Magazine* during the latter half of 1876. Over the next few months, there is considerable evidence of Swinburne's expanding argument, as when he decides to consider Brontë 'in contrast to George Eliot from first to last' (*Letters* 3, 260) or revisits her novels and explains that they 'completely knock me up and break me down (almost) even to think of' (*Letters* 3, 315). In late 1877, he wrote to Reid himself, thanking him for his 'vindication' of Charlotte but taking issue with his criticism of *Wuthering Heights*. Reid describes Emily's novel as now 'practically unread,' a work that 'is repulsive and almost ghastly,' despite bearing evidence of considerable genius. 'From the first page to the last there is hardly a redeeming passage in the book . . . the hero himself is the most unmitigated villain in fiction'; Reid continues with this *ad hominem*: 'love, except for the love for nature and for her own nearest relatives, was a passion absolutely unknown to [Emily Brontë]'. The novel is the 'work of one who . . .

⁴⁹ Kenneth Graham, *English Criticism of the Novel 1865-1900* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), p. 1.

was a mere child'⁵⁰ though equipped with enormous talent. It is to Reid's claim of improbability that Swinburne responds with the story of the Westmoreland gentleman-farmer, and to Reid's professions of disgust, he retorts, 'with all its horrors, it is so beautiful!' (*Letters* 4, 22).

Though always an ardent defender of Emily, Swinburne's attentions at that time were primarily focused on Charlotte. His *Note on Charlotte Brontë* appeared in late 1877, and was reissued in 1894. To begin, Swinburne classes imaginative work into three divisions:

the lowest, which leaves us in a complacent mood of acquiescence with the graceful or natural inventions and fancies of an honest and ingenious workman . . . the second, of high enough quality to engage our judgment in its service, and make direct demand on our grave attention for deliberate assent or dissent; the third, which in the exercise of its highest faculties at their best neither solicits nor seduces nor provokes us to acquiescence or demur, but compels us without question to positive acceptance and belief.⁵¹

He gives no examples of the first class, but identifies George Eliot and George Meredith as writers of the second. In typical, unabashedly partisan fashion, he categorises Charlotte Brontë as the most glittering instance of the third. Her gift is 'what I cannot but regard as the highest and the rarest quality which supplies the hardest and the surest proof of a great and absolute genius for the painting and the handling of human characters in mutual relation and reaction'.⁵² This hyperbole is hard to take seriously, and Swinburne's convoluted prose further obscures his point. It is worth considering, however, that he was aggressively on the defence. He considered himself the protector of Charlotte's reputation against the encroaching popularity of George Eliot and other social realists. And, as was his wont, Swinburne's defensive stance is generally overdone, over-compensating for what he considers years of misunderstanding.

⁵⁰ Thomas Wemyss Reid, *Charlotte Brontë: A Monograph* (London : Macmillan, 1877), pp. 202-04.

⁵¹ *A Note, SaC*, 187-88.

⁵² *A Note, SaC*, 188.

Now, of course, having access to the broad range of Victorian critical opinion, we realise that Charlotte's reviewers were kinder and much more discerning than might be assumed. But 'strong emotion sometimes lurks behind Swinburne's literary opinions' (Hyder, 5), and in order to write compellingly he often required something (individual, institution, concept) against which to react. This dualism is typical of Swinburne; it appears in his verse and fiction as well as his critical writing. His thinking is often binary: love and death, pain and pleasure, chastity and voluptuousness. Thus, in his work on Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot figures as the opposite, the magisterial, cold voice in contrast to Charlotte's fiercely passionate outcry. Rather unkindly, he writes, 'it would, as I venture to think, be little or nothing more or less than accurate to recognise in George Eliot a type of intelligence vivified and coloured by a vein of genius, in Charlotte Brontë a type of genius directed and moulded by the touch of intelligence'.⁵³ Splitting writing along a continuum of intellect and inspiration, he advances a spiritual, rather than materialist, ideology, in which Brontë's 'genius moulded by the touch of intelligence' seems finer than Eliot's intelligence 'vivified . . . by a vein of genius.'

These essays on Charlotte and Emily were written in response to biographical and critical work by Reid and Robinson. Similarly, Leslie Stephen reacted to the *Note on Charlotte Brontë* with a piece in the *Cornhill Magazine*. In it, he criticises Swinburne for his subjectivity, declaring that, although the poet 'bestowed' his praise 'upon worthy objects,' he was too likely to be driven by 'the contagion of enthusiasm' rather than the 'rigid impartiality' of 'an independent spectator.' He then takes issue with Swinburne's condemnation of George Eliot, stating that praising one's literary hero does not require 'burning the effigies of the hero's rivals.' Throughout, Stephen calls for a scientific approach to criticism, an analysis that rests 'upon a purely rational ground,' to 'be

⁵³ *A Note, SaC*, 190.

exposed to logical tests.’ He separates Charlotte Brontë from George Eliot as a poetic, rather than a scientific thinker; Brontë, he argues, favours synthesis over analysis, while George Eliot embodies those qualities of reason that her ‘poetic’ counterpart lacks. He is here in agreement with Swinburne, who also separates their qualities of genius. What Swinburne finds compelling, however, Stephen finds imprecise. Where Swinburne finds Brontë’s work harmonious and cohesive, Stephen perceives a ‘feverish disquiet’ that leads, not only to vivid expression, but also to ‘fretful’ degeneration.⁵⁴ But Swinburne’s approbation of Brontë is not, as Stephen suggests, merely the partial ‘fervour’ of an enthusiastic temperament. He offers concrete reasons for his praise, and although many subsequent critics have, like Stephen, accused him of unscientific and emotional evaluations, there is much in his essays to counter such claims.

Some of Swinburne’s sentiment is deeply influenced by a regional bias. If Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot are literary opposites, they are set apart even further by their geographical differences. Reinforcing the common belief that the urban south was cosmopolitan and cultured where the industrial or wild north was isolated and rustic, he remarks that ‘in knowledge, in culture, perhaps in capacity for knowledge and for culture, Charlotte Brontë was no more comparable to George Eliot than George Eliot is comparable to Charlotte Brontë in purity of passion, in depth and ardour of feeling, in spiritual force and fervour of forthright inspiration’.⁵⁵ The erudite and worldly Eliot speaks of and moves in a wholly different milieu from Charlotte Brontë. Swinburne emphasises Charlotte’s rustic background, her Northern ‘ardour of feeling’ and ‘fervour of forthright inspiration.’ This is romantic, and appeals to Swinburne’s romantic sensibilities. ‘Like the Romantic poets, Swinburne assigns a central role to the

⁵⁴ Leslie Stephen, ‘Charlotte Brontë’, *Cornhill Magazine* (Dec. 1877, 723-29). Rpt. in ed. Allott, pp. 413-23 (pp. 413-15).

⁵⁵ *A Note, SaC*, 190.

imagination,' and he applies Romantic criteria to his judgement of prose as well (Hyder, 10). Hence his exaltation of inspiration over intellect, sympathy and empathy over detachment and objective scrutiny, of the wildness and purity of natural forces over the smog and intelligence of urbanity.

But as much as Swinburne claimed himself a Borderer, he, like George Eliot, moved in avant-garde circles, spent most of his life in London or its vicinity, and breathed the same atmosphere of pollution, 'knowledge' and 'culture' as she. His fantasy portrait of Brontë as a simple, cloistered West Yorkshire girl, writing with pure intuition and native 'genius,' is problematic. He underestimates Charlotte's intellectualism, doing her a disservice by confining her talent to 'pure passion' and 'spiritual force.' As we now know, the Brontë sisters were not the naïve, simple girls characterised by later, well-meaning apologists. Though they did not have access to the sort of education that Swinburne (or their father, who attended Cambridge) had, they were extensively self-taught, read avidly, and were exposed to far more diverse and important streams of thought than was once believed. Nonetheless, Swinburne does not dramatically diverge from previous critics in arguing that Charlotte Brontë is closer to pure feeling than pure intellect; he describes her as such in order to make a point and distinguish her from George Eliot.

Swinburne praises Charlotte's facility for evoking 'mutual relation and reaction.' Her work, he asserts, stands unique because in other novels 'we rarely or never feel that, given the characters, the incidents become inevitable; that such passion must needs bring forth none other than such action, such emotions cannot choose but find their only issue in such events'.⁵⁶ This logical cohesion of character and circumstance he finds particularly compelling, arguably due to his classical background. Swinburne appreciates

⁵⁶ *A Note, SaC*, 189.

unity, and thus the individual development of Jane Eyre or the singular consciousness of Lucy Snowe, for he sees in these characters a believable, personal trajectory. His use of the word ‘inevitable’ is noteworthy — it recalls an Aristotelian arc⁵⁷ — and, for Swinburne, Lucy Snowe is in many ways a tragic heroine, ‘a sad, passionate, and valiant life’.⁵⁸ At the same time, the inevitable comes not from Fate, but from character. Like Heraclitus, Swinburne believes that character is fate.⁵⁹ ‘With [Swinburne] character is primary: the action must be consistent with the character,’ and he goes so far as to critique Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* because Celia’s union with Oliver is not consistent with either one of their characters. Celia’s moral superiority does not harmonise with Oliver’s ‘earlier baseness’ (Hyder, 12), and the latter’s Damascene conversion is not sufficient to explain their unaccountable pairing.

For Swinburne, unlike Lewes, it is not the effect of morality, but rather of moral harmony, that a novel ought to render. He is at core a lyricist, wordsmith, and singer, and such musical law is applied to the meanings and ramifications of prose. This is a subtlety often missed in rigid interpretations of art for art’s sake.⁶⁰ Swinburnian moral harmony is not a simple matter of virtue or vice, but rather whether virtuous characters behave in virtuous ways (likewise for their counterparts). And if a novel achieves this, its effect cannot be anything but ‘fresh’⁶¹ and moving. Attuned to patterns and musicality in verse, Swinburne is concerned with coherence, the unity of the whole – reaching beyond

⁵⁷ Unity of character and action: ‘a well constructed plot should, therefore, be single’ - Aristotle, *The Poetics of Aristotle*, ed. and trans. by S.H. Butcher (London: Macmillan, 1895; 1902), XII-XIII, pp. 41-43

⁵⁸ *A Note, SaC*, 197-98.

⁵⁹ Heraclitus, ‘A man’s character is his dæmon,’ Fragment 119. Hardy of course applies this to the rise and fall of Michael Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, borrowing it from Novalis (via George Eliot in *The Mill on the Floss*), who in turn derived it from Heraclitus. For more on this interesting provenance, see W. E. Yuill’s “‘Character Is Fate’: A Note on Thomas Hardy, George Eliot and Novalis”, *Modern Language Review* 57 (1962), pp. 401-02.

⁶⁰ ‘Swinburnian’ Aestheticism (as it is conventionally understood) argues that art does not have to be moral (‘wicked’ subject matter is thus acceptable or even desirable), while the ‘Paterian’ version argues that art should be pure form, minimizing content and aspiring to the condition of music. Swinburne’s notion of moral harmony, as I describe it here, broadens the conception of what ‘Aesthetic’ literature might be.

⁶¹ *A Note, SaC*, 193-94.

language and rhythm into the harmony of situation, circumstance, and meaning. He approves the fact that Charlotte Brontë's characters maintain the momentum of the action without intrusive narrative methods, *vis-à-vis* the logical interaction of personality, behaviour, and circumstance. The conclusion of *Villette*, which for earlier critics seemed hasty and inartistic, makes perfect sense given the character of Lucy Snowe. Her struggles are inward, her pleasures equally understated; it would be forced and unaccountable if she were to grasp happiness in the form of marriage to M. Emanuel. Such an ending would be antithetical to her personality. How much more appropriate her final words, simultaneously hopeful and despairing, which leave the reader feeling unsettled.

Aside from the convolution of the initial paragraphs, it is at this point in the *Note* that Swinburne's remarkable acuity as a critic becomes evident. He brings to bear his considerable skill as a scholar, both of classics and the Elizabethan dramatists, as well as his poetic sensibilities and burgeoning theories of prose fiction (we must recall that, by this time, he had already written, or partly written, three novels). This radically alters the language in which the Brontës are discussed. While earlier reviewers discuss Charlotte's characters as living people, with whom they would like to be acquainted (or not), Swinburne discusses them in a manner more familiar to us. He analyses whether they are successful as artistic creations, and further, considers them in the context of a larger novelistic tradition. For previous critics, Jane Eyre and Shirley Keeldar are passionate, lively, interesting characters. For Swinburne, they represent broader themes. He studies them in contrast or similarity to one another, upping the level of discourse on Brontë's work.

In particular, his comparison of St. John Rivers and the Reverend Brocklehurst in *Jane Eyre* seems strikingly contemporary. St. John he calls the 'white marble clergyman,'

‘counterpart, as it were, of the ‘black marble’ Brocklehurst’.⁶² This is important because the narrator’s sympathies do not actually lie with either figure. They are presented differently, not because one is fundamentally good and the other fundamentally bad, but because of the character of Jane herself. And of course, we see everything through her narration; her outlook becomes ours, her development our own dawning awareness. Her tantrum against Brocklehurst occurs at a young age, before she has learned to restrain her temper or keep her opinions, often scathing, to herself. Yet, when St. John Rivers appears, he shares remarkable characteristics with Brocklehurst; in a way, Jane must overcome another figure of ‘marble’ before she can return to her passionate ‘Vulcan,’ Rochester. This she does, only this time through restraint and civility. There is a final striking similarity, however: Jane can only escape St. John through yet another passionate outcry. This time, it is the mature assertion of an adult woman, as opposed to the furious fit of a little girl.

Swinburne is particularly adept at identifying such rich veins of interpretation. His attention to dualities within the text, as well as its underlying structures, anticipates much later criticism. ‘Disparagers of Swinburne’s criticism’ accuse him of ‘intemperance in ‘the noble pleasure of praising’ (Hyder, 17), but if any require proof that Swinburne does not merely admire indiscriminately, there is a glaring dearth of praise for Charlotte Brontë’s style and writing. Although he eulogises her sketches of character and her success in ‘spiritual portraiture’, he simply circumvents the issue of language. She is psychologically acute, but she lacks lyrical genius. This commendation he reserves for her sister, Emily.

Strangely, in an essay entitled *A Note on Charlotte Brontë*, Swinburne devotes a remarkable amount of space to Emily. It is when writing about the younger Brontë that

⁶² *A Note, SaC*, 193.

Swinburne really waxes eloquent, and he obviously felt strongly enough to write a second piece⁶³ dedicated solely to her. *Wuthering Heights* foregrounds many of Swinburne's own preoccupations: landscape and passion, violent storms on the moors and equally tempestuous human conflicts. Like Swinburne, Emily was a poet, and this connection cannot be over-estimated, for not only does 'Swinburne [see] in Emily his own antichristian feeling, his nature-worship, his love of liberty, and the creed of self-reliance,' but also his lyrical gift (Rooksby, 91). Indeed, some of Swinburne's own verses could easily be uttered by Brontë's characters. Is it a stretch to imagine Heathcliff speaking the opening stanza of 'The Triumph of Time'?:

Before our lives divide for ever,
 While time is with us and hands are free,
 (Time, swift to fasten and swift to sever
 Hand from hand, as we stand by the sea)
 I will say no word that a man might say
 Whose whole life's love goes down in a day;
 For this could never have been; and never,
 Though the gods and the years relent, shall be
 (*Poems* 1, 34, ll. 1-8).

Her writing, too, is more akin to Swinburne's own. If Charlotte is all deft characterisation and sharp psychology, Emily is all metaphysical concern⁶⁴ — passion and hate, isolation and union, heaven and hell. Emily deals with larger questions than Charlotte (contemporary reviewers, preoccupied with detailing horrors in *Wuthering Heights*, rarely moved beyond them to understand greater themes). Swinburne, however, cuts past specific incidents to praise Brontë's overarching ideas.

He writes that 'the tragic use of landscape was wellnigh even more potent and conspicuous in Emily than in Charlotte . . . all the wind and all the sound and all the

⁶³ 'Emily Brontë', *Athenaeum* (1883).

⁶⁴ Later criticism has often focused on EJB's realism: her canny grasp of the law, carefully planned chronology (Charles P. Sanger's 'The Structure of *Wuthering Heights*,' *Hogarth Essays*, XIX, 1926 is an invaluable resource), and the authenticity of her setting. And while the metaphysical themes of *WH* are Swinburne's primary focus, he shrewdly identifies the precision and accuracy of its setting, characters, and incidents.

fragrance and freedom and gloom and glory of the high north moorland'.⁶⁵ For Swinburne, as for Brontë, the 'fascination of the moors' (Hyder, 3) lies not only in their ferocious beauty, but in their richness as an emotional and spiritual outlet. Swinburne's language when he writes of Brontë's use of landscape is intensely poetic: 'the sound and all the fragrance and freedom and gloom and glory.' For both, the wildness of nature is a crucial locus for human interaction. In Swinburne's *Lesbia Brandon*, as in *Wuthering Heights*, many pivotal scenes (particularly between lovers) take place outside on the vast expanses of moor. Swinburne's verse, too, displays a similar motif. Like Swinburne's 'mother-maid,' the sea, nature is both healing and coldly insensitive to individual struggle. Nature, for Brontë and Swinburne, is simultaneously responsive and uncaring, and this interpretation prefigures the wasteland landscapes of their modernist successors. For both, like Hardy, 'the somber majestic heath represents' not only a 'great force' that evokes 'violent protest' or 'adulation,' but also 'the vast and unchanging reality around man'.⁶⁶

Swinburne points to Brontë's 'tragic use' of landscape, a description that at first seems almost trite. Even Brontë's slightly bemused contemporaries identified that *Wuthering Heights* was at core a tragedy. For these reviewers, however, the tragedy of the novel lay in 'all its horrors': brutality, abuse, cruelty, and death. Swinburne, with his classical eye and Elizabethan sensibilities, is instead referring to its tragic arc, the 'logical and moral certitude' inherent in the novel's atmosphere, setting, character, and incidents. These, we are assured, will without 'monotony,' 'repetition' or 'discord' fulfil their 'stormy promise'.⁶⁷ And Brontë's use of nature is essential to this vision. In describing the evolution of *Wuthering Heights*, Swinburne uses the imagery of wind and storm to

⁶⁵ *A Note, SaC*, 193-94.

⁶⁶ Curtis Dahl explores this interesting parallel between barren landscapes in Brontë, Swinburne, and Hardy and the widespread wasteland imagery in modernist verse in 'The Victorian Wasteland', *College English* 16(1955), pp. 341-47.

⁶⁷ 'Emily Brontë', *SaC*, 438-44.

evoke a tragedy that builds and breaks. He calls the novel's inception a 'dawn',⁶⁸ and likens its close to 'issuing . . . from the tumult of charging waters'.⁶⁹ The darkness of Brontë's tempestuous tale is mitigated by 'changing wind' and 'flying sunlight'.⁷⁰ For Swinburne, Brontë's novel itself takes on the shape of the landscape. And in its discussion of *Wuthering Heights*, Swinburne's criticism assumes prosodic contours, almost becoming a poem itself: 'from the first we breathe the fresh dark air of tragic passion and presage'.⁷¹ This is of course significant for later critics (Pater being the most obvious example, but even T. S. Eliot), whose subject matter bleeds into their lyrical prose. Thus, his essay on *Wuthering Heights* conflates most of Swinburne's major preoccupations: nature and its ability to reflect the condition of the human soul, a quality shared by poetry itself, and the key notion of harmony.

Swinburne's point about *Wuthering Heights* and landscape has important moral and aesthetic implications. Responding to previous critics, who 'find here and there in her [Brontë's] book the savage note or the sickly symptom of a morbid ferocity,' he argues that the 'pervading atmosphere of the book is so high and healthy' that these brutal scenes are 'neutralized' and 'transfigured'.⁷² Further, he asserts that those who call the passion between Heathcliff and Cathy immoral might just as implausibly find in this 'human emotion' a 'suggestion of a baser alloy' as 'in the splendour of lightning or the roll of a gathered wave'.⁷³ By comparing Brontë's novel to nature, Swinburne constructs a clever argument against those critics who disclaimed *Wuthering Heights* on moral grounds. There is no disharmony in nature; its dark and light exist alongside each other, like flashes of sunlight during a storm. To condemn the emotion and intensity of *Wuthering*

⁶⁸ 'Emily Brontë', *SaC*, 439.

⁶⁹ 'Emily Brontë', *SaC*, 443.

⁷⁰ 'Emily Brontë', *SaC*, 439.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² 'Emily Brontë', *SaC*, 443.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

Heights is, for Swinburne, as fantastic as criticising lightning for striking or a ‘gathered wave’ for its crushing momentum. Like these natural forces, Brontë’s work contains much that is both beautiful and terrible; it evokes the splendid power of nature. Not only should Brontë’s work not be judged on moral grounds, it is in fact ridiculous to do so. Previous critics, Swinburne implies, have missed the point. *Wuthering Heights* is not, unlike *Jane Eyre*, focused on interpersonal interactions and psychological development. Cathy and Heathcliff are not merely two teenagers in love; their passion has something of the transcendent. And although *Wuthering Heights* is a regional tale, filled with the details and eccentricities of Brontë’s immediate circumstances, it is also timeless and epic, an heir to the tragic tradition. ‘The book’ Swinburne writes, ‘is what it is because the author was what she was,’ a ‘writer whose genius is essentially tragic’.⁷⁴

Swinburne chooses his examples carefully: lightning has both tremendous beauty and destructive potential; to be caught in the ocean (a sensation that appears throughout his writing) is both exhilarating and terrifying. Both invoke a crucial Swinburnian moment: the experience of the sublime and simultaneous recognition of its danger. Beauty can represent peril to life; mortality is its twin-born. This double-edged awareness offers a thrill to which Swinburne repeatedly returns. In *Lesbia Brandon*, Bertie Seyton is addicted to the violent splendour of the ocean: ‘its incessant beauty maddened him with pleasure,’ ‘this travail and triumph of the married wind and sea filled him with a furious luxury of the senses that kindled all his nerves and exalted all his life’ (*LB*, 202). Although in *Wuthering Heights* this connection is not made as explicit, Swinburne suggests that its ‘human emotion’ reflects powerfully in Brontë’s landscape. He alludes to the ‘passionate and ardent chastity’ of Heathcliff and Cathy’s love. Its very violence, he

⁷⁴ ‘Emily Brontë’, *SaC*, 440-41.

suggests, purifies like ‘flame’ or ‘raging fire’.⁷⁵ Because it is elemental, like Bertie’s ‘maddening,’ beautiful sea, it carries with it no taint of brutality or immorality.

Swinburne does concede that ‘twice or thrice especially the details of deliberate or passionate brutality in Heathcliff’s treatment of his victims make the reader feel for a moment as though he were reading a police report or even a novel by some French ‘naturalist’’.⁷⁶ This reiterates the fact that most mid-to-late Victorian reviewers, even those as progressive as Swinburne, found it very difficult to sympathise with Heathcliff after the first half of the novel. It is only in the past few decades that Heathcliff has attained new critical status as marginalised anti-hero or demon lover (among others). It is puzzling that Swinburne, who seems to cut past the incidentals of *Wuthering Heights* to identify its core concerns, still deems Heathcliff’s behaviour excessive. Perhaps, however, he finds Heathcliff’s ‘treatment of his victims’ problematic in an aesthetic sense. If the reader feels ‘as though he were reading a police report,’ such an impression might damage the moral and artistic harmony rendered by the high atmosphere and vigorous passion of Brontë’s work.

Swinburne is not an anti-realist (some of his greatest literary heroes were earlier French realists⁷⁷), but he does dislike the ‘naturalist’ school, which paints a purposefully bleak picture of human existence. His essay on Emily Brontë was preceded by a vigorous condemnation of Émile Zola, which decried *L'Assommoir* (1877) for its descriptions of loathsome ‘physical matters’ and ‘details of brutality and atrocity practiced on a little girl’.⁷⁸ And while he wholly denounces Zola’s naturalism on moral grounds, reporting that he was deeply disturbed by the novel and wished he could ‘cleanse his memory of

⁷⁵ ‘Emily Brontë’, *SaC*, 443.

⁷⁶ A rather obvious jab at Émile Zola, whose *L'Assommoir* Swinburne had recently attacked in ‘Note on a Question of the Hour’ (*Athenaeum*, 1877). ‘Emily Brontë’, *SaC*, 443.

⁷⁷ Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert.

⁷⁸ Algernon Charles Swinburne, ‘Note on a Question of the Hour’, *Athenaeum* (June 16, 1877, 767-68), pp. 767-68.

the book',⁷⁹ he considers the late horrors of *Wuthering Heights* an artistic lapse that does not destroy its overarching harmonious effect.

Swinburne's comment about 'passionate brutality' recalls T. Wemyss Reid's statement that, upon reading 'the horrible chronicles of Heathcliff's crimes, the only literary work' that can be compared to *Wuthering Heights* is 'the gory tragedy of *Titus Andronicus*' (Reid, 202). It is difficult to imagine how even the worst of 'Heathcliff's crimes' could compare to the murder, rape, and other horrors of *Titus*, but this parallel is clearly one that struck Victorian reviewers. Swinburne, however, likens *Wuthering Heights* to '*King Lear* or *The Duchess of Malfy* . . . *The Bride of Lammermoor* or *Notre-Dame de Paris*'.⁸⁰ While Reid compares *Wuthering Heights* to a drama that is considered the crudest of Shakespeare's work, Swinburne associates it with what is possibly his greatest tragedy, the cataclysmic *Lear*. For Reid, the violence in *Wuthering Heights*, like that of *Titus*, is senseless; for Swinburne, it is haunting and, aside from a few excesses, comparable to that of the greatest dramatists and novelists.

Thus we see Swinburne laud *Wuthering Heights* in terms that transgress genre. Not only does he apply dramatic criteria to his appraisal, but he also conceives of it as a poem. The temperament of its author, he writes, is both a 'tragic genius' and a poetic one. He sees Emily as a kind of British Sappho, her 'passionate and inspired intelligence' coupled with a 'pantheistic faith . . . far alike from the conventions of vulgar piety and the complacencies of scientific limitation.' For him, she is a radical poetess, a 'Titaness' (*Letters* 4, 21), 'fiery and solemn,' grimly inspired by her tragic circumstances and filled with the same 'disdain of doctrine' and 'possessed by the sublime passion of belief' as her ancient predecessor.⁸¹ Later, he writes that 'this it is that distinguishes the hand of

⁷⁹ Clarence R. Decker, 'Zola's Literary Reputation in England', *PMLA* 49 (1934), 1140-53 (p. 1141).

⁸⁰ 'Emily Brontë', *SaC*, 439.

⁸¹ *A Note*, *SaC*, 196.

Emily from the hand of Charlotte Brontë. All the works of the elder sister are rich in poetic spirit, poetic feeling, and poetic detail; but the younger sister's work is essentially and definitely a poem in the fullest and most positive sense of the term'.⁸² This is a radical model for the novel, and Swinburne himself realises that he suggests a very different set of criteria. To judge by the opponents of *Wuthering Heights*, he writes, 'it might be supposed that the rules of narrative observed by all great novelists were of an almost legal or logical strictness and exactitude.' He then proceeds to exalt the imagination, claiming that true understanding and appreciation of a work like *Wuthering Heights* requires a suspension of disbelief that allows one to look past some crudities and comprehend the poetic spirit that formed it. We must, he writes, 'make believe a little as a very condition of the game'.⁸³ This moment of playfulness from Swinburne allows us to see that, for him, literature is both a serious endeavour and a continuing process of creative play. His statements have added poignancy when we realise that, a few decades' before, he was himself involved in a cross-genre project, his hybrid novel, *Lesbia Brandon*, a 'scheme of mixed verse and prose.' We cannot, Swinburne argues, impose a 'legal' and 'strict' set of stipulations that comprise what a novel can or cannot be. The 'symphonies and antiphonies of regular word-music' are no less important in the novel than in poetry, and indeed only through such 'word-music' can the 'absolutely right expression,' 'inexpressible in full by prose' be captured.⁸⁴ He sees the novel, particularly *Wuthering Heights*, in conversation with the genres of drama and poetry, borrowing the arc and momentum that drive classical and Elizabethan tragedy, while maintaining the lyrical power of the ancient chorus and of verse. Without such merging, prose itself is

⁸² 'Emily Brontë', *SaC*, 439-440.

⁸³ 'Emily Brontë', *SaC*, 442.

⁸⁴ *A Note*, *SaC*, 195.

incomplete. This confluence of interests is reflected, not only in his criticism, but also in his long narrative poems⁸⁵ and his hybrid, poetic novel.

Wuthering Heights, like many theatrical predecessors, encapsulates a pair of iconic lovers. We recall Swinburne's fascination for such: Atalanta and Meleager, Tristram and Iseult, the 'twain . . . led to the life of tears and fire . . . the lifeless life of night' (*Tristram of Lyonesse*, ll.55-58), Chastelard and Mary Stuart (*Chastelard: A Tragedy*), Sappho and Anactoria (*Poems and Ballads, First Series* 65-77). For Swinburne, the notion of the 'twain,' the 'twin-born spirits'⁸⁶ destined to love passionately and tragically, was central and mythic. The 'love which devours life itself' appears consistently throughout his work.⁸⁷ And to this classical catalogue of lovers he adds Jane and Rochester, Cathy and Heathcliff, and perhaps even Bertie and Lesbia or Denham and his idol Lady Wariston in *Lesbia Brandon* ('he could not meet or pass her without passion and pain', 207). As in his verse, Swinburne is drawn to the opposing forces of violence and tenderness, of grief and joy. Neither love, joy, nor pleasure can exist without desolation, despair, and pain. In the same way, pairs of lovers embody this dichotomy, signifying the Janus-like faces of opposition and transition.

Swinburne's portrait of Emily's death is meaningful: it reappears in *Lesbia Brandon*, with the passing of yet another fierce 'poetess and pagan,' Lesbia herself (*LB*, 350). He imagines that the 'final expression in verse' of Brontë's passionate genius 'was to be uttered from lips already whitened though not yet chilled by the present shadow of unterrifying death'.⁸⁸ To Bertie, visiting her death-chamber, Lesbia seems to fade into the darkness behind her, her pale face luminescent and cadaverous. It is a slow death, a consumptive's death — although Lesbia achieves this through poisoning herself — a

⁸⁵ *Atalanta in Calydon* (1865), the verse drama *Chastelard* (1878), and *Tristram of Lyonesse* (1882).

⁸⁶ Cf. 'On the Cliffs': 'pleasure's twin-born pain,' (*Poems* 3, 311, l. 8). Also in 'Dolores': 'despair, the twin-born of devotion,' (*Poems* 1, 157, l. 107). My emphasis. Also in *A Note*, *SaC*, 189

⁸⁷ 'Emily Brontë', *SaC*, 443.

⁸⁸ *A Note*, *SaC*, 196.

‘morbid and obscure’ fading like the illness that took Emily (*LB*, 347). Like Brontë — whose death Swinburne imagines was accompanied by her final, proud, individualistic declaration, ‘No Coward Soul is Mine’ — Lesbia’s last moments are unconventional, antichristian: ‘I hate all funerals and all the words read over us . . . all the faith and hope. I have none, and no fear.’ She wishes she could die outside, with her ‘body . . . burnt,’ pagan-fashion, ‘and the ashes thrown into the sea’ (*LB*, 348). Her final thoughts centre upon Bertie’s sister Lady Wariston. She dreams of her body, falling off a cliff (the parallel with Sappho is here obvious); she dreams that she herself has pushed her. Death and love are conjoined in this *Liebestod* of passionate violence. But Lesbia bears a resemblance to yet another figure: Catherine Earnshaw. ‘I wish I were dying out of doors,’ she says in an echo of Cathy’s ‘Oh, I’m burning! I wish I were out of doors’.⁸⁹ To the end, these fierce, poetic women seek a final communion with nature. Just as Cathy wishes to be a girl again, ‘half savage, and hardy, and free,’ running the moors or buried outside under the heath (*WH*, 98), Lesbia desires her ashes to mingle with the sea, her body to fall off a cliff, her spirit to pass outdoors, not inside, chained by walls. Communion with the beloved and communion with nature are, for Brontë and Swinburne, one and the same.

Then, too, Lesbia’s death scene recalls Cathy and Heathcliff’s final encounter. Bertie clasps Lesbia in a paroxysm of love, ‘he bowed his face upon her face . . . plunged his lips into hers, hot and shuddering; and devoured her fallen features with sharp sad kisses’ (*LB*, 348). Heathcliff, holding Cathy in a similar consummation, ‘gathered her to him with greedy jealousy’ but ‘could hardly bear, for downright agony, to look into her face’. ‘‘It is hard to forgive, and to look at those eyes, and feel those wasted hands’,’ he cries (*WH*, 123-26). Heathcliff and Bertie represent youth and vitality in contrast to Cathy

⁸⁹ Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, ed. by R. J. Dunn (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), p. 98. Subsequent citations in text as *WH*.

and Lesbia's 'fallen,' 'wasted,' attenuated forms, as much figures of an otherworld as of this one. And yet, while Cathy and Heathcliff's embrace implies union, Lesbia severs Bertie's clasp when she repulses him, 'savage terror in her voice and gesture' (*LB*, 348). Cathy slips away from Heathcliff through death, while Bertie cannot even possess Lesbia in life. This vision, of the passion and ultimate sterility of love, suffuses Swinburnian thinking. Lesbia's love for Bertie is merely sororal, while her last and most passionate thoughts are for the woman who cannot reciprocate it.

In favouring Emily over Charlotte, Swinburne was a 'brave dissenting' and 'lonely voice' in Victorian criticism.⁹⁰ But in his re-evaluation of the novel's parameters, Swinburne is not completely beyond the pale. During the latter half of the century, Kenneth Graham describes a 'new emphasis' began to develop, critical trends that sought to praise 'fiction for its comprehensiveness that embraces the functions of the epic, drama, and lyric' (Graham, 7). These changing opinions, while still uncommon, reflect altering Victorian discourse, which began to understand the novel as more than a popular, potboiler genre, but rather a serious form that could undertake and incorporate many of the same concerns as traditionally high modes (such as drama and poetry). That Swinburne was not alone in identifying this potential is important, because it places his essays on the novel in dialogue with many others. They were, as we have noted, part of a consistent conversation about the Brontës and their work, and in contributing to and evoking more responses, Swinburne, along with Reid, Robinson, and Stephen, set the tone for *fin-de-siècle* critics such as Mary Humphry Ward and her Modernist successors.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Tom Winnifrith, 'Charlotte and Emily Brontë: A Study in the Rise and Fall of Literary Reputations', *Yearbook of English Studies*, 26 (1996), 14-24 (pp. 14-17).

⁹¹ M. H. Ward wrote an influential introduction to the Haworth edition of *The Life and Works of the Sisters Brontë* (New York and London: Harper & Bros., 1899).

2. Swinburne on Collins: The Novel As Sensational Drama

But you would have felt my soul in a kiss,
 And known that once if I loved you well;
 And I would have given my soul for this
 To burn for ever in burning hell

- A.C. Swinburne, 'Les Noyades' (*Poems* 1, 48-51, ll. 77-80).

'Mr. Swinburne', announced Thomas Baynes in the July 1871 *Edinburgh Review*,¹ 'fairly out-Herods Herod. Much of his poetry is sensationalism run mad, foaming at the mouth, snapping rabidly at everything in its way, especially at the sanctities and sanities of life, avoiding all natural food, and seizing with morbid avidity on what is loathsome and repulsive, mere orts and offal'.² Baynes' review was one among many associating Swinburne with The Fleshly School of poets.³ But it also identifies such 'sensuous, avant-garde poetry' with sensation fiction, as 'Victorian critics deployed the discourses of sensationalism to denounce' the perceived moral, physical, and affective excesses of the Aesthetes.⁴ The sensation novels of the 1860s and the avant-garde verse signalled by Swinburne's 1866 *Poems and Ballads* posed a certain shared threat – 'perceived as dangerous because of the ways in which they might work upon the reader'.⁵ Just as 'Swinburne's rhythms and his command of language' could 'induce the reader's response and might "get under the skin" almost literally... in the sense of affecting blood and breath' (Blair, 190), sensation novels elicited thrills and chills, and 'taut, often visceral responses to [their] shocking twists and turns' (Seagrott, 45). They are the

¹ An essay reviewing *Songs Before Sunrise*, *Poems and Ballads*, *Notes on Poems and Reviews*, *Chastelard*, and *The Queen Mother*. Rosamond.

² [Thomas Baynes], Unsigned Review, *Edinburgh Review* (July 1871, 36-51). Rpt in *Algernon Swinburne: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Clyde K. Hyder (New York: Routledge, 1970), p. 142.

³ So named by Robert Buchanan in his article, 'The Fleshly School of Poetry' in the October 1871 *Contemporary Review*, classifying William Morris, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Swinburne.

⁴ Heather Seagrott, 'Swinburne Separates the Men from the Girls: Sensationalism in *Poems and Ballads*', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 30 (2002), 41-59 (p. 41).

⁵ Kirstie Blair, 'Swinburne's Spasms: "Poems and Ballads" and the "Spasmodic School"', *The Yearbook of English Studies* 36 (2006), 180-196 (p.190).

precursors of the modern thriller, and occupy this world of heightened physical and emotional intensity, stimulating pleasurable anxiety or nervousness through suspense.

Swinburne and the Aesthetes' relationship to the sensation movement became additional ammunition for their detractors, who saw in both trends a common emphasis on 'unorthodox behaviour or unconventional characters' and a 'shared propensity to re-work and trouble their audiences' responses', producing a 'radically reconfigured readerly experience' (Seagrott, 45). A satire on the 'Literary Culture of the Period' appeared in *The Period* of 1870, depicting Swinburne at a conclave with sensation writers including Ouida and Rhoda Broughton, in which Broughton defends her writing as follows:

For her part, she was so well convinced of the truth and propriety of her opinions, that she begged leave to conclude her remarks with a quotation from a poet whose works only required to be better known to be thoroughly appreciated. (The lady, after quoting the concluding stanza of *Les Noyades*⁶...resumed her seat amidst loud applause).⁷

Broughton upholding the 'truth and propriety of her opinions' with a poem about necrophilic passion by a poet shunned as a 'libidinous laureate' is in keeping with the absurdity of the vignette. But this incident reveals just how intertwined Swinburne's radical poetry and sensation fiction were in the critical imagination. As dramatized in the satire, each mutually justified the other, for both schools endorsed autonomy of theme and form. The sensation novel 'was and is sensational partly because of content: it deals with crime, often murder as an outcome of adultery and sometimes of bigamy, in apparently proper, bourgeois, domestic settings';⁸ similarly – but more extremely—

⁶ See the chapter epigraph

⁷ Ouida (1839-1908), writer of sensational, proto-adventure, and historical romance fiction. Rhoda Broughton (1840-1920), prolific novelist of sensational, transgressive, scandalous novels. Quoted in *Varieties of Women's Sensation Fiction: 1855-1890* (6 vols), *Vol 1: Sensationalism and the Sensation Debate*, ed. by Andrew Maunder (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2004), p. 235. For more on the contemporary reception of Swinburne in the context of sensation fiction, see *A Companion to Sensation Fiction*, ed. by Pamela K. Gilbert (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing, 2011).

⁸ Patrick Brantlinger, 'What is "Sensational" About the "Sensation Novel"?', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 37 (1982), 1-28 (p. 1).

Swinburne's verses were 'daringly sexual and blasphemous', handling illicit materials such as 'graphic depictions of women's bodies and sexual behaviour' with free license (Seagrott, 44). Both, however, generated a physical, affective force that was considered more threatening even than their proscribed subjects. If 'pulsations and spasms are essentials of a sensational poetics' revealed in *Poems and Ballads* (Blair, 190), then something equally physiological is essential to the aesthetics of the sensational novel:

the excitement that seizes us here is as direct as the "fight-or-flight" physiology that renders our reading bodies, neither fighting nor fleeing, theaters of neurasthenia. The genre offers us one of the first instances of modern literature to address itself primarily to the sympathetic nervous system, where it grounds its characteristic adrenalin effects: accelerated heart rate and respiration, increased blood pressure, the pallor resulting from vasoconstriction, etc.⁹

Of all the sensation writers, none was more effective in seizing his reader, in addressing his writing 'primarily to the sympathetic nervous system', than Wilkie Collins, chief propagator of the genre. Among his novels, *The Moonstone* (1868),¹⁰ *The Woman in White* (1859), *Armada* (1866), and *Basil* (1852), trade in cloak-and-dagger deception and exotic mystery, qualities that Heather Seagrott observes in Swinburne's poems, which, like these "'novel[s] with a secret', are 'full of dark secrets that the reader is invited to uncover' (Seagrott, 45). Thackeray writes of the joy he experienced when reading the 'thrilling *Woman in White*' during fits of ague.¹¹ Another reviewer describes Collins's 'galvanic power', producing 'upon the reader the effect of a literary nightmare'.¹² Consistently, the language of electricity, physical force, or nervous tension emerges in contemporary reviews of his novels, whose carefully crafted and developed

⁹ D.A. Miller, 'Cage Aux Folles: Sensation and Gender in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*' *Representations* 14 (1986), 107-36 (p. 107).

¹⁰ Famously called the 'first and greatest of English detective novels' by T.S. Eliot. See Eliot, 'Wilkie Collins and Dickens's', in *The Victorian Novel*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea and Infobase publ., 2004), pp. 307-314 (p. 310).

¹¹ William Thackeray, 'De Finibus', *Cornhill* (August 1862, 285). Rpt. in *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Norman Page (London: Routledge, 1974), p. 117.

¹² Unsigned review, *Saturday Review* (16 June 1866, 726-7). Rpt. in ed. Page. p. 151.

plots received praise from even the most censorious. Within a genre that many believed had dubious literary merit, his talents elevated his work above the pedestrian: ‘there were, as Dickens and others were quick to recognize, unmistakable qualities in Collins’s novels which raised them high above most other specimens of the class to which they appeared to belong. In his hands, fictional sows’ ears were apt to turn out as silk purses; and the reviewer was faced with a problem which may be put briefly in some such form as “Under what circumstances can a third-rate literary genre accommodate a first-rate work?”’ (Page, Preface, xi), a problem that Swinburne himself tackles in an essay on Collins, casting him as a modern-day dramatist and a skilful entertainer who would suffer from the snobbery of literary contemporaries but be admired by succeeding generations.

Swinburne’s article on Collins appeared in *The Fortnightly Review* of November 1889, a few months after the novelist’s death.¹³ A number of studies, ‘ranging from brief obituary notices in *The Times* (24 September), the *Athenæum* and elsewhere to substantial and important critical essays by Swinburne in the *Fortnightly Review* and Andrew Lang in the *Contemporary Review*’, were published on this occasion.¹⁴ Many reviewers attempted a retrospective of Collins’s long career in order to rank him with other Victorian novelists, and Swinburne’s assessment was an important part of this process. His writing on Collins has proven so seminal that later critics often regard this essay as one of his most significant, claiming that ‘it is still one of the best critical appraisals of the novelist’¹⁵ and that he ‘was later to blaze a trail for modern critics by pronouncing’ *The Moonstone* ‘the best of the novels’ (Page, ‘Introduction’, 11). He certainly helped to

¹³ Algernon Charles Swinburne, ‘Wilkie Collins’, *The Fortnightly Review* (1 Nov. 1889, 589-99). Rpt. in *Studies in Prose and Poetry* (1894) and collected in *Bonchurch* vol. 15, 289-306. Rpt. as ‘Wilkie Collins’ in *Swinburne as Critic*, ed. by C.K. Hyder, London & Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972, p. 209. Subsequent references as *WC*, *SaC*.

¹⁴ Norman Page, ‘Introduction’, in *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Norman Page (London: Routledge, 1974), pp. 1-20 (p. 16).

¹⁵ Clyde K. Hyder, Note on ‘Wilkie Collins’, *Swinburne as Critic*, ed. by Clyde K. Hyder (London & Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 209.

shape modern attitudes, as Collins's critical reputation (which declined thirty years after his death) began to revive in the 1920s. T.S. Eliot's essays of 1927 and 1928 'are generous without being excessive, and endorse the judgment of those Victorian reviewers', especially Swinburne, 'who praised [Collins] as supremely endowed with the gift of holding the reader's interest' (Page, 'Introduction', 17). Thus, Swinburne's work on Collins is foundational, particularly at a time when Modernist interest in plot and non-traditional narrative devices revived Collins's fading status. And his judgement is sound; he ranked Collins's novels in an order that still holds today.¹⁶

In 'Wilkie Collins', Swinburne shows, among other things, that he is not only a gifted critic of classical, British, and French predecessors, but also of contemporary writers. No literary elitist, he was a keen reader of sensation novels (despite their reputation as a 'third-rate', 'lower-class literary form', a mass amusement that resembled 'popular melodrama and penny dreadfuls'¹⁷) and is quick to note their merits as well as faults. He promoted Collins as one of the most talented practitioners of the form. Sensation novels arose from a tradition of Gothic fiction, romance, melodrama, and the Newgate¹⁸ novels of prior decades, enjoying a heyday in the 1860s and 1870s. Ellen Wood's novel *East Lynne* (1861) was the first to be called 'sensational', and initiated a trend continued by exponents such as Collins, Charles Reade, and Mary Elizabeth Braddon. Even Swinburne's literary hero Charles Dickens ('great among the immortal writers of his age'¹⁹) was noted at times to incorporate sensational elements. *Bleak House* (1852), with its coolly fascinating Lady Dedlock as an example of 'criminal femininity',

¹⁶ Swinburne gives *The Moonstone* pride of place, an opinion that has held relatively steadfast.

¹⁷ Lyn Pykett, *Wilkie Collins* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), pp. 87-88.

¹⁸ Also known as the Old Bailey novels, published from the 1820s-1840s, dealing with the melodramatic lives of various famous criminals. See Lyn Pykett, 'The Newgate Novel and Sensation Fiction 1830-1868', in *The Cambridge Companion to Crime fiction*, ed. by Martin Priestman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp.19-39.

¹⁹ Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'Charles Dickens', *Quarterly Review*, July 1902. Rpt. in *Charles Dickens*, ed. by Theodore Watts-Dunton (1913) and as 'Charles Dickens' in Hyder's *Swinburne as Critic*, pp. 223-42 (p. 238).

is ‘sometimes seen as the first sensation novel’, predating even *East Lynne* (1861).²⁰

Bearing elements of mystery, panic, and eerie strangeness, along with characters like the secretive convict Magwitch and the witch-like Miss Havisham, *Great Expectations* (1861) also owed much to the genre. The *Bildungsroman* plot of *Great Expectations*, superimposed upon its setting of crime and vengeance, recalibrated the parameters of such novels; they could be serious as well as sensational, realistic as well as paranormal, and provide plot-driven entertainment while simultaneously handling matters as weighty as class, conscience, and guilt.

As we have seen, the sensational novel had become a locus around which many late-Victorian debates on the novel centred. During the 1880s, critics sought to explain its popular appeal and analyse its technical and aesthetic worth. Swinburne registered these on-going debates. With his unique combination of interests (classical poetry and theatre, Elizabethan, Jacobean, and Restoration dramatists minor and major, unrivalled reading in French, and a wide range of British literature), there was no one better qualified to examine the sensation novel in its broader literary context. His approval (not intemperate) of Collins’s skill would have significant impact on the genre’s critical fortunes after the turn of the century.

Collins presented a nineteenth-century critical dilemma: his works were something more than the potboiler melodrama, yet something different from acknowledged *literature*. Norman Page explains this unease well, suggesting that ‘the modern reader, trained by such modern instances as the thrillers of Graham Greene, takes the paradox in his stride; but Victorian men of letters, many of them with a classical background, entertained stricter notions of a hierarchy of genres, and felt a genuine puzzlement at the difference between the kind of novel Collins appeared to be writing and

²⁰ Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, *Moulding the Female Body in Victorian Fairy Tales and Sensation Novels* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), p. 12.

the powerful and unignorable response of the reader'.²¹ Into this environment of critical 'puzzlement' came Swinburne – likewise a Victorian man of letters and scholar with a 'classical background'—an established voice who would provide a formative, indispensable, and pivotal assessment of Collins's merits. He would be the first to historicise and contextualise Collins, pulling him out of the hierarchy of which Victorian reviewers were so fond, and examining his novels in terms of craft and style.

Many critics were perplexed about Collins. Whereas 'the mysteries in *Bleak House* point to the larger mysteries of community and isolation, love and selfishness in the society that Dickens anatomizes', 'the mystery of *The Moonstone*, even though serious attitudes about crime and poverty, religious hypocrisy, the law, and the empire can be inferred from it, does not explicitly point beyond itself to larger issues' (Brantlinger, 20). Most assigned Collins a position somewhere between realism and melodrama. Henry James identified the truly chilling nature of his stories as a function of their locality, their domesticity, their introduction of the 'most mysterious of mysteries, the mysteries which are at our own doors'. Departing from the exoticism of the Gothic, 'instead of the terrors of *Udolpho*,²² we were treated to the terrors of the cheerful country-house and the busy London lodgings. And there is no doubt that these were infinitely the more terrible'.²³

Swinburne begins his study of Collins with a defence. This is not uncommon, he was often roused to write on subjects that he felt needed an eloquent advocate. While he defended Emily Brontë from moral censure and Charlotte from the growing popularity of George Eliot, he supports Collins against 'the ingratitude of readers and spectators'.

²¹ Norman Page, 'Preface', in *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Norman Page (London: Routledge, 1974), pp. xi-xii (p. xi).

²² Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), a Gothic romance set in the Pyrenees and Apennines of southern France and northern Italy.

²³ [Henry James], Unsigned review, 'Miss Braddon', *Nation* (9 November 1865, 593-5). Rpt. in ed. Page, pp. 119-120.

Readers, who have been ‘delighted’, ‘amused’, and ‘entertained’ by Collins, refuse him a place of ‘honour’ in their ‘estimation’.²⁴ This ingratitude, Swinburne suggests, stems from an ingrained elitism, which refuses to acknowledge the literary efforts of today (no matter how entertaining or pleasing) as comparable to those of a former era. Coming from a Bardolater and classical aficionado, this is startling. There are those, he states, who believe ‘that the age of Shakespeare is well worth studying even in the minor productions of his day and the humblest professors of his art’.²⁵ Should not, then, the entire spectrum of Victorian writing be considered? The argument against Collins is founded on the assertion that he is a ‘minor’ novelist; nevertheless, argues Swinburne, we study the minor Elizabethan dramatists, and there is merit in their works. With this in mind, he is loath to dismiss the best and most skilful representative of an entire genre. Just as the Victorians revere Elizabethan England as a golden age of art, so, too, might later generations perceive Victorian England. Its full literary output should therefore be studied – and this must include Wilkie Collins along with Thackeray, Dickens, Eliot, and the Brontës. Swinburne is here making a case for the importance of the Victorian novel. Regardless of genre, critical estimation, or popular appeal, he chooses those he believes to be the best representatives of his age.

Swinburne places Collins on a continuum with Dickens and Shakespeare, stating that, ‘though Dickens was not a Shakespeare, and though Collins was not a Dickens, it is permissible to anticipate that their names and their works will be familiar to generations unacquainted with the existence...of their most shining, most scornful, and most superior critics’.²⁶ Shakespeare had his critics, as did Dickens and Collins, but their value transcends contemporary disapproval and ultimately lies with the public that reads and

²⁴ *WC, SaC*, 209.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *WC, SaC*, 210.

enjoys their work. This argument is quite different from Swinburne's defence of the Brontës, whom he praised on artistic grounds (characterisation, incident, language, and form). With Collins, however, Swinburne emphasises 'interest' and 'general sympathy',²⁷ the sway that his novels hold over the public imagination. Again, he draws a comparison to Elizabethan drama, which 'culture, in their days, was pleased to ignore...with a scorn as academic...as it now can pretend to feel for the novel'.²⁸ That which the Elizabethan public enjoyed is now considered high art; the popular novel, 'scorned' as trivial, may soon assume an equally lofty position.

His notion runs parallel to James' articulation of the art of fiction (1884), which held, in concordance with Walter Besant, that 'fiction is one of the fine arts', that the novel 'must take itself seriously for the public to take it so', and that the novel requires 'a theory, a conviction, a consciousness of itself behind it-of being the expression of an artistic faith, the result of choice and comparison'.²⁹ In the same essay, James emphasizes the vast breadth and diversity of the novel, appraising the divisions that separate the 'novel of character' from the 'novel of incident', the novel from the romance, as artificial. Swinburne submits a similar proposition in 'Wilkie Collins', suggesting that the 'academic' scorn with which Victorian critics reject Collins's novels will evaporate over time: the entertainment of today might, like Shakespeare, be the significant work of tomorrow. James demands that the novel find a 'consciousness of itself', a theory of what it might encompass; that, lacking this, it will be subject to analysis limiting its theme or scope and pigeonholing it as a fiction of character versus one of incident, as a romance or a history. Such regulation of the genre is a key critical flaw that Swinburne, like James after him, robustly denounces. In the case of Collins's works, Swinburne calls this

²⁷ *WC, SaC*, 209.

²⁸ *WC, SaC*, 210.

²⁹ Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction', in *The Portable Henry James*, ed. by John Auchard (New York: Penguin, 2004), pp. 426-447 (pp. 427-28).

tendency ‘academic’ or snobbery; James calls it ‘old-fashioned’. Both agree that novels are a serious form of art, a genre that is large and contains multitudes,³⁰ and that the only standards by which they ought to be judged are those of merit. In James’ words, ‘there are bad novels and good novels, as there are bad pictures and good pictures; but that is the only distinction in which I see any meaning’. Alongside James, Besant, and others, Swinburne articulates a theory of the novel that explodes ‘old-fashioned’ Victorian hierarchies of literary worth, revising the history of the genre to include many different kinds of novels and writers, various styles and themes. In part, he paved the way for the modern reader of the novel earlier described – adaptable and flexible to the demands of the genre— a reader who could accommodate many kinds of literature, the novels of George Eliot and ‘the thrillers of Graham Greene’, taking ‘the paradox in his stride’, recognizing that plot, suspense, or entertainment may not preclude merit, but may actually contribute to it.

The connection between Collins and Dickens, as well as Swinburne’s discussion of the two in parallel, has roots in the emergence of sensation novels. *All The Year Round*, the periodical that Dickens founded and edited, ‘carried so many stories by Collins, Charles Reade and by Dickens himself that it could be accurately be described as an important forum for writers of the “sensation” school’ (Sen, 490). ‘Aimed at a broadly middle-class readership’, *All the Year Round* lacked the ‘overtly political mission’ of Dickens’s prior weekly, *Household Words*, and focused upon entertainment via ‘the serialization of novels by well-known authors’ and delivering ‘sensational texts representing such themes as middle-class crime, insanity, [and] female transgression’.³¹ In the early twentieth century, Walter Clarke Phillips deemed Reade, Collins, and

³⁰ Whitman’s verse is particularly fitting vis-à-vis Swinburne, a great admirer of the American poet.

³¹ Deborah Wynne, “‘We were unhealthy and unsafe’: Dickens’s *Great Expectations* and *All The Year Round*’s Anxiety Stories”, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 5(2000), 45-59 (p. 45).

Dickens a triumvirate of sensationalists – naming them the ‘Dickens group’ despite their formal differences—and regarding Collins’s Preface to *Basil* as their philosophical Urtext. In it, Collins famously opined that ‘the novel and the play are twin-sisters in the family of Fiction’,³² a relationship upon which Swinburne dwells in his criticism, and of which Phillips writes:

No single utterance of theirs is perhaps more significant of their joint aims and preferences ... Collins’s parallel of the theater, in fact, points to the narrative method which they persistently championed. At bottom their method aimed, by means of adapting to the novel some of the advantages and necessary restraint of play-writing, to impart a vivacity and verisimilitude hitherto insufficiently developed in English prose fiction ... Again, the full emotional value of the material was to be stressed as the theater stresses it. Hence climaxes arranged on the stage plan.³³

This avowed marriage of the novel and the drama, with the resulting ‘vivacity and verisimilitude’ and ‘full emotional value’ of ‘strong emotions, unusual incident’, and ‘dramatic method’, yielded a form of sensation fiction that could be classified as the dramatic novel. It is no coincidence that many sensation writers had a great enthusiasm for the theatre. Dickens’s works were heavily adapted into plays during his lifetime (not to mention posthumously); *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) and *East Lynne* were both first staged in 1863, while Collins frequently collaborated with Dickens on theatrical works such as *The Frozen Deep* (1856) and *No Thoroughfare* (1867). According to Phillips, theatrical characteristics lend this prose both weaknesses and strengths. The novels’ fast pace, animation, and suspense are secondary to hyper-plotted and staged incidents – Count Fosco’s improbable destruction at the end of *The Woman in White*, the series of critical coincidences in *Armadale*, even Miss Havisham’s fiery fate in *Great Expectations* – an overarching emphasis on the ‘fortuitous’ more than ‘the logical’ (Phillips, 12-13).

³² W. Collins, ‘Dedication’, in *Basil* (London: Sampson Low, 1862), pp. iii-viii (p. v).

³³ Walter Clarke Phillips, *Dickens, Reade, And Collins: Sensation Novelists* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1919), pp. 12-13.

Phillips' later transposition of melodrama for 'Collins's word *drama*' forecasts critical opinion that compares the two:

Perhaps the overriding feature of both melodrama and the sensation novel is the subordination of character to plot', for 'an inadvertent clue, a startling coincidence is all that melodramatic justice seems to need to unravel their secrets. The world of melodrama and of the sensation novel is very much one in which circumstances rule characters, propelling them through the intricate machinations of plots that act like fate (Brantlinger, 12-13).

The intimate association between sensation fiction and drama profoundly shaped Swinburne's criticism of the genre and of Collins, who, for him, is *the* representative dramatic novelist. First, he compares the mass appeal of the novel in the Victorian era to the play in Shakespeare's, arguing that, 'it must be admitted that the appeal to general imagination or to general sympathy, which then was made only by the dramatist, is now made only by the novelist'.³⁴ The novel, Swinburne suggests, is for Victorians what the drama was to Elizabethans: a populist vehicle packing narrative and emotive punch. And this sort of power cannot be undervalued, despite the protests of 'high-sniffing' high culture pundits, for the work of novelists such as Collins will 'be familiar to generations unacquainted with their existence and unaware of the eclipse of their most shining, most scornful, and most superior critics'. He cautions such 'superior critics' that 'the name of Shakespeare is now more widely known than the name of Puttenham', Anticipating James' meta-literary declaration that the novel must have 'consciousness of itself', Swinburne asks several things of his readers.³⁵ He asks that his age take a broader view of popular fiction in general, and of Collins's novels in particular. He demands a high standard from fellow critics—the avant-garde vision to recognize that the entertainment of today might just be the high art of the future—and furnishes them with several comic

³⁴ *WC, SaC*, 209.

³⁵ *WC, SaC*, 210. Richard Puttenham (1520-1601), assumed author of *The Arte of English Poesie*, per Hyder's note 3 on 'Wilkie Collins' in *SaC*, p. 221.

examples of critical taste proven incorrect by literary history. Finally, and most compellingly, he asks that the novel take itself seriously, and makes an impassioned case for it as both tremendous entertainment and artistic achievement.

Swinburne extends the drama/novel relationship that he explored in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. *Wuthering Heights* narrates tension through an inherently tragic set of characters and circumstances, inviting comparison with Shakespeare and Elizabethan or Jacobean drama. But in 'Wilkie Collins' he draws a provocative socio-historical comparison between that era and the present: 'Middleton, Heywood, and Rowley would now have to undertake the parts so excellently played by Collins, by Trollope, and by Reade'.³⁶ Swinburne chooses Collins as Middleton's present-day successor, and Trollope as Heywood's. This perhaps has something to do with Middleton's range and overlooked talent, which prompted Eliot to comment that the man was 'inscrutable, solitary, unadmired'. The prolific Middleton was capable of writing in multiple genres and styles: his plays moved from the blood and gore of *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1606) to the comic *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1630) and the tragic masterpiece *The Changeling* (1622). Eliot, agreeing with Swinburne as he did in several other critical opinions, called Middleton 'a great observer of human nature, without fear, without sentiment, without prejudice'.³⁷ Swinburne's analysis of Collins similarly praises 'his excellent sense, his perfect self-command, his modest devotion to his art'³⁸ and his 'peculiarly lucid method' which facilitates 'the peculiarly careful evolution of a most amusingly complicated story'.³⁹ Though Collins is not quite a fearless 'great observer of human nature' such as Middleton or Swinburne's other literary passion, Balzac, one senses in the defence an attempt to judge him fairly alongside contemporary novelists. As

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ T.S. Eliot, 'Thomas Middleton', *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. by F. Kermode (Florida: Harcourt, 1975), pp. 194-95.

³⁸ *WC*, *SaC*, 211.

³⁹ *WC*, *SaC*, 214.

for Trollope, the comparison with Heywood is both witty and apt as it identifies their shared interest in middle class domestic and public life, and showcases Swinburne's familiarity with drama of all periods as well as talent for creating fascinating literary linkages.

Swinburne then invokes the drama of the Restoration period and compares *The Moonstone* to 'Lord Digby's incomparable *Elvira* – the one dramatic work in the language which may be said to have anticipated the peculiarly lucid method, and the peculiarly careful evolution of a most amusingly complicated story, which we admire in the best works of Wilkie Collins'.⁴⁰ *Elvira, or the Worst not always True: A Comedy*, an obscure play from 1667 by George Digby, Earl of Bristol, had been put back into print in Dodsley's *Select Plays* (1876). It is apparent that Swinburne was familiar with the play's content and its author's relatively arcane output, because he then mentions 'Sir Samuel Tuke's *Adventures of Five Hours*' (1663) which Digby is thought to have co-authored. *The Adventures of Five Hours*, an adaptation of a Spanish play, *Los Empenos de seis horas* by Antonio Coello (1611-1652). This presents the familiar comedic plot of romantic doubles separated by opposing brothers. Swinburne was familiar with Samuel Pepys' opinion that, having 'recently witnessed' Tuke's play, made him reflect 'after seeing *Othello* – a play which he was wont to think well of – that, "having so lately seen *The Adventures of Five Hours*, it do seem but a mean thing"'.⁴¹ *Elvira* and *The Adventures of Five Hours* share much of their era's sensibility, its intriguing wars of the sexes and comic romantic entanglements. In referencing these two relatively outmoded dramas (*Elvira* more obscure than *Five Hours*) Swinburne once more expects high standards of literary knowledge from his reader and also makes explicit the connection

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ WC, SaC, 215. Pepys' diary for 20 August 1666 reads, 'Up, and to Deptford by water, reading "Othello, Moore of Venice," which I ever heretofore esteemed a mighty good play, but having so lately read "The Adventures of Five Houres," it seems a mean thing'. Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, New York: Modern Library, 2003.

between Collins and Restoration drama. He compliments Collins's *The Moonstone* and Digby's *Elvira* for 'the skill of construction' that is 'so exquisite, so complete, so masterly, that we follow the thread of the story with unflagging enjoyment and a perpetually changeful and delightful perplexity of conjecture as to what the upshot is to be'.⁴² He suggests that Collins's novels are perhaps closest to the sophisticated skill and resourcefulness of Restoration drama. The 'thread of story', the narrative arc and momentum, and the curiosity 'as to what the upshot is to be' make Collins a Victorian purveyor of plot and skilful crowd (reader) manipulation. The link is rich, for Swinburne can also use it to illuminate Collins's slippery use of genre— tragicomic, plot-driven, not easily pigeonholed—which is mixed just as it was in Restoration drama. The latter's range of comedy and tragedy is made evident when he mentions Otway's tragic romance *The Orphan* (1680), using it to invoke once more 'the construction of an interesting and perplexing story, well conceived, well contrived, and well moulded into lifelike and attractive shape' by Collins.⁴³ He repeatedly praises the ingenuous plotting of Restoration drama and seems to consider that its greatest legacy, at least where popular novels are concerned. They are inferior, however, to the emotional and tragic impact of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama ('the supreme quality of a work so far superior to Otway's as *The Maid's Tragedy*'⁴⁴). Swinburne's ranking of drama might help us interpret his ranking of contemporary novelists, for he seems to suggest that the Brontës (particularly Emily) and Dickens have something of the craft, power, magnitude, and observation of the great Jacobean and Elizabethans, whereas Collins holds the craft, skill, ingenuous plot, and ceaseless capacity for suspense of the Restoration dramatist. His work is a puzzle box.

⁴² *WC, SaC*, 215.

⁴³ *WC, SaC*, 221.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

Finally, like drama of that age, Collins's novels are a sensation in themselves. Like popular plays such as *The Adventures of Five Hours*, they are crowd-pleasers.

Swinburne shows off his own engagement with contemporary drama by alluding to W.S. Gilbert's farce, *Engaged*, which premiered at Haymarket in 1877. The romantic burlesque, which influenced later comic dramatists such as Wilde, Shaw and Coward, romps through a Scottish courtship. Swinburne conjures up this decade-old play as a contrast to Collins's *Man and Wife* (1870), a tale as different in tone from Gilbert's rollicking production as possible. The novel deals with the legal standing of women and the disadvantages of Scottish marriage laws, along with the coincidence and fortuitous or unlucky circumstances that drive typical Collins narratives. Swinburne calls the novel 'the first and best' of Collins's 'didactic or admonitory novels', then merrily jumps to Gilbert's burlesque, unable to resist comparing these two recent plots set in Scotland:

The subject of marriage law in Scotland is one which it is painfully difficult for any one who has read the most exhaustingly delightful and the most unmercifully side-splitting of all farcical comedies [*Engaged*] to consider as suggestive of serious or tragic interest. Belinda and her Belvawney, Cheviot and his Minnie, rise up again before the eyes of enraptured if incredulous fancy, in the light –or should we say limelight? –of inextinguishable and irrepressible laughter: and the woes and wrongs of any couple accidentally or otherwise mismarried on the wrong side of the Border are inevitably invested with a lambent halo of ridicule – an ineffaceable aureole of farce.⁴⁵

Swinburne obviously expects his readers to have a strong engagement with current drama in addition to novels, and his theatre puns both invoke the stage and highlight (or 'should we say limelight') the potential for farce in Collins's setting and plot. It is difficult to consider the subject 'as suggestive of serious or tragic interest', especially in light of *Engaged*. Collins, however, succeeds, and for Swinburne it is 'still possible' to set aside *Engaged*'s 'ineffaceable aureole of farce' and grapple with the serious intent of the novel, 'the unexplained if not inexplicable incongruity between the physical and moral weakness

⁴⁵ *WC, SaC*, 216.

which could yield up honour and character to the seduction or attraction of a brainless and soulless brute'.⁴⁶ Thus, Swinburne believes that Collins's ability to transcend the subject matter and serve a narrative of substance and weight is even more praiseworthy.

Yet there is another dimension to Swinburne's comparison. He not only aligns Collins's popular appeal and legacy with that of drama, but he also employs the language of the stage in his defence, pointing to a key technical aspect of sensation fiction. One feels, in reading any of the major novels—*Basil*, *The Woman in White*, *Armada*, *The Moonstone*—that Collins is putting on a particularly intricate performance: as Dickens, Reade, and Collins maintained, one is reading a 'dramatic novel'. Characters have their exits and entrances (via letters, journals, and other narrative fragments), and when they have served their turn often disappear for the rest of the story. *The Moonstone*'s Ezra Jennings is an obvious example; after organising the experiment that resolves much of the mystery, he dies of a lingering illness, having destroyed all his personal effects. The complicated plots, 'construction, and the narrative', create a sustained tension that rivals the appeal of the stage.⁴⁷ This dramatic tension, however, takes a form very different from that found in *Wuthering Heights*. For Swinburne, the drama that Brontë generates flows naturally from her characters (and the circumstances that ensue) and her own tragic poetic spirit. Collins's tension, in contrast, stems from the mounting suspense of a incident-driven mystery, the 'exquisitely mechanical ingenuity of so continuously intricate a plot'.⁴⁸

Swinburne's comparison is just, for Collins is indeed a 'very dramatic novelist'. He 'made a great deal of use of theatrical scenes, especially at the end of an episode' and 'also relied heavily on dialogue'. We know that he was 'extremely interested in plays and

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ *WC*, *SaC*, 210.

⁴⁸ *WC*, *SaC*, 212.

the theatre' (Pykett, 93-94), converting several of his novels to productions, and as we have seen in his Preface to *Basil*, considered the novel and the drama to be 'twin-sisters in the family of Fiction' (Collins, 'Dedication', *Basil*, v). John Dennis wrote of *The Evil Genius* (1886), 'it is full of dramatic scenes, and might, we think, be readily transformed into a sensational drama'.⁴⁹ Dennis's view was one shared by Collins's contemporaries as well as by subsequent critics. In treating Collins's works as dramatic novels, Swinburne approaches the issue of plot and planning, the blueprinting and staging of the prose, in the same manner as the text of a play. His capacity to appreciate the narrative tension of these novels is inflected by his understanding that they are (melo)dramatic, that the criteria by which they must be judged are quite different from the traditional, 'old-fashioned', motive- and psychological-centric Victorian standards of the novel. Swinburne's rescue of Collins's dramatic fiction is due, in part, to his deep affection for the drama as a performance, a mode of discourse, and a testing ground for intense and important emotions, sensations, and ideas.

Like entertaining plays, sensation novels tell a good story, peppered with shocking revelations and unique, often bizarre, characters. But while the dramatic strength of plot drives Collins's stories, such power does not always lend itself to his characters. Swinburne even refers to one of Collins's creations (the villain Mannion in *Basil*) as a 'stage property'.⁵⁰ The dramatic metaphor becomes, for a Swinburne, a double-edged sword. While Collins can create and sustain narrative momentum, his individual players often appear to be 'stage properties', two-dimensional personalities who are either over-caricatured or weakly delineated. In this, his parallel to those 'minor Elizabethan dramatists' becomes evident. His work also more nearly follows Shakespeare's early, crude efforts. The fluently self-reflective protagonists of the later tragedies (Macbeth,

⁴⁹ [John Dennis], Unsigned review, *Spectator* (4 Dec. 1886, 1628). Rpt. in ed. Page, p. 220.

⁵⁰ *WC*, *SaC*, 210.

Hamlet, Othello, Cleopatra) evolve from opaque types like Titus and King John.⁵¹ Like Shakespeare's early plays, Collins's novels proceed because of incident, rather than character. Events are imposed on individuals and they react accordingly. Swinburne values circumstance that derives from character, 'action consistent with character' (Hyder, 12). He writes that 'the study of character and the modesty of nature' in Collins's major novels 'must too surely have been subordinated, if not sacrificed, to the...plot'.⁵²

On the theme of individual portraiture, Swinburne believes that another major failing of Collins's work is that 'he could not ... get forward at all without the help of some physical or moral infirmity in some one of the leading agents or patients of the story'. He proceeds to suggest that, had Anne Catherick in *The Woman in White* or Sarah Leeson in *The Dead Secret* been 'sound in mind—not abnormally and constitutionally deficient in nerve and brain', the meticulous plots would have been unhinged. This is a problem because it is a 'cruel and a painful mainspring for a story or a plot', and the reader feels that there is 'something unlovely as well as artificial' in such a story.⁵³ To gain our delight and entertainment from another's 'infirmity' is, for Swinburne, a moral lapse. Further, it violates the rules of fiction. Just as Ophelia's madness in *Hamlet* is 'an important but subordinate point in the working of the story', so should Anne Catherick's sickness be interwoven into the texture of the novel without being integral to its narrative.

The issue of plot, which repeatedly appeared in criticism of Collins, 'had had a long innings in criticism of the drama', but at the time that Swinburne was writing, 'the nineteenth century found itself called upon to grapple with in relation to fiction' (Page, Preface, xi). In his preference for character-driven narrative, Swinburne was in accord with many of his contemporaries: the reign of plot was associated with the crude,

⁵¹ *Coriolanus* (1623) is an example of a later work whose plot is skilfully planned and executed, but whose tragic hero is found to be more opaque and less sympathetic than many other Shakespearean characters, protagonists and antagonists alike.

⁵² *WC, SaC*, 212.

⁵³ *WC, SaC*, 211.

embryonic novel, while the hallmark of the mature novel was psychological realism. The greatest criticism levelled against Collins was always the ‘ancient debating-point’, the ‘relation between “character” and “action”’.⁵⁴ As Graham notes, ‘the dominance of the first, due to a new interest in human motives and psychology, has often been said to typify mid- and late-Victorian thinking about the novel’, while ‘critics come to identify ‘plot’ with the particular incidents and conventions used by older writers’. Collins ‘becomes a symbol of the old regime, and at times a martyr to the change in critical taste’ (Graham, 97-98). With the growing popularity of psychological realists such as Eliot and Trollope, Collins found himself under attack for his techniques. His characters were ‘puppets of circumstance’ whereas psychological realism showed ‘that man moulds his own fate’ (Graham, 100).

One review of *Armada* called the book another instance of Collins’s ‘strange capacity for weaving extraordinary plots’, a ‘lurid labyrinth of improbabilities’. Its heroes and heroines, writes the critic, have a ‘sort of unearthly and deadly look’ about them, and ‘though it is necessary for the purpose of the plot that they should keep moving, we feel that every one of their motions is due, not to a natural process, but to the sheer force and energy of the author’s will. They dodge each other up and down the stage after the manner of puppets at a puppet-show’.⁵⁵ This description encapsulates the unease that Collins’s work inspired. His ‘unearthly and deadly’ characters and seemingly impossible plots aroused a certain discomfort, a sense of the macabre, the authorial puppet master positioning every limb of his marionette creations, enacting their ‘twistings and turnings’ with studied organisation. At the same time, the critic evinces admiration for the ‘sheer force and energy’ of the author’s will, as well as the choreographed performance that the reader enjoys. Another reviewer found Collins’s mechanisms not so much chilling as

⁵⁴ Kenneth Graham, *English Criticism of the Novel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), pp. 97-98.

⁵⁵ Unsigned review, *Saturday Review* (16 June 1866, 726-7). Rpt. in in ed. Page, p. 151.

stodgy, pedantic, and rehearsed: ‘it is plain that his imagination works and schemes with patient deliberation. He plans his stories as a plodding chamber counsel might draw a settlement’.⁵⁶ Collins’s facility with deliberate and detailed plots inspired a host of sensations: visceral enjoyment and pleasurable suspense, but also—conflictingly—disquiet that the reader has been manipulated by this master of plot, and boredom with his consistent, ponderous narrative technique. The disjunction between character and incident, with its accompanying puppet metaphor, would haunt his reputation for his entire career. Painfully aware of this, he made it clear in his many prefaces that, as well as a sensational plotter and popular writer, ‘he also wished to be taken seriously as an artist, and to be considered as a serious novelist’ (Pykett, 101-02).

Swinburne’s position on Collins’s incident-, rather than character-driven, narrative is befitting of the time, and consistent with his theory of the novel as demonstrated by critical essays on many other novelists (the Brontës, Hugo, Dickens, to name a few). But in the ‘Art of Fiction’, James points to a commingling of the two traits:

What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character? ... It is an incident for a woman to stand up with her hand resting on a table and look out at you in a certain way; or if it be not an incident, I think it will be hard to say what it is. At the same time it is an expression of character (James, ‘The Art of Fiction’).

Moving away from the Victorian ‘hierarchy’ and emphasis on incident following character, James argues that the two are organically, irrevocably linked, and that the novel –like a picture – portrays a certain moment or revelation.

Although at times the most Victorian of radical Victorians, and although he reveals a very Victorian perspective on Collins’s characters and plots, Swinburne nonetheless pushes towards the sort of genre diversification and unification that James proposes in ‘The Art of Fiction’. By encouraging readers and critics to embrace the

⁵⁶ Unsigned Review, *Saturday Review* (2 Mar 1872, 282-3). Rpt. in ed. Page, p. 197.

dramatic elements in Collins's prose, proposing a theatrical structure by which to understand his novels, and by suggesting that only future readership can determine the ultimate value of his work, Swinburne broadens the scope of the novel at the time. Though a strong advocate for psychological realism, he recognises that Collins's novels (particularly *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*) are something out of the ordinary, works of 'indisputably great merit' because they prompt a 'delightful perplexity of conjecture as to what the upshot is to be'⁵⁷ – the cerebral and somatic indulgence of the mystery. He grants Collins literary status, writing that 'it will be admitted that Wilkie Collins was in his way a genuine artist'.⁵⁸ His 'occasional lapses' Swinburne disclaims, upholding 'the evidence of original and noticeable power' and 'sustained though not elevated interest'⁵⁹ in *Basil*, a promise that develops into the 'exquisite, complete, and masterly' 'skill of construction'⁶⁰ in *The Moonstone*. In an interesting departure, he compares Dickens unfavourably to Collins, stating that Collins never lapses as greatly as Dickens in *Little Dorrit*:

A writer might let his characters slip for the sake of his story, or he may let his story slip for the sake of his characters: Dickens, in *Little Dorrit*, fell alternately into both errors, and yet achieved such success on both lines that the chaotic magnificence of his work may well be held sufficient to strike even the most rational and rightful criticism into silence. Such triumph and such aberration were alike impossible to Collins.⁶¹

While Collins never reaches Dickens's heights, he also never creates as 'shapeless or misshapen a piece of work' as *Little Dorrit* (1857).⁶² In craft and 'admirable ingenuity'⁶³ Collins has, according to Swinburne, no rival. And, though Dickens was one of Swinburne's childhood idols, and contributed to the rise of sensation fiction, it is Collins

⁵⁷ *WC, SaC*, 215.

⁵⁸ *WC, SaC*, 210-11.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *WC, SaC*, 215.

⁶¹ *WC, SaC*, 212.

⁶² *WC, SaC*, 211.

⁶³ Swinburne, 'Emily Brontë', *SaC*, 206.

whom Swinburne praises for having ‘amused our leisure, relieved our weariness, delighted our fancy, enthralled our attention, refreshed our sympathies’ with his ingenious tales.⁶⁴

Although Swinburne concedes that Collins’s characters are often subordinated to plot, he marks several for special commendation. ‘It seems to me’, he writes, ‘grossly and glaringly unjust to deny or to question the merit or the truthfulness of his better studies’.⁶⁵ Among these he identifies *The Woman in White*’s genial villain Count Fosco, *The Moonstone*’s ‘Evangelical hag’,⁶⁶ Miss Clack, and Lydia Gwilt, the ‘criminal heroine’ of *Armadale*.⁶⁷ Swinburne writes that an earlier critic,⁶⁸ otherwise ‘fair and good’, describes Fosco as ‘a mechanical non-entity, an ingenious invention never realized or vitalized or informed with humanity’. He counters this by arguing that ‘this would be a quite unimpeachable objection if the story had been told in the third person’ but ‘the author does not tell us what he thinks of his creature; he gives us the various impressions made on the fellow-creatures of his imagination’. We thus see, that ‘there are more ways of considering and estimating a man’s character than a meaner artist could have suggested’.⁶⁹ This multiplicity of perspectives reveals the multi-faceted nature of Fosco, a personality that presents different ‘impressions’ to different people, in varying circumstances. Swinburne applauds Collins’s creation of a villain who is not unadulterated evil, but rather possesses amusing quirks (Fosco’s penchant for pet white mice and obsession with pastry) that only serve to heighten his villainy when it emerges. To Laura Fairlie, he is always frightening; to Marian Halcombe, strangely mesmerising;

⁶⁴ *WC, SaC*, 209.

⁶⁵ *WC, SaC*, 212-13.

⁶⁶ *WC, SaC*, 213.

⁶⁷ *WC, SaC*, 214.

⁶⁸ It is unclear to which article Swinburne refers as ‘the most thoughtful, serious, and critical article that appeared on the occasion on [Collins’s] death’ (*WC, SaC*, 213). It might be M.W. Townsend’s unsigned obituary article in *The Spectator* (28 Sept. 1889, 395-96).

⁶⁹ *WC, SaC*, 213.

to Percival Glyde, forceful and persuasive. The strange contradictions of human nature intrigue Swinburne, as always; so he finds this kindly, amoral rogue a fascinating villain of the type of Balzac's Vautrin or Vautrin's original, Vidocq.⁷⁰

Swinburne was not the only Fosco admirer. Other contemporary reviewers acknowledged the brilliant creation of such a character, who 'from his first entrance is master of the scene — his noiseless movements, his villainous bland philosophies, his enjoyment of life, his fine waistcoats — every detail about him is necessary to his perfection'.⁷¹ He is praised as the 'great personage of the book', a 'wonderfully clear-cut type of a somewhat mythical class. With great skill in music, chemistry, and diplomacy; with a magnetic power over men and women'.⁷² In fact, it is owing to Fosco that Collins earns some aesthetic compliments from his critics; Fosco is 'a far higher artistic effort than constructing the plot',⁷³ and 'few characters in modern fiction are as well drawn and sustained as that of Count Fosco, the cool, sensible, intellectual villain'.⁷⁴ A truly evolved character, Fosco has continued to be regarded as one of Collins's greatest and most complex creations. If he is indeed a reincarnation of the French convict-turned-policeman Vidocq, as several recent critics have suggested, it is apt that Swinburne, Balzac devotee and admirer of the sweetly diabolical, strangely tragic Vautrin, singled him out for immense praise.⁷⁵ Vidocq, who 'whether in person or in the guise of some fictional character...appears regularly in the literature of the nineteenth century' (Guyon, 146), is a

⁷⁰ There have been several articles on this provenance, namely Deborah Wynne's 'Vidocq, The Spy: A Possible Source For Count Fosco in Wilkie Collins's "The Woman In White"', *Notes And Queries* (September 1997). and Loïc P. Guyon's, 'In Vidocq's Footsteps : A Comparative Study of some Explicit and Implicit References to the Adventurer Vidocq in Nineteenth-Century Literature', *Journal of European Studies* 2003 33: 145. Eugène-François Vidocq (1775-1857) was a French criminal/convict turned policeman whose life inspired Victor Hugo's character Jean Valjean, as well as Balzac's recurring character Vautrin.

⁷¹ [Margaret Oliphant], Unsigned review, 'Sensation Novels', *Blackwood's Magazine* (May 1862, 565-74). Rpt in ed. Page, p. 113.

⁷² J.L. Stewart, 'Wilkie Collins as a Novelist', *Rose-Belford's Canadian Monthly & National Review* (November 1878, 586-601). Rpt. in ed. Page, p. 224.

⁷³ *Spectator*, unsigned review (28 December 1861, 1428). Rpt. in ed. Page, p. 109.

⁷⁴ *Lippincott's Magazine*, unsigned review (December 1868, 679-80). Rpt. in ed. Page, p.179.

⁷⁵ See Footnote 37.

figure of inspiration for writers including Hugo, Balzac, Poe, Collins, and Arthur Conan Doyle. Poe's Dupin and Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, both savant detectives who can seemingly think like the villains they track, owe something to Vidocq. Having himself been once a criminal, he rose to the heights of the police force due to his uncanny ability to understand the criminal mind. Watson, Moriarty, and others repeatedly remind us that, had Holmes turned to crime, he would have been formidable and likely impossible to arrest. Along the same lines, Fosco is nigh impossible to outwit, and it is only through a shady *deus ex machina* – an Italian secret society, 'The Brotherhood' – that he turns up dead by vendetta. The rich interconnections between Vidocq, Vautrin, and Fosco are significant for Swinburne given his comprehensive reading of both Balzac and Collins, admiration for nuanced character sketches (both Vautrin and Fosco are enigmatic, charismatic, maleficent, yet at times remarkably sentimental), and fascination with mysteries, crimes, and the criminal mind. Furthermore, the link between Vidocq and Fosco places the latter squarely in the tradition of detective fiction developing from the early nineteenth century into the fin de siècle, a tradition of which Collins was an important part.

Wilkie Collins's treatment of fallen women (most obviously in *The New Magdalen*, 1873) was just one of the many 'sensitive subjects' for which he was 'taken to task': 'illegitimacy (particularly in *No Name*), adultery (*Basil*), forgery and fraud (*The Woman in White*, *No Name*, *Armadale*), and prostitution (*The New Magdalen* and *The Fallen Leaves*)'. Collins, in turn, despised what he considered 'middle-class cant on fiction' (Pykett, 75). In this, he is not too different from Swinburne, whose sensational subject matter, we have seen, often earned him the title of 'sensational' poet, a reputation that he fought to counter.⁷⁶ But just as there is no doubt of the sensationalism in

⁷⁶ For more see Seagrott, 'Swinburne Separates the Men from the Girls: Sensationalism in *Poems and*

Swinburne's poetry, there is equally no doubt of it in his prose. *Lesbia Brandon* is filled with those 'thrills and chills, pangs and pains' (Seagroatt, 44-45) that typify sensational literature's visceral effect on its reader. For Swinburne, this fiction is compelling because it loosens conventional morals and restraints; it treats taboo subjects and situates them, not in the exotic or Gothic locales of older melodrama, but in the English countryside. The revealing of secrets in domestic life and the hidden, often wild motives and passions that lie beneath middle and upper-middle-class society are of great interest to him. Both *A Year's Letters* and *Lesbia Brandon* borrow in some ways from this sort of literature, and it is worth noting that, like Swinburne's hybrid novel, sensational fiction was considered a 'generic hybrid', which juxtaposed drama and prose, 'mixed romance with realism, the fantastic with the journalistic and, as Dickens observed of *The Moonstone*, the 'wild' with the 'domestic' (Pykett, 88).

Collins's greatest failure, according to Swinburne, was his later didacticism. In a now-famous witty couplet, he writes:

What brought good Wilkie's genius nigh perdition?
Some demon whispered—'Wilkie! Have a mission'.⁷⁷

Swinburne calls it Collins's 'benevolent and maleficent fancy' that 'he might do good service' and that, while it is 'as noble a work as man can undertake, to improve the conditions of life for other men', nonetheless 'if a man has not the requisite capacity', he is 'likelier to lose his own way than to lead other men back into theirs'.⁷⁸ Of Collins's moral efforts, he writes that *The New Magdalen* is 'feeble, false, and silly in its sentimental cleverness', but that *The Fallen Leaves* is 'too ludicrously loathsome'.

Swinburne compares Collins's ineptness as a moral teacher to 'M. Alexandre Dumas in his studies of the same or similar subjects', disparaging his 'extreme clumsiness and

Ballads, VLC 30 (2002), 41-59.

⁷⁷ WC, SaC, 220.

⁷⁸ WC, SaC, 215-16.

infelicity' in that regard and praising Dumas' 'tact' and 'exquisite skill' or Dickens's more successful didactic fiction. Collins fails by 'overstating his case' and hammering home his moral lessons so vigorously that both artistry and realism are lost.⁷⁹ Although Collins's attempt at didactic fiction falls short, Swinburne is careful to note that not all such work is 'illegitimate or inferior'. Despite his constant injunction against judging works of art on moral grounds, Swinburne does not dispute that the 'highest works' in didactic fiction 'fall short only of the highest ever achieved by man'. Such works, he writes, are the 'truest and noblest triumphs', but they can only be written by artists of 'matchless genius', such as Dickens and Shakespeare.⁸⁰ For an artist of Collins's calibre to write with a moral purpose dooms his endeavour from the start. For an author whose 'genius' (such as Emily Brontë or Dickens or Shakespeare) infuses his or her work with moral harmony, this high and 'noble purpose' can be served and only enhances the aesthetic effect of the work.

Finally, Swinburne's comments on Collins's novels reveal a profound interest in narrative technique; he recognises the way in which Collins's multiple narratives approach the same problem or mystery from many perspectives. Just as Fosco's character emerges through various, interior descriptions (journals, letters, and so forth), the mystery of the woman in white is taken up by several characters, each of which contributes to its resolution. Each extends the narrative thread, fleshing out the story with information and digressions. Collins employs this technique to even greater effect in *The Moonstone*, where the variety of reports, fragments, and historical documents is even more dazzling. Interesting, too, that detractors identified Collins with an older literary tradition –namely,

⁷⁹ *WC, SaC*, 217.

⁸⁰ *WC, SaC*, 220.

the novel in its earlier, cruder stages, when epistolary forms were widespread. Collins makes ample use of the genre, innovating upon it considerably.⁸¹

But Collins was less a writer of the old guard, and more a harbinger of the narrative techniques to come. The essay ends with the influence of French fiction and criticism, which for Swinburne is ever-present. It appears in pockets throughout his review of Collins, starting from the first paragraph, where he offers a cynical view of the role of criticism — ‘to create is nothing: to comment is much’⁸²— and quotes Hugo’s comment about his detractor Nisard: ‘*Un âne qui ressemble à monsieur Nisard*’.⁸³ Later, as reviewed in the discussion on Collins’s didacticism, he compares him unfavourably to Dumas fils. Finally, and most lucidly, he devotes his final discussion to Collins’s positive French reception, conjecturing that this has much to do with his technical skill: ‘it is but right and reasonable that his abilities should find such favour as they find in France; that so far an example of his conscientious and ingenious workmanship as the story called *I Say No* should have been honoured by the appearance of a masterly translation in the columns of the *Rappel*’.⁸⁴ He goes on to characterise Collins’s talents as particularly French, saying that his ‘best qualities are commoner, I regret to think, in French than in English fiction’.⁸⁵ He was an English writer, of course, but with his formidable narrative skills, he seems continental, a quality that detractors used to explain his heavily plotted, unsettling texts: ‘We doubt very much whether the sensation school, of whom Mr. Collins is by far the ablest representative, will ever become genuinely popular in England. It is a plant of foreign growth. It comes to us from France’, one critic wrote, offering that

⁸¹ Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, which also makes use of an array of documentary evidence, from ship’s records to journals, letters, and telegraph messages, borrows heavily from Collins’s novels.

⁸² *WC*, *SaC*, 209.

⁸³ ‘A donkey that resembles M. Nisard.’ From l. 23 of ‘*Les Grifonnages de l’ecolier*’, Hugo’s *L’Art d’être grand-père*. Translated in Hyder’s note 2 (242) and by Swinburne in ‘Wilkie Collins’ (209).

⁸⁴ From Hyder’s helpful note 28 ‘A journal (1869-1928) established in Paris by Victor Hugo’s sons, Auguste Vacquerie, and others’ (*WC*, *SaC*, 222).

⁸⁵ *WC*, *SaC*, 221.

sensationalism sounded better in French: ‘pointed phraseology, the epigrammatic terseness, and the wonderful lucidity of the French language, give their writers an advantage in sensational writing not enjoyed by those who employ the richer and more subtle vocabulary of the English tongue’.⁸⁶ We are reminded of Collins’s greatest portrait, Count Fosco, whose particular brand of diabolical Rabelaisian charm is Italianate, European. His end, too, comes as a result of an Italian vendetta. Collins was slightly out of step with his Victorian contemporaries, writing the sort of visceral, yet elaborately constructed prose that occasionally subordinated character and portraiture to style, skill, and design. He might even be remembered as a craftsman of plot and dramatist of the novel. Swinburne saw this quite clearly, and closes his retrospective of Collins somewhat forlornly, by regretting English taste and proposing that ‘such lucidity, such order, such care in the adjustment of parts and the arrangement of the whole, would hardly seem so exceptional to a French reader...’.⁸⁷ So, for Swinburne, Collins earns himself a place in the continental canon, bringing ‘lucidity’, ‘order’, ‘care’, and theatrical gifts to the crafting of the dramatic novel.

⁸⁶ *Reader*, unsigned review (3 January 1863, 14-15). Rpt. in ed. Page, p. 131.

⁸⁷ *WC*, *SaC*, 221.

3. Art's Cross-Currents: Baudelaire, Hugo, and Swinburne's Criticism

Hast thou found any likeness for thy vision?
 O gardener of strange flowers, what bud, what bloom,
 Hast thou found sown, what gathered in the gloom?
 What of despair, of rapture, of derision,
 What of life is there, what of ill or good?
 - A.C. Swinburne, 'Ave Atque Vale'¹

Thou sawest the tides of things
 Close over heads of kings,
 And thine hand felt the thunder, and to thee
 Laurels and lightnings were
 As sunbeams and soft air
 Mix'd each in other, or as mist with sea
 Mix'd, or as memory with desire,
 Or the lute's pulses with the louder lyre.
 - A.C. Swinburne, 'To Victor Hugo'²

Swinburne's Frenchness has become axiomatic but, as Cecil Lang argued almost half a century ago, '... everyone says so. But no one has said how or where or precisely in what way'.³ Since then, Swinburne's debt to French poetry, Baudelaire especially, has received considerable critical attention. Following Arthur Symons's early pronouncement that 'only one English writer has ever done [Baudelaire] justice',⁴ many including Thaïs Morgan, Richard Sieburth, and Patricia Clements have explored this cross-Channel literary relationship.⁵ That Baudelaire was a rich creative source for Swinburne's early poetry is undeniable. The ardent Francophile established himself as a conduit for French Romanticism and Symbolism in England, and brought about, in part,

¹ Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'Ave Atque Vale' (In Memory of Charles Baudelaire), in *The Poems of Algernon Charles Swinburne* (6 vols) (London: Chatto & Windus, 1904), 3, pp. 50-57 (p. 52, ll. 67-71).

² Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'To Victor Hugo', in *The Poems of Algernon Charles Swinburne* (6 vols), (London: Chatto & Windus, 1904), I, pp. 144-150 (p. 145, ll. 25-32).

³ Cecil Y. Lang, 'Preface', in *New Writings By Swinburne*, ed. by Cecil Y. Lang (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1964), pp. ix-xv. Further references to this and most other citations are given in the text.

⁴ Arthur Symons, 'Charles Baudelaire', *The Saturday Review* (26 January 1907), quoted in *Strangeness and Beauty: An Anthology of Aesthetic Criticism*, ed. by Eric Warner & Graham Hough (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 220.

⁵ See examples in Thaïs E. Morgan, 'Reimagining Masculinity in Victorian Criticism: Swinburne and Pater', *Victorian Studies* 36:3, *Victorian Sexualities* (Spring, 1993), pp. 315-32; Richard Sieburth, 'Poetry and Obscenity: Baudelaire and Swinburne', *Comparative Literature* 36:4 (Autumn, 1984), pp. 343-353; and Patricia Clements, *Baudelaire and the English Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

‘an exceptional moment in what Eliot called “cross-breeding” in poetry, the moment at which English poetry began to respond to the power of *Les Fleurs du mal*’.⁶ When it comes to Swinburne’s criticism of French literature, however, imprecision persists – very possibly because his ‘speculative and critical’ oeuvre is still ‘largely inviolate’.⁷ We have assumed that the French strain is confined to his poetic work, neglecting its contribution to his aesthetics, its effect on his own prose, and its vital importance as a cipher by which to interpret the interlocking genres of Swinburnian production.⁸ Like Lang, in ‘protest against so much vagueness’ (*New Writings*, xiii), I propose a keener dissection of this, less familiar, Swinburne.

Edmund Wilson, an early proponent of Swinburne’s prose, suggested that he was responsible for the ‘Frenchifying’ of Victorian letters. This had roots in his family background, where there was substantial French lineage, ‘so exceptional in Victorian England’.⁹ As well versed in French as in English literature, he enthusiastically championed the novelists Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert, and helped to introduce major figures such as Baudelaire and Hugo to England. In later chapters, I will argue that his own fiction owes most to Balzac, Théophile Gautier, and Choderlos de Laclos, but in his criticism he cast a wider net, ‘Frenchifying’ the Victorian scene or, at the very least, making it *au fait* with the French one.

On the theme of ‘cross-breeding’, Swinburne also acquired prominence in France, maintaining correspondences with Auguste Vacquerie, Leconte de Lisle, and Stéphane

⁶ T.S. Eliot, ‘Contemporanea’, *Egoist* 5. 4 (1918), 84-85. See Patricia Clements, “‘Strange Flowers’: Some Notes on the Baudelaire of Swinburne and Pater”, *The Modern Language Review* 76 (1981), 20-30 (p. 20).

⁷ Jerome McGann, ‘Introduction’ in *Major Poems and Selected Prose*, ed. by Jerome McGann and Charles L. Sligh (New Haven: Yale UP, 2004), pp. xv-xxviii.

⁸ By this, I am of course referring to the many modes and genres to which Swinburne turned his hand. Even within verse he experimented with forms as varied as the sestina and the border ballad. His prose fiction spanned a wide range – farcical, burlesque, Boccaccian romance, epistolary fiction, and hybrid verse and prose. As a critic, he worked prolifically, across genres. As a dramatist, his work ranged from imitations of Greek tragedy to Romantic closet drama.

⁹ Edmund Wilson, ‘Introduction’ (first publ. as ‘Swinburne of Capheaton and Eton’), in *The Novels of A.C. Swinburne* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978), pp. 3-37.

Mallarmé, and, as a ‘pivotal link between Romanticism and their lyrical Modernism’, influencing Rimbaud and Verlaine. For ‘what Poe was to Baudelaire and his generation, Swinburne was to Mallarmé and his tight circle of poets and critics’.¹⁰ Indeed, in 1875, Mallarmé invited Swinburne to contribute to his avant-garde periodical *La République des lettres*, a new review intended to foster connections between British and French artists.¹¹ With Baudelaire and Mallarmé, Swinburne shared an enthusiasm for Poe, a stirring that Wilde too describes in *The English Renaissance of Art*, declaring ‘The Raven’ a supreme ‘analysis of the workings of [Poe’s] own imagination’.¹² Poe is their transatlantic common ancestor, and the late Romanticism of Swinburne and the Symbolism of Baudelaire and Mallarmé share his obsessive introspection, his singling out of the hallucinogenic artistic imagination.

For Wilde, as for many critics who followed him, the ‘French strain’ in Swinburne’s Aestheticism took firmest root in his poetry and aesthetic credo. *Poems and Ballads, First Series* (1866) is often seen as a close cousin of *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857), a volume that Swinburne most likely first read during his years of association with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. ‘Whistler was a friend of Baudelaire and may have introduced Swinburne to his works’,¹³ while D.G. Rossetti likely presented to him the writings and theories of Théophile Gautier, chief apologist of *l’art pour l’art* in France. Gautier’s *Mademoiselle du Maupin*, and especially that novel’s Preface, would become crucial in Swinburne’s formulation of his own aesthetic theory. Meanwhile, Baudelaire’s *Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe* and *L’Art romantique* provided further influences. Among his

¹⁰ Charles A. Riley, *Aristocracy and the Modern Imagination* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2001), p. 147.

¹¹ Rosemary Lloyd, *Mallarmé: The Poet and His Circle* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), pp. 106-107.

¹² Oscar Wilde, ‘The English Renaissance of Art’, in *Strangeness and Beauty: An Anthology of Aesthetic Criticism*, ed. by Eric Warner & Graham Hough, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 129.

¹³ Thomas E. Connolly, *Swinburne’s Theory of Poetry: Innovations, Strategies, and Issues*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1965), p. 8.

Pre-Raphaelite friends, Swinburne was ‘encouraged in his expression’ of his theory of ‘art for art’s sake’ (Connolly, 8), recommended further reading material, and altogether applauded in his mission to broaden British aesthetics. We know that Swinburne was a prolific and omnivorous reader who ‘composed as easily in French as in English, and nearly as easily in Greek, Latin, and Italian’ (McGann, ‘Introduction’, xv) and, as such, was uniquely placed to be an important (perhaps *the* most important) critical voice of his day. In order to understand his ‘clearly defined intellectual framework’ (McGann, ‘Introduction’, xv), we ought to consider his writing on continental writers and the ways in which it exposes this philosophic scaffolding. I intend to focus on Charles Baudelaire and Victor Hugo — the first because he, too, was a poet and critic, and an example for Swinburne’s prose; the second as a novelist whom Swinburne the critic promoted, but Swinburne the novelist did not really imitate.¹⁴

Baudelaire has ‘more delicate power of verse than almost any man living, after Victor Hugo, Browning, and (in his lyrics) Tennyson’, and ‘The sound of his metres suggests colour and perfume’,¹⁵ professes Swinburne in ‘Charles Baudelaire: *Les Fleurs du Mal*’, published in the *Spectator* for 6th September 1862. As mentioned, the youthful Swinburne’s relationship to Baudelaire’s poetry is well canvassed terrain, but what makes ‘Charles Baudelaire’ most relevant to this study is its commentary on the other writer’s critical work and Swinburne’s enunciation — through praise of Baudelaire — of an artistic manifesto:

French poetry of the present date, taken at its highest, is not less effectually hampered by tradition and the taste of the greater number of readers than our own is. A French poet is expected to believe in philanthropy, and break off on occasion in the middle of his proper work to lend a shove forward to some theory of progress. The critical

¹⁴ Subsequent chapters will deal with French novelists—Laclos, Balzac, and Gautier – whom Swinburne both admired in his criticism and emulated in his own fiction.

¹⁵ Algernon Charles Swinburne, ‘Charles Baudelaire: *Les Fleurs du Mal*’ (*Spectator*, 6 September 1862, pp.998-1000), (*Bonchurch* vol. 13, 417-427). Rpt. in *Swinburne As Critic*, ed. by C.K. Hyder, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), pp. 27-36. Further references given in footnotes as ‘Charles Baudelaire’, *SaC*, page number.

students there, as well as here, judging by the books they praise and the advice they proffer, seem to have pretty well forgotten that a poet's business is presumably to write good verses, and by no means to redeem the age and remould society. No other form of art is so pestered with this impotent appetite for meddling in quite extraneous matters; but the mass of readers seem actually to think that a poem is the better for containing a moral lesson or assisting in a tangible and material good work ('Charles Baudelaire', *SaC*, p. 28).

Quite simply, missions have no place in verse, and it requires 'courage and sense', 'the conviction that the art of poetry has absolutely nothing to do with didactic matter at all', to produce the 'perfect and careful poetry' of Baudelaire.¹⁶ While belittling didacticism, however, much of the essay suggests insight, penetration, introspection and *meaning* as the proper domains of poetry (and of the poet himself). 'Even of the loathsome bodily putrescence and decay', he writes, Baudelaire 'can make some noble use; pluck out its meaning and secret, even its beauty, in a certain way, from actual carrion'.¹⁷ This beauty, he avers, is not that seen with the 'clear and simple view of writers content to believe in the beauty of material subjects', but rather 'there is not one poem of the *Fleurs du mal* which has not a distinct and vivid background of morality to it. Only this moral side of the book is not thrust forward in the foolish and repulsive manner of a half-taught artist'. Baudelaire is 'like a mediæval preacher, when he has drawn the heathen love, he puts sin on its right hand and death on its left'.¹⁸ Morality subtends the work so finely, so compellingly, that it cannot be called didactic. Yet he argues that many are mistaken in believing Baudelaire 'an old-world poet', indulging in 'a paganism on the spiritual side'. In reality it is he, demoniac youth and disciple of the old world, versifier of Hertha and Proserpine, Hermaphroditus and Itylus, who sees with a pagan eye — a vision that applies, not just to his verse, but to all his *belles-lettres*.

¹⁶ Charles Baudelaire', *SaC*, 28.

¹⁷ Charles Baudelaire', *SaC*, 30.

¹⁸ Charles Baudelaire', *SaC*, 32.

A 1914 review of G. Turquet-Milnes's *The Influence of Baudelaire in France and England* pronounces that Swinburne, the 'so-called Baudelairean', 'attempt[s] to make vice or sin beautiful or attractive', while Baudelaire himself 'sought no redemption from virtue, nor to him were the roses and raptures of vice other than charnel blossoms of Hell and the bark of Hell's hounds. He took the mingled metal of his soul, gold and bronze and dross, and found relief for his pain in beating it and working it into gorgeous filigree and arabesque, with here and there a terrific panel for the vestibules of Hell'. Further, Wilde is 'certainly nearer Baudelaire, at least in his later work where the soul of the poet cries from the depths of shame'.¹⁹ For these critics, Wilde's recantation, for example his *De Profundis* (1905), washes him clean of the 'white-eyed and poisonous-finned, shark-toothed and serpentine-curved'²⁰ days of Decadence, making him — along with Baudelaire — a legitimate Modernist forebear. While Baudelaire crafts 'gorgeous filigree' in pain and hell, Swinburne appears as a naughty schoolboy, playing with the 'roses and raptures of vice' for the fun of badness. Writing on the origins of literary Modernism, Laity explains that movement's indictment of Swinburne as part of its insistent divorce from British aestheticism.²¹ Modernists graded him by particular standards of masculinity. He failed, too, their standards of maturity, playing gleeful youth opposite Baudelaire's weary urbanite. They correctly identified the considerable differences between Swinburne and Baudelaire, but their judgement does the former a disservice. For, as Jerome McGann argues, Swinburne's predilection for controversial subject matter did not stem from simple inversion, the schoolboyish desire for

¹⁹ K.M. Linton, and T.B. Rudmose-Brown, 'Review of *The Influence of Baudelaire in France and England* by G. Turquet-Milnes', *The Modern Language Review* 9 (1914), 122-27 (p.126-27).

²⁰ Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'Hymn to Proserpine', in *The Poems of Algernon Charles Swinburne* (6 vols), (London: Chatto & Windus, 1904), 1, pp. 67-73 (p. 70, ll. 56-57).

²¹ Cassandra Laity, *H. D. and the Victorian Fin de Siècle: Gender, Modernism, Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

‘redemption from virtue’,²² but rather to make ‘himself and his work a sign of contention’ (McGann, ‘Introduction’, xv), touchstones in a greater ideological battle.

Though he praises Baudelaire’s lack of didacticism, Swinburne’s defence leans rather heavily on the French poet’s morality. He distinguishes Baudelaire the ‘mediaeval preacher’ from the ‘old-world poet’, the pagan lover of beauty. Given all we know of Swinburne’s sensibilities and intellectual framework, this is a telling distinction – while Baudelaire is influential, he is quite as important as a contrast. If it seems that the meaning that Swinburne seeks in poetry is rather different from that with which he credits Baudelaire, the French poet evidently agreed, suggesting ‘that Swinburne had overstated the moral grounds for his defence’.²³ But while Swinburne is no preacher to weigh sin and beauty and death, he is — to co-opt his own term — a sort of purveyor of ‘intellectual drugs’. His mind-altering writing produces an effect simultaneously somatic and cerebral — a sensual amplification that compels introspection. For him, sin and beauty and death cannot be easily weighed, and it would be hard to find ‘moralities in plenty’²⁴ (his description of *Les Fleurs du Mal*) in any of Swinburne’s works. This early analysis of Baudelaire is vital, for though *Les Fleurs du Mal* provides an important structure for Swinburne’s verse and a kernel for his nascent thoughts, it also shows us that Swinburne was not merely a disciple of the French Symbolist, and that his aesthetics of writing was already a rather complex mosaic of ancient and modern philosophies.

Baudelaire’s appeal for Swinburne is that of a master craftsman; his writing is ‘worth study for its vigorous beauty and the careful facility of its expression’. Swinburne rhapsodises that the ‘main charm of [*Les Fleurs du mal*] is, upon the whole, that nothing

²² ‘Redeem us from virtue’, in Algernon Charles Swinburne, ‘Dolores’, *The Poems of Algernon Charles Swinburne* (6 vols), (London: Chatto & Windus, 1904), 1, pp. 154-168 (p. 163, l. 279).

²³ Clyde.K. Hyder in a brief opening comment on ‘Charles Baudelaire’, in *Swinburne as Critic*, ed. by C.K. Hyder (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 27.

²⁴ Charles Baudelaire’, *SaC*, 32.

is wrongly given, nothing capable of being re-written or improved on its own ground'.²⁵ Baudelaire's 'natural' gift, 'always to use the right word and the right rhyme' becomes the younger poet's ambition.²⁶ Ever a willing apprentice, Swinburne served in the schools of Sophocles and Shakespeare, Blake and Shelley, before harnessing himself to Baudelaire, whom he admired for his 'faultless and studious simplicity'.²⁷ He was not Baudelaire's shade, but wrote in sympathy with him. It seems important to distinguish such emulation, the *métier* of style and 'sad and strange things', from Swinburne's aesthetic and ideological worldview, which diverges quite widely from Baudelaire's.²⁸

While Swinburne's writing is certainly melancholic, reminding us 'that a full awareness of even the simplest human experience is unachievable' (McGann, 'Introduction', xxv), it is quite different from the work of a man whom James Huneker called 'the evil archangel of poetry'.²⁹ Where Baudelaire 'saw everywhere the hidden skeleton' (Huneker, xxiv), Swinburne saw a world upended because the 'individual imaginative life' had been compromised (McGann, 'Introduction', xxii). Bleak, it is true, but not irredeemable. In Isobel Armstrong's view, he 'sought to dissolve [the] tyranny' of power and the law.³⁰ Thus, he adopts the republicanism of Byron, the 'enlightened action' of Blake (McGann, 'Introduction', xxi), and, embracing the sort of Shelleyan radicalism that would later lay him open to ridicule, conceived of his writing as a transformative way to secure liberty — from institutional Christianity, parochial morality, and the stifling of artistic self-reflection.

Later in life, Swinburne famously announced that 'he had very little in common with Baudelaire', though he retained 'all [his] early admiration for his genius at its best',

²⁵ Charles Baudelaire', *SaC*, 30.

²⁶ Charles Baudelaire', *SaC*, 29.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Charles Baudelaire', *SaC*, 28.

²⁹ James Huneker, 'Preface', in *The Poems and Prose Poems of Charles Baudelaire* (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), pp. ix – liii, (p. xxvi).

³⁰ Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 392.

and it is known that ‘Baudelaire occupied Swinburne less and less after 1870’.³¹ As Graham Hough points out in *The Last Romantics*, misunderstandings of Baudelaire are rife, as when ‘his work was regarded as an authority for the discussion of “forbidden” subjects’³² while really an ‘expression of metaphysical disgust, the final horror of a man who believes in original sin, but not in the existence of God’ (Hough, 193). The antichristian sentiment of Swinburne is quite another matter, a *non serviam*—born of an ancient tradition of humanism and proclaimed in such works as ‘Laus Veneris’ and ‘Hymn to Proserpine’ or in characters like Lesbia Brandon and Lady Midhurst³³—‘which even yet has a majesty about it and continued importance’ (McGann, ‘Introduction’, xix). Instead of Baudelaire’s doctrine of nothingness and ‘final horror’, Swinburne embraces ‘the perfectability of man’, his reclamation through imagination. Catherine Maxwell has called this his ‘poetic law...the law of the mother – of Sappho and the muses’ against ‘patriarchal law’ and the ‘law of public morality’.³⁴ In Welby’s account, ‘The ebullience, volubility, and restlessness of Swinburne are indeed far removed from the compression, economy, and immobility of Baudelaire, in whose world almost everything is petrified; and of genuine philosophical pessimism ... there is hardly a trace in Swinburne’ (Welby, 248). The ‘poetic law’ that Swinburne drafts in ‘Charles Baudelaire’ bears five hallmarks — themes of note in Swinburnian aesthetics. He emphasises the importance of style and workmanship, the dangers of didacticism, the capacity of verbal synaesthesia to express light, colour, perfume, and sound, and the pre-eminence of the imagination. Finally, he underscores the critic’s role in elucidating such merits without hammering them into

³¹ T. Earle Welby, *A Study of Swinburne* (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2005 (first pub. 1926)), p. 248.

³² Graham Hough, *The Last Romantics* (Harrison Press, 2007 (first pub. 1949)), p. 209.

³³ Both figures from Swinburne’s novels: the first the eponymous character from *Lesbia Brandon*, the second the grand schemer of *A Year’s Letters*.

³⁴ Catherine Maxwell, *The Female Sublime From Milton to Swinburne: Bearing Blindness* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 191.

oblivion; that, eventually, literature must be left to ‘make its way’ and ‘to know when or how concerns us as little as it probably concerns the author’.³⁵

The difficulty of interpreting Swinburne’s essays is often that he says too much, for he writes under poetic laws, and it is taxing to read prose where each word carries the resonance and substance of poetry. His criticism, like his verse, requires much of the reader. Take, for example, this echoing passage on *Les Fleurs du mal*: ‘the glorious style and decorative language clothing this poetry of strange disease and sin; the hideous violence wrought by a shameless and senseless love might stand as an emblem of that analysis of things monstrous and sorrowful’³⁶ or, ‘it seems as if all failure and sorrow on earth, and all the castout things of the world – ruined bodies and souls diseased – made their appeal, in default of help, to Him in whom all sorrow and all failure were incarnate’.³⁷ His prose absorbs the rhythm and repetition of verse, forming a critical style characterized by suggestion. The matter is only a beginning: by the close of Swinburne’s essay, we know much about *Les Fleurs du Mal* but even more about his opinions on the nature of art, on the vital importance of style, and on the topics of sorrow, failure, shame, love, the passing of time, and death. The critical piece itself becomes art – a review of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, yes, but also a meditation on and example of craft. The sibilance of ‘sad light and strange colour’, ‘strange disease and sin’, ‘shameless and senseless love’ whispers amidst reverberating ‘failure and sorrow’, evoking Baudelaire’s ‘numbing horror of reviled desire’ in a peculiarly Swinburnian manner (Laity, 437). Such suggestive aesthetic criticism refracts matter in a prismatic way that altered what the genre could be and thus made critics like ‘Pater and Wilde possible’ (McGann, ‘Introduction’, xv).

³⁵ ‘Charles Baudelaire’, *SaC*, 35.

³⁶ ‘Charles Baudelaire’, *SaC*, 33.

³⁷ ‘Charles Baudelaire’, *SaC*, 34.

Swinburne mentions that Baudelaire's 'first publications were his essays on the contemporary art of France, written now many years since. In these early writings there is already such admirable judgment, vigour of thought and style, and appreciative devotion to the subject, that the worth of his own future work in art might have been foretold even then'.³⁸ He places Baudelaire and himself in a long line of writer-critics, whose good taste and judgement of others' works presaged fineness in their own. Dating back to the ancient and classical, renewed in the Renaissance, and given fresh relevance in the nineteenth century, the tradition of the artist-critic is crucial for Swinburne, for such scholars bring forth their era's *Zeitgeist*. Reminding us of criticism's key place in literature, Swinburne becomes a strong voice for the role of the critic in England, advocating a more open-minded and sophisticated appreciation of artists who display versatility, ability, and the gift of transcending genre.

Of these artists, the 'Master and father-figure' was always Victor Hugo.³⁹ Much has been said about Swinburne's adulation of the writer who was so much 'the object of [his] lifelong devotion' (Hyder, 153) that he identified himself as Hugo's disciple, an engagement which 'was deeply personal, devotional, and profound'.⁴⁰ The paean 'To Victor Hugo' in *Poems and Ballads, First Series* finds Swinburne naming him 'first of men and friend' and a 'poet highest of heart', while other writings included reviews of *Les Misérables* (1862) in the *Spectator* of 1862, an 1869 review in the *Fortnightly Review* of *L'Homme Qui rit* (1869), an essay on *L'année terrible* (1872) in the *Fortnightly* for September 1872, and an 1886 full-length *Study of Victor Hugo*.⁴¹ There was also *La Fille*

³⁸ Charles Baudelaire', *SaC*, 28.

³⁹ Charlotte Ribeyrol, 'A Channel Passage: Swinburne and France', in *A.C. Swinburne and the Singing Word*, ed. by Yisrael Levin (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2010), pp. 107-27 (pp. 109-10).

⁴⁰ John A. Walsh, "'Quivering Web of Living Thought": Conceptual Networks in Swinburne's *Songs of the Springtides*', in *A.C. Swinburne and the Singing Word*, ed. by Yisrael Levin, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2010), pp. 29-55, (p. 38).

⁴¹ The volume edited by Edmund Gosse and published in 1914 as *A Study of Victor Hugo's "Les Misérables"* by Algernon Charles Swinburne (Bonchurch, vol. 19), included two *Spectator* articles from

du Policeman (1861),⁴² the parodic early novel wherein, Lang remarks, ‘Hugo cannot have been far from his mind, or his heart’, one source being ‘the dramas of Hugo, principally, his *Cromwell* (1827), *Marie Tudor* (1833), and *Ruy Blas* (1838)’ (*New Writings*, 236). In every literary form, then, with the stark exception of his serious novels, Swinburne paid homage to Hugo. He might have disavowed Baudelaire later in life, but in his verse, criticism, and parody (itself a form of criticism), the old Master is a constant presence. When Swinburne wrote novels in earnest, however, Hugo’s influence is noticeably absent. What then is the meaning of this admiration, but not imitation? Why, when making his own contribution to the European novel, did he turn to other French novelists⁴³ and neglect the ‘allegoric myth’⁴⁴ of Hugo?

To better understand this seeming neglect, it is important to understand Hugo’s position in the larger world of letters. Unlike some of Swinburne’s other heroes, the genius of Hugo was widely appreciated, and the young British poet was certainly not alone in his devotion. As the comparatist Victor Brombert describes:

During his lifetime, Victor Hugo’s reputation as a poet and novelist was almost as enormous as his ambition. Though he had detractors, unrestrained praise from the most diverse quarters generally greeted his productions. When *Notre-Dame de Paris* appeared in 1831, Lamartine did not hesitate to refer to its author as the Shakespeare of the novel ... Even masters of irony ceased being ironic when writing about him. Flaubert proclaimed that Hugo, more than anyone, had made his heart throb, that he simply adored the “immense view” – the grand old man. Compared to him, Flaubert felt, all other contemporary writers, himself included, looked pale: “Hugo ... enfoncera tout le monde.” Likewise, Baudelaire asserted in a dithyrambic essay that modern French poetry would be poor indeed had this rare and providential poet not appeared... And it is worth recalling that Rimbaud, who read Hugo’s fiction the way one reads and relishes poetry (*‘Les Misérables sont un vrai poème’*) granted him privileged status in his celebrated literary credo known as ‘La Lettre du voyant’.⁴⁵

1862 which were not actually by Swinburne, along with some which were (see R. H. Tener, ‘Swinburne as Reviewer’, in *TLS*, 25 December 1959).

⁴² Written in 1860 and 1861, a period, Lang observes, ‘when we know very little about the author’ (*New Writings*, 231).

⁴³ Laclos, Balzac, and Gautier, as I will argue in later chapters.

⁴⁴ Margot Louis, *Swinburne and His Gods* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1990), p. 192.

⁴⁵ Victor Brombert, *Victor Hugo and the Visionary Novel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 2-3.

Beloved of his countrymen, from Flaubert to Baudelaire, Hugo was also appreciated in an England awakening to the scope of urban mythopoesis. Like his counterpart Dickens, Hugo's representations of the city were woven into a fabric of industrialism. Though gritty with modernity, they 'tend toward the elaboration of a new epic', one 'closer to romance and myth than to the realist tradition'. Imagining archetypal figures in urban landscapes, Hugo was the agent of a new, cosmopolitan, myth making, a forerunner of the modern novel 'which no longer sings the heroic exploit but the moral adventure of man' (Brombert, 7), and his writing played a role in the 'cross-Channel exchange of ideas facilitated by the post-Napoleonic peace'.⁴⁶ He bore a universality perhaps lacking in the great Victorian novelists, who to some critics, 'appear peculiarly limited in their range of interests and unable to give their fictional worlds' the collective meaning, which 'we discover in the works of their French and Russian contemporaries'. Characters such as 'Amy Dorrit, Adam Bede, Gabriel Oak ... might have been 'too firmly embedded in their respective worlds' to 'transcend the limitations of their nationality and social class to become embodiments of the most profound values of humanity'.⁴⁷ This, of course, is just one view, but it is possible that Swinburne, with his love of sweeping epics, iconic figures, emblems, great ideological matters, the mythic and the tragic, found something in Hugo's 'collective symbols' that was deficient in Victorian letters — in short, grandeur. We will see that he believed Brontë approached such metaphysical scope and power in *Wuthering Heights*, which he called a poem 'in the fullest sense of the word' just as the novels of Hugo have been called 'the *roman poème*' (Brombert, 7).

Swinburne acknowledges Hugo's widespread acclaim in his Preface to *A Study of Victor Hugo*, explaining that there is no lack of praise for his novels or dramas, the 'great

⁴⁶ Britta Martens, 'Victorians' View of France', *Literature Compass* 3 (2006), 562-571 (p. 567).

⁴⁷ Jan Jedrzejewski, 'Re-orienting Victorian Studies: A European Perspective', *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies* 15 (2010), 15-27 (pp. 24-25).

romances' that 'need little more introduction to foreign readers than to French', but that his 'lyric or elegiac or epic or satiric' poetry requires further explication.⁴⁸ His piece on *L'année terrible* is such a study, but more compellingly an argument for the many alliances of art⁴⁹ – whether with antiquity, 'aimless beauty', and 'lyric genius' or the 'politics of a nation or any age', 'civic virtue', and 'moral or religious passion'.⁵⁰ Avowing a poetry of the eternal, he rescues Hugo's writing from accusations against its 'dusty ... old-world themes' (149) by declaring that time and theme are the playthings of art. Underpinning this is the notion that art knows 'but one tense', choosing matter from the continuum of history and transforming it via the catalyst of craft. From a rather different tactical base, Bakhtin describes the fatality of encapsulating a work of art 'in the single epoch of its creation, in its own contemporaneity', for it extends roots deep into the loamy past, sap rising, as it were, into the branching future, 'prepared for by centuries, and in the epoch of [its] creation it is merely a matter of picking the fruit that is ripe after a lengthy and complex process of maturation'. Penetrating a work's 'semantic depths' necessitates the collapse of false temporal barriers, for great works 'break through the boundaries of their own time, they live in centuries, that is, in great time and frequently (with great works, always) their lives there are more intense and fuller than are their lives within their own time ... But the work cannot live in future centuries without having somehow absorbed past centuries as well'.⁵¹ Now, Swinburne is talking of timeless subjects in art, while Bakhtin underscores the timelessness and universal timeliness of great art itself, its contemporary life manifesting 'as a kind of paradox' accreted from the

⁴⁸ Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'Preface', in *A Study of Victor Hugo* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1886), pp. v-vi (pp. v-vi). *Bonchurch* vol. 13.

⁴⁹ Hyder writes that the portion from the essay on *L'année terrible* excerpted as 'On Choice of Subjects' in *Swinburne As Critic* can be seen as 'defining Swinburne's attitude towards *l'art pour l'art*'.

⁵⁰ Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'On Choice of Subjects', excerpted from his Review on *L'année terrible* in the *Fortnightly Review*, September 1872 (*Bonchurch* vol. 13, 220-259). Rpt. in *Swinburne As Critic*, ed. by C.K. Hyder (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), pp. 146-52.

⁵¹ Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, 'Response to a Question from the Novi Mir Editorial Staff', in *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*, ed. by Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), pp. 1-9, (p. 4).

past, gathering meaning into the future, never belonging solely and completely to its day.⁵²

The death of the present and all that belongs exclusively to it gives substance to the Bakhtinian theory of *great time*, an alternate existence that great works enter by gaining significance. The posthumous life of art thus becomes more vital than that delimited by its immediate epoch, but only if we grant it importance outside of the same. Glacial time — slow moving, inexorable, massed, looming from the past, carving and uncovering the future — is a formative force in Bakhtinian aesthetics. And so it is in Swinburne's, for his assertion that 'Art knows nothing of time' belies an acute and perpetual awareness of temporality. The words 'past and present' appear together throughout the *L'année terrible* essay, evoking a spectral timeline where 'classic or feudal' and the 'spirit and secret' of the existing cohabit. We are told that time does not matter to art, yet are repeatedly provided with examples signposting a particular age: Athens, Jerusalem, Camelot, and Troy. Time generates the very matter of great work, yet is itself ephemeral, past and present only accessible through the eternal medium of art. We encounter this time paradox often in Swinburne, and will return to it frequently, because his aesthetics are much concerned with the relationship between time and art.

Defending Hugo's transformative use of the historical, he argues that,

It is true, as the one side urges, that [Art] fears not to face the actual aspect of the hour, to handle if it please her the immediate matters of the day; it is true, as the other side insists, that she is free to go back when she will to the very beginning of tradition and fetch her subject from the furthest of ancient days; she cannot be vulgarized by the touch of the present or deadened by the contact of the past.

If a work set in the past 'be lifeless and worthless, it is not because the subject or the form was ancient, but because the poet was inadequate to his task ... no form is obsolete, no

⁵² I should note that Bakhtin does not neglect the importance of the present, allowing that it holds 'decisive significance', and that scholarly work must proceed from it, but that danger lies in closing work off in its epoch, thereby cauterizing its growth and accretion of meaning, its potential for 'fullness' (5).

subject out of date, if the right man be there to rehandle it' ('On Choice of Subjects', *SaC*, 149-50). What follows is an argument for the universality of certain works created from the perpetual stuff of time, their themes — repeatable and 'eternally the same' — not, pace Nietzsche, terrifying and paralyzing, but liberating 'as present and as true, as palpable and as precious' (151). Certain great art draws near to us, 'palpable' and alive, for in accord with Bakhtin's claim that the lives of great works are fuller and more intense in great time than 'are their lives within their own time', Swinburne tells us that 'Achilles and Ulysses are even now more actual by far than Wellington and Talleyrand; not merely more noble and interesting as types and figures, but more positive and real' (150). He talks of reclothing and re-fleshing the 'heroic bones', vivifying their timeless structures and forms, in the same way that Bakhtin describes digging for 'semantic treasures' in Shakespeare, gems 'hidden in the language' and accruing meaning 'created and collected through the centuries and even millennia'. We find in Swinburne's defence of Hugo a preoccupation with enduring types and forms that, despite his statement that 'all times and all places' are one to art, sets a clear premium on the greatness of *certain* times and places.

According to Bakhtin, time itself transforms epoch and context, banking cultural memory and aesthetic meaning, whereas Swinburne believes that art transubstantiates material limited by era, period, manners, and mores into the stuff of the eternal. The appeal of past life is never extinct, for 'art is very life itself, and knows nothing of death'; it operates under its own laws, the poetic law that we have already recognised. While he maintains that art transcends the contemporary or historically circumscribed, his aesthetics nonetheless reveal an enduring interest in time: the pleasures of the bygone and fascination with prior eras, the epic and grand scope of the antique; but also a stinging awareness that time is the debt all men pay, and an acceptance of the devastation and

suffering wrought by its passage.⁵³ Beauty, born of this accumulation of meaning and epochal accretion, forms Swinburne's art of the eternal, created from, yet running ahead and escaping, glacial time. Throughout this study, temporality will assume preeminent importance in Swinburnian aesthetics of the novel (as it does in his verse).

In a most literal sense, chronology is important even in following the evolution of Swinburne's writing on the Master. The essay on *L'année terrible* and the *Study of Victor Hugo* represent later thinking — thinking which, I would suggest, had advanced in aesthetic theory but had remained quite stationary on the idolatry of Hugo. This contrapuntal movement, it has been suggested, began with Swinburne's 1862 review on *Les Misérables* in the *Spectator*. Gosse:

The considerable monograph⁵⁴ devoted to *Les Misérables* is the earliest example of Swinburne's mature prose which we possess ... He was careful to make not the slightest reference to it in later years, doubtless because the tone of it seemed cool and even carping to him when once he had resigned himself to the attitude of regarding Victor Hugo as a deity, immune from censure.⁵⁵

An example of the 'carping' of which Gosse speaks: 'some sense of personal sentiment and political meaning will slip in at every loophole. All this no doubt improves the book in one sense; gives it heat, directness, sharp clear life, and actual breath; but it is always on the edge of interference with the proper business of so great a book'.⁵⁶ Here the tension between Swinburne's youthful worship of Hugo and his growing belief in art for art's sake is evident. Connolly identifies the year of the *Les Misérables* review as pivotal, for Swinburne was simultaneously reading and reviewing Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*, the appeal of Aestheticism and the political and sentimental values of Hugo

⁵³ One has only to glance at 'The Triumph of Time' for a summative example of Swinburne's preoccupation with its transience. But this awareness pervades his novels quite as much as his poetry. The tragedy of his characters very often has to do with the sorrows and movement of time, love lost and debts paid, the fleetingness of relationship, the decay of youth and beauty, the trials and triumphs of age, and the terrible isolation of true solitude.

⁵⁴ Gosse's bibliographic errors aside, of course.

⁵⁵ Edmund Gosse, *The Life of Algernon Charles Swinburne* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1917), p. 88 (*Bonchurch* vol. 19, 84).

⁵⁶ Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'Review of *Les Misérables*', in *The Spectator*, June 7, 1862 (*Bonchurch* vol. 13, 151-179).

‘powerful forces working against each other’. He ‘faced the choice of repudiating Hugo on the basis of his newly adopted theory of art or reconciling that theory with the practice of his idol’.⁵⁷ In fact, he did neither, elevating Hugo and his values to the sacrosanct position at which Gosse scoffs, while pursuing the theory and practice of aestheticism in his own work.⁵⁸ This is not to imply, however, that Hugo remained simply a sentimental attachment for Swinburne. His grandeur and scope, emotional prowess, and ability to stir deep historical and political roots would have a lasting effect. He retained a stubborn and unshakeable love of Hugo not only out of devotion, but a desire to wield similar power in his own writing. Thus, as we will see, his novels clothe the emotional punch, the mournful and terrible, the wildly scenic, in new and radical forms. Hugo provided the spirit, his countrymen Balzac and Laclos the clay, while the aestheticism of Gautier and his contemporaries furnished Swinburne with a new framework upon which to sculpt his prose.

The *Les Misérables* essays bear interest for yet another reason: a prank. Swinburne created the ‘deplorable’ decadent writers Félicien Cossu and Ernest Clouët⁵⁹ in order to ‘use his own extremely clever and excessively naughty French verses as a pretext for wagging a moral and mournful head over their sins’ (Welby, 54). He references both characters in the *Spectator* reviews of *Les Misérables* ‘in so offhand a fashion that even the suspicions of an alerted editor would have been lulled’ (Lang, *New Writings*, 218). Nonetheless, when he later submitted a review of the fictional Clouët, Hutton, the editor of the *Spectator*, did protest – not because he suspected a hoax, but because he was troubled by Swinburne’s levity in what should have been a serious

⁵⁷ Thomas E. Connolly, *Swinburne’s Theory of Poetry* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1964), pp. 10-11.

⁵⁸ At the time of writing the *Les Misérables* review, Swinburne was poised on the brink of explosive success – much of the work for which he is recognized—*Atalanta in Calydon*; *Poems and Ballads*, *First Series*; *A Year’s Letters*; *Lesbia Brandon*; *Songs Before Sunrise*,— was produced in the prolific period between 1862, the year of the *Les Misérables* review, and the 1872 review of *L’année terrible*.

⁵⁹ For the texts of ‘Félicien Cossu’ and ‘Ernest Clouët’, and more on the Cossu/ Clouët hoax, see the chapters under ‘Hoax and Burlesque’ and Cecil Lang’s notes in *New Writings by Swinburne*.

condemnation of immoral art. And so ‘Cossu and Clouët closed the *Spectator* to Swinburne’ (Welby, 54), and he eventually turned to the *Fortnightly Review*. But not before pulling off a supreme stunt, embedding jewels of such thought in an essay on Victor Hugo despite seeming to denounce it. Lang makes much of this episode, describing Cossu and Clouët as Swinburnian alter egos that helped him find ‘a temporary equilibrium’ when he was ‘oscillating between the two poles of Hugo and Sade and far from comfortable at either extremity’. The alleged output of Cossu, ‘competent and original though [it is], are the verses of a man who has read, and read it well, the poetry of Gautier and Baudelaire but who, born and baptized in the church of Victor Hugo, remained in it for confirmation’ (Lang, *New Writing*, 220). Though a disciple of Hugo, Swinburne was at this time expanding his aesthetic reach, puzzling through all that he believed about great work and the function of art, and perhaps attempting a reconciliation in order to ‘combine the two different visions of the mission of art’ (Ribeyrol, 110). Some have declared it a temporary apostasy,⁶⁰ but I would suggest that it took deep root, for Swinburne would spend the rest of his life attempting to frame Hugolian essentials of poetic spirit, republican fervour, and historical scope within his steadfast faith in the paramount sanctity and inviolableness of art. And, though he continued to deify Hugo as a reader and a critic, in his craft he began to stray quite far.

On this topic, Swinburne had already penned a parodic French novel, *La Fille du Policeman*, between 1860 and 1861. Lang convincingly argues that the satire is, among other things,⁶¹ a spoof of Hugo, who ‘cannot have been far from his mind, or his heart, when he composed’ (Lang, *New Writings*, 236). This hoax predated the Cossu/Clouët one, and perhaps parody is the highest form of criticism; regardless, the novel ought to be incorporated into the history of Swinburne and Hugo. It has received little attention save

⁶⁰ cf. Connolly in *Swinburne’s Theory of Poetry*,

⁶¹ Lang also points to Pétrus Borel as an additional source (see following page and footnote).

from Lafourcade in *La Jeunesse de Swinburne* and Lang in *New Writings*. Lafourcade, too, draws the Hugo connection when he mentions it in a list of Swinburne's early writings and makes amused reference to its potty humour: 'le cloaque est tout pétri d'azur: il y a dans ces latrines quelque chose de Dieu'.⁶² Scatalogical references are the least of the novel's excesses. In 1861, Swinburne wrote to William Bell Scott, 'don't talk of French horrors till you have read the hideous disclosures of English society contained therein! Rape, perjury, murder, opium, suicide, treason, Jesuitry, are the mildest ingredients' (*Letters* 1, 42). *La Fille du Policeman* was a 'great success with Swinburne's friends',⁶³ including George Meredith, who called it the 'funniest rampingest satire on French novelists dealing with English themes that you can imagine'.⁶⁴ Lang calls it 'unique' and like almost nothing else, sourced in the dramas of Hugo, 'principally, his *Cromwell* (1827), *Marie Tudor* (1833), and *Ruy Blas* (1838)' (Lang, *New Writings*, 236). Swinburne had 'lived with these dramas so intimately – as he lived with so much literature – that their clichés leapt naturally from his pen and were transformed gaily into something very funny indeed' (Lang, 239).

The ludicrous characters in *La Fille du Policeman*, including the false Bishop Whitestick, Lord Chops, Blubbs, Edwards Tonk, and Rogers Fox, bear some similarity to the clunkily named personages in Pétrus Borel's 1839 novel *Madame Putiphar*, a resemblance that Lang explores in depth.⁶⁵ Of Borel's nomenclature (which encompasses such delights as the Monsieur de Gave de Villepastour, a boy named Vengeance, Sir John Chatsworth, and Cockermouth Castle) he writes that 'the novel not only is filled with the Anglo-Saxon words that fit so uneasily, so comically, in the French prose ... but also has

⁶² Lafourcade 2, 375.

⁶³ Cecil Y. Lang, 'Note 3 on Letter 27', in *Letters* 1, 41.

⁶⁴ 'George Meredith to a Friend Engaged to be Married, 1861', cited in *Letters of George Meredith, collected and edited by his son* (2 vols), ed. by W.M. Meredith, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912), 1, p. 55.

⁶⁵ For more on this, see Lang's analysis of Borel's novel in relation to Swinburne in his Editor's Notes to *New Writings* (pp. 231-244).

its share of the orthographic and typographic delights on which Swinburne was to ring so many changes' (235). But the real inspiration for Swinburne's romp through ridiculous excesses and machinations in the court of Prince Albert is the heightened, earnest spectacle of Hugo's British political drama. *Cromwell* and *Marie Stuart* are, according to Lang, 'sitting ducks' for such parody, and it appears that Swinburne took delighted aim. Significantly, as we will see in his later review of *L'Homme qui rit*, it is when Hugo attempts to write about England that Swinburne either ridicules (*La Fille du Policeman*) or takes issue with him (such as the essay on *L'Homme qui rit*). The great master is, for Swinburne, such a universal artist that he can write persuasively or compellingly about British historical particulars even when he gets them ludicrously wrong. In this regard, Swinburne's republican instincts are in tension with his overarching aesthetic and continental values⁶⁶ – and so we find that his works attempt to remythologise the cosmopolitan in the setting of England.

Even as Swinburne's own work progressed in its own direction, however, the grandeur of Hugo continued to sway and impassion him. This is evident in his review of *L'homme qui rit*, written in 1869, following several of his major early publications⁶⁷ and quite in the middle of his preoccupation with *l'art pour l'art*. The novel, published in the same year, is one of Hugo's least celebrated works. Set in an eccentric version of seventeenth-century England, it tells the story of Gwynplaine, an abandoned orphan with a monstrous physical deformity (a Glasgow smile carved into his face so that he appears perpetually to be laughing). Gwynplaine and another foundling, a beautiful blind girl named Dea, are rescued by a mountebank named Ursus, who raises them as surrogate

⁶⁶ Julia Saville's 'Swinburne Contra Whitman: From Cosmopolitan Republican to Parochial English Jingo?', *ELH*, 78 (2011), 479-505, revisits Swinburne's 'cosmopolitan republican poetics' and argues that the limited republicanism of his later years was less jingoistic and more due to the difficulties of balancing his cosmopolitan values with his British nationalism.

⁶⁷ *Atalanta in Calydon* and *Chastelard* (1865), *Poems and Ballads, First Series* (1866), *William Blake: A Critical Essay* (1868), *A Year's Letters*, and *Lesbia Brandon*, all written during this period.

children, earning a living at carnivals by exhibiting Gwynplaine's grotesque 'laugh'. Dea loves her foster brother, but Gwynplaine is attracted to Duchess Josiana, a bored peeress and the Queen's bastard sister, who seeks diversion from court by attending one of his performances. Josiana is fascinated by the freak show and his unlikely juxtaposition of masculine grace and deformity. Queen Anne, however, has received word from a band of Comprachicos (Hugo's Spanish coinage of 'child buyers') that they once abducted and mutilated a child – son of an English Baron and one of the King's enemies – intending to exhibit him as a mountebank on the King's orders. Gwynplaine, it transpires, is this child, and the Queen makes reparations by reinstating him to his father's title. With her confidant, Barkilphedro, Josiana conspires to seduce Gwynplaine, but once she realizes that he is a legitimate lord and, according to the Queen's wishes, her soon to be husband, loses interest. Mercilessly mocked when he attempts to take his seat in the House of Lords, Gwynplaine renounces his peerage and seeks out Ursus and Dea, whom he finds on a ship bound for the continent. Dea, slowly weakened since his departure, confesses her love and then abruptly dies, and the stricken Gwynplaine walks off the edge of the ship into the oblivion of the ocean. Hugo declared in the preface of *Les Travailleurs de la mer* that three fatalities weigh upon us, dogma, law, and things: 'l'anankè des dogmes, l'anankè des lois, l'anankè des choses', and that with these mingles the supreme fatality, the human heart ('à ces trois fatalités qui enveloppent l'homme se mêle la fatalité intérieure, l'anankè suprême, le cœur humain').⁶⁸ Kathryn Grossman argues that, 'If the first form of fatality is featured in *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831), the second, in *Les Misérables* (1862), and the third, in *Les Travailleurs*, all four converge in *L'Homme qui rit*'.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Victor Hugo, 'Preface' in *Les Travailleurs de la mer* (Paris: Librairie Internationale, 1866), p. 2.

⁶⁹ Kathryn M. Grossman, 'Grotesque desires in Hugo's *L'Homme qui rit*', *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 33 (2005), 371-384 (p. 371).

Swinburne had mixed feelings regarding Hugo's 'strangest creation, with its haunting, sombre beauty and its devastating pessimism'.⁷⁰ Before the publication of his essay, he wrote to the *Fortnightly*'s then editor, John Morley: 'I take *L'Homme qui rit* as a room in a great house, not my favourite room, and judge the people, not as English actualities, but as human possibilities' (*Letters* 2, 14). This equivocation was followed by a review in which Swinburne hails Hugo's genius, alternately defends and criticises the novel's historical inaccuracies, praises its 'elemental' and archetypal qualities, and provides perceptive analyses of Barkilphedro and Josiana. Aside from these, it is a patchy critical effort, being mostly a reiteration of Hugo's brilliance amidst uncertainty about the novel's merits; as a piece of writing, however, it contains some of his most virtuoso aesthetic prose.

He begins with prefatory remarks on the French writer's power, a passage⁷¹ cited as exemplary of his Hugo-love, but more notable for its lyrical beauty and the synaesthesia that he so warmly praised in Baudelaire:

Only once in my life have I seen the likeness of Victor Hugo's genius. Crossing over when a boy from Ostend, I had the fortune to be caught in midchannel by a thunderstorm strong enough to delay the packet some three good hours over the due time. About midnight the thundercloud was right overhead, full of incessant sound and fire, lightening and darkening so rapidly that it seemed to have life, and a delight in its life... Underneath and about us the sea was paved with flame; the whole water trembled and hissed with phosphoric fire; even through the wind and thunder I could hear the crackling and sputtering of the water-sparks. In the same heaven and in the same hour there shone at once three contrasted glories, golden and fiery and white, of moonlight and of the double lightnings, forked and sheet; and under all this miraculous heaven lay a flaming floor of water... the impression of that hour was upon me the impression of [Hugo's] mind; physical, as it touched the nerves with a more vivid passion of pleasure than music or wine; spiritual, as

⁷⁰ Marianna C. Forde, 'The Pessimism of an Idealist: Hugo's *L'Homme qui rit*', *The French Review* 41 (1968), 641-48, (p. 641).

⁷¹ Thomas Connolly discusses how this passage illustrates the 'spiritual interplay between man and nature' and the nature of poetic power in his 'Swinburne on "The Music of Poetry"', *PMLA* 72 (1957), 680-88, (p. 684). Harrison refers to it when elaborating his theory of Swinburne's 'moral passion', which holds that the tragedy and suffering to which humanity is subjected is integral to the 'beneficent force that generates and sustains the world', in A.H. Harrison, 'Swinburne's Losses: The Poetics of Passion', *ELH* 49 (1982) 689-706, (p. 690).

it exalted the spirit with the senses and above them to the very summit of vision and delight.⁷²

With flooded verbal power, with incandescent language — as in his later essay on Emily Brontë⁷³ — he invokes the ‘sound and fire’ of a storm to describe the elemental effect of Hugo’s writing. Sky meets sea in a union of ‘phosphoric fire’. Similarly, the impression of Hugo’s mind upon Swinburne is physical, exalting the spirit only because it exalts the senses. Most vivid is the image of the ‘three contrasted glories, golden and fiery and white’, moonlight and ‘the double lightnings’ playing across the firmament and the water, as ‘between the moondawn and the sundown here the twilight hangs half starless; half the sea still quivers as for love or pain or fear’.⁷⁴ And how can we ignore the significance of a boyish Swinburne, caught on a boat midway between Belgium and England, watching lightning ignite water and thinking of the genius of Victor Hugo? Whether or not he exaggerated the episode for the essay, the cataclysmic importance of this channel passage in Swinburne’s imagination cannot be underestimated. It is bound up with his youth, fascination for Hugo, and awareness of his role as a trans-Channel writer-critic. Though it exudes youthful enthusiasm, the episode is recollected in the language of a more mature and careful practitioner — by this time an acclaimed and seasoned poet, experimental novelist, and a well-regarded critic. Like Baudelaire, whose practice of verse informed his criticism, Swinburne makes a strong case for the importance of suggestion in texturing and sensualising prose.

In its essence, Swinburne praises *L’Homme qui rit* for playing with great emotions, ‘living as it were an elemental life’ (*L’Homme qui rit*, 3). Just as he exalts the ‘unquenchable and raging fire’ of human emotion in *Wuthering Heights* for matching

⁷² Algernon Charles Swinburne, ‘L’Homme qui rit’, in *Essays and Studies*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1875, pp. 1-2 (*Bonchurch* vol. 13, 206-219).

⁷³ see ‘Emily Brontë’ in the *Athenaeum*, 1883.

⁷⁴ Algernon Charles Swinburne, ‘On the Cliffs’, in *The Poems of Algernon Charles Swinburne* (6 vols), (London: Chatto & Windus, 1904), 3, pp. 311-325 (p. 311, ll. 1-3).

natural forces and possessing ‘nothing less pure in it than flame or sunlight’ (‘Emily Brontë, *SaC*, 207), so he states that Hugo’s novel is a ‘play played out not by human characters only; wind and sea, thunder and moonlight, have their parts too to fill’ (3). The prelude, with its storm of lightning and flame across the channel, sets up the elemental argument to follow. Though subsequent readers have perceived in *L’Homme qui rit* an ‘austere dualism’ that throws “*grandeur materielle*”, power riches, vanity, idleness, fratricide and the flesh to one side and sets them at odds with obscurity, poverty, humility, industriousness, true friendship, true love, the spirit and “*grandeur morale*” (Forde, 644), Swinburne’s analysis is much less concerned with such socio-political or economic elements. In fact, he argues that ‘it is not, whatever it may seem, a novel or a study, historical or social. What touches on life or manners we see to be an accidental byplay as soon as we see what the book is indeed; the story of the battle of a human spirit’ (*L’Homme qui rit*, 3). At first, this may seem a deliberate and perverse disregard of elements that clearly figure: *L’Homme qui rit* is set in a particular historical moment, deals with the economic tribulations of a particular set of characters, and displays the class strife and inevitable tragedy of poverty when set against riches and nobility.

It is not that Swinburne is unaware of these material structures and forms. Rather, he evades such analysis because Hugo’s historical failures are too much for him to defend; and defend Hugo he must. So he boils the novel down to fundamental archetypes: Fate, the besieged Hero (Gwynplaine), the Flesh (Josiana), the Devil (Barkilphedro), and the World. But because Hugo ‘does not love England’, having ‘never applied his spirit to the spirit of the time’, ‘the World is drawn wrong’ and his details of seventeenth-century English life are flat and disharmonious (5-6). For an instant, we see a flash of Swinburne’s republicanism, well described recently by Julia Saville:

In a review of Hugo’s novel, *L’Homme qui rit*, set in England in the reign of Queen Anne, Swinburne as an English republican of hybrid patrician and radical

opinions takes issue with the radical French republican Hugo for an unconvincing representation of England's mixed constitutional republic. Here he insists that to understand the history of another culture well enough to represent it convincingly, especially to its own citizens, the writer must be imaginatively immersed in its intellectual and material texture to the point of seeming to feel "the breath of its mouth" and "to see by the light of its eyes".⁷⁵

We will recall these republican sentiments when we turn to his novels, which are coincidentally both set in distinctly English environments — particular and very familiar to Swinburne — whose 'intellectual and material texture' is deeply interwoven with his artistic identity. And thus he feels strongly Hugo's 'unconvincing representation' of such English history. He cannot criticise his idol for too long, however, and once he has established that *L'Homme qui rit* ought not be judged on the basis of its historical accuracy or trueness of *Zeitgeist*, he recovers by asserting its universal properties. The moral and evil forces of the novel, he argues, are ones that we can all recognise, and it is upon these and Hugo's 'poetic imagination' that he spends the rest of the review.

The villainous Barkilphedro Swinburne dubs 'the evil spirit of the place' and a 'bastard begotten by Iago upon his sister, Madame de Merteuil', lacking their cool calculation, deficient in their 'demonic calm', and brimming with 'fume and fret in his wickedness'. In an inversion worthy of the poet of Dolores, he writes of Iago and de Merteuil that 'theirs is the peace of the devil, which passeth all understanding'. Barkilphedro 'does not sin at rest', and unlike these forbears, who manifest a 'purity and simplicity of sin, which has no sensible components', he has 'yet a too distinct and positive quality of definable evil. He is actually ungrateful, envious, false'. Nonetheless, Swinburne finds him compelling as 'the evil spirit of envy rather than the devil absolute', and praises the chapters in which his 'evil soul is stripped and submitted to vivisection' in all its 'fiery eloquence and passion bitter as blood' (*L'Homme qui rit*, 7). The anatomy

⁷⁵ Julia Saville, 'Cosmopolitan Republican Swinburne, The Immersive Poet as Public Moraliser', *Victorian Poetry* 47(2009), 691-709, (p. 697).

of evil is formative to Swinburnian aesthetics. It iterates in his verse, prose, drama, as well as his critical and historical obsessions—a multiform entity wrapped up in cruelty, passion, manipulation, and creative or artistic energy. Witness his adulation of Laclos's Madame de Merteuil⁷⁶ and the master dissimulator, Iago⁷⁷; his fascination with the urbane and menacing Count Fosco⁷⁸ or the brutally passionate Heathcliff.⁷⁹ He admires these for the aesthetic and ideological meaning of their evil. Madame de Merteuil and Iago denote the calm and cold calculation of the highly evolved, a 'quiet of mind in which they live and work out their work at leisure' ('L'Homme qui rit', 7), and are self-formulated and self-created Luciferian artists reigning in a hell of their own making. As such, they remind us of the *non serviam* that drives Swinburne's poetic law, an energy pulsing in his rhythms, narratives, and even the spiritual exaltation he describes on the crossing from Ostend. And so he finds in Hugo's novel a character that approximates such energy, though dimly, his soul hidden 'behind an impenetrable mask'⁸⁰ (Grossman, 373).

In Swinburne's own work, the cruelty of the sexually powerful yet ruthlessly chaste woman is of particular interest: Keats's La Belle Dame sans Merci incarnated in titanesses and goddesses, sirens and selkies, Sappho, the virgin huntress Atalanta, Messalina and Faustina, the cold jewelled Dolores, the heartless lover in 'Anactoria', the icy Mary Stuart, the white maiden of 'Les Noyades', the fierce eponymous poetess in *Lesbia Brandon*. In Hugo's Josiana he uncovers a similar type, the 'virgin harlot',

⁷⁶ Swinburne's commentary on Laclos is scattered throughout his novels, correspondence, and other criticism. Further detailed in the chapter on Swinburne and Laclos.

⁷⁷ See Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Study of Shakespeare* (1880) (*Bonchurch* vol. 11). Rpt. as 'Shakespeare' in *Swinburne as Critic*, ed. by C.K. Hyder (London & Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), pp. 253-267.

⁷⁸ See Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'Wilkie Collins', *Fortnightly Review*, (1 Nov. 1889, 589-99) (*Bonchurch* vol. 15). Rpt. in *Studies in Prose and Poetry* (1894) and as 'Collins' in *Swinburne as Critic*, ed. by Clyde K. Hyder (London & Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), pp 169-173. Earlier discussed in the chapter on Swinburne and Collins.

⁷⁹ See Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'Emily Brontë', *Athenaeum* (16 June 1883, 438-44). Rpt. as 'Emily Brontë' in *Swinburne As Critic*, ed. by Clyde K. Hyder (London & Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), pp. 201-08. Earlier discussed in the chapter on Swinburne and the Brontës.

‘perverse, not unclean; there is nothing of foulness in the mystic rage of her desire ... she has seven devils in her, and upon her not a fleck of filth’ (*‘L’Homme qui rit’*, 10). Her highly sexualized chastity and masochistic surrender to Gwynplaine bring to mind the self-flagellating passion and sadomasochism in Swinburne’s oeuvre; indeed, he quotes the most dramatic episode in translation. Josiana to Gwynplaine:

No one has touched me, I give myself up to you as pure as burning fire ... Despise me, you that people despise. Degradation below degradation, what a pleasure! The double flower of ignominy, I am gathering it. Trample me underfoot. You will like me all the better ... Insult me. Beat me. Pay me. Treat me like a street-walker. I adore you.⁸¹

The ecstatic abandonment of this outcry resonates with the language of *‘Les Noyades’* and *‘Anactoria’*, the magnetic violence between Denham and Lady Wariston. Swinburne calls it absolutely natural. The words ‘pant and ring’, for Hugo has given his ‘modern Maenad the thought and the tongue of a Sappho with the place and the caprice of a Cleopatra’ (*‘L’Homme qui rit’*, 10). He then links her perversity and Hugo’s most sombre examination of ‘sad and strange things’⁸² to that other French influence: ‘Perversity is the fruit of weariness as weariness is the fruit of pleasure. Charles Baudelaire has often set that theme to mystic music...his sweet and subtle lyrics were the prelude to this grand chorus of the master’s’ (*‘L’Homme qui rit’*, 10). In casting *L’Homme qui rit* as the summative achievement of years of aesthetic development, Swinburne tries to achieve a reconciliation – a twin vision of art that incorporates the gravitas and capacity of Hugo with the mystic weariness and lyrical sweetness of Baudelaire. Accusations of perversity, deployed against Aestheticism, are deflected when Swinburne reveals Hugo’s use of it. The Romantic novel of Hugo and the Aesthetic novel occupy similar terrain, where pleasure, weariness, desire, envy, and elemental currents interact in new and radical ways.

⁸¹ Swinburne quoting Hugo in *‘L’Homme qui rit’*, pp 9-10.

⁸² Charles Baudelaire, *SaC*, 28.

Nonetheless, it is a hybrid, and not Hugolian vision. This reconciliation is a uniquely Swinburnian project, with its attention to prosodic prose and meditation on time, passion, and the lyrical grandeur of great forces in art and the world.

Concluding the essay on *L'Homme qui rit*, Swinburne returns to nature. Having been led through the storm of Hugo's elemental novel, 'through all the thunder and tumult of things fatal', we enter the 'measureless and nameless peace of night upon a still sea' ('L'Homme qui rit', 12). Framed and surrounded by the element of water, the piece floats in the space between Swinburne's lifelong devotion to Hugo and on-going effort to define his own writing and creed against him. In the end, Swinburne expresses gratitude for the gifts of 'the supreme singer now living among us' (16), whose work must be read 'not by the lamplight of realism, but by the sunlight of his imagination reflected upon ours' (2). For Swinburne the poetic imagination of Victor Hugo is nonpareil.⁸³ Because it is so, he makes no effort to mimic or reproduce it, moving forward instead in its spirit of mythmaking. In this, his verse and prose course together as cohesive parts of a great aesthetic whole. The poet Randolph Henry Ash in A.S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990) claims that 'the difference between poets and novelists is this – that the former write for the life of the language – and the latter write for the betterment of the world'.⁸⁴ For Swinburne, the legacy of Hugo was that each might do both.

⁸³ There is possibly some anxiety of influence at work here, but that is hardly the sole force at play.

⁸⁴ A.S. Byatt, *Possession: A Romance* (New York: Vintage International Edition, 1997), p. 147.

4. Flowers Double-blossomed: The Aesthetic Autonomy of Swinburne and Gautier

Veiled loves that shifted shapes and shafts, and gave,
 Laughing, strange gifts to hands that durst not crave,
 Flowers double-blossomed, fruits of scent and hue
 Sweet as the bride-bed, stranger than the grave;

- A.C. Swinburne, 'Memorial Verses on the Death of Théophile Gautier'
 (*Poems* 3, 64, ll. 177-80)

First there was Hugo, and then, later, Baudelaire. But with them was yet another 'influential forerunner' of Swinburne. Théophile Gautier 'belongs to an earlier generation' — that of Nerval, Dumas (père), Borel, Hugo — and 'Gautier gave rise to Baudelaire'¹ in the way, some have argued, that Baudelaire gave rise to Swinburne (or, as I have suggested, to certain facets of Swinburne's early development). I would add that Gautier gave rise to another aspect of Swinburne — the aesthetic theorist, critic and writer of prose who was also the incendiary, gender-bending novelist of *Lesbia Brandon*. If *A Year's Letters* owes most to Choderlos de Laclos and his *Les liaisons Dangereuses*, then *Lesbia Brandon* is most indebted to Gautier and his iconic novel, *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835). Even more than this direct association, however, Gautier's explication of *l'art pour l'art* and demonstration of style, beauty, and refinement in literature moulded Swinburne's thinking. These values underpin Swinburne's production, but they would also come into tension with those gathered from other sources — the republican aesthetics of Blake, Shelley, and Hugo, the panoramic techniques of Boccaccio and Balzac, and the psychological and dramatic insight of Shakespeare and the Brontës. His critical and fictional prose would wrestle with this, striving for a balance. These aesthetic values were what Swinburne would defend for most of his career, and it is partly due to his interpretation of them that he was and has remained such a controversial figure. But

¹ Graham Hough, *The Last Romantics* (Harrison, OH: Harrison Press, 2007, first pub. 1949), p. 192. Further references to this and all other citations are given in the text.

this study aims to understand Swinburne's aestheticism in the context of his other creative and theoretical stimuli; to examine his peculiar version of *l'art pour l'art*, inflected as it was by principles derived from myriad sources. To elaborate what I have previously called the composite of Swinburnian thought, we must consider the impact of Gautier.

Swinburne probably first encountered Gautier during his Oxford years, under the influence of Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, when Rossetti may have introduced him to *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, whose Preface offered an 'excitingly shocking' view of art, favouring 'the pursuit of beauty for its own sake' over 'Christian morality'.² It was an extraordinarily rich period of theoretical development for Swinburne, who was also absorbing Baudelaire and Sade (in fact, he read *Justine* in the company of Rossetti in 1862 (*Letters* 1, 53-54), the same year that his review of *Les Fleurs du mal* appeared in the *Spectator*). Of course, Baudelaire bore a deep affection for Gautier, and had inscribed *Les Fleurs du Mal* to the man he called his 'maître et ami':

*Au poète impeccable
au parfait magicien ès Lettres françaises
à mon très cher et très vénéré
maître et ami
Théophile Gautier
avec les sentiments
de la plus profonde humilité
je dédie
ces fleurs malades*³

² Alastair Grieve, 'Rossetti and the scandal of art for art's sake in the early 1860s', in *After the Pre-Raphaelites: Art and Aestheticism in Victorian England*, ed. by Elizabeth Prettejohn (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 17-35 (p. 17). Grieve bases this claim on the transposition of first names in Swinburne's letter to Theodore Watts on 10 August 1887, where he states that 'just 25 years since' he was 'under the morally identical influence of Gabriel Gautier and of Théophile Rossetti' (*Letters* 5, 207) and on a similar suggestion by Lafourcade (2, 337). Swinburne would have had access to a copy of the novel in Oxford in the Taylorian Library, and a letter to Monckton Milnes, probably written in February 1863, indicates that Swinburne and Lady Trevelyan were joking about 'Mademoiselle de Maupin' by 1859 (*Letters* 1, 76-7). Swinburne's letter to E. C. Stedman of 23 February 1874, however, states that he had been an 'ardent admirer' of Gautier 'from boyhood almost' (*Letters* 2, 282), which might place the discovery a little earlier than his first meeting with Rossetti in 1857.

³ Charles Baudelaire, 'Dedication', in *Les Fleurs du Mal* (Paris: Poulet-Malassis et de Broise, 1857), p. 1.

Swinburne acknowledges their connection in his review, writing that Baudelaire garnered from Gautier the ‘habit of a faultless and studious simplicity’.⁴ The cross-pollination between the two artists had extended over decades: Baudelaire published a long piece on Gautier in 1859,⁵ citing the older writer as a powerful influence and establishing him as a progenitor for successive generations, the equal of the greatest artists in the past and a model for those to come, a perfect man of letters: ‘l’égal des plus grands dans le passé, un modèle pour ceux qui viendront, un diamant de plus en plus rare dans une époque ivre d’ignorance et de matière’, and ‘un parfait homme de lettres’ (Baudelaire, *Gautier*, 190). In turn, Gautier wrote the preface to the 1868 posthumous edition of *Les Fleurs du mal*, in which he recounts his first meeting with Baudelaire in 1849 and describes him as ‘un talent inédit, se préparant dans l’ombre pour la lumière’, and that ‘dans le cénacle mystérieux où s’ébauchent les réputations de l’avenir, il passait pour le plus fort’.⁶ In addition to Baudelaire, however, Gautier was also associated with Swinburne’s idol Hugo. Nerval introduced Gautier to the ‘Cénacle’ literary circle around Hugo, and the two eventually developed a close friendship. Hugo wrote memorial verses, ‘À Théophile Gautier’, in *Le Tombeau de Théophile Gautier* (1873), a volume to which Swinburne also contributed. As a contemporary of Nerval and Hugo, Gautier had firm roots in French Romanticism, while his connection to Baudelaire, the Parnassians, and, through them, Symbolism, situates him as a kind of fulcrum in nineteenth-century literature, a position arguably shared later by Swinburne across the channel.

⁴ Algernon Charles Swinburne, ‘Charles Baudelaire: *Les Fleurs du Mal*’ (1862) (*Bonchurch* vol. 13, 417-27). Rpt. as ‘Charles Baudelaire: *Les Fleurs du Mal*’, in *Swinburne as Critic*, ed. by Clyde K. Hyder (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), pp. 27-36 (p.29).

⁵ Charles Baudelaire, *Théophile Gautier* (Paris: Poulet-Malassis et de Broise, 1859). Rpt. in the collected *L’Art Romantique Par Charles Baudelaire* (Paris, Michel Lévy, 1868).

⁶ Théophile Gautier, ‘Preface’ to *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1868). Rpt. in *Portraits et Souvenirs Littéraires* (Paris: Charpentier, 1885), p. 132.

Mademoiselle de Maupin, the work that Swinburne called ‘the golden book of spirit and sense, the holy writ of beauty’⁷ and ‘the most perfect and exquisite book of modern times’,⁸ has been controversial from the very beginning, and ‘no serious reading of *Mademoiselle de Maupin* can afford to ignore Gautier’s polemical Preface’.⁹ In it, Gautier takes on proponents of morality in art, socially conscious advocates of art’s usefulness, the Saint-Simonians, and, above all, utilitarians, for whom he reserves his most caustic scorn and wit:

You fools, you imbeciles, you goitrous idiots, a book does not make jellied soup; a novel is not a pair of seamless boots nor is a sonnet a vaginal syringe; a drama is not a railway; all of these things that are essential to civilization and to the advancement of humanity along the path of progress.

By the bowels of all popes past, present and future, no, two hundred thousand times no.

You cannot make a cotton bonnet out of metonymy and you cannot put on a comparison as you do a slipper; you cannot use an antithesis like an umbrella; you could not, more’s the pity, wrap a few multicoloured rhymes round your middle by way of a waistcoat.¹⁰

For those who take a moral stand on art, he argues that ‘the age, whatever people say, is immoral (if that word has any meaning, which we very much doubt) ... books follow manners and manners do not follow books... Pictures are created according to the model,

⁷ Algernon Charles Swinburne, ‘Sonnet (with a copy of *Mademoiselle de Maupin*)’ in *Le Tombeau de Théophile Gautier* (1873) and *Poems and Ballads, Second Series* (1878), collected in *The Poems of Algernon Charles Swinburne* (6 vols), (London: Chatto & Windus, 1904), 3, p. 66, l. 2.

⁸ Algernon Charles Swinburne, ‘Notes on Some Pictures of 1868’ (1868), in *Essays and Studies* (1875), *Bonchurch* vol. 15, 196-216). Rpt. in *Major Poems and Selected Prose*, ed. by Jerome McGann & Charles L. Sligh (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 372.

⁹ Patricia Duncker, ‘Introduction’, *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (London: Penguin, 2005), pp. xi- xxxvi (p. xiv).

¹⁰ Théophile Gautier, ‘Preface’, *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, ed. and trans. by Helen Constantine (London: Penguin, 2005), pp. 3-37 (pp. 20-21). ‘Non, imbéciles, non, crétins et goitreux que vous êtes, un livre ne fait pas de la soupe à la gélatine ; – un roman n’est pas une paire de bottes sans couture ; un sonnet, une seringue à jet continu ; un drame n’est pas un chemin de fer, toutes choses essentiellement civilisantes, et faisant marcher l’humanité dans la voie du progrès. De par les boyaux de tous les papes passés, présents et futurs, non et deux cent mille fois non. On ne se fait pas un bonnet de coton d’une métonymie, on ne chausse pas une comparaison en guise de pantoufle ; on ne se peut servir d’une antithèse pour parapluie ; malheureusement, on ne saurait se plaquer sur le ventre quelques rimes bariolées en manière de gilet’.

not the model according to the picture' ('Preface', 19).¹¹ We hear echoes of this argument in Swinburne's 'Charles Baudelaire', wherein he declares that 'a poet's business is presumably to write good verses, and by no means to redeem the age and remould society ... the mass of readers seem actually to think that a poem is the better for containing a moral lesson or assisting in a tangible and material good work'.¹² Just as Gautier mocks those readers who would set art to good use, an ode serving as 'winter wear' or a 'strophe, antistrophe or epode' ('Preface', 20-21) as clothing, Swinburne disparages the notion that it must produce 'tangible and material good work'. Unlike Gautier, however, whose tone is farcical, admonitory, and snide, and whose argument is a jab at poor public and critical literary taste, Swinburne's pitch is more sober and earnest — it takes 'courage and sense', he writes, to 'profess and act on the conviction that the art of poetry has absolutely nothing to do with didactic matter at all', and this is 'proof enough of the wise and serious manner in which he is likely to handle the materials of his art'.¹³ There is an undertone, if not of outright morality, then of moral feeling, in Swinburne's judgement, for he suggests that the very act of non-didacticism is an act of conviction, courage, and sincerity. Gautier and Swinburne converge at similar conclusions, but their motivations and provocations are rather different. Where Gautier advocates an anti-utilitarianism that announces, 'everything that is useful is ugly, for it is the expression of some need, and the needs of men are ignoble and disgusting, like his poor and infirm nature' ('Preface', 23), Swinburne dreams of a more Keatsian truth in beauty and an art that aims for art above all, its harmony a virtue in itself.¹⁴ As he argues in defence of Emily Brontë, the poetic or artistic spirit is transfiguring, pure as a natural

¹¹ 'L'époque, quoi qu'ils en disent, est immorale (si ce mot-là signifie quelque chose, ce dont nous doutons fort)...Les livres suivent les mœurs et les mœurs ne suivent pas les livres...Les tableaux se font d'après les modèles et non les modèles d'après les tableaux'.

¹² 'Charles Baudelaire', *SaC*, 28.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ 'Tout ce qui est utile est laid, car c'est l'expression de quelque besoin, et ceux de l'homme sont ignobles et dégoûtants, comme sa pauvre et infirme nature'.

force in its unwavering truthfulness.¹⁵ Of Baudelaire, he says that ‘it is not his or any artist’s business to warn against evil’, and that those intent on finding either something ‘mischievous’ or something ‘useful’ in a work have set themselves to the ‘dullest game’ and most ‘profitless task’.¹⁶ In his meditations, he channels the Romantic and humanist inclinations of Keats, Hugo, and the Renaissance writers, fusing them to the more satirical and epigrammatic aesthetic commentary of Gautier.

Most damningly, Gautier accuses the critics of being failed writers, hypocrites who condemn artists because they could not themselves produce art. Deploying the especially insulting metaphor of impotence, he writes that:

You only become a critic once you are sure you cannot be a poet. Before you are reduced to the dreary role of cloakroom attendant or to noting down moves like a billiard-boy or a ball-boy at the *jeu de paume*, you have long courted the Muse; you have tried to deflower her; but your strength is not sufficient; your breath has failed you and you have fallen back again, pale and exhausted, at the foot of the holy mountain. I quite understand this sort of hatred. It hurts to see someone else sitting down to a banquet to which you have not been invited, or going to bed with a woman who wants nothing to do with you. I pity from the bottom of my heart the poor eunuch obliged to be present at the sport of the Grand Signor (‘Preface’, 13).¹⁷

Attacking those who suggest art should serve a moral or useful purpose, Gautier’s Preface is also an aggressive assault on that which he considers the ‘biggest and worst of all’ faults: hypocrisy (12). Gautier’s relativism, plagued by no ‘dragons of virtue’ (12) and hampered by no concrete classifications of morality, leaves little room for the concept of sin, but hypocrisy is the vice that he loudly and stridently condemns. It ranks beside the

¹⁵ Algernon Charles Swinburne, ‘Emily Brontë’, *Athenaeum* (16 June 1883, 438-44). Rpt. as ‘Emily Brontë’ in *Swinburne As Critic*, ed. by Clyde K. Hyder, pp. 201-08. This is more closely discussed in the earlier chapter entitled ‘Swinburne and the Brontës’.

¹⁶ ‘Charles Baudelaire’, *SaC*, 32.

¹⁷ ‘Vous ne vous faites critique qu’après qu’il est bien constaté à vos propres yeux que vous ne pouvez être poète. Avant de vous réduire au triste rôle de garder les manteaux et de noter les coups comme un garçon de billard ou un valet de jeu de paume, vous avez longtemps courtoisé la Muse, vous avez essayé de la dévirginer ; mais vous n’avez pas assez de vigueur pour cela ; l’haleine vous a manqué, et vous êtes retombé pâle et efflanqué au pied de la sainte montagne. Je conçois cette haine. Il est douloureux de voir un autre s’asseoir au banquet où l’on n’est pas invité, et coucher avec la femme qui n’a pas voulu de vous. Je plains de tout mon coeur le pauvre eunuque obligé d’assister aux ébats du Grand Seigneur’.

‘viper’ (12) envy — both are capital evils, taking the form of moral censure, righteousness, and denigration of ‘sinful’ beauty when adopted by critics of art. Gautier further outflanks these critics by stating that he sees ‘nothing more licentious in today’s novels and plays than in the novels or plays of old’ (8).¹⁸ Opponents of contemporary art would, in fairness, be required equally to condemn Molière and Voltaire, La Fontaine, the medieval poets, and ‘guillotine Shakespeare, Corneille, and all the tragedians’ (18).¹⁹ To hold modern writers to different standards from established ones is, for Gautier, not just a haphazard argument, but yet another form of hypocrisy.

Though Gautier’s Preface was certainly not the first articulation of *l’art pour l’art*, it is one of the finest, and has become famous as formulating ‘an aesthetic posture for the generation of artists and poets who defined modernity’. The development of the concept can be traced from the lecture series of Victor Cousin in Paris in 1818 to its ‘reappearance as a rallying cry for young artists in the early 1830s’.²⁰ This resurgence would trigger an exponential and prolonged growth of support, with writers on both sides of the Atlantic — Poe,²¹ Baudelaire, Swinburne, Pater, Wilde, Mallarmé, and Rimbaud — taking up the ‘rallying cry’ and producing their own expressions of the principle. But it was Gautier who set the tone for the generation; in him, *l’art pour l’art* found a passionate and, at times, vengeful defender. With Gautier and his successors, the ‘rejection of utility in art’ became ‘much more absolute and rhetorically inflamed’ than it had been at the beginning of the century (Murphy, 154). This began ‘out of a moment of conflict’ (154): Gautier’s article on François Villon in *La France Littéraire* was attacked by the rival journal *Le Constitutionnel* for immorality and unsavoriness. This erupted into a national scandal, in

¹⁸ ‘...car je ne vois rien de plus licencieux dans les romans et les comédies de maintenant que dans les romans et les comédies d’autrefois’.

¹⁹ ‘À ce compte, il faudrait guillotiner Shakespeare, Corneille et tous les tragiques’.

²⁰ Marguerite Murphy, ‘Pure Art, Pure Desire: Changing Definitions of “*l’art pour l’art*” from Kant to Gautier’, *Studies in Romanticism* 47(2008), 147-60, (p. 147).

²¹ For more on this, see Glen A. Omans, ‘Victor Cousin: Still Another Source of Poe’s Aesthetic Theory?’, in *Studies in the American Renaissance*, ed. by Joel Myerson (Boston: Twayne, 1982), pp. 1-27.

which the Romantic school, government, and the press became key players. It eventually reached the courts, where *La France Littéraire* ‘won a pyrrhic victory when the court gave judgement in their favour, but took the part of *Le Constitutionnel*’ (Duncker, xiv). Gautier’s acerbic Preface was written in response to this quarrel, and though it started as a forum to ‘plead his case’ (Murphy, 154), became the keenest and most readable current manifesto of *l’art pour l’art*.²²

Swinburne’s equivalent of Gautier’s Preface came in 1866, when *Poems and Ballads, First Series* came under such violent attack that he felt compelled to confront his critics in *Notes on Poems and Reviews*. Connolly calls it ‘important as the most unrestrained expression of Swinburne’s belief that any subject that relates to man is fit for poetic treatment’ and ‘essentially an expression of the ideas of *l’art pour l’art* that he derived from Gautier and others’.²³ But where Gautier outspokenly opens with, ‘In the glorious age in which we have the good fortune to live nothing is more ridiculous than the efforts being made by every journal, of whatever political hue, be it red, green or tricolore, to re-establish Morality’ (‘Preface’, 3),²⁴ Swinburne starts by confirming that ‘it is by no wish of my own that I accept the task now proposed to me. To vindicate or defend myself from the assault or the charge of men whom, but for their attacks, I might never have heard of, is an office which I, or any writer who respects his work, cannot without reluctance stoop to undertake’.²⁵ He explains that the ‘office of commentator’ of one’s own works ‘cannot be accomplished without some show of egotism’ and opens one to the ‘consequent charge of arrogance’ (5). In his Preface, Gautier both ignores and

²² Michel Crouzet, ‘Le “Banquet” romantique’ (Introduction), *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), pp. 9-10.

²³ Thomas Connolly, *Swinburne’s Theory of Poetry* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1964), p. 38.

²⁴ ‘Une des choses les plus burlesques de la glorieuse époque où nous avons le bonheur de vivre est incontestablement la réhabilitation de la vertu entreprise par tous les journaux, de quelque couleur qu’ils soient, rouges, verts ou tricolores’.

²⁵ Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Notes on Poems and Reviews* (London: Hotten, 1866), p. 5. (*Bonchurch*, vol. 16, 353-373).

openly flouts such a charge. He sarcastically admits that he ‘falls short of’ conventional ‘standards of morality’ (4), that he might be the most ‘enormously immoral person to be found in Europe or anywhere else’ (8), and assumes the sort of naïve curiosity — ‘Dear Lord! Such outbursts! Such a raging! What has bitten you? What’s stung you? Why on earth are you shouting so loud?’ — that allows him to comment on the many hypocrisies and double standards of his day (4).²⁶ With hauteur worthy of Lady Midhurst, Swinburne displays supreme unconcern regarding the allegations of indecency or blasphemy: ‘To me, as I have intimated, their verdict is a matter of infinite indifference: it is of equally small moment to me whether in such eyes as theirs I appear moral or immoral, Christian or pagan’ (*Notes*, 6). But he, too, affects Gautier’s faux naïveté, declaring that ‘what certain reviewers have imagined [his poem ‘Anactoria’] to imply, I am incompetent to explain, and unwilling to imagine. I am evidently not virtuous enough to understand them. I thank Heaven that I am not. *Ma corruption rougirait de leur pudeur*’ (*Notes*, 8). Throughout, he invokes a sort of *noblesse oblige*, maintaining a higher moral ground that is simultaneously aristocratic and farcical; this distinctly emerges when he confesses that he has ‘not studied in those schools whence that full-fledged phoenix, the “virtue” of professional pressmen, rises chuckling and crowing from the dunghill, its birthplace and its deathbed’ (*Notes*, 8). Whereas Gautier enters the fray, raising his voice in the clamour of legal and societal scandal, Swinburne preserves himself (at least initially) apart from the ‘prurient prudery and virulent virtue of pressmen’, calling for ‘an atmosphere where calumny cannot speak, and fatuity cannot breathe’ (8). His language draws an implicit contrast between the ‘professional pressmen’, diggers of journalistic dirt and ‘backbiters and imbeciles’ and himself, the artist, *ancien régime* in both aesthetics and morality (8). Flying above their *petit*

²⁶ ‘Mon doux Jésus! quel déchaînement! quelle furie! – Qui vous a mordu ? qui vous a piqué ? que diable avez-vous donc pour crier si haut...’

bourgeois scandal mongering, he proclaims that he has no wish to ‘change the unchangeable, to purify the impure’ (8). There is class-consciousness and a whiff of Laclos’s *Les liaisons dangereuses* here, for Swinburne mocks virtue just as much as Gautier (he even likens Virtue to a ‘dragon’s jaws’ (8), in a striking parallel), and presents an inversion in which the ‘impure’ is just as beautiful as the pure – perhaps, indeed, more beautiful.

Gautier dismisses moral critics as faddish, jeering that ‘it is the fashion nowadays to be moral and Christian, that’s the current affectation. People pretend to be St Jerome, just as they used to pretend to be Don Juan...so they are Christians, they talk about the sanctity of art, the noble mission of the artist, the poetry of Catholicism, M. de Lamennais, the painters of the Angelic School, the Council of Trent, the progress of civilization and a thousand other fine things’ (‘Preface’, 5).²⁷ In sympathy, Swinburne writes that contemporary culture expects literature to be a sort of moral sustenance, a ‘supply of milk for babies’, safeguarded by ‘moral milkmen’ who cry ‘their ware about the streets and by-ways’. Audiences must not be coddled, he argues, ‘let those read who will, and let those who will abstain from reading. *Caveat emptor*’ (Notes, 14). Swinburne demands maturity and judgement in his readership, for it should not be that the ‘first and last requisite of art is to give no offense’ nor that ‘all that cannot be lisped in the nursery or fingered in the schoolroom is therefore to be cast out of the library’ (Notes, 20). He even echoes Gautier’s ‘ce que j’écris n’est pas pour les petites filles dont on coupe le pain en tartines’, when he scoffs that ‘our time has room only for such as are content to write

²⁷ French priest, political, philosophical, and theological writer (1782-1854). His *Essai sur l’indifférence en matière de religion* (1817-23) placed ecclesiastical authority paramount and decried private judgement and lack of state involvement in religious affairs; his *Paroles d’un croyant* (1834), arguing that democracy has its roots in the Gospels, was condemned by the Pope. ‘Mais c’est la mode maintenant d’être vertueux et chrétien, c’est une tournure qu’on se donne ; on se pose en saint Jérôme, comme autrefois en don Juan...Alors on est chrétien, l’on parle de la sainteté de l’art, de la haute mission de l’artiste, de la poésie du catholicisme, de M. de Lamennais, des peintres de l’école angélique, du concile de Trente, de l’humanité progressive et de mille autres belles choses’.

for children and girls' (*Notes*, 14).²⁸ All of this suggests that producing and consuming art is an adult (and, in some regards, masculine) enterprise—the 'office of adult art is neither puerile nor feminine, but virile'—one that requires courage, thoughtfulness, appraisal, and conviction (*Notes*, 23). Because good art (or what Swinburne terms, 'pure' art) necessarily depicts all things, it must be 'outspoken and full-grown', not 'truncated and curtailed' (23). Art is weighty, serious, and fervent, and Gautier deals with its importance through his vitriolic and tongue-in-cheek attack on those who would undermine its value, while Swinburne approaches it as a great and vital endeavour.

Gautier argues that the human capacity for pleasure and enjoyment of useless and superfluous things 'distinguishes us from the animals', for we alone have the God-given 'threefold glorious privilege of drinking without being thirsty, of striking a light, and of making love all year round' ('Preface', 24).²⁹ Swinburne writes that 'if literature indeed is not to deal with the full life of man and the whole nature of things, let it be cast aside with the rods and rattles of childhood' (*Notes*, 21). Both make a case for a complete, candid, and whole literature, a literature sans hypocrisy and prudery — 'purity and prudery cannot keep house together' (21). If, for Gautier, art ranks amongst the divine pleasures that make us human, and for Swinburne it must deal with the 'full life of man', literature must in truth write of both pleasure and life, must be pure in its depiction of the 'whole nature of things'. The greatest things in the world, Gautier says, are 'royalty and poetry', and the 'perpetual baying' of the press and the police of morality 'deafen all inspiration and cast suspicion into people's hearts' ('Preface', 35).³⁰ Thus, though Swinburne and Gautier adopt rather different strategies, they both ultimately agree that art

²⁸ Théophile Gautier, *Albertus, ou L'âme et le péché* (1832): 'what I write is not for little girls whose toast is cut up for them at breakfast'. Swinburne also quotes this line from Gautier's *Albertus* in *Notes on Poems and Reviews* (1866).

²⁹ '...ce triple et glorieux privilège de boire sans avoir soif, de battre le briquet, et de faire l'amour en toutes saisons, ce qui nous distingue de la brute beaucoup plus que l'usage de lire des journaux et de fabriquer des chartes'.

³⁰ 'Ces aboiements perpétuels assourdissent l'inspiration, et jettent une telle méfiance dans les coeurs...'

is both great and inspirational, that it lifts man beyond the animal and provides one of the most profound pleasures in life. To be ‘worthy of men’, urges the humanist Swinburne, literature must be ‘large, liberal, sincere’ (*Notes*, 21), and this can only come to pass when art is judged by its own standards, ‘work done for work’s sake’ and ‘pure by instinct’ rather than censure, enforced virtue, or prudish morality (*Notes*, 23).

Benjamin called the theory of *l’art pour l’art* a ‘theology of art’³¹ that arose after the ‘secular cult of beauty’ born in the Renaissance, which in turn followed the decline of the original (magical and religious) basis of art, ritual. For Gautier’s generation, the ‘aesthetic autonomy’ of *l’art pour l’art* signified ‘artistic freedom at a time of growing governmental control over free speech in the universities and *grandes ecoles*’ as well as a ‘revolutionary and social ideal and a potential threat to order for the middle class’ (Murphy, 160). Marguerite Murphy comments on the contemporary denigration of ‘pure art’ (a critique shared by Benjamin later), where artists were perceived to place themselves outside social movements, structures, conscience, and thought. ‘By this reasoning’, she suggests, ‘purity becomes its “moral” opposite when, through its unadulterated freedom, it embraces “dirt,” and so Gautier explicitly promoted “filthy” art — the art of sex and corpses — in his Preface’ (Murphy, 160). Swinburne, too, has no desire to ‘purify the impure’, and reveres, in fact, the craft of someone like Baudelaire, which ‘of the loathsome bodily putrescence and decay’ can ‘make some noble use’ and ‘pluck out its meaning and secret, even its beauty, in a certain way, from actual carrion’.³² There is moral purity in the freedom to write about ‘dirt’ and ‘filth’, the ‘art of sex and corpses’, for as we discussed earlier, such expression has the chastity of truth, leaving no room for puritanism, hypocrisy, or corruption.

³¹ Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (1936)’. Rpt. in *The Nineteenth-century Visual Culture Reader*, ed. by Vanessa R. Schwartz, Jeannene M. Przyblysk (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 63- 70 (p. 67).

³² ‘Charles Baudelaire’, *SaC*, 30.

Testing the boundaries of aesthetic autonomy, transgression, and self-fashioning, *Mademoiselle de Maupin* is a novel of freedom and secrets, paradoxes, veiled desires and emotions, confessions and revelations, channelling the ‘physical and pagan’ and anti-bourgeois impulses that Swinburne admires. It is a pornographic and ‘filthy’ text, a *tour de force* of sexual ambiguity, seduction, and the *ménage* of polysexual desire, known for its ‘calculated and intentional’ subversion of ‘literary cross-dressing’ (Duncker, xi). Set in the seventeenth century, it tells of the handsome chevalier D’Albert, and his lovely mistress Rosette, who meet an attractive young stranger named Théodore (unbeknownst to them, Madeleine de Maupin in disguise). Following its early vigour, D’Albert and Rosette’s affair has grown stale. D’Albert murmurs that, ‘despite all appearances to the contrary, Rosette is as sated with me as I am with her’, and he craves –as he has craved since before meeting Rosette — to find a woman who satisfies (and perpetually frustrates) his quest for ideal beauty.³³

Beauty is the only thing which cannot be acquired, forever inaccessible to those who do not have it in the first place, that fragile and fast-fading flower which grows unsown, a pure gift of God...Beauty is harmony...All my passions and tastes have only been these three desires in disguise. I have loved weapons, horses and women. Weapons to make up for my lack of nerve; horses to provide me with wings; women, so that I could possess in someone at least the beauty which I myself do not have (*MdM*, 121-26).³⁴

They both find themselves drawn to Théodore, whose androgynous ‘marvellous beauty’ holds an illicit attraction (*MdM*, 185). His appeal is equal parts appearance, enigma, and ambiguity. The worn spaces of Rosette’s and D’Albert’s prior relationship give way to a mutual passion for the striking youth, a common ground of jealousy and obsession.

³³ Théophile Gautier, *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, ed. and trans. by Helen Constantine (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 113. ‘Malgré toutes ces belles apparences, Rosette est soûle de moi comme je suis soûl d’elle...’

³⁴ ‘La beauté, seule chose qu’on ne puisse acquérir, inaccessible à tout jamais à ceux qui ne l’ont pas d’abord ; fleur éphémère et fragile qui croit sans être semée, pur don du ciel !...La beauté ? c’est l’harmonie...Toutes les passions et tous les goûts que j’ai eus n’ont été que des déguisements de ces trois désirs. J’ai aimé les armes, les chevaux et les femmes : – les armes, pour remplacer les nerfs que je n’avais pas ; les chevaux, pour me servir d’ailes ; les femmes, pour posséder au moins dans quelqu’une la beauté qui me manquait à moi-même’.

Gautier makes it amply clear that the root of their fascination with Théodore is that they simply cannot decipher him. D'Albert exclaims:

I have never suffered so much and the last two months [of loving Théodore] have seemed more like two years or two centuries. Wave upon wave of doubt, enough to dull the strongest brain, has filled my head. I have been pushed and pulled so violently in every direction, I have gone through such periods of exhilaration and suffered such dull periods of inertia, such unreasonable hopes and such deep despair that truly I do not know why I have not died of chagrin. This idea has so occupied and obsessed me that I am surprised it was not clearly visible through my body like a candle in a lantern, and I have been in mortal agony in case anyone chanced to discover who the object of my crazy love was (241-42).³⁵

We do not receive a similar profession from Rosette simply because we never hear from her directly. The novel's confessions belong to D'Albert and Mademoiselle de Maupin. D'Albert's testimony confirms, however, that Rosette is equally mesmerised, baffled, and troubled by Théodore, who is endlessly alluring chiefly because he is indefinable and impossible to capture or pin down. His sort of beauty 'cannot be acquired' and remains 'forever inaccessible' and thus, forever ideal, just as D'Albert rhapsodised. The beauty that is enjoyed at will or passion that is 'sated', like that of D'Albert and Rosette, grows pallid and flat. Ultimately, Théodore is revealed as a woman when he/she plays Rosalind in the play-within-a-book performance of *As You Like It*. This precipitates a crisis wherein both Rosette and D'Albert express their love to the now-public Madeleine de Maupin, who makes love to each in turn before departing the region forever.

Like *Les liaisons dangereuses* and *A Year's Letters*, *Mademoiselle de Maupin* is constructed as a sequence of letters; it, too, is fascinated with interiors and draws us into 'bedrooms and boudoirs', where we are 'made party to intrigues and hidden desires'

³⁵ 'Je ris, mais certainement il n'y a pas de quoi, car je n'ai jamais tant souffert, et ces deux derniers mois m'ont semblé deux années ou plutôt deux siècles. C'était dans ma tête un flux et reflux d'incertitudes à hébéter le plus fort cerveau ; j'étais si violemment agité et tiraillé en tous sens, j'avais des élans si furieux, de si plates atonies, des espoirs si extravagants et des désespoirs si profonds que je ne sais réellement pas comment je ne suis pas mort à la peine. Cette idée m'occupait et me remplissait tellement que je m'étonnais qu'on ne la vît pas clairement à travers mon corps comme une bougie dans une lanterne, et j'étais dans des transes mortelles que quelqu'un ne vînt à découvrir quel était l'objet de cet amour insensé'.

(Duncker, xi). Unlike those novels, however, it does not boast unbroken epistolary technique. Its content, rather than its form, renders it transgressive. Perhaps the two most intimate and risqué declarations are those of D'Albert and Madeleine de Maupin. D'Albert's comes first: 'Silvio, I am in love with ... Oh no, I shall never be able to say it ... I am in love with a man!' *MdM*, 166).³⁶ Madeleine's is akin to Madame de Merteuil's long description of her self-fashioning³⁷: '[I] left town, intent on returning only when I had acquired as full an experience of the world as possible ... I wanted to study men in depth, dissecting them fibre by fibre with my relentless scalpel' (*MdM*, 190).³⁸ Both express these hidden thoughts in letters to childhood friends, Silvio and Graciosa, invisible confidantes like the reader. D'Albert's statement is the most overtly scandalous: a man coming out to himself and his friend, unable to comprehend that he desires another man. But Madeleine's detailed description of her project — to dress and perform as a man in order to anatomise men — provides both the aesthetic pivot and subversive energy of Gautier's own project. Her intelligence and theatrical skill recall de Merteuil's recommendations for social and amorous manipulation: careful study followed by crafted performance. Mademoiselle de Maupin, of course, takes this one step further by actually playing the role of a man, simultaneously observing the gender both from within and without. She calls herself the 'third sex', a role that mirrors that of the reader of epistolary fiction or dramatic monologue — the third party to an intimate conversation or correspondence.

We must not forget, of course, that the real seventeenth-century Madeleine de Maupin had a 'formidable reputation' and 'was involved in sexual scandals and plots',

³⁶ '...Silvio, j'aime... Oh ! non, je ne pourrai jamais te le dire... l'aime un homme !'

³⁷ See Letter LXXXI, *Les liaisons dangereuses*, in which Mme.de Merteuil declares that she has created herself through profound self-reflection and analysis, and the upcoming chapter on Swinburne and Laclos.

³⁸ 'Je réalisai ce que j'avais de bien, et je sortis de la ville, décidée à n'y revenir qu'avec l'expérience la plus complète. ...je voulais étudier l'homme à fond, l'anatomiser fibre par fibre avec un scalpel inexorable et le tenir tout vif et tout palpitant sur ma table de dissection...'

but ‘finally succumbed to religion, repented all her excesses, and died young’ (intro, xiii). In the nineteenth century, Gautier recollects an earlier age of *libertinage*. For him, the era offers all the aesthetic possibilities of romance, chevaliers and their mistresses erotically trapped in chateaus and quaint cottages. And when Mademoiselle de Maupin, like the Marquise de Merteuil, disappears at the end of the novel, the void she leaves is never satisfactorily filled. Having taken both as her lovers, she vanishes. The space between Rosette and D’Albert is a place of constant desire, a longing for this third sex that, according to Madeleine, will only inflame their passion. The letter that she leaves describes love’s transience, ‘for everything has to come to an end’. The wistful language and sensuality of *Mademoiselle de Maupin* offer a tenderness that Laclos’s anti-sentimental epistles lack. Swinburne’s *A Year’s Letters* lies somewhere between the two, with Lady Midhurst herself providing both irony and sensitivity.

Whether the epistolary form is maintained or shattered, no author who chooses the genre does so lightly. In *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, Gautier deliberately breaks the form in order to comment on illusion. His omniscient narrator dryly remarks that his presence is a ‘return to the traditional form of the novel’.³⁹ Like Madame de Merteuil’s famous Letter 81 in *Les liaisons dangereuses*, an announcement of her history, development, and self-fashioning, revelatory declarations exist in *Mademoiselle de Maupin*. Gautier’s Preface could be considered yet another epistle: the author’s letter to his reader. There are others: D’Albert’s explanation of his search for beauty, followed by his wrenching admission, and Madeleine de Maupin’s outline of her radical project. Like de Merteuil’s letter, which is a sharp and intricate analysis in its own right, these are set-pieces that could almost stand alone as essays or aesthetic manifestos.

³⁹ Offering that ‘however far-seeing and full of wisdom’ he may be, the ‘epistolary confession which [D’Albert] was addressing to his friend’ still reveals more than the narrator ever could (*MdM*, 132).

Mademoiselle de Maupin has inspired much discussion as a gender-bending work⁴⁰ of ‘literary cross-dressing’, a piece of theatre dressed up in drag. When published in 1835, its treatment of same-sex love was especially risqué, not the least because homoeroticism ‘appears in the novel as the most romantic — because most erotic — form of romantic love’.⁴¹ Its sexual politics, especially the figure of the androgyne as embodied by Théodore, are all the more important given its counterculture aesthetic energy: ‘As a figure for art that transcends limiting considerations such as morality, the androgyne suits the campaign of Gautier and, in turn, Swinburne, to “épater le bourgeois” and promote art for art’s sake’.⁴² Promoting a model of aesthetic autonomy that leaves one free to admire, and love, whomever or whatever one pleases, Gautier produces a text where sex and art are fully intertwined — to deny one is to repudiate the other, for the admiration and love of beauty (in all its forms) is the very source of aesthetic appreciation. The androgyne manifests as a sort of pinnacle, the ‘third sex’ that unites both male and female in a ‘symbol of aesthetic perfection as well as of sexual fulfillment’ (319). Throughout *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, we are imparted lyrical sketches of Théodore’s looks. He is a pale horseman, his ‘golden pallor full of strength and life’; his ‘thin, straight nose imparted a remarkable pride and vigour to his profile and the skin at the edge of its curve was so fine it let the light shine through’, his look one of ‘marvellous superciliousness, a scowl of the most seductive kind; a sulky, bad-tempered childish expression that was most singular and attractive’ (134).⁴³ Or D’Albert’s smitten description:

⁴⁰ *Mademoiselle de Maupin*’s position as one of the earliest and most influential examples of the androgyne in nineteenth-century European literature is discussed in A.J. Busst’s study, ‘The Image of the Androgyne in the Nineteenth Century’ in *Romantic Mythologies*, ed. by Ian Fletcher (London: Routledge, 1967), pp. 1-95.

⁴¹ Elizabeth Wilson, ‘Bohemian Love’ *Theory Culture Society* 15 (1998), 111-127, (p. 114).

⁴² Thaïs Morgan, ‘Reimagining Masculinity in Victorian Criticism’, *Victorian Studies* 36 (1993), 315-332 (p. 319).

⁴³ ‘...mais d’une pâleur dorée, pleine de force et de vie... son nez droit et mince donnait à son profil une fierté et une vigueur merveilleuses, et la chair en était si fine que, sur le bord du contour, elle laissait transpercer la lumière... ce qui lui donnait quelque chose d’adorablement dédaigneux, une smorfia on ne

Two large locks of black lustrous hair, just like bunches of grapes from ancient Erigone, hung gracefully down his cheeks and framed the delicate, regular oval of his beautiful face in a most charming fashion...with his long hair wafting gently in the breeze revealing his white-as-marble throat, the large robe tied around his waist, those beautiful hands protruding from their cuffs like the pistils of a flower from its petals, he was not just the most beautiful of men but the most beautiful of women as well...(168-69).⁴⁴

Declaring her deep love for him, Rosette calls Théodore ‘handsome, young, smiling, just like the charming god Phoebus’, and claims that ‘at every moment roses and rubies spilled forth from your lips’ (192).⁴⁵ But his charm is not just his handsome beauty, his lovely handsomeness; his behaviour itself is captivating, as ‘in all his manners there was such winning charm, such natural grace, something so gentle and proud that even men were won over by him’ (151).⁴⁶ The descriptions alter, as D’Albert and Rosette slowly comprehend — the first intuiting, the other discovering — that Théodore is a woman, a shift that suggests that perception and aesthetic appreciation are fluid, and that beauty is indeed in the eye of the beholder. Interpretation of beauty, that is, changes based on the beholder’s attitude. When Mademoiselle de Maupin dresses as Rosalind, her attraction is represented by D’Albert in distinctly feminine terms: ‘Her long brown hair entwined with strings of large pearls fell down around her beautiful cheeks in natural curls. Her shoulders and neck were bare ... And how wonderfully poetic the soft undulations of her curves, more smooth and velvety than swans’ necks!’ (232).⁴⁷ But before Mademoiselle de Maupin’s revelation, her beauty is inexplicable, mysterious, neither the soft

peut plus piquante, un air de bouderie enfantine et de mauvaise humeur très singulier et très charmant’.

⁴⁴ ‘Deux grosses touffes de cheveux, noires, lustrées, pareilles aux grappes de raisin de l’Érigone antique, lui pendaient gracieusement le long des joues et encadraient d’une manière charmante l’ovale fin et correct de sa belle figure... Avec ces longs cheveux que la brise remuait doucement, ce cou de marbre ainsi découvert, cette grande robe serrée autour de la taille, ces belles mains sortant de leurs manchettes comme les pistils d’une fleur du milieu de leurs pétales, – il avait l’air non du plus beau des hommes, mais de la plus belle des femmes...’

⁴⁵ ‘Vous arrivez beau, jeune, souriant, pareil à Phoebus le dieu charmant... Vos lèvres chaque minute laissaient tomber des roses et des rubis...’ A clever bit of wordplay linking Phoebus to Phoebe, as Rosette herself plays the lovestruck shepherdess to Théodore’s Rosalind in their production of *As You Like It*.

⁴⁶ ‘Il y avait dans toutes ses façons un charme si vainqueur, une grâce si naturelle, quelque chose de si doux et de si fier que les hommes mêmes y étaient sensibles’.

⁴⁷ ‘Ses grands cheveux bruns, entremêlés de cordons de grosses perles, tombaient en boucles naturelles au long de ses belles joues ! ses épaules et sa poitrine étaient découvertes... quels ravissants poèmes dans les moelleuses ondulations de ces contours plus souples et plus veloutés que le cou des cygnes !’

‘undulations’ of a woman nor the chiselled vigour of a man, but the ‘perfect, harmonious’ blend of the ‘son of Hermes and Aphrodite’, what D’Albert calls ‘one of the sweetest creations of the pagan genius’ (182).⁴⁸ It is the quality of aesthetic taste that the androgynous object intensifies; faced with a pure beauty that is neither male nor female, the beholder’s gaze sees with a new clarity, unhampered by the boundaries of gender or morals.

Transgressive homosexual passion, as linked to the figure of the androgyne, was gaining importance in French literature of this period. Elizabeth Wilson insightfully identifies Balzac’s Vautrin and his burning love for the pale Lucien de Rubempré as a key example:

In *Lost Illusions* and *Pleasures and Troubles of Courtesans*, written in the same years as Gautier’s novel [*Mademoiselle de Maupin*], Honoré de Balzac dealt directly with homosexual love, linking it to another fatal figure, whose characteristics contributed to the idea of the bohemian... Vautrin is a satanic figure, endowed with enormous strength and cunning, yet he is also heroic and, in his love for Lucien de Rubempré, poignant and even tragic. Lucien, the would-be poet is, by contrast, a weak, effeminate, and narcissistic dandy... Balzac does not present Vautrin as a bohemian character, yet the character reminds us that as well as displaying features of the doomed aristocrat, Byron, the emerging figure of the rebel artist or bohemian was simultaneously linked to the underworld... The combination of aristocratic outlawry and underworld associations marked the emergent bohemian out as quintessentially anti-bourgeois. To flout the conventions and restrictions surrounding sexual behaviour in 19th-century society was one obvious form of rebellion ... Bohemian women — with considerably more difficulty — laid claim to the same rights to sexual freedom as men (Wilson, 114-15).

Swinburne greatly admired the character of Vautrin⁴⁹ for his criminal genius, evil energy (a Machiavellian drive similar to that of Wilkie Collins’s Count Fosco or Laclos’s Valmont and de Merteuil), and colossal creative ambition; it is interesting, and perhaps very significant, that Vautrin also came to represent a subculture in Balzac’s *La Comédie humaine*, that of the sexually experimental and marginalized (potentially aristocratic)

⁴⁸ ‘C’est en effet une des plus suaves créations du génie païen que ce fils d’Hermès et d’Aphrodite’.

⁴⁹ An admiration that is examined further in the chapter on Swinburne and Balzac.

bohemian. We are reminded of Gautier's assertion that the greatest things in life are 'royalty and poetry', an acknowledgement that creating art and being noble are the foundation for a rebel life of decadence, transgression, and beauty. It is of course typical of Balzac's dark realism that Vautrin's homosexuality and passion for the androgynous Lucien de Rubempré come to tragedy, whereas Gautier's transgressive, bisexual Madeleine de Maupin not only avoids disaster, but actually flourishes. In its ideal, aesthetic world, the bohemian impulses in *Mademoiselle de Maupin* are obvious, vibrant, and celebrated. Where Vautrin must in the real world suffer the consequences of crime and outlawed desire, the trio in Gautier's novel are better off for their liaisons. Rosette and D'Albert experience renewed desire because of their passionate interlude with Théodore. The true novelty of *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, however, is its introduction of the female androgyne. As Wilson remarks, Lucien de Rubempré is the slightly effeminate, androgynous, male object of desire — a more usual type. In *Lesbia Brandon*, Swinburne models his eponym on Gautier's female androgyne, playing with the concept of the female bohemian, the aristocratic pagan and antichristian poet who desires sexual and aesthetic liberation.

Our first glimpse of Lesbia Brandon is at a party given by the Waristons; she is mentioned earlier as a skilled versifier and writer, but she finally makes a much-anticipated appearance:

Miss Brandon was dark and delicately shaped; not tall, but erect and supple; she had thick and heavy hair growing low on her forehead, so brown that it seemed black in the shadow; her eyes were sombre and mobile, full of fervour and of dreams ... Her cheeks had the profound pallor of complexions at once dark and colourless; but the skin was pure and tender, the outline clear and soft: she was warm and wan as a hot day without a sun ... A certain power and a certain trouble were perceptible in the face, but traceable to no single feature: apart from whatever it might have of beauty, the face was one to attract rather than satisfy (*LB*, 273).

In manner she is utterly androgynous, confounding traditional femininity and her devoted lover Herbert Seyton, who is perplexed by her just as much as D'Albert by the cross-dressing Madeleine. 'The woman was all but incapable of tears' (*LB*, 285), writes Swinburne, and 'was so wholly ignorant of man's love as not to feel herself cruel' to Herbert (286). Most compellingly, her beauty is one to 'attract rather than satisfy', reiterating D'Albert's ideal of perfect beauty, which entices but is 'forever inaccessible', or, Cleopatra-like, 'makes hungry where most [it] satisfies'.⁵⁰ That Lesbia remains unreachable and unattainable makes her the ideal object, one for which a lover can strive passionately without obtaining satisfaction or its counterpart, bored satiation. Herbert's love for Lesbia is fervent and fruitless, for she, true to her name, prefers women — specifically, his sister, Lady Wariston, who is in turn engaged in a hopeless affair with Herbert's tutor, the punishing Denham. At the very last, dying by killing 'herself off by inches, with the help of eau-de-Cologne and doses of opium', she is 'white, with grey lips; her long shapely hands were pale and faded, and the dark tender warmth of her even colour had changed into a hot and haggard hue', but 'her beauty of form was unimpaired' (*LB*, 342). Delirious, she admits to Herbert that, while she cares for him with a fraternal love, the slight attraction she once felt was because he was 'very like [his] sister once about the mouth and eyes', and that she had 'seen women with as much hair about the lips' (*LB*, 348-49). Thus, though Lesbia is Swinburne's female androgyne, it is Bertie's androgynous features and resemblance to his sister that make him a vague, though unfulfilled, object of affection.

The tragic end of Lesbia Brandon outlines Swinburne's sensibility in powerful contrast to that of Gautier. The novel reads very much like *Mademoiselle de Maupin*. Its tone is similarly lyrical; a similar passion animates its characters. But unlike Gautier's

⁵⁰ William Shakespeare, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, ed. by Burton Raffel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 55, ll. 239-240.

personalities, Swinburne's are doomed, thwarted, and disillusioned, for life will not allow them to satisfy their aesthetic ideal. Herbert's wounded thoughts at Lesbia's deathbed encapsulate the bittersweet Swinburnian lyric well:

The moments as they went seemed to touch him like falling drops of sand or water: as though the hourglass or the waterclock were indeed emptied by grains or gout upon his head: a clock measuring its minutes by blood or tears instead of water or sand ... That night, as hope and trust fell away from under him, he first learnt the reality of fate: inevitable, not to be cajoled by resignation, not to be averted by intercession (*LB*, 349).

In the perfectly enclosed world of *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, D'Albert dreams his faultless beauty and, in the person of Théodore/Madeleine, achieves it. An ideal night is consummated, and, because the object of desire departs, D'Albert and Rosette suffer no bitter aftertaste of surfeit, excess, or ennui. Gautier's characters exercise an aesthetic autonomy that Swinburne can never — not in his verse nor in his prose — fully embrace, for there are consequences to such bliss and freedom, outcomes not conventionally moral, but harmonious with the 'reality of fate: inevitable, not to be cajoled by resignation'. The differences between Gautier's Preface and aesthetic manifesto and Swinburne's more tempered strain of *l'art pour l'art* resurface, for while the French poet claims that he belongs to 'those for whom the superfluous is necessary' ('Preface', 23), Swinburne recognises that the superfluous pleasures that make us human are the same ones that give our lives their great tragedies, their poignant losses, their intensely mortal regrets. But the right to experience such things, and to depict them in art, is an aesthetic autonomy for which Swinburne perpetually strives, the freedom and danger felt by Herbert in the mystic sea as he 'sprang at the throat of the waves that threw him flat, pressed up against their soft fierce bosoms, and fought for their sharp embraces, grappled with them as lover with lover' (*LB*, 205-06).

Though Madeleine de Maupin garners the most attention as the aesthetic heart of *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, I contend that its true centre lies in D'Albert's impassioned

treatise — in the form of a letter to Silvio — on his ardent response to beauty. The ideal that he eulogises is one that reverberates in later aesthetic theory — by Swinburne, Pater,⁵¹ and Wilde, among others. His letter also contains an oblique critique of those who seek to suppress or censor anything that has to do with the beauty of the human body:

As to the rest, I don't define beauty by such and such a curve or line. The manner, gestures, bearing, breath, colour, sound, scent, everything which goes to make up life comes into the composition of beauty, as far as I am concerned. All sweet-smelling things, all that sings and is radiant belong to it by rights. I love rich brocades and the great sumptuous folds of splendid cloths; I love huge flowers and perfume burners, clear running water and the shiny reflection of fine armour, thoroughbred horses and big white dogs like you see in the pictures of Paul Veronese. I'm a real pagan in this respect, I don't care for ugly gods at all. Although I am at bottom not exactly irreligious, nobody is in fact a worse Christian than I am. I don't understand this mortification of the flesh which is the essence of Christianity. I believe it is sacrilegious to harm God's handiwork and I can't believe flesh is bad, because He has worked it Himself with His hands and in His image (*MdM*, 122).⁵²

He goes on to describe his visceral reaction to an object of beauty:

My first sensation, when I see one of these marvellous heads in paintings which seem to look right through you for all eternity, is a sudden frisson and an admiration not unmixed with a certain terror. There are tears in my eyes, my heart starts racing. Then, when I have become more familiar with it and have further explored the secrets of its beauty, I quietly compare this head with my own. Jealousy writhes around in the depths of my soul, more twisted and knotted than a viper, and it is all I can do not to throw myself at the canvas and tear it to pieces (*MdM*, 125).⁵³

⁵¹ See Benjamin Morgan, 'Aesthetic Freedom: Walter Pater and the Politics of Autonomy', *ELH* 77 (2010), 731-56 for a close analysis of aesthetic autonomy and the effect of *l'art pour l'art* on Pater.

⁵² 'Au reste, je ne circonscris point la beauté dans telle ou telle sinuosité de lignes. — L'air, le geste, la démarche, le souffle, la couleur, le son, le parfum, tout ce qui est la vie entre pour moi dans la composition de la beauté ; tout ce qui embaume, chante ou rayonne y revient de droit. — J'aime les riches brocarts, les splendides étoffes avec leurs plis amples et puissants ; j'aime les larges fleurs et les cassolettes, la transparence des eaux vives et l'éclat miroitant des belles armes, les chevaux de race et ces grands chiens blancs comme on en voit dans les tableaux de Paul Véronèse. — Je suis un vrai païen de ce côté, et je n'adore point les dieux qui sont mal faits : quoiqu'au fond je ne sois pas précisément ce qu'on appelle irréligieux, personne n'est de fait plus mauvais chrétien que moi. — Je ne comprends pas cette mortification de la matière qui fait l'essence du christianisme, je trouve que c'est une action sacrilège que de frapper sur l'oeuvre de Dieu, et je ne puis croire que la chair soit mauvaise, puisqu'il l'a pétrie lui-même de ses doigts et à son image'.

⁵³ 'Ma première sensation devant une de ces têtes merveilleuses dont le regard peint semble vous traverser et se prolonger à l'infini est le saisissement et une admiration qui n'est pas sans quelque terreur : mes yeux se trempent, mon coeur bat ; puis, quand je suis un peu familiarisé avec elle, et que je suis entré plus avant dans le secret de sa beauté, je fais une comparaison tacite d'elle à moi ; la jalousie se tord au fond de mon âme en noeuds plus entortillés qu'une vipère, et j'ai toutes les peines du monde à ne pas me jeter sur la toile et à ne pas la déchirer en morceaux'.

The desire, craving, and aching need for beauty are here so strikingly depicted that D'Albert's frustrated passion feels almost more real than anything else in the novel. Madeleine de Maupin may be the creative self-fashioner, but D'Albert possesses an artistic temperament and eye. He fully admits his 'pagan' instincts, his adoration of the 'God-given' human flesh, and his unabashed fascination with beauty that is carnal, worldly, and mortal. He also sketches a multi-faceted view of beauty that encompasses synaesthesia and impression, 'sweet-smelling things' and all that 'sings and is radiant'. These passages resonate with Swinburne's deeply sensual and humanistic ideology of art that is 'like the hearing of strong music or the drinking of sweet wine', satisfying 'not the wonder and hunger of the eyes only, but also the mouth and the ears'.⁵⁴ D'Albert's need is the longing of an artist for art, but more warmly, that of the lover for the beloved. And in binding love and art together so inextricably, Gautier makes the most compelling case for a *poésie pure* that holds beauty of form and impression paramount. D'Albert's testament is the centrepiece to *Mademoiselle de Maupin* as an aesthetic novel, a novel about aesthetics, and a forerunner to Swinburne's thoughts on the opportunities and limits of aesthetic freedom.

⁵⁴ Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'The Portrait' (1861, publ. 1909), collected in *Bonchurch* vol. 17, 3-8. Rpt. as 'The Portrait' in *Major Poems and Selected Prose*, ed. by Jerome McGann & Charles L. Sligh (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), pp. 437- 439 (p. 438). Discussed extensively in the chapter on Swinburne and Boccaccio.

5. *Amour Courtois*: Swinburne, Boccaccian Romance, and the *Triameron*

What pain, established in so sweet a place,
 But the plucked leaf of it smells fragrantly?
 What colour burning man's wide-open eye
 But may be pleasurably seen? what sense
 Keeps in its hot sharp extreme violence
 No savour of sweet things? The bereaved blood
 And emptied flesh in their most broken mood
 Fail not so wholly, famish not when thus
 Past honey keeps the starved lip covetous.

- A.C. Swinburne, 'The Two Dreams (From Boccaccio)'
 (*Poems* 1, 259, ll. 242-50)

Among his other apprenticeships, Swinburne trained under a Florentine master:

Giovanni Boccaccio. *The Decameron* of Boccaccio (composed between 1350-1353) encompasses a hundred tales told by ten people over ten days — tales of love bawdy, erotic, and sometimes tragic; stories of wit and pragmatic life lessons.¹ They are housed in a frame narrative similar to *One Thousand and One Nights*: a group of Florentine men and women fleeing from the Black Death gather nightly to tell tales which ultimately form a catalogue of life in medieval Italy. We have several outstanding examples of Boccaccio's inspiration in Swinburne's verse, chiefly 'The Two Dreams', which appeared in *Poems and Ballads, First Series* (1866), and 'The Complaint of Lisa', from *Poems and Ballads, Second Series* (1878). 'The Two Dreams' is about Andriuola and Gabriotto, doomed lovers whose secret trysts culminate in Gabriotto's sudden death, the premonition of which appears in the titular two dreams. 'The Complaint of Lisa' is a double sestina based on *The Decameron* X.7, narrating the unrequited passion of Lisa for King Peter of Aragon. Both poems examine the inner lives of Boccaccio's characters, and both focus on the competing drives of love and death. Gabriotto and Andriuola's last kiss, for example, is painted as burning final act and death rattle ('he, with close mouth

¹ Edition used is Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. by Mark Musa and Peter Bondanella (New York: Signet, 2002).

passionate and dumb, burned at her lips'), the 'harsh last moan' of doomed love that transmutes Boccaccian romance into Swinburnian tragedy (*Poems* 1, 264, ll. 391-393). Where *The Decameron's* story is laced with humour, an attention to the mundane — for example, the bawdy advances of the *podestà* upon a grieving Andriuola returning her lover's body — Swinburne brings the tragic elements of the tale into sharper relief by focusing quite explicitly upon them; this will have importance when we turn to *The Decameron's* influence on his prose. In these poems, Swinburne's unique talent is to pluck out the psychological lives of *The Decameron's* dramatis personae and, employing the monologue form of which he was a master, present them individually apart from Boccaccio's populated and sprawling tapestry.

Boccaccio's subjects provided rich sources for his verse, but *The Decameron* also inspired Swinburne as a pattern of prose that he enjoyed, admired, and would imitate. Its vibrant sketches of Italian life and character studies bring to mind Edmund Wilson's description of Swinburne's novel *Lesbia Brandon*, where one gets 'splendid descriptions of swimming and riding that convey the thrill of real experience while at the same time giving the impression that, like Swinburne's fantastic Elizabethans, they are somehow framed and varnished as painted panels in the great ornamental country houses in which the characters lived'.² The 'thrill of real experience' combined with the impression of 'framed and varnished' portraits suggest to us the texture that *The Decameron* provided. Boccaccio's allegories encompass a *commedia umana*, a 'great Human Comedy'.³ Balzac's *La Comédie humaine*, indeed, owes something (though more in theme than in style) to *The Decameron*, and the French novelist actually wrote a partial cycle of *Contes Drolatiques* (*Droll Stories*) — three sets of ten stories each, in 1832, 1833, and 1837 —

² Edmund Wilson, 'Introduction', in *The Novels of A.C. Swinburne* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1962), pp. 3-37 (p. 27).

³ Thomas G. Bergin, 'Introduction', in *The Decameron*, trans. by Mark Musa and Peter Bondanella (New York: Penguin, 1982), pp. xxi-xxxi (p. xxix).

in the manner of Rabelais and Boccaccio, ‘broad, racy, and somewhat licentious’.⁴ The earlier *Heptameron* (1558) of Marguerite of Navarre included eight days and 72 racy and romantic stories modelled on *The Decameron*. Closer to Swinburne, his idol Walter Savage Landor wrote the *Pentameron* (1837), a continuation of his *Imaginary Conversations* (1824-1829). It consists of fictional dialogues between Petrarch and Boccaccio, dialogues which become a vehicle for Landor’s critiques of Dante. In one key passage, Petrarch says to Boccaccio, ‘I meant your *Decameron*; in which there is more character, more nature, more invention, than either modern or ancient Italy’, and ‘little more than a tenth of the *Decameron* is bad: less than a twentieth of the *Divine Commedia* is good’.⁵ Swinburne of course worshipped Landor, even alluding to him in the same letter in which he describes his Boccaccio project to Lady Trevelyan: ‘Have you heard the report that old Landor is going to republish *all* his suppressed libels in verse and prose, and more new ones? Isn’t he a marvel of heaven’s making?’ (*Letters* 1, 40). Landor’s support of the humanism and inventiveness of *The Decameron* is thus highly relevant. Swinburne would have appreciated such continuity, the Bakhtinian growth and interconnection of great literature over time, and the fullness of admiring Balzac and Landor, who in turn admired Boccaccio, and so on. His eternal desire to live in the company of preceding masters has been described as a ‘veneration of the poets of the past’ that ‘was exceeded only by his desire to be clothed with as many of their mantles as possible’.⁶ At best, his veneration of these poets signifies Swinburne’s belief in the unity of art, irrespective of time and place. Great humanists like Boccaccio and Balzac –whose preoccupation was the human, rather than divine, comedy — moulded his thought most strikingly.

⁴ Frederick Lawton, *Balzac* (London: Grant Richards Ltd, 1910), p. 110.

⁵ Walter Savage Landor, *The Longer Prose Works of Walter Savage Landor* (2 vols), (London: J.M. Dent & Co, 1893), p. 10.

⁶ Alison Milbank, *Dante and the Victorians* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1998), p. 77.

Like many creative artists, Swinburne began writing prose by imitating the work of others, using both parody and pastiche. His experiments of the early 1860s reflect this process. I have elsewhere discussed the first complete example of his fiction, *La Fille du Policeman* (1861), a send-up of Hugo and contemporaries in an improper, parodic French novel about English life. Around this time, he also produced imitations of fourteenth-century prose fiction, his Boccaccio-inspired short stories. Finally, there were the chronicles (*The Chronicle of Queen Fredegond* and *Lucretia Borgia (The Chronicle of Tebaldeo Tebaldei)*), pastiches of late medieval and early Renaissance narratives. He wrote in 1861 to Lady Trevelyan and William Bell Scott that he was ‘trying to write prose ... a few stories each about three or six pages long. Likewise a big one about ... Lucrezia’ (*Letters* 1, 38-39) and that, ‘I have done three prose stories of a mediaeval kind, about as long and moral as those of Boccaccio’s. Item - compiled a chronicle of the life of Queen Fredegond - seven chapters ... Item - nearly completed my French novel’ (*Letters* 1, 41).⁷ Hyder calls Swinburne’s imitations of the Renaissance poet part of a ‘rigorous’ preparation in various genres and forms that included ‘the old chronicles, the Elizabethan drama, and modern poets’.⁸ Among his on-going projects, he mentions to Lady Trevelyan ‘a long one out of Boccaccio, that was begun ages ago and let drop’ (*Letters* 1, 38-39). This was probably his projected collection of tales, *The Triameron*, intended as a series of interlocking stories modelled on those of Boccaccio.⁹ Edmund Gosse published a list of the proposed stories in the *Fortnightly Review*, these comprising the first and second days (missing the third), ‘written probably in 1861...found among his papers, written out on the back of a page of the draft copy of *Chastelard*’:¹⁰

FIRST DAY.

⁷ *La Fille du Policeman* (1861).

⁸ Clyde K. Hyder, ‘Swinburne and the Popular Ballad’, *PMLA* 49 (1934), 295-309 (p. 295).

⁹ Named as such in the postscript to ‘The Portrait’.

¹⁰ Edmund Gosse, ‘Swinburne’s Unpublished Writings’, *Fortnightly Review* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1914), pp. 255-267 (p. 261).

The Two Kisses.
 The Portrait.
 Dead Love.
 Dream of a Murder.
 Talking in Sleep.
 A Man lov'd by a Witch
 The Story of Queen Fredegonde.
 The Feast of Ladies.
 A Lover of Brinvilliers.
 The Case of René Aubryat.

SECOND DAY.
 Lescombat.
 Mistress Sanders.
 Accorambuoni.
 Sans Merci (betrays lover to husband).
 A Châteaubrun of Rococo period.
 A Friend of Madame Dubarry's.
 Bogey.
 Romance.
 Bianca Capello.

Of these, 'Dead Love' was published in *Once a Week* in October 1862, and Georges Lafourcade argued that a version of 'Sans Merci' appears in Letter 20 of Swinburne's novel *A Year's Letters* (1877).¹¹ 'The Portrait' was published posthumously in 1909, and 'The Story of Queen Fredegonde' is likely an Urtext for *The Chronicle of Queen Fredegond*, also posthumously published in 1909 (and which Swinburne distinguishes from the Boccaccian short stories in the letter to Bell Scott: 'three prose stories' in the style of Boccaccio and 'a chronicle of the life of Queen Fredegond – seven chapters'). 'The Case of René Aubryat' is identified by Wise as the basis for *A Criminal Case*

¹¹ Reggie writes to Clara of a 'bit of family history' regarding an ancestor 'Lady Cheyne of James I.'s time' known to be a great beauty of steadfast moral character ('that is why they gave her the motto *Sans reproche*') who, though married to the 'gaunt' William, tenth Baron, fell in love with a Reginald Harewood. After a tryst with Harewood, she awakes her husband and enjoins him that 'if he believed her good and honest, let him strike a stroke for her and kill this fellow', a story that aligns with Swinburne's jotting 'betrays lover to husband' (*AYL*, 112-113). According to Lafourcade : 'Il faut ajouter à ce conte l'étrange anecdote qui figure dans la lettre XX de *A Year's Letters* et qui narre comment une Lady Cheyne de l'époque de Jacques I^{er} reçut un soir son amant Reginald Harewood dans sa chambre, puis alla au milieu de la nuit chercher son mari et lui fit laver son honneur en égorgeant le jeune homme endormi. <<They called her <<sans reproche>>. I should put <<sans merci>> under the frame [of her picture] if it were mine>>. Cette dernière phrase prouve l'identité de cette histoire avec le n° (14) de la liste: *Sans Merci (betrays lover to husband)*'. (Lafourcade 2, 91).

(published in 1910, featuring a family named Andryot instead of Aubryat).¹² Finally, 'The Marriage of Monna Lisa' (1909), is not present on the list and was perhaps intended for the third day.¹³

That Swinburne chose Boccaccio is typical of his eclecticism and fondness for championing authors who were inadequately appreciated by the Victorians. While on one hand he wrote penetrative commentary on popular writers (Wilkie Collins, Charles Dickens, Victor Hugo), he was often concerned with bringing the obscure, overlooked, scorned, or condemned to light. So it was with Baudelaire, Laclos, and Balzac to a certain degree; so perhaps it was with Boccaccio. Dante, of course, enjoyed huge popularity in Victorian England, and became a 'central source of value, a touchstone' for many Victorian poets (Milbank, 27). But Boccaccio, his bawdy biographer, offers a distinctly different (and later) vision of the early Renaissance in Italy.¹⁴

Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375) was born the son of a Florentine merchant, his mother unknown; the details of his origins are largely *sub rosa*. In his early years, he studied the works of Dante, which would deeply influence him. He was apprenticed at a bank, but disliked the profession, and later studied law. Eventually, he pursued writing full time as a vocation. He began *The Decameron* in 1349 (though the stories themselves were probably in process much earlier), and in 1350 he met Petrarch, whose friendship and mentorship would be a defining factor in his later years. Boccaccio revised *The Decameron* in 1370-71, and it has been speculated that his association with Petrarch

¹² Lafourcade corroborates, 'il 'nest point douteux que le récit doive faire partie du Triaméron puisqu'il figure à la liste déjà citée sous le titre non équivoque de <<*The Case of René Aubryat*>>. Il s'agit tout simplement d'une charge amusante des romans de Balzac' (2, 90-91). Randolph Hughes disagrees, 'If A *Criminal Case*, which treats a section of Parisian life in 1836, was really meant to be part of the *Triameron*, then the external mise-en-scene of the latter must have been set in the fourth decade of the 19th century at the earliest – and this is very questionable...for one thing, the language of the tales which indubitably belong to the series is that of people of some past epoch; it is unlikely that they were all represented as being past-masters in the art of pastiche' (Hughes, 'Period', 73).

¹³ Possibly the third of the 'three prose stories of a mediaeval kind' in the Bell Scott letter of Jan. 1861?

¹⁴ Boccaccio wrote the *Life of Dante* around 1348 – it is the earliest glimpse of the poet, and established such central facts of Dante's biography as the real identity of Beatrice.

transformed him from the broadly humanistic perspective of the *Decameron* to a more austere one. Boccaccio of course revered Dante, and modelled much of his early work on this preceptor. His later writing owes much to his friendship with Petrarch, but Dante is to Boccaccio what Hugo was to Swinburne — a master and literary father figure. To the Victorians, Dante was the ‘representative of a more poetic age that [could] invigorate contemporary aesthetics’ (Milbank, 27), while Boccaccio was funny, frank, vulgar, and risqué. *The Decameron* suffered a bad reputation ‘in more censorious times’ and literary historians often dismissed its supposedly ‘frivolous nature’ and ‘scandalous tone’ (Bergin, xxix-xxxi). Tennyson ‘returned to Boccaccio much later in life, writing a play on another subject from the *Decameron*, *The Falcon*, when he was nearly 60’, and though the cycle was famed for its bawdiness, he was drawn to the tales that belonged to a ‘more courtly romance tradition’.¹⁵ Similarly, Swinburne seems to have extracted the tales with romantic and tragic potential for his own purposes (especially in verse). At the same time, however, he is not quite the same reader of Boccaccio as many of his contemporaries; Swinburne was, after all, himself a writer of bawdy burlesques and farces, perpetrator of hoaxes, lover of Balzac and other writers of great scope, the admirer of *La Comédie humaine*. It is easy to imagine that *The Decameron*, with its breadth and crosscutting tales of love, humour, wit, and society, would have appealed to his humanism. We know that he saw ‘the period between the installation of official Christianity at Rome and the re-emergence of classical, humanist, and even pagan culture in the Italian Renaissance as a long, dark age’, and Boccaccio is one of the earliest of the emerging humanist luminaries.¹⁶ *The Decameron* is ‘not concerned with eternal, transcendent values’ in the way of Dante and Milton, but the ‘savor of [the] book is wholesome and *au fond* not

¹⁵ Leonée Ormond, ‘Victorian Romance: Tennyson’, in *A Companion to Romance: From Classical to Contemporary*, ed. by C.J. Saunders (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 321-340 (p. 329).

¹⁶ Jerome McGann, ‘Introduction’, in *Major Poems and Selected Prose*, ed. by Jerome McGann and Charles L. Sligh (New Haven: Yale UP, 2004), pp. xv-xxviii (p. xxi).

without its own kind of inspiration. Having no didactic axe to grind ... the author reports serenely on what he sees' (Bergin, xxx-xxxi). Humanity, with all its foibles, is Boccaccio's subject, and in its naturalism and lack of moralizing, *The Decameron* is strikingly modern. The fact that Boccaccio has no 'didactic axe' to grind could only have elevated the book in Swinburne's view. As an early example of non-didacticism in art, especially the vitally significant Renaissance flowering of art and humanist thought, *The Decameron* gains even more importance in the formation of Swinburne's early thinking.

Though many of Swinburne's contemporaries had a vexed relationship to Boccaccio, it is important to note that a subset did not. These, of course, were the Pre-Raphaelites, for whom Boccaccio was not just an interest, but also a central figure and profound inspiration. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 1859 painting, 'Bocca Baciata', which established his signature aesthetic — voluptuous, Italianate,¹⁷ and sensual, — bears a title and inscription that refer to a proverb from *The Decameron*: '*Bocca baciata non perde ventura, anzi rinnova come fa la luna*'.¹⁸ The proverb appears at the end of the seventh story on the second day, and refers to the Babylonian princess Alatiel who is promised in marriage to the King of Algarve. Due to a series of misfortunes, she passes through the hands of nine different men, and despite her amorous encounters with the same, is eventually returned to her father and thence presented to the King of Algarve as his virgin bride. Rossetti's choice of this story reveals, in part, the Aesthetic preoccupation with flesh and desire, the beauty of voluptuousness and female sexuality. The kissed mouth, of course, has tasted pleasure, and rather than being diminished by it, wan and thin as the Victorian fallen woman, it blooms and ripens. This pleasure becomes a fertile metaphor for aesthetic enjoyment, which does not wither, but constantly renews itself like the lunar cycle (itself a sign of female fecundity). *The Decameron* has been called a 'book of

¹⁷ More specifically, Venetian and Titianesque.

¹⁸ 'A mouth that is kissed loses no flavour, but, like the moon, is renewed' (*The Decameron* II.7, p. 148).

laughter’,¹⁹ but it could equally be named a book of pleasure — it openly portrays sensual enjoyment: its characters give and receive delight, and even its amusement is fleshy, physical. The beauty of pleasure (and pleasure in beauty) and the appeal of Boccaccio’s golden era are critical to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and to its sometime, informal member, Swinburne. As we know, he ‘joined the Pre-Raphaelite artists who were engaged in decorating the newly-built Union Debating Hall at Oxford in 1857’ and ‘adopted their general enthusiasm for the Middle Ages’,²⁰ which only supplemented a passion already extant. He was involved with the Pre-Raphaelites in their early years, and though their paths ultimately diverged, this period of time would prove crucial to both parties’ developing aesthetics. In this time, Boccaccio played an important role.

Wolfgang Iates argues that ‘the medievalism of Pre-Raphaelite art mainly relied on figures and episodes taken from literature, some of which became leitmotifs for the work of the movement’ (Iates, 142). One of these icons was Boccaccio’s Isabella, from *The Decameron* IV.5. Isabella (or Lisabetta), the daughter of a wealthy merchant family in Messina, falls in love with Lorenzo, a young man who works in her brothers’ shop. Her brothers discover their affair and murder Lorenzo; his ghost appears in Isabella’s dream and tells her where he is buried. She finds his body and plants his head in a basil pot, which she waters with her tears. Over time, the basil grows luxuriant, and Isabella’s beauty fades. Her brothers notice this and remove the pot from her room, whereupon she falls ill and finally dies. In 1818, Keats wrote a poem called ‘Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil’, and the ‘sad ditty of this story born, from mouth to mouth through all the country

¹⁹ Ernest H. Wilkins, *A History of Italian Literature*, revised by Thomas G. Bergin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 109.

²⁰ Wolfgang Iates, “‘When the Sword came back from sea’ – Aspects of Medievalism in Pre-Raphaelite Literature”, *The Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature*, ed. by H. Grabes, H. Diller, H. Isernhagen (Berlin: Verlag Walter de Gruyter & Co, 1988), 5 (1987), 141-71 (p. 161).

pass'd'²¹ was to have a deep influence on the Aesthetic movement. Keats himself was a fascinating figure for the Victorians, and with the publication of Monckton Milnes's 1848 biography²² of the poet:

Keats was read as an archetypal young, prodigious artist, bred nobly through his mother, suffering neglect or abuse from the world, yet above greed or lust for fame, striving through self-help and self-education to improve himself- a quintessential Victorian striver. For mid-century Victorians, Keats was the site of deep emotional attachments and public affection.²³

The PRB was similarly attached to Keats, some of its members having viewed his poetry as a rich source even before Monckton Milnes biography, which both John Everett Millais and Holman Hunt read eagerly.²⁴ Holman Hunt and Millais 'shared Keats's sense of disinheritance from cultural traditions and his methods of fetishizing translations or imitations of past art to appropriate knowledge, even if second hand' (Codell, 341). The PRB (and, one could argue, Swinburne) were attracted to the young prodigy striving to create beauty amidst the darkness and cruelty of his circumstances. By taking inspiration from *The Decameron*, Keats's poem reinforced the PRB's medievalism and predilection for 'proto-Renaissance style and spatial arrangements, translated and transcribed Renaissance literature (Boccaccio read through Keats), eighteenth-century English conversation-piece painting, and English Romantic poetry' (Codell, 350), and provided a legitimate literary forbear for their choice of theme and style. Isabella and her basil pot would become valuable and enduring symbols. Millais depicted a scene from the story in his *Lorenzo and Isabella* (1848-49) and Holman Hunt painted *Isabella and the Pot of Basil* (1867) many years later. Millais portrays the moment when the brothers discover

²¹ John Keats, 'Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil: A Story from Boccaccio', *John Keats: Complete Poems*, ed. by Jack Stillinger (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), pp. 184-198 (p. 198, ll. 501-502).

²² Richard Monckton-Milnes, *Life, Letters, and Literary Remains, of John Keats* (London: Moxon, 1848).

²³ Julie F. Codell, 'Painting Keats: Pre-Raphaelite Artists Between Social Transgressions and Painterly Conventions', *Victorian Poetry* 33(1995), 341-70 (p. 346).

²⁴ William Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (2 vols), (London: Macmillan, 1905), 1, 114.

Lorenzo and Isabella's affair — all parties gathered for a meal, the fraternal conspirators on one side and, on the other, Lorenzo offering Isabella a blood orange. The tension of the painting 'fuses dramatic themes woven throughout the poem: the revelation of desire, the deferral of sexual consummation, and the threat of death' (Codell, 348). Holman Hunt's focus, however, is on the pining Isabella, gossamer gown and hair draped over the glistening, skull-adorned pot, suggesting 'the totality and voluptuousness of Isabella's interior state' (Codell, 363). These differences suggest some of the changes in the PRB over 19 years — a transition from the *mise-en-scène* of worldly forces (Millais' crowded dining table of passion and ominous portent) to the gilded detail and interiority of private spaces (Isabella's boudoir in Holman Hunt's piece). By the time Swinburne came on the scene, of course, Holman Hunt's 1867 vision was *au courant*. This is important because of the way in which these latter-day medievalists were to employ Boccaccio, the writer of a century of tales, to perpetuate their particular vision. For the Pre-Raphaelites, this would be an iconography of beauty via unusual and historical visual detail. For Swinburne, it would be the telescoping of a multitude of voices into the singular, revelatory monologues of a few. The interiority of Swinburne's transcribed Boccaccian voices parallels the PRB's growing focus on such private, internal, and solitary spaces.

Swinburne was also a medieval translator, producing original versions of Villon's ballades between 1861 and 1863 and praising the French poet in an 1866 speech at a banquet of the Royal Literary Fund.²⁵ Several of these poems, including 'The Complaint of the Fair Armouress' and 'Ballad Against The Enemies of France', appeared in *Poems and Ballads, Second Series*, under 'Translations from the French of Villon'.²⁶

²⁵ Lafourcade 2, 100-104. For a much more detailed study of Swinburne's interest in Villon, see Glen Omans, 'The Villon Cult in England', *Comparative Literature* 18 (1966), 16-35.

²⁶ Swinburne's enthusiasm for Villon may have influenced Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who also produced translations of the French poet, three of which — 'The Ballad of Dead Ladies'; 'To Death, of his Lady'; and 'His Mother's Service to Our Lady' — appeared in his 1870 volume, *Poems*. Rossetti's translations were so well received that his interpretation of 'The Ballad of Dead Ladies' gave the English language one of its

Swinburne's interest in the fifteenth-century artist, thief, and drifter lends his medievalism a grittier flavour. We must remember that others Swinburne deeply admired — Hugo, Baudelaire, and Gautier — were also 'drawn to the grotesque aesthetics that were illustrated by medieval authors such as Villon and Rabelais. Hugo mentions the grotesque in his preface to *Cromwell*, and Gautier details the life and works of Villon in his collection of essays entitled *Les Grotesques*'.²⁷ In fact, the Villon revival had begun in his native France, with Gautier, who 'thought he discovered in the medieval poet a kindred spirit. Looking upon Villon as a precursor of the Romantics and the Bohemians, Gautier praised him in the 1830s and 1840s for his supposed defiance of bourgeois values'.²⁸ Swinburne, one imagines, perceived and was attracted to similar qualities — Villon's position as vagabond writer of the French proletariat, voice from the fringe, satirist and parodist of conventional forms, and — most exceptionally — artist of sensitivity, melancholy, and isolation.

Incorporating the writing of Boccaccio and the later French medievalism of Villon allowed Swinburne once more to 'step outside English poetic tradition, with the result that his engagement with the Middle Ages was overshadowed neither by Chaucer nor by the recreations of medieval history found in Shakespeare's *Henriad* and elsewhere'.²⁹ This 'engagement' with a European, rather than exclusively British, Middle Ages, reinforces our sense that Swinburne was reading and writing in a cosmopolitan tradition. This speaks to the cross-pollination between artists of various eras and nations and, while this comparison has not frequently been made, Villon's work bears several similarities to

most famous refrains: 'but where are the snows of yesteryear?' Swinburne and Rossetti had planned to do a complete translation of Villon, which never materialised.

²⁷ Charlotte Ribeyrol, 'A Channel Passage: Swinburne and France', in *A.C. Swinburne and the Singing Word*, ed. by Yisrael Levin (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 107-126 (p. 112).

²⁸ Robert E. Morsberger, 'Villon and the Victorians: The Influence and the Legend', *The Bulletin of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association* 23 (1969), 189-96 (p. 189).

²⁹ Nick Freeman, 'The Gallows Nightingale: Swinburne's Translations of Villon', in *Beyond Arthurian Romances: The Reach of Victorian Medievalism*, ed. by J.A. Palmgren, L.M. Holloway (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 133-146 (p. 142).

that of Boccaccio. Though of a later vintage, Villon's ripe writing has something in common with that of his Renaissance predecessor: one a bawd and vulgarian, the poetic renovator who penned both deeply personal and satirical lyrics within established forms (including that of the legal will³⁰); the other also a bawd and innovator (playing with conventions of the frame narrative and allegory). Both document life in their respective ages (though from different viewpoints), sometimes with grotesquery or biting realism; both mock and satirize aspects of such life. Both are poets of the people: Villon of the street and its underbelly; Boccaccio of humanity in its varying forms. Both deal with its rush, sorrows, and joys; both, too, are well aware of the ideal of courtly romance. Villon upends it with deliberate perversion and a bitter passion against disappointed love, whereas Boccaccio's tales of romance are gently ironic, interspersed with comedy, yet tender towards young lovers. Both point to the calamities and tragedies inherent in life, though for Villon these reflections are introspective and often brooding,³¹ while for Boccaccio they compose a tapestry both dark and light. If *The Decameron* is a book of laughter and the *Testament* a book of sorrow, then it makes sense that Swinburne, 'thrall to sorrow' and 'page to joy',³² would turn to both medieval sources for inspiration.

The influence of Boccaccian lovers can be felt throughout Swinburne's oeuvre, with tragic doublings appearing again and again in works both explicitly and obliquely medieval. *Tristram of Lyonesse* is the obvious example. The narrative poem of 'twain souls'³³ is well within Aesthetic convention, whose iconic pairs include 'Lancelot and Guinevere, Tristram and Iseult, Paolo and Francesca', all representing 'both the attraction

³⁰ In the *Testament* (*Le grand testament*) of 1461-2.

³¹ This necessarily had to do with Villon's life and circumstances, which were famously difficult and romanticized by subsequent biographers and readers. Born poor, a charged brawler, murderer and thief, unlucky in love, he was imprisoned multiple times and escaped several death sentences. The last was commuted to exile from Paris, after which nothing more was heard from him. For many of his English readers, he was 'the idealized melancholy Bohemian' (Omans, 21).

³² Swinburne, 'A Match', *Poems* 1, 104-105 (p. 105, l. 26).

³³ Swinburne, *Tristram of Lyonesse*, *Poems* 4, vii – 151 (p. 113, l. 43).

and the hazard of forbidden love, the doom of fateful passion that violates moral and social law' (Lottes, 142). Isabella and Lorenzo and Andriuola and Gabriotto could be added to this catalogue of hopeless, illicit passion. Of course, *The Decameron* boasts its share of comedic romance plots that end happily in marriage or understanding, but the violent and tragic tales held particular interest. Swinburne and the Pre-Raphaelites were, after all, Victorians, and the Boccaccian tragic romance and the Victorian adultery plot briefly overlap in many of these stories. The integral importance of adultery in the nineteenth-century conception of art cannot be underestimated:

It is no coincidence that the romances to which Victorian poets were most powerfully drawn were romance stories that hinged on adultery, for as Tony Tanner points out in his seminal study, *Adultery in the Novel*, adultery is the great theme of nineteenth-century fiction. Tennyson can offer the *Idylls* as at once a poem about marriage and a national epic because he is adherent of the view that the marriage bond is both the type and the guarantee of the whole system of bonds through which civilized society is maintained ... Arnold, Morris, and Swinburne do not share Tennyson's interest in the national implications of the topic, but, like him, they are preoccupied by the notion of adultery, a love that demonstrates its intensity through, perhaps a love the intensity of which depends upon, its transgression of the most central of social taboos.³⁴

Though the fated lovers in Boccaccio are often unmarried, wealth and status separate them as surely as the marriage bond. In *The Decameron*, the mercantilism of Renaissance Italian society frequently proves the greatest limiting factor; very often the lovers are distanced by birth and are forced to pursue their affairs secretly, cheating, in a way, on their class or position. And thus, while adultery might be the most powerful of social taboos for the Victorians, infidelity to class, caste, and wealth is the great taboo in *The Decameron*. The plots share, however, the central qualities of transgression, of intensity overleaping convention. In this, the nineteenth century and the Middle Ages meet, and Boccaccian lovers are recast or adapted into alternative plots that centre upon adultery –

³⁴ Richard Cronin, 'Victorian Romance: Medievalism', in *A Companion to Romance: From Classical to Contemporary*, ed. by C.J. Saunders (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 341-359 (p. 357).

Malory's influence is felt in the principal triangles of Lancelot, Guinevere, and Arthur as well as Tristram, Iseult, and Mark; Dante's Paolo and Francesca are another resonant pair. For the Aesthetic movement and Swinburne, however, there is a celebration of such transgression, of the 'bocca baciata' and the giving and receiving of pleasure, the anti-bourgeois instinct that adulterous love provokes and increases, the renewal and enjoyment of beauty. This is an aesthetic statement much more than a moral or societal one. At the same time, there is full knowledge of the inevitable tragedy and fleetingness of doomed love, not simply because of social convention or morality, but due to an indifferent universe, where human experience is 'only the precarious dignity that is won when one asserts one's own wholly individual values in the face of a world that pays that them no heed' (Cronin, 356). As he writes in *Tristram*:

We, as the men whose name on earth is none,
We too shall surely pass out of the sun;
Out of the sound and eyeless light of things,
Wide as the stretch of life's time-wandering wings,
Wide as the naked world and shadowless,
And long-lived as the world's own weariness.³⁵

While *Tristram of Lyonesse* is one of the most striking and prolonged explorations of courtly love in Swinburne, there are many others. As Antony Harrison observes:

Swinburne's continuous subject from 1857 to 1882 is Love. He dwells either upon passions that are so 'strange' (or masochistic) as to be by definition insatiable (those of Chastelard, Tannhäuser, Sappho, Baudelaire), or upon passions which cannot ever be happily fulfilled because of obstacles (Rosamond's, Meleager's, Phaedra's, Tristram's).³⁶

'Laus Veneris', from *Poems and Ballads, First Series*, tells of the young knight

Tannhäuser, who falls in love with the goddess Venus ('her lips luxurious', her 'hair had

³⁵ Swinburne, *Tristram of Lyonesse*, *Poems* 4, vii – 151 (p. 11, ll. 209-214).

³⁶ Antony H. Harrison, '“Love Strong As Death and Valour Strong as Love”: Swinburne and Courtly Love', *Victorian Poetry* 18 (1980), 61-73 (p. 65). Harrison's article offers a thorough examination of Swinburne's relationship to courtly love, particularly in the channeling and mimicry of French troubadour poetry.

smells of all the sunburnt south',³⁷ painted throughout as an ideal of Mediterranean, pagan, voluptuous beauty in opposition to the 'pale Galilean'³⁸ Christ), and lives in her subterranean home until, filled with remorse for his sin, he journeys to Rome for absolution from the Pope. The Pope declares that this is as impossible as his papal staff blossoming. Tannhäuser returns to Venus, convinced of his eternal damnation, and gives himself up once more to her sensual enslavement. After he leaves, the Pope's staff blooms, but Tannhäuser never hears of it. The poem bears an epigraph from the fictional '*Livre des grandes merveilles d'amour, escript en latin et en françoys par Maistre Antoine Gaget, 1530*'. This time, Swinburne turns his penchant for literary hoaxes towards the creation of a medieval author, Antoine Gaget. The faux-historicism of the Urtext, this '*livre de grandes merveilles d'amour*', establishes a frame for Swinburne's examination of desire, beauty, and pleasure within the context of the well-known legend of Tannhäuser.³⁹ A Christian morality tale warning against the lure of sensual pleasure, it offers a pretext and vehicle for Swinburne's antichristian sentiments. The praise of Venus echoes throughout – the title itself bears her name, not that of Christ — for she is 'more beautiful than God', and her love 'such bliss' that renders heaven 'barren' ('*Laus Veneris*', 25-26, 388-413). Similarly, Mary, Queen of Scots, the object of devotion in Swinburne's play *Chastelard* (1866), wears an ornament representing a 'Venus crowned, that eats the hearts of men'.⁴⁰ Love is peril, and Chastelard, the Queen's knight and lover, suffers for his royal Venus. Sentenced to death for his transgression, he enacts his punishment upon her with true Swinburnian sadomasochism:

³⁷ Swinburne, 'Laus Veneris', *Poems* 1, 9-26 (p. 25, ll. 395-6).

³⁸ Swinburne, 'Hymn to Proserpine', *Poems* 1, 67-73 (p. 69, l. 35).

³⁹ Tannhäuser was a German poet and Minnesinger of the 13th century, whose legends began to circulate in the fifteenth century. According to them, he was a knight and poet who found the Venusberg, the subterranean home of Venus, and remained there worshipping the goddess. Conscious of his sin, he traveled to Rome seeking absolution, was refused it by Pope Urban IV (pending impossible blooming of papal staff), and returned to the Venusberg. After his departure, the pope's staff blossomed, but Tannhäuser could not be found.

⁴⁰ Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Chastelard: A Tragedy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1878), p. 23 (*Bonchurch* vol. 8, 1-133).

Stretch your throat out that I may kiss all round
 Where mine shall be cut through: suppose my mouth
 The axe-edge to bite so sweet a throat in twain
 With bitter iron, should not it turn soft
 As lip is soft to lip? (*Chastelard*, 161).

In yet another version of courtly love, ‘Les Noyades’,⁴¹ the hopeless passion of a young man in love with a woman oblivious to him is rewarded, not by a conventional consummation, but by union in death: ‘Bound and drowned, slaying two by two, maidens and young men, naked and wed’. The poem is based, of course, on the *Noyades de Nantes*, mass executions by drowning conducted during the Reign of Terror. The political, romantic, and ideological combine in Swinburne’s post-medieval vision. Though ‘Les Noyades’ is not a conventional depiction of courtly love, it possesses many of its vital characteristics – the young man desperately in love with an ideal woman, political forces conspiring against their happiness, and perfect union in death, enclosed within an idyllic space (which, for Swinburne, is almost always water/the sea). If this sounds very similar to *Tristram* –whose lovers finally embrace in death and ‘over them, while death and life shall be, the light and sound and darkness of the sea’ (*Tristram*, 151, 576) — that is because these themes recur throughout Swinburne’s writing in every genre. Such love represents the nexus of physical passion and spiritual transcendence, for ‘it is most often the exclusive and total commitment of a lover to his beloved, in spite of (if not because of) insuperable obstacles, that ennobles a man and renders him worthy of reputation in courtly love lore’ (Harrison, 65). For Swinburne, man’s capacity for such love is his ultimate redemption, rendering him divine. When Reggie tells Clara⁴² in *A Year’s Letters*, ‘We will have a good fight with the world if it comes in our way, Let us have the courage of our love, knowing it for the best thing there is’ (*AYL*, 147), he writes

⁴¹ *Poems* 1, 48-51.

⁴² Reggie Harewood is in love with Clara, the married Mrs. Radworth

with similar humanistic impetus.⁴³ Indeed, the disastrous liaisons of the pairs of young lovers in the novel are neo-Boccaccian, avant-garde models of courtly romance set in nineteenth-century England. The affairs are adulterous, incestuous, and passionate; they take place amidst the aristocracy and depict fervent cousin-love akin to Swinburne's devotion to Mary Gordon, the 'avatar of the woman doomed to be loved by and lost to him from eternity'.⁴⁴ If losing his cousin was the great romantic disappointment of Swinburne's life, it was also a landmark in his personal mythos, his autobiographical narrative of courtly love — the lifelong worship of an unattainable woman. In Swinburne we find, unlike Boccaccio, that it is most often the man who pines, adores, self-flagellates. Swinburne would not produce an Isabella, Lisa, or an Andriuola, for his women are typically coldly voluptuous, cruelly beautiful, changeable, and unreachable sources of tormented pleasure for their lovers. They are Venus and Clara Radworth, Mary Stuart and Faustina. 'Fair white' Iseult, the exception – sweet souled and 'sinless, 'girlish' – is still inviolate because she belongs to another man.⁴⁵

Swinburne's own prose fiction in the spirit of the medieval romance, *The Triameron*, was ambitious and unfinished. Gosse wrote in the *Fortnightly Review* that:

One of the projects of his youth which Swinburne most reluctantly abandoned, if he ever abandoned it at all, was the composition of a cycle of prose stories of passion, which should be tied together, in the old Italian manner, by some gracious fable of friends, met in an idle mood at farmstead or forest palace, who tell one another romantic stories of their adventures in love and war. The whole was to be called the *Triameron*, and the contents of two days were actually planned, and largely composed. The following list, written probably in 1861, was found among his papers, written out on the back of a page of the draft copy of *Chastelard* [Gosse includes the list of stories] ... Of all these stories, one only has hitherto been known to the world, if indeed it can be said to be known. This is *Dead Love*, which, at the introduction of George Meredith, was printed in *Once a Week*, in October, 1862, and afterwards by Swinburne himself, as a pamphlet

⁴³ Notably, Reggie (poetic, fiery, and passionate) is often interpreted as Swinburne's fictional counterpart, and thus much of his sentiment is akin to that of a youthful Swinburne.

⁴⁴ Jerome McGann, *Swinburne: An Experiment in Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 218.

⁴⁵ *Tristram*, *Poems*, 34, 692.

which has never been reprinted, in 1864. More about the *Triameron* will possibly be divulged, when the poet's early correspondence is examined.⁴⁶

In the same letter to Lady Trevelyan mentioned earlier, Swinburne explains that he hopes 'to make a few stories each about three or six pages long', and that writing prose 'is very hard' (*Letters* 1, 38-39) — a rare insight into his uncertainty at approaching the genre, despite his facility for poetry and drama. The short story 'Dead Love' was written in 1861 and appeared in *Once A Week* in 1862,⁴⁷ several years before *Atalanta in Calydon* and *Poems and Ballads, First Series* would establish Swinburne's reputation as a brilliant young poet. Though the story did not capture quite the same attention as his verse, it has generated a fair amount of posthumous interest, even being collected in the *Broadview Anthology of Victorian Short Stories*⁴⁸ alongside works by many prominent Victorian writers.⁴⁹ In the anthology, Dennis Denisoff writes that some of Swinburne's short pieces (such as 'Dead Love') 'move toward the category of the prose poem, a newly developed genre that was receiving greater attention in France' and that his innovations in prose style eventually 'influenced a number of other writers, including Oscar Wilde'.⁵⁰ Marguerite Murphy calls the prose poem a 'battlefield' where 'conventional prose of some sort appears and is defeated by the text's drive to innovate and to differentiate itself', a subversive genre where 'the traditional and the new are brought continually and inevitably into conflict'.⁵¹ This is of particular relevance to Swinburne's prose (both short fiction and novels), which is poised between the traditional and the experimental. In

⁴⁶ Edmund Gosse, 'Swinburne's Unpublished Writings', *Fortnightly Review* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1914), pp. 255-267 (p. 261-262). The pamphlet publication to which Gosse refers is now believed to have been one of T. J. Wise's forgeries.

⁴⁷ 11 October 1862

⁴⁸ Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'Dead Love', in *The Broadview Anthology of Victorian Short Stories*, ed. by Dennis Denisoff (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2004), pp. 215-220.

⁴⁹ Including Mary Shelley, Elizabeth Gaskell, Wilkie Collins, Charles Dickens, Sheridan Le Fanu, Arthur Conan Doyle, Thomas Hardy, and Oscar Wilde.

⁵⁰ Dennis Denisoff, Introduction, 'Dead Love', in *The Broadview Anthology of Victorian Short Stories*, p. 215 (p. 215).

⁵¹ Marguerite S. Murphy, *A Tradition of Subversion: The Prose Poem in English from Wilde to Ashbery* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), p. 3.

rekindling the Boccaccian short story, he deliberately remakes traditional modes of literature with avant-garde effect. As we will see, he also hybridizes prose by using poetic imagery and style, contributing to the notion of a ‘genre formed in violation of genre...in name a contradiction of terms’ (Murphy, 1).

‘Dead Love’ is a strange, paranormal story set in fifteenth-century France during the Armagnac-Burgundian Civil War.⁵² It tells of Yolande de Craon, the wife of a slain knight, Messire Olivier de Bois-Percé, ‘the chief and worthiest’ of many ‘great captains’ on the Armagnac side.⁵³ Olivier is killed by the Burgundian Messire Jacques d’Aspremont, a ‘very fair and strong man, hardy of his hands’ (‘Dead Love’, 433), who is in turn slain by Yolande’s cousin, Amaury de Jacquville. Amaury takes Jacques’ body to his cousin so that she might ‘behold the face of the fellow dead by whom her husband has got his end, and it shall make the tiding sweeter to her’ (433), but after Yolande overcomes her initial grief and anger on her husband’s behalf, she begins to sorrow for the dead Jacques as well. This compassion soon turns into passionate love:

And all the time of this bitter sorrow she thought how goodly a man this Jacques must have been in his life, who being dead had such power upon her pity. And for compassion of his great beauty she wept so exceedingly and long that she fell down upon his body in a swoon, embracing him ... afterward, out of her love, she caused the body of this knight to preserved with spice ... and had his coffin always by her bed in her chamber (434).

Yolande’s fervour for her dead lover becomes the prevailing passion of her life; she ignores other knights who come to court her, and eventually it is rumoured that she is ‘bewitched’ by a demon that has taken possession of Jacques’ body. Infuriated by her behaviour, her cousin Amaury visits her house. Standing in her doorway, he overhears her speaking to the corpse, espousing her constant devotion and love, declaring that she is

⁵² A suggestive parallel with Gautier’s ‘La morte amoureuse’ (1836) which tells the tale of a priest named Romauld, who falls in love with the beautiful Clarimonde who is revealed to be a vampire.

⁵³ Algernon Charles Swinburne, ‘Dead Love’ (*Bonchurch* vol. 17, 11-16). My references come from the reprinted story in *Major Poems and Selected Prose*, ed. by Jerome McGann and Charles L. Sligh (New Haven: Yale UP, 2004), pp. 433-436 (p. 433). Also

his ‘true maiden and servant’ (435). As she embraces and kisses him, Jacques’ body suddenly animates, and the knight himself comes to life with these words: ‘Seeing you have done so much for love of me, we twain shall never go in sunder: and for this reason has God given back to me the life of my mortal body’ (435). At this, Amaury rushes into the chamber and stabs Yolande; as she expires, her lover dies as well. The two are ‘burned openly in the place where witches used to be burned: and it is reported by some that an evil spirit was seen to come out of the mouth of Jacques d’Aspremont’ (436). Yolande’s ‘sinful and strange affection’ is thus put down to the influence of ‘the evil one’ (436), her very soul in jeopardy because of her diabolical love.

‘Dead Love’ has the driving horror of a Poe story. Indeed, its resonances with ‘Ligeia’ (1838) are powerful — necrophilia, animated corpses, fidelity beyond the grave, and love so formidable that it imperils the soul.⁵⁴ Swinburne was, like Rossetti, a great admirer of Poe, and this connection is strongly felt. But the ‘dead loves’ in Boccaccio are also very evident — Isabella, tending her lover’s remains in the basil pot; Andriuolo, bearing Gabriotto’s corpse for burial. The particular anguish of ‘Dead Love’ lies in the fact that Yolande develops a perverse, impossible passion for her husband’s killer, a betrayal only redeemed by the fidelity of her love for a man she has never met or known. That she is capable of such devotion elevates her to the level of tragic heroine, who — like the condemned lover in ‘Les Noyades’ — suffers death at the moment of her greatest joy (the awakening of her dead love). It also puts her in the position of devoted knight in the traditional constellation of courtly love, an inversion that is especially interesting because Swinburne’s women are typically the object of such love; at the same time, it

⁵⁴ Though for Swinburne of course, such love exalts the soul. The conclusion of the story reads ironically and is a testament to Swinburne’s skepticism about the ‘dark ages’ of Christianity in the Middle Ages. Swinburne’s description of Yolande’s love as ‘sinful and most strange’, the result of devilish influences and the cause of ‘pains of condemnation’, is a sarcastic reflection upon local superstition and Christian moralizing over Yolande’s illegitimate passion.

places her well in the tradition of Boccaccian women, faithful to the last. The poem 'The Leper'⁵⁵ also offers obvious parallels, with its necrophilic intensity:

'Love bites and stings me through, to see
Her keen face made of sunken bones.
Her worn-off eyelids madden me,
That were shot through with purple once'⁵⁶

'Dead Love' and 'The Leper' share a certain obsessive worship of the inviolable lover, the masochism of desiring the permanently unattainable, and the pseudo-religious commitment to the object of love, a dedication that replaces all other pursuits and interests. The difference, of course, is that the love of the speaker in 'The Leper' is never reciprocated, whereas Yolande receives a fleeting affirmation of her passion. 'Dead Love' shows us the clear distinction between Boccaccian and Swinburnian romance: where the lovers in *The Decameron* are separated by forces external, material, and human, those in Swinburne are thwarted by themselves. Their sorrows are, to a certain extent, self-inflicted, their passions sadomasochistic, and their failures those of overwhelming intensity, of the inevitable ravages of time and the ironies and paradoxes of life. Although it is Amaury's sword that cleaves the lives of Yolande and Jacques in 'Dead Love', or the orders of Carrier that drown the lovers in 'Les Noyades', the tragedies precede these clear-cut actions, for they are intrinsic, inherent, and psychological. Swinburne is acutely aware of the alternating, bittersweet fulfilment and disappointment constant to human existence, and he is able to approach these issues afresh by casting them in the genre of medieval romance.

*The Portrait*⁵⁷ was written in 1861 and printed for private circulation by Watts-Dunton (London, 1909). It is of a very different flavour from 'Dead Love', being rather

⁵⁵ See Clyde K. Hyder's article, 'The Medieval Background of Swinburne's *The Leper*', *PMLA*, 46 (1931), 1280-88, for a detailed examination.

⁵⁶ Swinburne, 'The Leper', *Poems* 1, 119-124 (p. 123, ll. 105-108).

more obviously ironic and biting. More, it contains seeds of aesthetic prose that could be considered prototypically Paterian or Wildean. In a note to his edition,⁵⁷ Watts-Dunton adopts Gosse's view that the speaker is 'evidently a priest, a dissolute abbe, who shows his calling by an ironical attack on art and beauty and nakedness, an attack so obviously ironical that it makes the soldiers and the ladies "laugh more exceedingly than before"'.⁵⁹ The narrator tells of an Italian woman who loves a painter, Messer Pietro Guastagni Bocafoli, but is unhappily married to a merchant (a very Boccaccian beginning). She asks Pietro to paint a portrait of her 'which a man shall not look upon without loving, and so if he touch it he shall certainly die', and then present it to her husband who for love of her 'will certainly give it a kiss or twain on its mouth; and when he is dead we will burn the picture' (*The Portrait*, 437). Pietro produces a portrait of exceeding beauty, which he eventually shows his lover's husband, Messer Gian. Gian kisses the portrait and 'there was a bitter savour in his lips, and they smarted therewith'; to erase the bitterness, he kisses his wife: 'and she, feeling the savour of a violent death on his lips (for his mouth was not yet wiped), cried out and smote him on the said mouth' (439). And thus, this La Bella Dama Senza Pietà and her husband both die, while Pietro the artist is 'taken and hanged in sight of a great multitude' and the portrait 'cut in twain and burned' (439).

The language of *The Portrait* is more resonantly aesthetic than that of *Dead Love*, which is more archaic in style. *The Portrait* deals much more palpably with art, aesthetics, and morality, mocking critics of aestheticism through the ironic voice of its narrator, the 'dissolute abbe', a sort of Lord Henry with a clerical collar. It is Pietro's art, more than anything else, which comes under satirical attack. The narrator reports that Pietro was 'a man that rejoiced in all manner of shameful dealing, and was also unclean

⁵⁷ *Bonchurch* vol. 17, 3-10. My references are to the reprinted text in *Major Poems and Selected Prose*, ed. by Jerome McGann and Charles L. Sligh (New Haven: Yale UP, 2004), pp. 437-439.

⁵⁸ Theodore Watts-Dunton, *The Portrait*, 1909, collected in *Bonchurch* vol. 17, 3-10.

⁵⁹ Expressed in 'Unpublished Writings' in *The Fortnightly Review*, p. 262.

of his life, as is the fashion of men that paint and men that make songs and verses'. He further accuses him of making 'many amorous poems' and painting 'the bodies of beautiful women that were naked, which is a very grievous thing in the opinion of God', for 'such men as are painters, or such as are poets, are most often evil and foolish' (437). At the conclusion of the story, the audience has a good laugh at this, for 'they understood well that Messer Vittore [the priest] was a very good painter, and feared God little, being a loose living man' (439). With this tongue-in-cheek attack on his own tribe (poets and painters), specifically the Renaissance precursors of his Pre-Raphaelite brethren, Swinburne achieves a narrative that is both wickedly funny and didactically non-didactic. A prominent chunk of *The Portrait* is devoted to Vittore's diatribe 'against' the 'sinful delight' of the senses, following a luxuriant description of Pietro's portrait:

She sat to be painted in a little close gown of green sewn about with ornaments of gold, and the lining was of a tender and clouded colour between violet-blue and grey-blue. And all this the painter painted very beautifully, for he put all his love and the strong lust of his evil will into the picture ... And he had drawn her with her head a little stooped, as was the fashion for the weight of gold and heavy pearls that she wore above her hair ... She had her gown all ungirt on one side (I believe it was the left side) and the fastenings of it undone; so that all her body from the breast downward, and over against the flank, was naked between two edges of gold colour that met like two lips. And the beauty of her body was a great wonder (437-438).

After dwelling on the vivid and vital blossoming of the portrait, Vittore says that beholding it was 'like the hearing of strong music or the drinking of sweet wine; for not the wonder and hunger of the eyes only, but also the mouth and the ears were feasted and fully satisfied with the deliciousness ...' (438). The synesthetic power of the painting, intoxicating all the senses like a banquet, evokes the Paterian 'beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic

reveries and exquisite passions'.⁶⁰ Vittore shatters this reverie, however, with a faux-puritanical speech on the wages of sin, the honey and 'strong kisses of love' that shall be converted to the 'taste of blood and sharp gall', the 'pleasant flesh' that shall experience the 'burning of whips like as fire' on the day of judgement ('The Portrait', 438). The so-called evil of sensual art is so comically lambasted, the imitation of a hypocritical priest so well achieved, and the art itself so splendidly described, that the story works counter to its argument and offers a lesson in aesthetic delight.

Then of course there is the intertextual significance of a beautiful portrait that has supernatural and potentially evil influence. Swinburne's 'Portrait' differs from Wilde's *Picture* by sapping life rather than absorbing the ravages of time and sin, but there is still a rich association. Pietro's lover commissions a portrait that no man 'shall look upon without loving', and it is much the same with Dorian's likeness, which, like Dorian himself, mesmerises and ensnares its viewer. Both portraits are repositories of malign power—one destroys life while the other masks evil by drawing its outward signs within. One is an agent of murder, the other of hypocrisy. In the end, both turn on their subjects: Swinburne's 'Portrait' kills its original, while Wilde's Dorian Gray is destroyed when he attempts to destroy his distorted (and true) reflection. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a study in doubles, duplicity, the contrast between aesthetic and inner beauty. It also bears certain medieval hallmarks: Wilde describes Dorian listening with 'rapt pleasure' to Wagner's *Tannhäuser* and 'seeing in the prelude to that great work of art a presentation of the tragedy of his own soul'.⁶¹ Dorian's identification with Tannhäuser, the beautiful young man entrapped by sensual delights and unable to obtain salvation even when he desires it, shows the persistent presence of medieval leitmotifs as a vehicle for aesthetic

⁶⁰ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry (1893 Text)*, ed. by Donald L. Hill (London: University of California Press, 1980), p. 98.

⁶¹ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (7 vols), ed. by Joseph Bristow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 175.

writers to explore their integral and existential themes: beauty, pleasure, guilt, sin, and damnation. *The Portrait* is less a sombre meditation, however, and more a tale of the macabre — a supernatural homicide, neo-medieval in the style of Poe, its antique setting and jewelled art a backdrop for a conspiracy of passion. It is also a satirical commentary against aestheticism's detractors, written when Swinburne was deeply involved with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, immersed in visual art and production, and aligning his passion for medieval literature with the PRB's paintings and reinventions of the same. It cannot be coincidence that the *bocca baciata* reappears in *The Portrait*, only this time the kissed mouth confers death, in a string of poisonous caresses that destroys everyone. Swinburne's deliberate inversion of the PRB's creed and his own developing aesthetic ideology is part of the priest's sardonic retelling which, superficially and conventionally moral, requires that the kissed mouth — the mouth that has tasted pleasure — be punished.

Alongside the Boccaccian stories, which I have suggested are his pastiches of fourteenth-century prose fiction, Swinburne also produced chronicles, imitations of late-medieval and early Renaissance historical narratives. *The Chronicle of Queen Fredegond*, which appears to have been intended for the *Triameron* but, as Gosse describes it, 'outgrew the length desired' (262), was probably written in 1861 and takes as its subject Fredegond, a serving-woman who became Frankish queen after mesmerizing King Chilperic I (539-584), who for her love cast off his first wife and strangled his second. Gosse and Lafourcade both note that Swinburne probably takes his historical outline from the *Historia Francorum* (538-594) of Gregory of Tours. *The Chronicle* concludes with: 'There is an end of the story of Queen Fredegond, that was called the Queen, and lady chief over all mortal women for her beauty. And her story was written in French by

Messire Nicolas, a great clerk of Paris, in the great book of strange histories'.⁶² Gosse speculates that Swinburne mentions 'Messire Nicolas' in order to suggest that he borrowed material from Nicolas of Troyes, author of a book of 'strange histories' called *Le Grand Parangon des Nouvelles Nouvelles*, (written around 1535, published 1866) and 'divert attention' from the large quantity of material he took from Gregory of Tours (263). Lafourcade disagrees ('toutes ces conjectures tombent a l'examen: Swinburne n'a pris qu'un ou deux details a Gregoire' (2, 82)), and argues that 'Messire Nicolas' is Nicole Gilles,⁶³ whose 1533 edition of *Annalles* he considers the most likely source.

In the unfinished *Chronicle of Tebaldeo Tebaldei*, written in 1861 along with the stories for *The Triameron*, Swinburne was able to write about one of his great passions, the woman he jokingly called his 'blessedest pet' in a letter to Lady Trevelyan, the archetypal *femme fatale*, Lucrezia Borgia. *The Chronicle* was intended as part of a book on Lucrezia, a 'big one' (*Letters* 1, 38-39) that Swinburne was composing at the same time as his Boccaccian project. Randolph Hughes produced a beautifully printed, heavily annotated edition of *The Chronicle of Tebaldeo Tebaldei* in 1942,⁶⁴ an effort which one reviewer named 'an inestimable service' to Swinburne scholarship.⁶⁵ Hughes's Foreword discusses the provenance of the manuscript, which was listed in Wise's *Bibliography* of Swinburne's writings⁶⁶ and also partially reproduced by Lafourcade in his *Jeunesse*.⁶⁷ Hughes found an incomplete version in the Brotherton Library at Leeds, apparently sold by Wise ('Foreword', 20), but ultimately received the complete manuscript from Mrs.

⁶² Algernon Charles Swinburne, *The Chronicle of Queen Fredegond* (*Bonchurch* vol. 17, 19-57), pp. 56-57.

⁶³ Notary and secretary to Louis XI, best known as author of *Les Chroniques et Annalles de France* (written in the 1490s), telling the history of modern France from the Trojan war to the contemporary monarch.

⁶⁴ Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Lucretia Borgia* (*The Chronicle of Tebaldeo Tebaldei*), ed. by Randolph Hughes, engravings by Reynolds Stone (Great Britain: Golden Cockerel Press, 1942). Swinburne called it *The Chronicle of Tebaldeo Tebaldei*, while Hughes notes that he chose to give it a 'name that conveys some idea of its contents' i.e. *Lucretia Borgia* ('Foreword', 7).

⁶⁵ A.R. Chisholm, 'Swinburne's *Lucretia Borgia*', *The Australian Quarterly*, 16 (1944), 85-88 (p. 85).

⁶⁶ *Bonchurch*, vol. 20.

⁶⁷ Lafourcade, *Jeunesse* vol. 2, Appendice V, 'Tebaldeo Tebaldei's Treatise of Noble Morals', pp. 226-230.

Rossetti Angeli (daughter of W.M. Rossetti), who had received the manuscript from Theodore Watts-Dunton soon after Swinburne's death.⁶⁸

In his Foreword, Hughes makes a strong case for the *Chronicle of Tebaldeo Tebaldei*, writing that it is, 'together with *Lesbia Brandon* ... the most important of the large mass of Swinburne's unpublished writings', and 'far superior to the four pieces of the same category' (*The Portrait*, 'Dead Love', 'The Marriage of Monna Lisa', and *The Chronicle of Queen Fredegond*). Hughes also denies that *The Chronicle* is 'an exercise in pastiche' like the others, but that 'it proceeds very much more from the immediate personality of the author' and 'engages forces of his poetic and philosophic self that are altogether more profound'. On Swinburne's literary achievement Hughes declares, 'in felicities of creative phrase, in beauties of cadence, in far-reaching adventure of poetic vision, certain passages' of *The Chronicle* 'are not inferior to what is best in any other work of the same class in any part of the poet's career'.⁶⁹

The question of why Swinburne was so fascinated by the Renaissance and the Borgia family has been taken up by many. Edmund Wilson suggests that 'one of the charms of the Borgias for Swinburne was that they gave him an opportunity to deal with incestuous situations' (Wilson, 28), a theme that reappears, and has rich significance, in his novels. For Jerome McGann, it is because they were 'exemplary historical figures, forecasting the humanist pagan renaissance that captured the imaginations of so many nineteenth-century Europeans' (McGann, 'Introduction', xxi-xxii). Hughes has a similar approach. He suggests that it is the 'braveries' of the Renaissance, its 'far-ranging audacities',⁷⁰ and a 'certain spirit, certain values, moral and philosophic' that it 'brought into prominence'; further, the Borgias (especially Lucrezia and Cesare, Latinized to

⁶⁸ Hughes provides an extended explanation of the history of design and bibliography of the *Chronicle* in 'The Chronicle: The Design and Actual Achievement', *Chronicle*, pp. 128-145.

⁶⁹ Randolph Hughes, 'Foreword', *Lucretia Borgia (The Chronicle of Tebaldeo Tebaldei)*, ed. by Randolph Hughes, engravings by Reynolds Stone (Great Britain: Golden Cockerel Press, 1942), pp. 7-21 (p. 7).

⁷⁰ Randolph Hughes, 'The Period and Swinburne's Relationship to It', *Chronicle*, pp. 86-145 (p. 86).

Lucretia and Caesar) became, for Swinburne, the leading lights of this spiritual and philosophic awakening – Caesar ‘one of the master spirits of history’, and Lucretia ‘in many ways the ideal woman’ (Hughes, ‘Foreword’, 10). Hughes suggests that they are types, ‘representative cases’ of the epoch (Hughes, ‘Period’, 88).

The Chronicle of Tebaldeo Tebaldei broadly unites many of Swinburne’s favourite topics in the setting of the Borgia court and during the rule of Pope Alexander VI. In it, we find a union of recurring themes that appear in the Boccaccian stories and novels, and manifest his characters. It is a series of little histories and episodes in the family Borgia, narrated by Tebaldeo Tebaldei after the death of his mistress, Lucretia.⁷¹ The famous *dramatis personae* include Lucretia Borgia herself, her oldest brother Giovanni (Duke of Gandia), her second brother Caesar, a cardinal, their father Rodrigo Borgia (Pope Alexander VI), and mother Vanozza dei Cattanei (called Vanotia by Swinburne). *The Chronicle* begins with a description of Tebaldeo’s first sight of Lucretia and the manner by which he becomes her servant, then tells of several episodes of Lucretia’s jealousy of her brother the Duke of Gandia’s mistress, then of Lucretia’s marriage to Giovanni Sforza, the Pope’s extravagant masque, the French incursion into Italy and the cardinals’ revolt against the Pope, and finally of the passionate affair between Tebaldeo and Lucretia.

From the first, it is clear that Tebaldeo is infatuated with Lucretia, and indeed the entire family – ‘the most noble and gracious court and most fortunate period that since Caesar has ever been in our Christian city of Rome’ (*CTT*, 23). His two favourites, though, are Lucretia and Caesar, whom he calls ‘a true Apollo’ (*CTT*, 23). The Duke of Gandia is rather wan throughout, an amiable figure that provides a foil to the darker,

⁷¹ Antonio Tebaldeo (1463-1537), an Italian poet who served as secretary to Lucretia Borgia, a ‘comely man’, intellectually a ‘sort of unstable –and of course less universal, as well as far less gifted – Leonardo da Vinci’, perhaps in love with Lucretia, or she with him.

incisive, and forceful Caesar (Hughes, 'Period', 101). Lucretia is clearly a Swinburne *femme fatale*, golden hair 'full of little waves like sea-waves in the sun' (*CTT*, 25). To the besotted Tebaldeo, she appears gentle and angelic, and his stated mission is to 'refresh the honour of the most perfect and most fair woman' (23). Several episodes, however, belie this soft image. On two separate occasions, Lucretia joyfully laughs at bloodshed and violence. On the first, Tebaldeo kills a page, Agostino Secchi, for daring to insinuate that Lucretia poisoned the Duke of Gandia's mistress: 'when they saw he was dead, they were astonished and went on their way, carrying with them his pierced body. And all this while D. Lucretia,⁷² being in her brother's house and looking out of a window, beheld all the fight and laughed favorably upon me' (*CTT*, 29). The second is when the city's Jews are made to fight with pigs for the court's pleasure: 'at the sight of which pigs and Jews thus violently destroying each other, it is impossible to say what delight and laughter there arose among all the ladies, also D. Lucretia, who by her nature hated a Jew more than any living beast, shouted for pure joy when a pig got the upper hand' (*CTT*, 33). These episodes illustrate that society's comfort with violence, but they also show us a Lucretia who is not just golden and perfumed, but bloodthirsty, carnal, even malicious. Like La Bella Dama in *The Portrait*, this Lucretia has a savour of cruelty; like her, too, she finds conduits for such malice through art. She commissions portraits of the 'traitor and knave Gano',⁷³ and another figure she dislikes, the historical king Mark from the 'story of Lancelot', in the likeness of the Borgia enemy King Charles of France (*CTT*, 31-32).

Most compellingly, however, Tebaldeo often describes Lucretia as Venus, a representation that begins when Lucretia recreates the Birth of Venus in her father's court masque: 'For there was prepared for her a great and wide bath of pure marble admirably carved, full of perfumed water; from the which being arisen, her wet hair lay down below

⁷² *Domina*

⁷³ Ganelon, who betrayed Charlemagne's armies to the Muslims.

her knees' (34). We know the vital significance of Venus iconography in Swinburne, and after the masque, much of the *Chronicle* becomes an extended 'Laus Veneris', with Tebaldeo as Tannhäuser. When Tebaldeo finally becomes Lucretia's lover, he calls their tryst a 'thing so sweet ... which befell me by God's grace, and the mercy of our lady Venus, who put it in the heart of my mistress her servant ... to take compassion upon my strange and strong love towards her' (CTT, 45). She seduces Tebaldeo when he returns from battle in the war against France, and upon seeing her he meditates on the beauties of her body: 'she lay there upon her couch-bed, and was laughing a little to herself under breath. There was nothing upon her, not a shred of silk or purple, but only the clothing of that adorable and supreme beauty of her flesh which God made her with for the delight of men' (47). Their consummation is sensuous, prolonged, violent, as when, Anactoria-like, Lucretia 'plunged her face into the hollow of [Tebaldeo's] throat biting and kissing it, and as if in a rage rent off a part of [his] raiment with her hands' (49). After this meeting, Tebaldeo declares himself a devotee of Venus; he states that he has written 'this little chapter of love' in praise of her, and of Lucretia.

Unlike Tannhäuser, or Chastelard, Tebaldeo's romance with Lucretia is not tragic. Though Lucretia is an incarnation of the 'perilous and poisonous goddess' Venus, it is not Tebaldeo who suffers the consequences of her deadly attraction (59). He lives to immortalize her in prose. Tebaldeo's fidelity to Lucretia makes him somewhat unreliable, and provides limited insight into her character. Swinburne nonetheless scatters the *Chronicle* with episodes that suggest danger and a golden beauty edged with darkness, her happiness at the bloody spectacles of death and violence among them. There is too, the theme of poison: the Duke of Gandia's mistress, whom Lucretia passionately dislikes, dies mysteriously, 'her saddle had been poisoned in the pommel' (28); Zizem, a Turkish prince beloved of Lucretia, dies miserably, his end an eerie echo of Balzac's Valérie

Marneffe: 'his face became green with sickness, also his hair came off by handfuls ... before he died the flesh of his face was rotted and eaten away' (41). And, though Tebaldeo attributes both these deaths to others, Swinburne cleverly introduces suspicion, and associates Lucretia with the Borgia's prime weapon, poison. The *bocca baciata* here takes on another meaning: the kiss of Lucretia, whether bestowed upon those she hates or loves, becomes deadly. At the same time, Hughes correctly points out that this Lucretia is a more subtle mix of qualities than, for example, the Lucretia in Hugo's play: 'not a woman all of one piece, a sinister maenad driven by sombre love or hate ... but a creature with a variety of elements in her composition; flexible and of multiple mood ... full of winning ways and sweet sorceries that arouse disturbing visions in men; the antique Venus come back to the modern world, with her mercies and her cruelties' (Hughes, 'View', 66). Indeed, Tebaldeo affirms that 'the tooth of Venus bit hard into the veins of my heart', and that as she sleeps her 'hair also vibrated like a golden-coloured great serpent with many throats and each breathing softly' (59). This Venus, Lucretia, is a golden Medusa, a gentler Dolores, or even a Cleopatra.

For all his infatuated misdirection, Tebaldeo turns out to be a fascinatingly complex narrator. At the end of the *Chronicle*, he offers a 'Treatise of Noble Morals' that becomes an aesthetic declaration:

I begin this my treatise of noble morals and of the excellent goodness which is above all other virtues. These morals are called pleasures, and this goodness is bodily beauty; than which there is nothing more good and gracious and profitable, and without which all just or merciful conduct and all kinds of virtuous behavior are as rags and weeds and dust and dung ... Beauty is the beginning of all things, and the end of them is pleasure (57).

This thesis does not stop at simple inversion, though. Tebaldeo proceeds to argue against those who say that 'between the beginning which is beauty and the end which is pleasure there is midway the beast evil, full of danger and pain', to which he responds, 'Thou

fool, what if this very evil be of its nature also necessary and beautiful? Knowest thou not that a thing unsavoury if it be chewed by itself may be used to flavor deliciously some delicate weak wine? That bitter perfumes will stab and sting with excess of delight' (58).⁷⁴ Finally, he examines the woman whom he has praised lavishly throughout the text, and asks, 'doth any kind of evil desire or aught of a darker nature (*qualche cosa di più fosco*) inhabit in this body or spirit of hers?' (58), and after several pages of meditation, concludes quite equivocally. He never denies that Lucretia is evil, but suggests instead that 'if they reply that we worship things evil, let us not over hastily rebuke that saying of theirs. For we do indeed worship these things, even love and desire and delight ... and that which is called of these men evil, without doubt we do also worship it, if so be it seem in our sight as a parcel of that which is good' (60). Finally, then, Tebaldeo sets aside the question of Lucretia's evil or good, upholding pleasure as a good in itself, and reprimanding those who spend their lives in repentance or penitence, emotions that he considers the ultimate evil. His treatise is a version of Swinburne's credo of humanism, and Hughes identifies it as in accordance with 'the humanists of the generation to which the fictitious writer of the *Chronicle* belongs' (Hughes, Note on Text, 188, 243).

We can see how *The Chronicle* expands on many of the themes Swinburne was thinking about during the writing of the *Triameron* stories, and continuing in his novels. Hughes calls it 'the dearest and most grandiose of all Swinburne's non-lyrical ambitions'.⁷⁵ The Borgias had preoccupied Swinburne for so long, ever since (and probably before) he read Victor Hugo's play *Lucrece Borgia* at Eton and Alexandre

⁷⁴ Hughes believes this to be Swinburne's 'rationale of masochism, i.e. the desire or need to suffer pain as an element (often the chief element) of erotic excitation' (Hughes, Notes on Text, *Chronicle*, 188). While this is certainly part of it, I think that Swinburne's argument here is for the greater mixture of life's bitter and sweet, that happiness cannot be tasted without sadness or pain, and so forth.

⁷⁵ Randolph Hughes, 'The Unwritten Masterpiece: The Larger Venture of Which The *Chronicle* Is No More Than A Part', *Chronicle*, pp. 63-85 (p. 63). Further references as (Hughes, 'Venture', page number).

Dumas' 'The Borgias' in *Crimes Celebres* (1839-1840).⁷⁶ He had projected a drama on Lucretia of which only a fragment remains,⁷⁷ and it seems that the *Chronicle*, though much longer of course, suffered a similar fate. In his editorial material, Hughes writes thoroughly and persuasively on the possible reasons for this, including the fact that Lucretia was a poor subject for a tragic romance of the sort that Swinburne wanted and was equipped to write: 'however fascinating she may be as a woman ... there is no sequence towards a final climax of tragedy in her very varied career' (Hughes, 'Venture', 79). In his essay on Charles Heywood, Swinburne wrote quite insightfully, 'Madonna Lucrezia Estense Borgia (to use the proper ceremonial style adopted for the exquisitely tender and graceful dedication of the 'Asolani') died peaceably in the odour of incense offered at her shrine...nothing more tragic and dramatic could have been made of her peaceful and honourable end'.⁷⁸ In the end, it may have been Caesar (who does not figure that prominently in *Chronicle*, the amorous Tebaldeo displaying hero-worship, but little else, for him), whose life and meteoric, Machiavellian rise and fall could have played better in the drama Swinburne wished to write.⁷⁹

Yet it is the writing in *The Chronicle of Tebaldeo Tebaldei*, rather than its dramatic arc, that rates attention. As in *Lesbia Brandon* (but not *A Year's Letters* or the Boccaccian short stories), Swinburne tends to write expansively in *The Chronicle* – entire paragraphs are devoted to lyrical description. Where in *The Triameron* he incorporates exposition and depiction in a few brief pages, writing with a succinctness and sharpness that lend the stories their keen pace, in *The Chronicle* he dwells longer, exacts a poetic debt from the prose. Take, for example, this passage:

⁷⁶ For a more comprehensive analysis on Dumas' effect on Swinburne 's Borgias writing, see (Hughes, 'Period', 127).

⁷⁷ Fragment most likely written in 1859.

⁷⁸ 'Charles Heywood', *Bonchurch* vol. 11, 419-459 (pp. 425-26).

⁷⁹ Hughes has also written on this in his notes on why Swinburne gave up the *Chronicle* (Hughes, 'View', 78).

The hollow heavy-looking clothes emptied of her beautiful and desirable body, lay all upon a great carven chair some way off, and all the soft silk and hard gold kept in them the sweetness of her limbs, that had been there before she put off her raiment ... I drew close up to her, and stooped, and fastened my lips upon the inside of her left arm, and my tears fell out upon it and ran down to her wrist; and she held up her wrist and shook it to let them drop off. And when I lifted my face, that was quivering and weeping with pleasure, up from the curve of her arm, I saw all the colour and shadow of her eyes turned upon mine, and a shudder in the lashes of them as if she could have wept as well (*CTT*, 48).

Although Denisoff suggested that ‘Dead Love’ and the other Boccaccian stories ‘move toward the category of the prose poem’, I would counter that it is *The Chronicle*, most of all, that approaches this genre, the narrative where ‘the language wraps itself lovingly round the thought and is made one with it’ (Chisholm, 85). In it, Swinburne was indeed writing something more than pastiche; he was producing a style of writing that could meld narrative and tone for a new aesthetic outcome.

During this time, Swinburne was clearly immersed in the Middle Ages, and we can conjecture that his writing of the period — short and long prose, drama, and verse — shared substantial medieval influences. We have already observed interconnections between ‘Laus Veneris’, ‘The Leper’, ‘Les Noyades’, *Chastelard*, ‘The Two Dreams’, ‘The Complaint of Lisa’, and the fragmentary *Triameron*. But these linkages extend beyond the generic or thematic, for they are also ideological. In the context of Swinburne’s antichristian inclinations, the Middle Ages are a vexed time. He imagined them as the very middle of the ‘long, dark age’ (McGann, ‘Introduction’, xxi) of Christian supremacy, a time when the church waxed powerful, quashing art, beauty, sensuality, and pleasure. At the same time, this repression and introspective desire contributed to the burgeoning of culture that would become the Renaissance; several of Swinburne’s beloved humanists and intellectuals — Dante, Boccaccio, Villon, Malory — emerged from, or perhaps because of, the middle shadows. Further, it is an era almost universally respected by the writers he read, critiqued, and promoted, for ‘those of temperament akin

to Swinburne's, with his non-Christian or anti-Christian values, have always been and always will be attracted to the Renaissance as he was': Stendhal, whose Julien Sorel could be seen as an 'incarnation of the qualities of *virtù*';⁸⁰ Balzac, whose Vautrin is of much the same type, perhaps even Laclos, whose Valmont and Madame de Merteuil embody such amoral energy (Hughes, 'Period', 109-110). We see evidence of this Renaissance effect on Swinburne's aesthetic prose in *The Chronicle of Tebaldeo Tebaldei*. Thus, throughout Swinburne's writing the medieval and its shift to the Renaissance are both setting and undertone; he revisits this period, not because of nostalgia for the antique, but because he considered it a pivotal time in human history. Poised on the brink of great intellectual and imaginative achievement, casting off the fetters of what Swinburne perceived to be religious and moral enslavement, the Middle Ages and Renaissance become part of his iconography, heralding what he hoped would be a similar upheaval in the nineteenth century. To this end, his work pushes for such an awakening, while attempting to preserve the integrity and beauty of art. After his training exercises in the medieval and Renaissance, Swinburne would be ready, in 1862 and 1863, to embark on the 'Kirklowes fragment' and *A Year's Letters*. Sypher describes that he was writing out the former while 'beginning to plan *A Year's Letters*', jotting names and ideas down on the back of the fragments (Sypher, xxi). Included on these fragments is the name 'Lucrezia Estense Borgia', a revealing scribble that shows he was still contemplating the Borgias and the Renaissance, or perhaps even plotting his posthumously published *Duke of Gandia* (1908),⁸¹ alongside the novel that would be one of his finest prose efforts.

⁸⁰ Promoted in the Renaissance, written of by Machiavelli and others, the quality of power, the amoral capacity for action needing expression, tending toward development. Caesar/Cesare Borgia is a classic type for this.

⁸¹ *Bonchurch* vol. 10, 385-408.

6. Swinburne, Laclos, and de Sade: The Perversity of Conversation

In the dedication to *Love's Cross-Currents*, the 1905 re-publication of *A Year's Letters*, Swinburne thanks Theodore Watts-Dunton for his support of the novel:

I can only hope that you may not be for once mistaken in your favourable opinion of a study thrown into the old epistolary form which even the giant genius of Balzac could not restore to the favour it enjoyed in the days of Richardson and Laclos. However that may be, I am content to know that you agree with me in thinking that in the world of literary creation there is a legitimate place for that apparent compromise between a story and a play by which the alternate agents and patients of the tale are made to express what befalls them by word of mouth or of pen.¹

This expression of mingled anxiety and pride, defence of his unconventional choice and eagerness to set it within a larger epistolary tradition (Honoré de Balzac, Samuel Richardson, Choderlos de Laclos), conveys just how controversial the genre was at this particular time. By the end of the nineteenth century, it was played out – widely considered a tired and overwrought mode of fiction, belonging to the early, unpolished days of the novel. Very few took the risk of using it. In his *Doctor Thorne* (1858), which features a chapter almost entirely composed of letters, Trollope presents an apologia for the genre²:

There is a mode of novel writing which used to be much in vogue, but which has now gone out of fashion. It is, nevertheless, one which is very expressive when in good hands, and which enables the author to tell his story, or some portion of his story, with more natural trust than any other, I mean that of familiar letters. I trust I shall be excused if I attempt it as regards this one chapter...³

It is interesting to see that a mainstream novelist such as Trollope was thinking about and using the epistolary form just a few years before Swinburne. Nonetheless, the genre was

¹ Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'Dedication', in *Love's Cross-Currents (A Year's Letters)* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1905), pp. v-vii (pp. v-vi), *Bonchurch* vol. 17, 67-258. Further references to this and all other citations are given in the text.

² Chapter 38, *Doctor Thorne*.

³ Anthony Trollope, *Doctor Thorne*, in *The Chronicles of Barsetshire* (8 vols), (London: Chapman and Hall, 1893), III, 344.

‘out of fashion’, and to recapitulate it was an act simultaneously brave and deliberate on Swinburne’s part. Though two other nineteenth-century authors whom he admired, Anne Brontë and Wilkie Collins, had made partial use of the form, it had long fallen out of vogue. Swinburne wanted to reinvigorate this ‘apparent compromise between a story and a play’, whose dialogue of letters lends theatricality in the same way that spoken dialogue delivers momentum on stage. In mentioning Laclos and Richardson as well-regarded forbears, Swinburne situates himself between two great Enlightenment writers – one English, the other French. But it is the letters of Laclos’s libertine novel, rather than Richardson’s sentimental ones, that most strongly inflect his work.⁴

Before examining Laclos’s powerful influence however, his contemporary (though quite different) libertine writer Donatien-Alphonse-Francois, Comte de Sade, usually known as the Marquis de Sade (1740-1814) also deserves mention.⁵ Swinburne’s interest in de Sade has been given a great deal of biographical attention, but is worth briefly recapitulating here — in particular because he undoubtedly admired, but chose not to emulate, de Sade’s particular brand of perverse fiction. De Sade was an early interest. Indeed, Swinburne was ‘Sade’s enthusiastic champion before he had opened a page of his books’.⁶ Soon after he left Oxford, Swinburne’s budding friendship with Richard Monckton Milnes deepened, and much has been made of Milnes’s influence as a ‘sinister guru who corrupted the much younger Swinburne and released his latent preoccupation with flagellation by introducing him to Sade’s writing’ (Mitchell, 81). Milnes (Baron Houghton from 1863), a politician, writer, and literary patron ‘well known for his role as a host who introduced men like Swinburne and Wilde to each other and who

⁴ There is unfortunately no surviving evidence to indicate when Swinburne might have first read Laclos. It is apparent, however, that by the time he was drafting his novels, he was very familiar with him.

⁵ Portions of this discussion appear in the unpublished MSt thesis, Lakshmi Krishnan, ‘Swinburne the Novelist’ (New College, Oxford 2007).

⁶ Jeremy Mitchell, ‘Swinburne: The Disappointed Protagonist’, *Yale French Studies* 25 (1965), 81-88 (p. 81).

disseminated outrageous texts like de Sade's', became a sounding-board for his enthusiastic friend'.⁷ With him, Swinburne was able to discuss his more infamous affinities, including sadomasochism. But it took him some time to convince Milnes – perhaps concerned that de Sade would be an unduly strong influence on a young and impressionable personality — that he was ready to read the 'mystic pages of the martyred marquis de Sade' (*Letters* 1, 29). In 1861, Swinburne wrote a poem in French, 'Charenton⁸ en 1810', an ode where the young reader imagines the moment when he will finally read Sade, which ends with the prisoner's revelation of identity: 'Enfant, dit le vieillard, je m'appelle de Sade'.⁹ Milnes finally yielded in 1862, allowing Swinburne to borrow *Justine* (1797). After years of fulsome praise, Swinburne's response to de Sade's actual text was one of disappointment: 'Weep with me over a shattered idol!' he exclaimed to Milnes (*Letters* 1, 34). It continues:

I looked for some sharp and subtle analysis of lust — some keen dissection of pain and pleasure ... but in *Justine* there seems to me throughout to be one radical mistake rotting and undermining the whole structure of the book ... he takes *bulk* and *number* for greatness...as if a number of pleasures piled one on another made up the value of a single great and perfect sensation of pleasure (*Letters* 1, 54).

The analysis reveals a Swinburne unmoved by de Sade's 'pleasures piled'. His remark that 'one radical mistake' can enfeeble 'the whole structure' of a book, brings in the issues of form and composition. Repetition destabilises de Sade's text; 'bulk and number' amass without any psychological acuity or sharp description. 'Assertion is easy work', Swinburne writes, but 'shew us how and why these things are as they are' (*Letters* 1, 55). Swinburne offers both a close reading and a macrocosmic view of *Justine*. He

⁷ Richard Dellamora, *The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), p. 22.

⁸ The asylum, of course, where the Marquis de Sade was imprisoned and ultimately died.

⁹ Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'Charenton en 1810' (1861), printed in James Pope-Hennessy, *Monckton Milnes, The Flight of Youth, 1851-1885* (London: Constable, 1951), collected in *New Writings by Swinburne*, ed. by Cecil Y. Lang (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1964), pp. 7-10. Lang calls the poem 'like practically all of Swinburne's French verse, Hugolian to the last degree' (*New Writings*, 178)

believes de Sade's passion for producing overwhelming impressions detract from 'sharp and subtle analysis', and calls his novel the 'great lumbering Justine'. He even calls de Sade a 'Christian ascetic bent on earning the salvation of the soul through the mortification of the flesh', claiming that his 'one knack is to take common things, usual affections, natural pleasures and make them walk on their heads' (*Letters* 1, 57). Sade's writing is merely reversal, and lacks philosophic substance. Without serious thought and development, Swinburne argues, prose lacks effect. It must have what Rossetti called 'fundamental brainwork'.¹⁰ His discussion of *Justine*'s flaws is evidence that, even as a young writer, he was able to discern de Sade's structural and intellectual failings. That he was able to be clear-eyed about a writer he had worshipped (as an ideal) for so long is a testament to the seriousness of Swinburne's approach to prose fiction. In conclusion, he tells Milnes, 'I drop my apostrophe to M. de Sade, having relieved my mind for good and all of its final judgment on a matter of some curiosity and interest to me' (*Letters* 1, 57). Whether or not de Sade continued to function in Swinburne's imaginative life, he never became a major influence on his prose. His libertine fiction, though radical, perverse, and shocking in forms to which Swinburne could relate, did not provide an acceptable aesthetic model.

Instead, the single most important inspiration for *A Year's Letters* was Pierre Choderlos de Laclos's *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782),¹¹ a novel that ignited various scandals, crowned by the 1824 'decree of the *cour royale de Paris*' which 'condemned it to be destroyed as dangerous', a verdict that 'remained the official one throughout the

¹⁰ 'Conception, my boy, FUNDAMENTAL BRAINWORK, that is what makes all the difference in art': Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Hall Caine, 8 March, 1881', in *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (9 vols.), ed. by W.E. Fredeman (Cambridge: D.H. Brewer, 2010).

¹¹ Choderlos de Laclos, *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, trans. and ed. by Douglas Parmée (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

later nineteenth century'.¹² Through it, Swinburne succeeds to an inheritance of provocative epistolary fiction made manifest in his correspondence and the novel *A Year's Letters*. Though the genre enjoyed widespread English success, producing in the early days of the novel such works as Richardson's *Pamela* (1740-41) and *Clarissa* (1747-49) and Burney's *Evelina* (1778), it is upon the French tradition that Swinburne relies. This lineage, from Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (1721) to Rousseau's *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), and culminating in Laclos's *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, inaugurated a distinct, 'eighteenth-century transgressive tradition in France', whose 'texts shock at the level of representation but often conform to near classical forms of stylistic economy and operate in the confines of an already established epistolary form'.¹³ Such shocking texts, cinching lust, manipulation, passion, and sex in the corsets and conventions of 'classical forms', and operating desire in a 'stylistic economy', would naturally attract Swinburne, with his penchant for transgression clothed in high tradition.¹⁴

Rather than the blushing Pamela, ravished Clarissa, or modest Evelina, it is Madame de Merteuil who is important to Swinburne. The rose-hued English epistolary novels, whether they describe 'virtue rewarded'¹⁵ as in *Pamela* or *Evelina*, or virtue tragically martyred as in *Clarissa*, lack the amoral, rational *modus operandi* of Laclos's *Liaisons*. They lack, too, Laclos's gilded refinement, criminal creativity, and unprincipled ingenuity. Richardson's Lovelace,¹⁶ who comes the closest to Laclos's Valmont in

¹² P.W.K. Stone, 'Introduction', in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (London: Penguin Classics, 1961), pp. 7-15 (p. 7).

¹³ A.E. Jamison, *Poetics En Passant: Redefining The Relationship Between Victorian and Modern Poetry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 8.

¹⁴ Cf. the anapestic verse that formalizes and makes sombre the shocking matter of 'Dolores', or the classical stanzas of the 'Sapphics'

¹⁵ Subtitle to Richardson's *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded*

¹⁶ Seducer and destroyer in Richardson's *Clarissa*, his lust leads him to manipulate, drug, and rape. Clarissa eventually contracts a brain fever, symptom of her months of mental torment by Lovelace, and dies; Lovelace is devastated and volunteers himself for a duel. Severely wounded, he dies saying, 'let this expiate!'

function (and eventual repentance), has no English de Merteuil to abet his libertine schemes and counterpoint his ultimate repentance. Further, the great English epistolary novels propagate a clear ethical formula: virtue preserved is rewarded (as when Mr. B, the would-be seducer in *Pamela*, retracts his illicit offer and proposes honourable marriage), and virtue forcibly tarnished (cf. *Clarissa*) is still rewarded, though in the spiritual realm. Such values comprise the sentimental novel. *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, a libertine novel, offers no such bromides: though Valmont atones in a deadly duel and Marquise de Merteuil is socially ostracised, the novel does not pronounce easy judgement. *A Year's Letters* carries this even further; at the conclusion of its incestuous and adulterous affairs, little has materially changed. The lovers preserve their rank and position, and the appearance of conventionality is preserved through the efforts of the formidable Lady Midhurst, who declares that 'le dénouement c'est qu'il n'y a pas de dénouement' (*AYL*, 156). As befits a believer in *l'art pour l'art*, Swinburne admires Laclos's example of exquisitely crafted, risqué, artistically challenging letters, and his autonomous, self-ruling characters, just as he admired similar qualities in Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin*.

After the 1824 public condemnation and enforced destruction of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* by the *cour royale de Paris*, Charles Baudelaire was one of its few supporters, 'but the article he planned in its defence was never written' (Stone, 7). He compiled his thoughts in the 1856 *Notes analytiques et critiques sur les Liaisons dangereuses*,¹⁷ famously declaring, that the book burned not so much like fire as like ice: 'Ce livre, s'il brûle, ne peut brûler qu'à la manière de la glace'. These, however, were not

¹⁷ Charles Baudelaire, 'Notes analytiques et critiques sur les Liaisons dangereuses', in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Y.G. Le Dantec and Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1976), pp.66-75. Also see : Marguerite-Marie D. Stevens, 'Baudelaire lecteur de Laclos', *Études françaises*, 5 (1969), 3-30.

formally published until 1903.¹⁸ Until the end of the century, *Les Liaisons dangereuses* was virtually unknown in Britain ‘to all but Francophiles like Swinburne’.¹⁹ The latter lobbied vigorously for its acceptance, mentioning Laclos alongside Balzac in his essay on Byron,²⁰ comparing Barkilphedro from Hugo’s *L’Homme qui rit* to Merteuil,²¹ and alluding to the Marquise many times in the unfinished *Lesbia Brandon*, as well as producing an homage to the whole in his *A Year’s Letters (Love’s Cross-Currents)*.

As Philip Thody notes, almost everyone who writes on Laclos finds ‘their starting-point in one of Baudelaire’s remarks’ (Thody, 838). These, while brief, are an early endorsement of Laclos which is as much a landmark as Swinburne’s *Note* is for the Brontë sisters. He was ‘perhaps the first critic to note the importance of portraiture as a structuring principle of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*’,²² a useful observation as ‘critics have frequently admired the perfection with which *Les Liaisons dangereuses* is constructed from a purely formal point of view’ (Thody, 838). Baudelaire was also extremely attentive to the scandals that hounded the novel during and after publication. He ‘dismissed’ the ‘protestations of morality which Laclos included in his *Avertissement* and *Préface*. An author who allows his hero to die courageously in a duel, and who needs a providential attack of smallpox to punish his heroine, is in all probability doing nothing more than trying to placate the censor when he claims that his book is really very moral’ (Thody, 834). At the same time, he reads the novel as a moralist, claiming that ‘evil aware of itself is less frightful, and closer to the cure, than evil unaware of itself’ (*Notes*, 68), a statement that perhaps exonerates Valmont and impugns de Merteuil. He identifies

¹⁸ Philip Thody, ‘*Les Liaisons dangereuses*: Some Problems of Interpretation’, *Modern Language Review* 63(1968), 832-39 (pp. 832).

¹⁹ David Coward, ‘Introduction’, *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, trans. and ed. by Douglas Parmée (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. vii-xxxiv (p. xiii).

²⁰ 1866, originally a preface to a selection of Byron’s poems (1866), in *Essays and Studies* (1875), collected in *Bonchurch* vol. 15, 120-139. Rpt. in Hyder’s *Swinburne as Critic*.

²¹ In the 1869 review of *L’Homme qui rit*, amply discussed in chapter on Swinburne, Baudelaire, and Hugo.

²² Anne C. Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology: Sensibility in the Literature and Medicine of Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 270.

Madame de Tourvel as Laclos's ideal woman, a 'type simple, grandiose. Admirable création. Une femme naturelle. Une Eve touchante' (*Notes*, pp. 638-46). Baudelaire's 'puritanical, Jansenistic cast of mind' (Thody, 832) leads him to a rather different interpretation from Swinburne, whose admiration for Madame de Merteuil is obvious (and unsurprising) and whose character Lady Midhurst lauds her as a 'Prometheus in petticoats' (*LB*, 254).

Edmund Wilson was one of the earliest critics to explore the ways in which Swinburne's *A Year's Letters* derived from *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, though both the *Saturday Review* and the *Athenæum* had recognized the connection in their 1905 reviews of the novel, reissued in that year as *Love's Cross-Currents*. According to Wilson:

Not only has Lady Midhurst French blood; it is evident that the book derives from Laclos's *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (sic). Both stories are told in letters, and though the incidents and personalities in Swinburne are quite different from those in Laclos, one can recognize that, transposed into these different terms, Swinburne's theme is the same as Laclos's – the manipulation of simple people, regardless of their own real interests, by flexible and steely intelligence. But in Laclos there are two villains, and it is exhilarating when they at last get their odds and begin practicing their tricks on one another. Yet Lady Midhurst has no accomplice with whom she will fall out, to the ruin of their common plans. She is left in the end triumphant, and the upshot of *Love's Cross-Currents* is actually more unpleasant than that of the gratuitous exploits in eighteenth-century wickedness carried out by the schemers of Laclos.²³

Recognising the uncertain morality of Lady Midhurst's actions, Wilson evidently believes her triumph at the conclusion to be 'more unpleasant' than the tragedy of Laclos's novel. But there is neither elation nor heartbreak in her final statements, only a quiet pride at her accomplishment — forestalling family disaster and disintegration. Wilson rightly notes that the entire novel, like *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, is an act of play, the 'manipulation of simple people' by 'flexible and steely intelligence'. His assessment of the 'upshot' is also important because it acknowledges a key difference between Laclos's and Swinburne's

²³ Edmund Wilson, 'Introduction', in *The Novels of A.C. Swinburne* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1962), pp. 3-37 (p. 35).

novels: where one ends with the ruined ‘common plans’ of the two schemers, the other offers no such final reckoning, not even a by-line to conventional morality or reader expectation. Instead, in a very Balzacian outcome, reality is amoral, and to the best thinker (Lady Midhurst), not the best person (Redgie, perhaps, as young Swinburne’s fictional alter ego), gets the spoils.

The *Saturday Review* remarks that ‘Mr. Swinburne may have found in Laclos a little of his cynicism, though for that he need have gone no further than Stendhal, who is referred to in these pages significantly’, but that he lacks the ‘great novelist’s gift’ possessed by both Laclos and Stendhal: ‘that passion for life, and for the unraveling the threads of life’.²⁴ Of course, the same reviewer finds it ‘palpably and demonstrably absurd’ that ‘a married lady may prefer some chance stranger to her husband’ and adjudges morality ‘the soul of art’, measuring a ‘picture, poem, or story’ by the ‘lesson it conveys’ (184). Obviously, though the *Saturday Review* saw the Laclos-Swinburne linkage, it rather missed the finer points of amorality in both authors. The *Athenæum* offers a more theoretical analysis, confining its remarks primarily to the demerits of the epistolary form:

It seems to us to be a bastard form, which sacrifices the advantages of dramatic narrative and direct narrative without any commensurate gain in verisimilitude. It is a compromise between the story and the play. In art most compromises are bad. We do not like tinted sculpture, rhymeless lyrics, and illustrative music ... It is, we think, the least natural as well as the least probable. It is also the most wearisome ... It was a sheer accident that made the youthful Richardson write love-letters for amorous servant-girls ... Laclos undoubtedly imitated ‘Clarissa’ in ‘Les Liaisons Dangereuses.’ De Valmont is merely a Gallic Lovelace.²⁵

Despite these complaints against the genre, however, the review deems Swinburne’s novel a ‘literary success’, obliquely praising it as ‘no story at all, but simply a group of

²⁴ ‘A Poet As Novelist: “Love’s Cross-Currents. A Year’s Letters. By Algernon Charles Swinburne.”, *The Saturday Review* (5 August, 1905, 184-185), p. 185.

²⁵ ‘Love’s Cross-Currents: A Year’s Letters. By Algernon Charles Swinburne’, *The Athenæum* (Aug. 5, 1905, 165-166), p. 165.

letters, exhibiting a brief relationship between four lovers and their grandmother, and owing their vitality to their literary quality' (166). Swinburne, it adds, can 'write a letter as few can write it in this age when the telegram, the telephone, the typewriter, and the penny post have made letter-writing the rarest of arts and most despised of pastimes'. His letters are so diverse 'in mood, so brilliant in form, that they are sure to live as letters apart from their relations to each other and to the tenuous story in which they are set' (166). But this, indeed, is the essence of the great epistolary novel: letters that 'live as letters apart', not as forced or enforced creations (a complaint commonly levelled against Richardson's works), but a real, believable, and diverse series of correspondence. By the mid-century, fiction that was exclusively epistolary increasingly fell out of favour, replaced by novels, such as Collins's *The Moonstone* or Stoker's *Dracula*, that employed letters or messages as artefacts within a greater whole.²⁶ Thus, it is unsurprising that the *Athenæum* criticized the genre so strongly. In accepting Swinburne's talent for the art of the letter, however, these contemporary critics paved the way for later assessments that have applauded his use of the form.

But why Swinburne's elaborate homage? Why the preference for epistolary form? What does he find so compelling in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* and its 'epical' heroine to revisit them in this way? In 1782, 'the epistolary novel was an obvious form for Laclos to choose. It was by far the most popular kind of fiction in the eighteenth century, two of whose most celebrated novels, Richardson's *Clarissa* and Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, were composed in this style'.²⁷ But for Swinburne, writing almost a century later, the genre is a less obvious choice. In fact, it is a deliberate, historical, and rather perverse one. The epistolary novel had largely faded out by the end of the eighteenth

²⁶ For more on Swinburne's relationship to Collins and sensation fiction, see the earlier chapter on Swinburne and Collins.

²⁷ Helen Constantine, 'Introduction', in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), pp. xi-xxiv, (p. xvi).

century. This decline was partially due to the rise and increasing refinement of the novel form. But it also had something to do with the genre itself, which was often accused of being artificial and forced. When done poorly, its characters somehow manage to sneak away for hours and write long epistles that reproduce conversations verbatim (the criticism flung most commonly at Richardson's novels). In a polished example, such as *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, the form succeeds brilliantly because the letters themselves *become* the conversation. The genre was, nonetheless, famously challenging. That Swinburne would undertake this task should not be surprising: a poet who set himself ever more complex and arcane verse schemes (using, among others, a double sestina) can hardly be expected not to embark on a similar project in prose. Thus, at the peak of the Victorian three-decker, when prose fiction was dominated by Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope and the early work of George Eliot, Swinburne returns to and innovates with a style that arose at the inception of the European novel.

Improvements on this form accompany the development of the novel, as it progresses from cruder attempts (*Pamela*, *Clarissa*, *Héloïse*) to a piece as consummate as *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. The epistolary technique, while 'not the easiest way to tell a story', 'does present subtle possibilities to the skilful writer'.²⁸ *Les Liaisons dangereuses* has been praised because each letter is 'an incident in the plot' rather than a 'mere report of events' (Stone, 11). Additionally, Laclos 'keeps more than one correspondence alive at a time, and, moving from one to another, is constantly providing the reader with a fresh point of view on events' (Stone, 12). In his study of the work, Jean-Luc Seylaz comments that it is an almost perfect epistolary novel where the letters themselves act as weapons.²⁹ For the genre to succeed, we must believe the illusion that its letters are documents, that

²⁸ Dorothy R. Thelander, *Laclos and the Epistolary Novel* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1963), p. 14.

²⁹ Jean-Luc Seylaz, *Les Liaisons dangereuses et la création romanesque chez Laclos* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1958), p. 22.

we are presented with evidence and asked to ‘recreate’ the novel for ourselves. And we do so ‘with minimal guidance from the author in this genre’ (Thelander, 15). Even further, the characters become real, our relationship with them unmediated by a narrative voice. The contradiction, however, lies in the fact that there *is* an overarching narrative presence that, pluralistic and amorphous as it is, nonetheless inflects each and every character. This inexorable, guiding hand reminds us that the events of the novel, while they seem to occur in real-time, have already transpired. The letters are documentary evidence of this foregone conclusion.

‘A letter’, writes Helen Constantine, ‘is a chameleon-like entity. It may in turn be an auto-portrait, a weapon against an enemy, an instrument of mediation or manipulation, an internal monologue, a personal diary, an unconscious revelation of character, a threat or an instrument of ridicule’ (Constantine, xvii). Of course, it is also a form of literature: a history of events, process of revelation, or an explication. Thus, the letter has a shape-shifting quality that can be at once purposive and not. It is, in fact, an instrument of play. As such, it affords immense aesthetic possibility. And while Laclos’s letters are lauded for consistently furthering the plot, each serving as an incident, some, like the famous Letter 81, exist for their own sakes. The latter is a formidable declaration by Madame de Merteuil, an explanation of her background and development, of her ‘self-creation’. At the same time, however, it is a sharp and intricate analysis in its own right, a set-piece that could almost stand alone as an essay or aesthetic declaration. Swinburne’s reasons for revisiting epistolary fiction become clearer.

Of *A Year’s Letters*, F.J. Sypher writes, ‘in most novels of the sort, the author’s narrative frets at the limits of probable correspondence’,³⁰ but Swinburne’s novel suffers from no such constraint. Its ‘delicate tonal strokes’ and ‘patterns of persuasion and

³⁰ Francis J. Sypher, ‘Introduction’ in *A Year’s Letters*, ed. by F.J. Sypher (New York: New York University Press, 1974), pp. xi-xxxviii (p. xvi).

digression' lend credence to the interactions between its characters (xvii). Swinburne is particularly successful at evoking characters through their 'distinctive' letter-writing styles: '*ancien régime* (Lady Midhurst), muscular Christian (Redgie's father, Captain Harewood), schoolboy-intense (Redgie)' (xvii). But just as pre-revolutionary France was outraged by Laclos's novel, 'the moral climate of the Victorian age did not favour the kind of story Swinburne had to tell' (xi). *A Year's Letters* 'was too daring to find a sympathetic audience in its day' (xx), with its representations of incest and adultery and its subtle style.

While the seductions and liaisons in both novels are obvious grounds for scandal, their stylistic innovations are in fact much more incendiary. Critics have identified that *Les Liaisons dangereuses* 'circulates as a form of gossip',³¹ the letters buzzing around a certain *milieu* with all the speed and virulence of rumour. The reader, in turn, becomes a part of this web, for we are slotted in as the 'other who reads Merteuil' (Roussel, 114) or the other characters, and therefore invited to pass judgement. Things are different in *A Year's Letters*, as Lady Midhurst assumes a dominant position amidst the web of scandal. We are set adrift in *Liaisons*, while in *A Year's Letters* we are anchored by her presence, whether we agree with her manipulations or not. Stylistically, *Les Liaisons dangereuses* may 'have been a little out of fashion in 1782' by employing irony as its chief mode and countering the 'rise of sensibility'. It was 'found shocking because it offended current literary tastes' (Byrne, 4-5). Readers were perturbed by de Merteuil and Valmont's eighteenth-century neologisms, verbs freshly 'prefixed by "re"' and a vocabulary of 'exotic words', 'legal phrases' and 'Biblical terms'. They both also 'use the idiom and slang' (Thelander, 138-9) of their contemporary society, a richness of language that delicate readers found shocking. Readers of Swinburne will find such accusations

³¹ Roy Roussel, *The Conversation of the Sexes: Seduction and Equality in Selected 17th and 18th Century Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 114.

familiar; the ‘superflux’ (‘Anactoria’, *Poems* 1, 58, l. 28) and superfluity of his language was often the lynchpin of allegations against him.

Les Liaisons Dangereuses evokes a distinctive milieu, the last gasp of the *ancien régime*. It is a novel of exclusively and genuinely aristocratic life, of its dissipation and machinations. Set against a background of political conservatism, absolute monarchy, and the excesses of pre-revolutionary France, it is in many ways proto-Decadent.³² For Swinburne, although he distanced himself and Aestheticism from Decadence in the 1870s and 1880s, the aristocracy — both French and British — offered rich potential for a certain radical aesthetic. To take the novel, a middle-class art form, and turn it non-bourgeois, is Swinburne’s shocking contribution. Both novels deal with interiors, not only of *boudoirs* or parlours, but also of minds and imaginations. And while Laclos is never ‘interested in the external natural world’ (Constantine, xx), Swinburne very often is (as evidenced in his verse, dramas, and *Lesbia Brandon*). His decision to confine *A Year’s Letters* to interior spaces, to ‘take us into the house and let us see the kind of life that is lived there’ (Wilson, 21-22), is therefore especially telling.

Lady Midhurst embodies in many ways Madame de Merteuil’s alter ego, Swinburne’s homage to de Laclos’s icy *femme fatale*.³³ She appears in both of Swinburne’s novels, as the central schemer in *A Year’s Letters* and playing a cameo role in *Lesbia Brandon*. She is a ‘venomous old beauty’, French on her mother’s side, de Merteuil aged and ‘gone all to brain and tongue’ (*LB*, 230). And she, too, is a widow,

³² It anticipates the Decadents’ rediscovery of the aristocracy, which of course went hand-in-hand with their renewed interest in Catholicism, imperialism, conservative political beliefs, and fascination with high and rigid ritual. Like Gautier’s *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, it also exhibits a fascination with dress—its textures, colours, and materials—that is not simply social or cultural, but also aesthetic.

³³ Swinburne’s verse and prose reflects his preoccupation with *femmes fatales*: Faustine, Dolores, Proserpine, Venus, Margaret, Lady Wariston, Lesbia Brandon. In Madame de Merteuil/Lady Midhurst, he finds a different sort of fatal woman, whose faculties of insight and perception shape her as subject, rather than object, of Laura Mulvey’s ‘male gaze’ (for more see her essay ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, *Screen*, 16 (1975), pp. 6-18.

enjoying ‘the liberty that widowhood ... confer[s] upon’ her (*LLD*, LXXXI).³⁴ So far as society allows, both women are free agents who turn their skills and experience to interpersonal play. As Swinburne writes of Midhurst, ‘she had done many good turns, and many evil; and was ready, as the case might be, to help or to hinder, to set up or to upset’ (*LB*, 230). This power — to fashion or destroy the lives of others — she shares with Merteuil. ‘Outside her own family she regarded any man or woman as a *fera naturae*’ (*LB*, 233), and even within it, she is not above taking ‘any pains’ to avoid ‘ridicule’ or the ‘least chance of scandal’ against the family (*AYL*, 73). Like the Marquise, she ‘can be herself only so long as her reputation remains intact in the eyes of the world’ (Thody, 835). Such safeguarding requires a healthy dose of machination — and in this Lady Midhurst is more than happy to engage. Possessed of considerable analytic power, her principles, like those of the self-created, self-determined de Merteuil, are the ‘fruit of profound reflection’. She has ‘created them’ and with Merteuil can say that she has ‘created [her]self’ (*LLD*, LXXXI).³⁵ ‘Voluble and virulent with a savour of secret experience’, Lady Midhurst rules the game of society, standing ‘by herself as a little lonely power’ (*LB*, 230-31).

Unlike Madame de Merteuil, however, Lady Midhurst’s *modus vivendi* is not ‘strictly rational’.³⁶ There are touches of softness to her portrait that betray Swinburne’s warmth toward his creation: ‘Towards children she was undeniably soft-hearted; and the sight of beauty, which she had sense enough keenly to enjoy, softened instead of sharpening her’ (*LB*, 246). ‘There was’, the narrator of *A Year’s Letters* observes, ‘a certain amiably cynical side’ to the ‘affections’ of the ‘old life-worn philosophic lady’, and Lady Midhurst was ‘really very much fonder of her two grandchildren than of anyone

³⁴ ‘...la liberté qu’allait me donner mon veuvage, et je me promis bien d’en profiter’.

³⁵ ‘Je les ai créés...’

³⁶ Bill Overton, ‘The Play of Letters: *Les Liaisons dangereuses* on the Stage’, *Theatre Research International*, 13 (1988), 263-74, (p. 267).

else alive' (*AYL*, 57). He distinguishes her from the aesthete Linley, claiming that the 'main difference between' them is that 'she was not a bad woman for a cynic ... Cruel she certainly was on occasion; cruelty amused her ... but she was not, like some, impregnated with cruelty as a sponge with water. She had often pure impulses and kindly passions: and could even be simply tender' (*LB*, 246). She is not quite of de Merteuil's school, 'Conquer or perish' (*LLD*, LXXXI).³⁷ Her lone and unassailable position seems tinged with melancholy. Having conquered most of her softer passions and managed the liaisons of her surrounding family (the events of *A Year's Letters* predate those of *Lesbia Brandon* by some years), she stands alone, a 'little lonely power'. Perhaps Swinburne imagines Marquise de Merteuil, older and even wiser, having suffered no 'providential' punishment of disfigurement or social ostracism, nonetheless solitary in the sunset of her life. Perhaps, too, he read of a young Stendhal's apocryphal meeting in Grenoble³⁸ with the 'original' Madame de Merteuil, 'by then an old lady, lame and ugly, who petted him and gave him pickled walnuts' (Stone, 10). While Lady Midhurst's state is certainly not quite so destitute, it resonates with this projection of de Merteuil's fate: its solitude and softness toward youth. Since Laclos's conclusion — despite the neat death of Valmont and the tidy banishment of the Marquise — is so terse and inconclusive, later readers unconvinced by its parochial ending envisaged alternative fates for the fascinating de Merteuil. Swinburne joins this imaginative readership.

Lady Midhurst's sensitivity toward youth and beauty seems to stem not only from a certain highly developed aesthetic capacity,³⁹ but also from her love of literature, particularly French literature. She 'entangles' her companions 'in the mazes' of a drawing

³⁷ 'Il faut vaincre ou périr'.

³⁸ Stendhal grew up, and Laclos spent part of his army life, in Grenoble. So the encounter is possible, although improbable. More important is the idea that Madame de Merteuil's fate was fascinating, not only to de Laclos's contemporary readers, but to important literary figures who looked upon him as a crucial predecessor.

³⁹ And this, for Swinburne, also represents emotional capacity, a humanistic *Weltanschauung* and ideology as discussed earlier.

room ‘discussion on art and literature’ and launches into the topic of Balzac, whose prose she synaesthetically likens to ‘lightning, and a noise of water and wind’. She goes on to say that reading Balzac is ‘all but eating the fruit of knowledge and seeing men with the eyes and the sense of gods’ (*LB*, 255). This expressed desire, not conventionally feminine, ‘to see men with the eyes and the sense of gods’, reveals Lady Midhurst’s metaphysical, as opposed to Linley’s physical, philosophy (*LB*, 246). He, ‘plunged quite overhead into the fertile and tenacious mire of physical philosophy’ (*LB*, 246), is the ‘sinister sadist and Baudelairian’ to her more Romantic or classical humanist.⁴⁰ To perceive the world, Olympus-like, from above, to see human entanglements and lives with the ‘sense of gods’, this is her distinctly unfeminine ambition. Like the Marquise, who embarks on a course of study to master the rules of her world and ultimately rule it, Lady Midhurst stands both within and apart from her society. When cruel, she is cruel in the way of nature (which, for Swinburne, is always a woman), in the interests of pragmatism. And this harsh streak runs alongside a keen sense of beauty and a reverence for art. Her pagan leanings are identified early on: ‘a completer heathen had not existed in the pre-Christian era’ (*LB*, 230), a woman avoided by none but ‘religious and philanthropic persons. These, with the natural instinct of race, smelt out at once an enemy in her’ (*AYL*, 52). ‘If art is not worth more than virtue’, she argues, ‘it must be worth less, and in that case may as well go overboard. But if it is?’ (*LB*, 255).

Lady Midhurst’s surprising compassion also emerges at the conclusion of *A Year’s Letters*, in a letter to her niece Clara. ‘I have no right to reproach, and no heart’, she writes, ‘no one has the right; no one should have the heart ... But the time to count up and pay down comes for us all; we have no pleasures of our own; we hold no comforts but on sufferance. Things are constant only to division and decline’. She continues, ‘It is

⁴⁰ Randolph Hughes, ‘Foreword’, in *Lesbia Brandon*, ed. by R. Hughes (London: The Falcon Press, 1952), pp. iii-xxxv.

a pity you two poor children are not to be given more play ... I too have had everything handsome about me, and I have had losses. You see, my dear, the flowers (and weeds) will grow over all this in good time ... The years will do without us; and we are not fit to keep the counsel of the Fates' (*AYL*, 174-5). The transience of things, the 'triumph of time' over love, these are the subjects of her meditation. The lyricism of this passage, with its classical allusions and poetic drift, suggest a Lady Midhurst who enjoys the 'play' of language, whose humanistic and literary impulses are just as strong as her Machiavellian ones. Her age, intelligence, and wisdom lend Lady Midhurst the god-like perspective that she so admires in Balzac. Sypher argues that, 'the more one reads [Lady Midhurst's] letters, the more one sees in them hints and suggestions of the events and passions of a whole lifetime' (Sypher, xviii). She recognises 'life's inevitably tragic development for all spirited men and women: tragic because satisfying our passionate impulses is ultimately impossible'.⁴¹ When the cousins are separated and the gossips satisfactorily quelled, she says that, had passions been consummated and consanguineous marriages taken place, it 'would have made our friends open their eyes and lips a little' (*AYL*, 184). An understated summing-up, but it is not in Lady Midhurst's character to gloat. She steps back from her work after engineering, for pages, the steady fragmentation of her family's liaisons, and qualifies it with only a simple declaration. Sypher argues, 'the success of the Cheynes lies, one imagines, in their ability to produce every few generations someone like Lady Midhurst who can keep the members of the family in place' (Sypher, xix). Lady Midhurst represents survival, and she does indeed conquer, not perish.⁴²

⁴¹ Antony H. Harrison, 'Swinburne's Losses: The Poetics of Passion', *ELH* 49 (1982), 689-706, (p. 690).

⁴² I have made this point previously in 'Swinburne the Novelist', an unpublished MSt thesis, New College, Oxford, June 2007.

Rather than being written about, Lady Midhurst writes; she is not the object, but the subject. Her consciousness is literary; she exerts her influence over the four lovers through language, the remarkable power of her letters. Even further, she conceives of the entire drama as a ‘comedy’ that ‘slips off the stage without noise’. In an ironic twist, she declares, ‘luckily it never turned to the tearful style, as it once threatened to do’ (*AYL*, 184). We are reminded of de Merteuil’s comment that ‘one had only to combine an actor’s talents with a writer’s wit’ in order to win others’ admiration (*LLD*, LXXXI).⁴³ The *Athenæum*’s observation that the epistolary novel is a ‘compromise between the story and the play’ becomes less pejorative and more suggestive of possibility. Swinburne, who admired the drama of Collins’s novels and the theatrical conceit of letter-writing, is able to present characters like players on a stage, personalities wearing different masks and pitching different voices in their correspondence. *Les liaisons dangereuses* is his foundational text, its *dramatis personae* displaying, as Madame de Merteuil confides in Valmont, ‘upon the great stage’ of their world and the world of the book, the ‘talents which had been given’ them (*LLD*, LXXXI).⁴⁴

Acting the role of another sort of artist, Lady Midhurst writes of circumstances throughout as if they are literary, imagining how she ‘shall console and revenge [herself] by writing a novel ... I see my natural profession now, but I fear too late’ (*AYL*, 174). The events of the year were ‘pretty scandalous materials: the making of an excellent *roman de mœurs*’ (*AYL*, 176). Swinburne writes her as a figuration of the novelist, although her ‘best works of art are made not in print, but in life’ (Sypher, xvii). Like Swinburne, she thinks in terms of literature; like Madame de Merteuil, she is performative. Lady Midhurst’s literary grasp is connected to her conscious and deep involvement with ‘the

⁴³ ‘...il suffisait de joindre à l'esprit d'un Auteur le talent d'un Comédien.’

⁴⁴ ‘Alors je commençai à déployer sur le grand Théâtre les talents que je m'étais donnés.’

texture of contemporary events—political, artistic, and literary’ (Sypher, xvi-xvii). She is obviously the most self-aware of the characters in *A Year’s Letters*.

In this, Lady Midhurst evokes the Marquise de Merteuil yet again. She is ‘without a doubt, the most singular individual’ in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. Like her Victorian counterpart, ‘this singularity never takes the form of flagrant unconventionality. No one seems more at home in her world’ (Roussel, 96-97). Both adroitly navigate their societies, rewriting rules while appearing conventional. Lady Midhurst is the ‘internal centre’⁴⁵ of *A Year’s Letters*, wheedling, persuading, negotiating, and arranging, all under the guise of candour and sincerity. In her correspondence, she constantly calls herself a ‘bore’ or avers that she wants to disclose the ‘real, simple truth’ (*AYL*, 87-89). She is, of course, neither boring nor simple, and rarely truthful. In contrast to the Marquise, who has at least one correspondent — Valmont — with whom she is (mostly) candid, Lady Midhurst has none. We can only deduce her true opinions from the diversity of her tactics and the skill of her performance.

Madame Merteuil tells Valmont of her self-education after her husband’s death. She made ‘observations’ which she ‘supplemented with the aid of books’, studying ‘our manners in the novelists, our opinions in the philosophers’ (*LLD*, LXXXI).⁴⁶ While waiting for her lover, the Chevalier, she reads ‘a chapter of *Le Sopha*, a letter from *Héloïse*, and two of La Fontaine’s tales’ in order ‘to establish in [her] mind the different nuances of tone’ she ‘wished to adopt’ (*LLD*, X).⁴⁷ Literary precedent is not, however, sufficient. Warning Valmont of the difficulties of seducing La Présidente Tourvel through letters, she writes that ‘the great defect of all novels’ is that the ‘author whips himself up

⁴⁵ In an 1861 letter to a friend, George Meredith wrote that he could find no ‘internal centre from which springs anything that he [Swinburne] does’.

⁴⁶ ‘Je les fortifiai par le secours de la lecture ...J’étudiai nos mœurs dans les Romans ; nos opinions dans les Philosophes...’

⁴⁷ ‘...je lis un chapitre du Sopha, une Lettre d’Héloïse et deux Contes de La Fontaine, pour recorder les différents tons que je voulais prendre’.

into a passion' while 'the reader is left cold'. 'There is not', however, 'the same difficulty in conversation ... tears that come easily are an added advantage; and in the eyes an expression of desire is not easily distinguished from tenderness' (*LLD*, XXXIII).⁴⁸ Texts constitute the script for her performance. She studies her face before a mirror, she smiles or appears calm, practises the skill of masquerade so that she can produce an exact and highly efficient effect. Mademoiselle de Maupin's cross-dressing act echoes this: her project to learn men by effectively becoming one is a similar method of study and proto-feminist discourse. The difference, of course, is that Madeleine de Maupin's passionate liaisons afford romance and highly aestheticised pleasures. She experiences such feelings sensually, whereas Madame de Merteuil understands pleasure and pain cognitively, perceiving 'in these different sensations only facts upon which to reflect and meditate' (LXXXI).⁴⁹ Writing, according to the Marquise, can leave 'the reader' or lover cold, while the impassioned tears and sighs of conversation, however artificial, evoke visceral reactions in much the same way as a *pièce de théâtre*, stimulating 'excitement and incoherence' (*LLD*, XXXIII).⁵⁰ Grounding her behaviour in a system — literary, social, and philosophical — she both fully understands and scorns its rules. She 'claims to find the freedom of the novelist who writes her own story' (Roussel, 96), an act of self-determination which enables her to 'raise [herself] by painful effort above other women' (*LLD*, LXXXI).⁵¹

De Merteuil's 'natural profession' is both writer and actor. She performs a seemingly scripted role while in reality improvising alternate and radical interpretations,

⁴⁸ 'Il n'en est pas de même en parlant. L'habitude de travailler son organe y donne de la sensibilité ; la facilité des larmes y ajoute encore : l'expression du désir se confond dans les yeux avec celle de la tendresse...'

⁴⁹ '...et ne voyais dans ces diverses sensations que des faits à recueillir et à méditer'.

⁵⁰ '...l'excitation et l'incohérence...'

⁵¹ '...qu'après m'être autant élevée au-dessus des autres femmes par mes travaux pénibles...'

‘display[ing] upon the great stage’ her ‘acquired talents’ (*LLD*, LXXXI).⁵² De Merteuil seizes the prerogative to see her life and actions with ‘the eyes of gods’, to fashion her narrative both as its subject and the object of her own gaze. She, like Valmont, adopts the godlike agency to self-mythologize (‘I have created myself’, ‘a latter-day Delilah’,⁵³ LXXXI), and defines herself ‘as a certain ambiguous play within a system of fixed meanings’ (Roussel, 112). Play, in relation to the Marquise, assumes multiple meanings. There is the play, or performance, of her act; the linguistic and intellectual play of her wit; and finally, the philosophical play wherein she becomes ‘free and self-defining’ (Roussel, 112) amidst conventional signifiers. The very term ‘play’ connotes a certain ambiguity and transience, a certain ‘flow and passage’ or flexibility of thought.⁵⁴ Lady Midhurst refers to this element of play, but in relationship to love: ‘it is a pity you two poor children are not to be given more play’. Schiller asserts, ‘the agreeable, the good, the perfect, with these man is merely in earnest; but with beauty he plays’.⁵⁵ Swinburne, we remember, is accused of ‘playing’ with vice, attempting to make it beautiful, while Wilde discerns in Pater’s prose the ‘free play of the mind’.⁵⁶

The tradition of *libertinage*, to which *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* belongs, is coupled to such play — conveying ‘sexual depravity’ on one hand, but also ‘something of its old sense of “free-thought” which, around 1700, had meant the revolt of a group of radical intellectuals against the Church and established morality’. Earlier, during the sixteenth century, ‘libertine and atheist became synonymous. The concept slowly evolved

⁵² ‘Alors je commençai à déployer sur le grand Théâtre les talents que je m’étais donnés’.

⁵³ ‘...ils sont le fruit de mes profondes réflexions ; je les ai créés, et je puis dire que je suis mon ouvrage...Nouvelle Dalila, j’ai toujours...’

⁵⁴ Angela Leighton, *On Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 78.

⁵⁵ ‘Mit dem Angenehmen, mit dem Guten, mit dem Vollkommenen ist es dem Menschen *nur* ernst; aber mit der Schönheit spielt er’, in Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man (Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen, in einer Reihe von Briefen)*, Fünftehnter Brief, 3^o Teil, *Sammlung kleinere prosaischen Schriften*, 1800 (republished Stuttgart: Reclam, 2000).

⁵⁶ Oscar Wilde, ‘The Critic as Artist’, in *Intentions* (London: Methuen, 1919), pp. 93-217, (p. 214).

from heresy and atheism to debauchery'.⁵⁷ The libertine is at core a freethinker, whose intellectual independence manifests as liberated style, culture, and sexuality. Raising 'opposition to the civil and ecclesiastical Establishment' and promoting 'the cause of liberty (implicit in "libertinage") in the specific context of sexual mores', the 'libertine novel ... formed one strand of the philosophical novel. Its uniqueness lay in its exploitation of the shock value of eroticism' (Coward xix). This is familiar terrain for Swinburne, whose work provoked such a stormy reaction for its radical aesthetics, the 'shock value' of its eroticism, and its unrelenting revolt against 'established morality'. *Poems and Ballads, First Series* began to 'destabilize the previously established boundaries between what could be considered aesthetic and what pornographic',⁵⁸ and in this regard is well situated within the libertine tradition. Similarly, his prose bends these boundaries and offers an attractive, unsettling portrait of libertinage in the nineteenth-century aristocracy of England. That this destabilization has ideological roots in a radical, anti-conventional philosophy of the Enlightenment provides a continuous historical context for Swinburne's thinking. In Laclos's libertine novel we see a prototype, not only for Swinburne, but for many other writers: Honoré de Balzac, Stendhal, Edgar Allan Poe, William Thackeray, Baudelaire, Oscar Wilde, Thomas Hardy, all who owe something to its ideological transgressiveness and the 'shock value' of its eroticism. At the heart of the libertine novel is the intellectual and erotic play that simultaneously observes and dances around convention.

Play, then, has long been associated with a variety of aesthetics and forms.

Unfortunately, critics have often chosen to associate notions of beauty and of the Aesthetic itself with a static, 'artistic inviolableness' said to originate in Keats's frozen

⁵⁷ Catherine Cusset, 'Editor's Preface: The Lesson of Libertinage', *Yale French Studies* 94 (1998), 1-14, (p. 2 – Footnote 2).

⁵⁸ Allison Pease, *Modernism, Mass Culture, and the Aesthetics of Obscenity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. xiii. For more on this topic, see the chapter on Swinburne (pp. 37-71)

lovers and the perfect ‘Attic shape’⁵⁹ of the Grecian urn. This of course violates a fundamental Romantic and Keatsian idea that ‘process, involving decay and death, is necessary to beauty; the only beauty of genuine and lasting satisfaction is a truth that includes the fact of mutability’.⁶⁰ ‘Nay, for a little we live, and life hath mutable wings’, says Swinburne in ‘Hymn to Proserpine’, ‘a little while and we die; shall not life thrive as it may? /For no man under the sky lives twice, outliving his day’ (*Poems* 1, 68-69, ll. 30-32). Lady Midhurst mourns, in her own way, the passing of love and its ‘play’, acknowledging that ‘the time to count up and pay down comes for us all’. Love, like other things of beauty, may be a ‘joy forever’, but is only made glorious ‘spite of’ and owing to the ‘despondence ... of gloomy days’.⁶¹ The Marquise de Merteuil, a free agent of play, finds herself denied ‘the ambiguity necessary for this play’ when Valmont’s defection shows her freedom to be ‘only an illusion’. She then becomes ‘defined by ... forces she had initially suppressed’ — physicality and conventionality — the decay of her body and the rigidity of her society (Roussel, 112). The joy of play is necessarily subject to decay and death, a gloom that heightens, rather than overshadows, its beauty.

Love is interlinked with play and in turn with beauty and the creation of art. The Aesthetic, ‘its seductive, sly, even Chinese whispering, is a freedom to play’ (Leighton, 11). Angela Leighton insightfully argues that literature itself is an act of play, that ‘the importance of not being in earnest is precisely what makes the play of literature important. It is *as* play, even as the playing of “lyres and flutes”, that it might have something to say. Such play is not a totally free play, but remains connected with ethical and political values. But neither is it normatively identical with those values, so that the one can be bedrocked in the other’ (Leighton, 35-36). The notion of play, as it pertains to

⁵⁹ John Keats, ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’, *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, ed. by Arthur Quiller Couch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1908), pp. 729-30, ll.40.

⁶⁰ Allen C. Austin, ‘Toward Resolving Keats’ Grecian Urn Ode’, *Neophilologus* 70 (1986), 615-29 (p. 616).

⁶¹ John Keats, *Endymion: A Poetic Romance* (London: Taylor and Hessey, 1818), Book 1, p. 10.

the stage, letters, constructed identities, and the many masks that a single actor can wear, has rich significance for Swinburne. It impresses upon us his belief that thematic play can occur within a series of fixed forms, patterns, even genres, and it suggests that the motifs we find repeated in Laclos, Baudelaire, Gautier, and finally in Swinburne are interlinked across time and culture. Leighton's point that this play is 'not a totally free play, but remains connected with ethical and political values' has especial import in relation to Swinburne. The sort of play afforded by the aesthetic autonomy of *l'art pour l'art* is intimately related to the masquerade of plot and character in epistolary fiction. At the same time, this freedom of play, play-acting, and playful acting is not without compass, consequence, or coherence. As Lady Midhurst writes — offering a highly Swinburnian view of fate and moral harmony, rather than morality — 'the time to count up and pay down comes for us all; we have no pleasures of our own; we hold no comforts but on sufferance. Things are constant only to division and decline' (*AYL*, 155).

Mr. Linley and Lady Midhurst discuss Balzac's *Eugénie Grandet*, a conversation that becomes an extended comparison between Valérie, Madame Marneffe, and Madame de Merteuil. Valérie, Linley declares, is a 'copy in water-colours of Madame de Merteuil en bourgeoisie'. Lady Midhurst disagrees, contending that she is 'no more like the Merteuil than I am'. Here Swinburne quips parenthetically, 'not so very unlike then, said the other with his eyes' (*LB*,). Linley's telling silence is the only explicit comparison between Lady Midhurst and her 'Titaness', the 'epical' Marquise who 'fights heaven', 'only you don't see it for the red heels and powder'. Balzac's stylish adulteress, the 'little nymph', as Lady Midhurst dubs her, is pursued by 'shepherds and Satyrs ... Hulots and Crevels and Steinbocks'. But the Marquise has 'gods against her and men beneath' and 'might be put into Milton as mother of sin and death'. De Merteuil transforms into a sort of goddess, a Dolores redeeming the world from virtue or a Satanic mother straight out of

Paradise Lost, doing battle not with men but with gods and demons. Shades of Byron and Shelley colour Lady Midhurst's vision of an epic, creative, generative Hellish creature, an 'enormous' Titaness who steals fire and braves the punishment of heaven (*LB*, 254). And of course she alludes to de Merteuil's classical ancestor Prometheus ('in petticoats'), icon of humanism and Romantic revolt. By construing her on such a grand scale, Lady Midhurst displays penetrating insight. She, and by extension, Swinburne, predate by decades critics who have referred to Vicomte de Valmont and Marquise de Merteuil as Satanic figures, an anti-hero and heroine filled with 'libertine energy' and 'seductive presence'.⁶² This hellish verve has led some to call them charmingly 'urbane monsters' (Stone, 8) and others to admire their vitality and — until it is shattered — 'self-sufficiency' (Roussel, 109). De Merteuil's career of Luciferian pride and subsequent downfall makes her a powerful symbol for Swinburne given his ideology of *non serviam*, his rebellion against the 'long Dark Age of Christian worship' that began with the Biblical and Miltonic 'shift of primal power'⁶³ that replaced the pagan artist, classical free-thinker, 'mortal poet' with 'an immaterial idea, God' (or, in the case of De Merteuil, conventional morality).

Lady Midhurst later comments on the implausibility of de Merteuil's punishment: 'that smallpox always seemed to me to spoil the face of the book itself'. The Marquise's disfigurement becomes a very scar on the 'face' of de Laclos's novel, for *Les Liaisons dangereuses* 'stands or falls by' Madame de Merteuil in much the same way that *A Year's Letters* 'stands or falls by Lady Midhurst'. 'If she gives satisfaction, it must be all right; if not, Chaos is come again' (*SL*, I.106). And by dispatching de Merteuil with inappropriate haste, Laclos gives a sop to popular morality and ultimately damages an

⁶² Patrick Byrne, *Les Liaisons dangereuses: A Study of Motive and Moral* (Glasgow: University of Glasgow French and German Publications, 1989), p. 3.

⁶³ Jerome McGann, 'Introduction', in *Major Poems and Selected Prose*, ed. by Jerome McGann and Charles L. Sligh (New Haven: Yale UP, 2004), pp. xv-xxviii (p. xxii).

otherwise excellently crafted work. As Lady Midhurst remarks to Bertie Seyton, ‘Don’t get any notion of providential justice into your head; it doesn’t pay except in Carlyle — and the Bible of course’ (*LB*, 248). She finds the ending dissatisfying for this very reason: ‘I don’t believe she was beaten at last’ (*LB*, 254). Providential justice, while an attractive enough notion in theory, simply ‘doesn’t pay’, and the likelihood that someone of the Marquise’s magnitude would fail is therefore unbelievable.

The fall of Valmont occurs, of course, in more dramatic fashion; he is fatally wounded in a duel against Chevalier Danceny, and upon dying hands over a sheaf of letters sufficient to destroy Madame de Merteuil’s reputation. The duel itself is a loaded literary trope: a clash of minds and skill, a contest distilled into a set of rules and circumscribed space. It is a dance of two adversaries, which achieves resolution only through death. Intellectual duels are fought throughout *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, where gossip, rumour, and strategy masquerade as the conversation of drawing room or boudoir. Each letter is itself a duel, squaring the wits of two correspondents. The violence implicit within the text is made tangible through Valmont’s fatal stabbing, the duel a moment of shocking awareness in the novel — not only will Valmont die, but so will Madame de Tourvel, while Madame de Merteuil will be shamed and exiled. Benjamin, via Baudelaire, presents the ‘duel in which the artist, just before being beaten, screams in fright’ as ‘the creative process itself’.⁶⁴ This analogy is fruitful for both *Les Liaisons dangereuses* and *A Year’s Letters*, in which duels both physical and intellectual are agents of ‘creative process’, devices of corruption, manipulation, and transformation, and which ultimately form a work of art. Benjamin describes the artist’s creative process as the shock of fright just before a violent duel. In contrast, Valmont’s duel provides a blood-soaked denouement to this novel of shocks.

⁶⁴ Walter Benjamin, ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’, in *Selected Writings: Vol.4. 1938-1940* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 313-56 (p. 319).

The deception of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* lies, not simply in its indiscretions or improprieties, its erotic and manipulative scandals, but in the fact that it ‘lays many trails which turn out to be false when they are not liberally strewn with red herrings’ (Coward, xxxiv). It is filled with literary temptations and falsehoods, bafflements to entice the reader, ironies that confuse. The values of the author are opaque, a move that was far ahead of its time. The disruption of tradition in *Les liaisons dangereuses* is all the more perverse and shocking because it exists in settings so conventional, refined, patrician, and constrained, and is written in a genre of such formal purity and controlled restraint. The libertine disregard for rules is, for Swinburne, important not merely because it is playfully risqué or richly ironic, but because it illustrates an ideology of autonomy and creative licence within *ancien régime* France, a culture and class which bear striking similarities to the titled England of his own background. By Swinburne’s time, the novel had been claimed as the great bourgeois form; in turning to a scandalous French epistolary text and revisiting its themes of sex, creativity, wit, and ironic manipulation, Swinburne sought a precedent for English novels that would be non-bourgeois — unconventional, aristocratic, radical, hyper-refined, shocking — and an alternative pattern for modern prose to follow.

7. A 'Panorama of Passions': Swinburne and Balzac

Part of Swinburne's novel, *Lesbia Brandon*, appears in a recent anthology of literary responses to Honoré de Balzac, *L'Invention de Balzac: Lecture européennes*.¹ In its introduction, Susi Pietri explains how Swinburne had intended a cycle of novels with recurring characters, 'une sorte de 'comédie humaine' condensée et corrosive de la haute société britannique' and his inclusion was appropriate.² Swinburne himself identified *Lesbia Brandon* as an 'étude à la Balzac',³ and spoke of the novelist warmly in his correspondence (*Letters* 1, 224). More, he projected an interlocked series of novels—an alternative history of the English aristocracy in the style of Balzac — that would be uniquely his, uniquely Swinburnian. Pietri persuasively argues that this cycle might be a 'miroir concentrique' of *La Comédie humaine* (1799-1850), and that *Lesbia Brandon* itself is 'délibérément un micro-miroir reflétant le plus large miroir de l' œuvre cyclique de Swinburne' (9). Swinburne's intimate relationship with Balzac extended beyond admiration into literary ambition, and his production of *Lesbia Brandon* bears importance not just for our understanding of his prose, but also his entire 'oeuvre cyclique'.

In this chapter, I propose to unlock the Balzacian elements that were of particular interest to Swinburne, and to cast Balzac, not only in his traditional role as a great realist, but also as a figure integral to the history of nineteenth-century Decadence. Through his capacity for both meticulous craft and scandalous delineation, his concurrent awareness of the world of ideas and that of materials, Balzac holds a vital place in the new world of

¹ Multiple authors, *L'Invention de Balzac: Lecture européennes*, ed. by Susi Pietri (Saint-Denis: P U De Vincennes, 2004), pp. 157-163. Responses include those of Swinburne, H. James, Rilke, Wilde, Chekhov, Yeats, Hofmannsthal, and Pasternak. Further references to this and all other citations are given in the text.

² Susi Pietri, 'Introduction: Balzac et la scène européenne du roman', *L'invention de Balzac* (Saint-Denis: PUV, 2004), p. 9.

³ To Richard F. Burton, 11 January 1867: 'A scheme of mixed verse and prose – a sort of 'étude à la Balzac plus the poetry – which I flatter myself will be more offensive and objectionable to Britannia than anything I have yet done'.

letters occupied by Swinburne and his contemporaries, 'laying the ironic foundations of a Modernist aesthetic, focusing all the major currents of Romantic and pre-Romantic thought and projecting them into our century'.⁴

As a focus for many lines of thought, Balzac compelled Swinburne in a way quite different from his other idols. He admired Balzac's ability to 'push analysis to the verge of creation, and with his marvellous clearness of eye and strength of hand turn discovery almost to invention',⁵ an analytic, mechanistic counterpoint to the imaginative power of Hugo or Blake. Swinburne's language when speaking of Hugo is almost always elemental: the gathering might of a storm or the fantastically lit sky over the Channel; to explain Balzac, he relies on the heuristics of science. Comparing him to Blake, Swinburne writes that if 'passed through the crucible of [Balzac's] supreme intellect — submitted to the test of that supple practical sense, that laborious apprehension', 'the strange floating forces of Blake's instinctive and imaginative work might have been explained and made applicable to direct ends in a way we cannot now hope for', a process he likens to 'condensing apparent vapour into tangible and malleable form, of helping us to handle air and measure mist' (*WB*, 102-104). Such weighing of evidence, the 'supple' work of labour and intellect, and its 'tangible' and empirical results, Swinburne argues, separates Balzac from the 'great men who are pure artists', who 'hardly care about descending to the level of a preacher's or interpreter's work'. Balzac belongs to a certain eminent 'class of workmen', the moral scientist, fit to 'grapple with the strange things and words, and compel them by divine violence of spiritual rape to bring forth flowers and fruits good for food and available for use' (103).

⁴ Graham Robb, *Balzac: A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1994), p. 423.

⁵ Algernon Charles Swinburne, *William Blake: A Critical Essay* (London: John Camden Hotten, 1868), pp. 102-104, cited as *WB*. Collected in *Bonchurch* vol. 16, 51-350.

Henry James, who would later write persuasively in defence of Balzac,⁶ shared this opinion. He, too, admired Balzac's involvement, that he 'lived and breathed in his medium' (73) and 'never disengaged, paring his fingertips as Stephen Dedalus puts it; he suffers with those he sees suffering, and that makes for another suffering of his own'.⁷ Swinburne offers Balzac as a great observer, an 'eye and brain' in the world, not isolated at the level of the pure artist, but physically absorbed, wrestling with 'strange things and words' in order to interpret them and become the 'greatest direct expounder of moral fact'. He 'asserts', and 'cannot blunder or lie' (102-104).

As was so often the case, Swinburne was an early and forceful voice supporting Balzac, who for the better part of fifty years was often 'handled with surgical gloves', or 'lumped together with all those other "revolting" French novelists — Dumas, Sue, and Hugo' (Robb, 422). Toward the end of the century, more writers joined Swinburne in praising Balzac: Oscar Wilde and Henry James among them. Wilde called his works 'our most important magazine of documents on human nature',⁸ echoing Swinburne's scientific language:

As the naturalist studied lions and tigers, so the novelist studied men and women. Yet he was no mere reporter. Photography and procès-verbal were not the essentials of his method. Observation gave him the facts of life, but his genius converted facts into truths, and truths into truth. He was, in a word, a marvelous combination of the artistic temperament with the scientific spirit (29).

James, too, suggests that the 'lyrical element is not great, is in fact not present at all, in Balzac', but that he is a 'lover of the image of life', a 'fellow-craftsmen' of novelists who followed, his *Comédie humaine* a 'huge distributed, divided, and sub-divided picture of

⁶ See Henry James, *The Question of Our Speech: the Lesson of Balzac; Two Lectures* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1905).

⁷ David Gervais, 'The Master's Lesson: Balzac and Henry James', *The Cambridge Quarterly* 33 (2004), 315-330 (p. 322).

⁸ Oscar Wilde, 'Unsigned review of Honoré de Balzac, *The Duchesse de Langeais, and Other Stories — Cesar Birotteau* (Balzac's Novels in English), 2 vols', *Pall Mall Gazette* XLIV. 6706 (1886). Rpt. in Oscar Wilde, *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Richard Ellmann (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 29.

the life of France in his time, a picture bristling with imagination and information ... a world of special and general insight, a rank tropical forest of detail' (James, *Balzac*, 72-74). All three critical examinations of Balzac use the syntax of observation, science, exploration, and distinguish his technical achievement. Swinburne describes him as a chemist or physicist of ideas, sublimating the insubstantial to the concrete; Wilde calls him a naturalist, transcending observation to reframe that which he observes. James represents Balzac's fictional world as a massive and rich 'tropical forest of detail', an ecological study in what Swinburne calls his 'laborious apprehension'. All three writers refer to him as a master craftsman and patriarch of the novel; all three consider him a fellow draughtsman and wordsmith. Their respect for Balzac's all-encompassing and sacrificial commitment to his art is palpable, as when James names him a 'painter of life, inflamed with ingenuity', shattered at the close of a life 'worn out with work and thought and passion' (James, *Balzac*, 74-76). Both Swinburne and Wilde mention him alongside Shakespeare, as the novelist who, like the dramatist, turns 'discovery almost to invention' (*WB*, 102-104).

Such invention involves not only his mastery of observation and analytic narrative, but also his characters, which simmer with vitality. Indeed, Wilde admits to being so fully absorbed in Balzac's world that its inhabitants assume a greater realness than the living:

After the *Comédie humaine* one begins to believe that the only real people are the people who never existed ... [his characters] all bring with them a kind of contagious illusion of life. They have a fierce vitality about them: their existence is fervent and fiery-coloured; we not merely feel for them but we see them--they dominate our fancy and defy scepticism. A steady course of Balzac reduces our living friends to shadows, and our acquaintances to the shadows of shades' (30).

Swinburne seems similarly immersed in this world,⁹ evinced by consistent references to Balzac and the characters of *La Comédie humaine* that appear throughout his critical writing. In 'Byron' (1866), Swinburne esteems portions of the English poet's *Don Juan* to be 'worthy of Laclos or Balzac'¹⁰ ('Byron', 47). In 'John Webster' (1886), Swinburne describes a 'delicate line of demarcation' which 'divides the impressive and the terrible from the horrible and the loathsome — Victor Hugo and Honoré de Balzac from Eugène Sue and Émile Zola'.¹¹ His piece on Charles Dickens compares Dickens's satirical achievement unfavourably to that of Balzac: 'a Lady Kew was as far outside the range of his [Dickens'] genius as a Madame Marneffe'¹² ('Charles Dickens', 231). In his essay on Shakespeare, he discounts actors who play Iago 'like a member — and a very inefficient member — of the secret police', arguing that it 'would seem impossible for actors to understand that he is not a would-be detective, an aspirant for the honours of a Vidocq, a candidate for the laurels of a Vautrin'.¹³

As Cecil Lang points out in his edition of Swinburne's *Letters*, the correspondence contains important literary criticism. Here too Swinburne 'evangelized tirelessly' for Balzac. Writing on 16 December 1859 to William Bell Scott, he asks, 'Have you begun Balzac yet? I found Gabriel Rossetti in the thick of him and appreciating him very justly. You would rejoice in the *Études Philosophiques* which I

⁹ In his edition of *Lesbia Brandon*, Randolph Hughes says, 'Swinburne was steeped in Balzac before he left Oxford. I have drawn up a list of the French books borrowed by him from the library of the Taylor Institution between March 1859 and May 1860...and it includes over forty of Balzac's works' (Hughes, 'Commentary', *LB*, 403).

¹⁰ Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'Preface to Byron's Poems' (1866), *Bonchurch* vol. 15, 120-139. Rpt. as 'Byron', in Hyder's *Swinburne as Critic*, pp. 37-52 (p. 47).

¹¹ Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'John Webster' (1886), *Bonchurch* vol. 2, 281-314. Rpt. as 'John Webster', in Hyder's *Swinburne As Critic*, pp. 286-311 (p. 295).

¹² Character from Balzac's *La Cousine Bette* (1846)

¹³ Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Study of Shakespeare* (1880), *Bonchurch* vol. 2, 3-266. Rpt. as 'Shakespeare', in Hyder's *Swinburne as Critic*, pp. 253-267 (p. 264). Jacques Collin, alias Vautrin, is an escaped convict and criminal mastermind who appears in several of Balzac's novels: *Le Père Goriot*, *Illusions perdues*, and *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes*. As mentioned in the chapter, 'Swinburne on Collins', Vidocq (1775-1857) was a former criminal who founded the Sûreté Nationale, the father of modern criminology, whose life inspired Victor Hugo's character Jean Valjean, as well as Balzac's Vautrin.

have just purchased.’ (*Letters* 1, 28).¹⁴ Swinburne ‘read Balzac extensively while at Oxford’¹⁵; he even sent William Bell Scott his personal copy of *Le Livre mystique* (an 1835 collection of *Séraphita*, *Les Proscrits*, and *Louis Lambert* into a two volume set) in February 1860, while noting that ‘I am bound to add that I have never got through it’ (*Letters* 1, 31-32). In 1875, he calls Browning’s ‘new “sensation novel”’ (the narrative poem *The Inn Album*) a ‘fine study in the later manner of Balzac,’ asserting that, ‘I always think the great English analyst greatest as he comes nearest in matter and procedure to the still greater Frenchman’ (*Letters* 3, 87). As late as November 1895, in a letter thanking Thomas Hardy for a copy of *Jude the Obscure* (1895), Swinburne remarks that, ‘Balzac is dead, and there has been no such tragedy in fiction — on anything like the same lines — since he died’ (*Letters* 6, 91). Perhaps the most significant of these references, however, comes in the postscript to Swinburne’s letter to William Bell Scott, written in January 1861: ‘P.S. As for your criticism of that divine book of Balzac’s — rot! Madame Marneffe was the greatest of her sex and an honour to humanity’ (*Letters* 1, 43). His energetic defence forecasts Wilde’s assertion that ‘we not merely feel for [Balzac’s characters] but we see them — they dominate our fancy and defy scepticism’. For Swinburne, the vibrant and polarizing Madame Marneffe, in particular, ‘reduces our living friends to shadows, and our acquaintances to the shadows of shades’ (30).

To further understand why ‘Père’ Balzac was such an important predecessor for Swinburne, we should first consider the novel that Swinburne praised to Bell Scott as ‘that divine book’ (*Letters* 1, 43), *La Cousine Bette* (1846). Swinburne’s hallowed text

¹⁴ Between 1842 and 1848 Balzac published a collected edition of his novels and tales under the general title *La Comédie humaine*. The collection was eventually divided into three parts: ‘Études de mœurs’, ‘Études philosophiques’, and ‘Études analytiques’. The ‘Études philosophiques’ include *La Peau de chagrin*, *Melmoth réconcilié*, *Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu*, *Gambara*, *La Recherche de l’Absolu*, *Les Proscrits*, *Louis Lambert*, and *Séraphita*. Since Swinburne lent his copy of a collected edition of the last three of these titles to William Bell Scott in February 1860, it is possible that he had acquired only these, rather than the entire series.

¹⁵ Catherine Maxwell, *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne: Bearing Blindness* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 253.

opens with Monsieur Crevel, a ‘tradesman, a shopkeeper, an ex-salesman of almond paste, eau-de-Portugal and hair oil!’ pressuring a Baroness Adeline Hulot into an affair.¹⁶ She refuses. Others in the novel, however, are not so fastidious. Her son, Victorin, is married to (and running up debts on behalf of) Crevel’s daughter, Celestine, while her daughter, Hortense, is on the lookout for a husband. Meanwhile, we are introduced to the Hulots’ poor relation Lisbeth (Bette), whom Balzac describes as ‘a primitive peasant of Lorraine ... not without a streak of treachery ... stiff as a post’.¹⁷ ‘Her black hair’, he writes, ‘her hard fine eyes, the rigid lines of her face, and the dusky Spanish complexion that made her look like a figure by Giotto, and which a real Parisienne would have used to good advantage, and above all her odd clothes made her appearance so freakish that she sometimes looked like nothing so much as one of those dressed-up monkeys ...’ (*Bette*, 37).¹⁸ Bette bitterly resents her cousin’s affluence and beauty. She comes upon the young Wenceslas Steinbock, an unsuccessful Polish sculptor, attempting to commit suicide. Nursing him back to health, Bette develops a maternal attachment to him. She is crushed, however, when Hortense Hulot falls in love with Steinbock and the two are eventually married.

Bette is a singular creation, something more than a sour spinster, combining the ‘freakish’ and the poignant, and a wellspring of bitter energy in the novel. She is what Camille Paglia terms a ‘coarse female androgyne’ and ‘Apollonian objet d’art’. Her spinsterhood and low social standing generate a great drive to infiltrate and destroy the society that has done her wrong. As such, she is an ‘amoral black diamond’ filled with

¹⁶ Honoré de Balzac, *Cousin Bette* (1846), trans. by Kathleen Raine (New York: Modern Library, 2002), p. 9. ‘Je suis un épicier, un boutiquier, un ancien débitant de pâte d’amandes, d’eau d’ Portugal, d’huile céphalique...’

¹⁷ ‘...la sauvage Lorraine, quelque peu traîtresse...mais elle gardait la roideur d’un baton’.

¹⁸ ‘Ainsi, la chevelure noire, les beaux yeux durs, la rigidité des lignes du visage, la sécheresse calabraise du teint qui faisaient de la cousine Bette une figure du Giotto, et desquels une vraie Parisienne eût tiré parti, sa mise étrange surtout, lui donnaient une si bizarre apparence, que parfois elle ressemblait aux singes habillés en femmes, promenés par les petits Savoyards’.

‘primal aggression’. Indeed, Paglia affirms that, ‘though she belongs to a social novel’, Bette ‘resonates with the archetypal’.¹⁹ Balzac constantly represents her as ‘stiff’, ‘hard’, ‘rigid’, stony, hard as granite and black like marble, a knotty figure of darkness as opposed to Valérie Marneffe’s bright beauty. One can imagine that these archetypal juxtapositions might interest Swinburne, for whom duality is such a vital concept. More, Balzac’s careful and complex characterisation of Bette justifies Swinburne’s comment that he ‘grapples with strange things and words’ in order to exact an analytic lesson and meaning, as well as Wilde’s description of his characters’ ‘fervent and fiery-coloured’ ‘fierce vitality’.

The wedding of Hortense and Steinbock marks the end of ‘the introduction to this story’, a shift that Balzac definitively declares: ‘This account is, to the drama that follows it, what premises are to a proposition, and what the prologue is to a classical tragedy’ (*Bette*, 148).²⁰ The first 150 pages, then, are the ‘prologue’ to Balzac’s tragedy. Wheels have been set in motion, various cogs and machinery that will now turn the story’s action — that is, in Aristotle’s words, ‘serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude’.²¹ Balzac’s characterisation of his characters is fully fleshed in the Prologue, and thus the singular and ‘complete’ action turns upon the characters of his characters. There is no *deus ex machina*, no external determinant of destiny. Once more we return to Heraclitus and his injunction that ‘character is fate’, a criterion that is essential to Swinburne and, by proxy, the works he admires.

The fates of Balzac’s creations are certainly shaped by their characters. Baron Hulot falls in love with the married Valérie Marneffe, and in his infatuation showers her with expensive gifts and establishes her as his mistress in a palatial house. As he spirals

¹⁹ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 407.

²⁰ ‘Ce récit est au drame qui le complète ce que sont les prémisses à une proposition, ce qu’est toute exposition à toute tragédie classique’.

²¹ Aristotle, *The Poetics of Aristotle*, ed. and trans. by S.H. Butcher (London: Macmillan, 1895; 1902), VI, 2-7, p. 23.

into debt, the clever and unscrupulous Madame Marneffe deceives him many times over, with Monsieur Crevel, Steinbock, and finally the Brazilian Baron Montes. Madame Marneffe's collaborator and friend, Bette, enables these liaisons and helps Valérie wheedle astronomical sums from the credulous Baron. His wife, meanwhile, watches his activities without uttering a word of reproach. When Hortense discovers Steinbock's infidelity, she leaves him and returns to her family home. In what she believes is her final act of revenge against the Hulot family, Bette convinces the Baron's brother, 'Le maréchal', of his brother's infidelities, and extracts from him a promise of marriage. When le maréchal discovers the Baron's failed financial scheme in Algiers, however, he dies of shame, and with this 'thunderbolt that burned up the harvest already garnered in the barn', shatters Bette's ultimate dreams of marriage and retaliation (*Bette*, 333).²²

Just as Aristotle specifies, the personalities in *La Cousine Bette* suffer a reversal in fortune (*Poetics*, 39): Bette dies miserable and unfulfilled; Valérie and Crevel are poisoned by a mysterious toxin sent in vengeance by Baron Montes; and Baron Hulot flounders on from mistress to courtesan to kitchen maid, while on her deathbed his unrepenting wife finally says, 'my dear, I had nothing left to give you but my life; in a few minutes you will be free, and you can make a Baroness Hulot' (*Bette*, 440).²³ Valérie Marneffe's death, in particular, has all the elements of tragic horror and pity, with a healthy dose of Balzacian satire. Doctor Bianchon puts it to Bette:

The poor woman, who was, I am told, very pretty, is well punished for her sins, for at this moment she is revoltingly ugly, if she is still anything at all! Her teeth and her hair are dropping out, and she looks like a leper; she is a horror to herself. Her hands are dreadful to look at, swollen, and covered with greenish pustules; the nails are coming loose, and lie in the midst of the sores that she has scratched; in

²² 'Cette mort...fut pour Lisbeth le coup de foudre qui brûle la moisson engrangée avec la grange'.

²³ 'Mon ami, je n'avais plus que ma vie à te donner: dans un moment tu seras libre, et tu pourras faire une baronne Hulot'.

short, all the extremities of the body are decomposing into running ulcers (*Bette*, 416).²⁴

The prosaic doctor's detailed description of Valérie's condition is meant to be hilariously ghoulish. His catalogue of signs and symptoms, her 'greenish pustules' and 'decomposing ulcers', has all the fascination of a freak show, with the undercurrent of pity and horror that such things always possess. In the final conversation between Madame Marneffe and Bette, Valérie says,

Listen! I have not more than a day or two left to think, for I cannot say to *live*. As you see, I have not a body any more; I am a heap of mud. They won't let me look at myself in a mirror. And it is no more than I deserve. And I only wish, that in order to receive mercy, I could repair all the harm that I have done ... You do not know what death is, what it is to be compelled to think of the day after your last day, of what awaits you in the grave – worms for the body, and for the soul ... What? Oh Lisbeth, I feel that there is another life! And I am so terrified by that thought that I hardly notice the pain of my rotting flesh! And I said to Crevel in jest, making fun of a saint, that God's vengeance takes every form of misfortune! Well, I was prophetic! Do not make light of sacred things, Lisbeth! (*Bette*, 419-20).²⁵

Taken as a set piece, Madame Marneffe's dying pathos bears similarities to many tragic soliloquys that 'look before and after',²⁶ including Lesbia's speech to Herbert in *Lesbia Brandon*.²⁷ The ridiculously grotesque manner of her death and her actions throughout the course of the novel, however, render this scene rather more absurd. To Valérie's Damascene conversion Bette anticlimactically replies, "Oh! If you talk like that, you

²⁴ Ses dents et ses cheveux tombent, elle a l'aspect des lépreux, elle se fait horreur à elle-même; ses mains, épouvantables à voir, sont enflées et couvertes de pustules verdâtres; les ongles déchaussés restent dans les plaies qu'elle gratte; enfin, toutes les extrémités se détruisent dans la sanie qui les ronge'

²⁵ 'Écoute! je n'ai plus qu'un jour ou deux à penser, car je ne puis pas dire vivre. Tu le vois? je n'ai plus de corps, je suis un tas de boue... Je n'ai que ce que je mérite. Ah! je voudrais, pour être reçue à merci, réparer tout le mal que j'ai fait. ... Tu ne sais pas, reprit Valérie, ce que c'est que la mort, ce que c'est que de penser forcément au lendemain de son dernier jour, à ce que l'on doit trouver dans le cercueil: des vers pour le corps, mais quoi pour l'âme?... Ah! Lisbeth, je sens qu'il y a une autre vie! et je suis toute à une terreur qui m'empêche de sentir les douleurs de ma chair décomposée !... Moi qui disais en riant à Crevel, en me moquant d'une sainte, que la vengeance de Dieu prenait toutes les formes du malheur...

Eh bien ! j'étais prophète !... Ne joue pas avec les choses sacrées, Lisbeth!'

²⁶ Percy Bysshe Shelley. 'To A Skylark', *The Oxford Book of English Verse: 1250-1900*, ed. Arthur Quiller-Couch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1919), p. 608. ll. 86.

²⁷ Further examined in the subsequent chapter on 'Lesbia Brandon'.

must really be dying!’” (*Bette*, 419).²⁸ Such is the nature of Balzacian tragedy: it is never unmixed, and always heavily seasoned with irony of the sardonic, rather than tragic,²⁹ sort. In this regard it differs from the classical prototype. In a further departure, Balzac’s characters are neither noble nor fine; their lives lack the aristocratic magnitude of Oedipus, Jocasta, Medea, or Hamlet, Lear, and Cleopatra. Their fates are in some aspect those of the *petit bourgeois*. Yet for Swinburne, Madame Marneffe (notably, he leaves out Cousin Bette, nor he does not mention the philandering Baron or Steinbock), is a tragic creature. Though never as titanic as Laclos’s Madame de Merteuil, he calls her ‘the greatest of her sex and an honour to humanity’.³⁰ Swinburne’s reading of Valérie Marneffe’s death, then, might have verged on the tragic, and he is far more likely to have called Balzac a practitioner of modern-day tragedy than merely a satiric chronicler of French urban and rural life.

Just as the meticulous craft and form of *La Cousine Bette* appealed to Swinburne, he was likely equally drawn to its raciness. Balzac, branded in England as a raconteur of ‘disease, depravity, and distortion’³¹ could not have failed to attract the devotee of de Sade, Laclos, and Gautier. Even a hasty synopsis of *Cousine Bette* touches upon sex and violence, multiple liaisons, double adultery, prostitution, Hulot’s sex addiction, Bette’s vengeance, and, feeding it all, the lifeblood of the novel: a murky current of money bought, sold, and laundered. Balzac’s improper text extends beyond mere licentiousness to encompass a society that is almost entirely transactional, where human relationships are traded and exchanged for ‘Money! Always money!’ (*Bette*, 305).³²

²⁸ ‘Oh ! dit Lisbeth, si tu parles ainsi, tu es bien morte!’

²⁹ For more on this, see Aristotle’s *Poetics* for a description of dramatic, or tragic, irony, and its function in the classical tragedy.

³⁰ See chapters on: Laclos and Gautier.

³¹ Clarence R. Decker, ‘Balzac’s Literary Reputation in Victorian Society’, *PMLA* 47 (1932), 1150-1157 (p. 1153).

³² So exclaims Baroness Hulot. ‘L’argent!...toujours l’argent!...’

At the close of the novel, Madame Marneffe's distorted face stands for both venereal and moral disease, the consequences of worshipping sex and Mammon. Balzac's contemporaries might have interpreted her grotesque demise as a moral act on the part of the author — a Parisian Jezebel brought low. As previously mentioned, however, her deathbed conversion is not without irony, and Balzac's depiction of her leprous face has overtones that are simultaneously Biblical and sardonic. As in the rest of *La Comédie humaine*, Balzac exhibits many forms of decadence without an offsetting conventional morality. This is perhaps why Leslie Stephen decried the author's 'diseased and exaggerated cynicism', which 'took a pleasure in dwelling upon horrors from which a healthy imagination shrinks' (Decker, 1153).

Swinburne dwells on mental and physical 'horrors' at the end of *Lesbia Brandon*, when Herbert visits her deathbed and, finding her 'living corpse' 'white, with grey lips', looking like 'one whom death was as visibly devouring limb-meal as though fire had caught hold her bound at a stake' (*LB*, 342); becomes tangled in the 'morbid and obscure fascination of obscure disease' (347). He experiences her sickness by proxy:

his nerves trembled in harmony with hers: he felt a cruel impersonal displeasure, compound of fear and pain, in the study of her last symptoms. Then by way of reaction came a warm sudden reflux of tenderness; and he clasped one pale restless hand with a sweet acute pang of physical pity (347).

Bertie 'suffers with those he sees suffering, and that makes for another suffering of his own': the burden of the artist, like Balzac, Stephen Dedalus, and Swinburne himself. In *Lesbia Brandon*, disease becomes a mode of aesthetic suffering and brand of liminality; despite her noble birth, Lesbia's fierce prophetic, poetic, and sexual impulses put her beyond the pale. The slow chemical decay of her excruciating death puts her in a historical and fictional tradition of both radical intellectuals (i.e. Socrates and Demosthenes) and formidable, possibly feminist icons (Madame de Merteuil, who doesn't die of course, but is branded by physical decay, and Madame de Marneffe).

At times, *La Cousine Bette* is casually naughty, as when Madame Marneffe asks her husband, ‘what would you say to being a father for the second time?’ even though both parties are well aware that the child is not Monsieur Marneffe’s (*Bette*, 245).³³ At others, the risqué and cruel exist side by side. Desperate for two hundred thousand francs, Baroness Hulot is driven back to Monsieur Crevel, the very man she refused at the beginning of the novel. When she offers herself as a mistress, he rejoins, ‘Valérie is a masterpiece in her own way, you know, Mother. Twenty-five years of virtue puts men off, like a neglected disease. And your virtue has grown moldy, my child.’ (*Bette*, 305).³⁴ Madame Marneffe’s sins might brand her with decay at the end of the novel, but Baroness Hulot’s ‘moldy’ virtue is, to the men of this world, equally diseased.

The trope of disease is prevalent throughout *La Comédie humaine*, but especially so in *La Cousine Bette*. There is somatic illness: Valérie and Crevel are poisoned miserably, Adeline Hulot dies, Balzac suggests, of her own goodness – ‘the savagery of vice had overcome the patience of the angel’— and Monsieur Marneffe is a key example of the vice of excess (*Bette*, 440).³⁵ But this decay has a particular historical significance that pertains to the ‘Decadent’ art of Swinburne’s era. Crevel says to Hulot, ‘we are such gallants, so very much Maréchal de Richelieu, rakes, Pompadour, du Barry, old profligates, and as eighteenth century as you please’ (*Bette*, 200).³⁶ Crevel marks himself and Hulot as members of the *ancien régime*, turning with glowing nostalgia to the days of the libertine and pre-Revolution aristos—the days, in short, of de Laclos’s *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. The nineteenth-century Paris depicted by Balzac construes that age as dissolute, corrupt, decadent and decaying. Notably, Madame Marneffe dies of a poison

³³ ‘Dis donc, Marneffe, te doutes-tu d’être père pour la deuxième fois?’

³⁴ ‘Valérie est le sublime du genre. Ma petite mère, vingt-cinq ans de vertu, ça repousse toujours, comme une maladie mal soignée. Et votre vertu a bien moisi ici, ma chère enfant’.

³⁵ ‘La férocité du vice avait vaincu la patience de l’ange’.

³⁶ ‘C’est une vaurienne, dit Crevel, une coquine à fouetter sur la place du Châtelet ; mais, mon cher Canillac, si nous sommes justaucorps bleu, maréchal de Richelieu, trumeau, Pompadour, Dubarry, roués et tout ce qu’il y a de plus dix-huitième siècle...’

that leaves her face unrecognisable, much like the disfiguring smallpox of Madame de Merteuil in *Liaisons dangereuses*. Valérie is a creature of de Merteuil's world, and, along with her 'old profligates' belongs to a former era of shocking schemes and dangerous manipulations.

The feeling of belonging to another time is familiar to Swinburne's novels. It is no wonder that Lady Midhurst, herself a grande dame of the *ancien régime*, vows that she 'lost [her] heart to M. Crevel' upon reading *La Cousine Bette* (LB, 253). It has previously been suggested that both *A Year's Letters* and *Lesbia Brandon* represent his efforts to draft alternative narratives of English nineteenth-century aristocratic life. With *dramatis personae* including Lady Midhurst and the decadent Linley, the cruelly passionate tutor Denham, poetic Herbert, and the modern Sappho Lesbia, not to mention the incestuously adulterous Cheynes, the novels are rife with characters and connections that hearken back to an era of elegant licentiousness. Swinburne, we know, admired *Les Liaisons dangereuses* immensely – could it be that the echoes of *ancien régime* in Balzac's *La Cousine Bette* are similarly echoed in his own novels? Is it possible that the mid-century novels of Balzac, hailed by so many as the forbears of the naturalist school, represented for Swinburne a new and radical playing field for aesthetic, decadent, risqué, and tragic narratives?

By the time Balzac wrote *La Cousine Bette*, he was more than a decade in to writing *La Comédie humaine*. In an essay on allegory in Balzac, Fredric Jameson makes the following, provocative statement:

The originality of the plan of the *Comédie humaine* lay not only in its ambition to present a total picture of a society, but also in the manner in which social interrelationship was conceived: the links between the stories, which is to say between the characters, and between different moments of the life of a single character as well, are felt as an absence, as the blank spaces between the works.³⁷

³⁷ Fredric Jameson, 'La Cousine Bette and Allegorical Realism,' *PMLA* 86 (1971), 241-254 (p. 241).

Balzac's characters live outside, or apart from, the pages of the *Comédie humaine*, and his great achievement is not simply the 'totality' of his vision, but also his control of the 'blank spaces' between his stories, the invisible links between his characters, and the gaps in this panorama. We recognise that 'there are hosts of interrelationships between the various characters, coincidences, meetings, passions, that exist but that never are and never will be present to our consciousness' (Jameson, 241). As Wilde writes, 'what a world it is! What a panorama of passions! What a pell-mell of men and women!' (Wilde, *Balzac*, 30).

Given this view, Balzac's masterwork becomes less a singular and sweeping vision and more a well-constructed montage, or series of images. The mirror that Balzac holds up to nature, then, is not simply that. His *Comédie* is refractive as well as reflective; it contains planes and surfaces of which we are often unaware. We read human nature, ultimately, through a sort of aesthetic realism of which Balzac was master.

This notion has especial resonance when applied to Swinburne, whose love of Balzac was intense and abiding perhaps because the French novelist incorporated so many of the seemingly contradictory elements that Swinburne adored and tried to include in his own work: tragedy, artistry, realism, and satire. Balzac's refractive realism, or reflective aestheticism, is employed to a certain degree by Swinburne in both *A Year's Letters* and *Lesbia Brandon*. Both novels possess gaps: one deliberately, as epistolary fiction, the other through circumstance, in a twist of meta-literary irony. *A Year's Letters* is presented as the artefacts of a family's life — a brief history and their letters. *Lesbia Brandon* is, quite literally, a series of fragments — between Swinburne's unfinished manuscript and Watts-Dunton's destruction of large portions of the text, piecing the novel together has become something of an Everest in Swinburne scholarship. Even its complete chapters, however, neglect certain explanations or leap over the minutiae of

everyday life in a way that precludes realism. In *A Year's Letters*, we often read about events in retrospect, and moments of dramatic realisation or tension are only alluded to in brief. The most striking example is probably that of Amicia's pregnancy, casually mentioned by Lady Midhurst in one of her letters. The circumstances leading to this event, which would represent a climactic and catastrophic moment in most Victorian fiction, are glossed, the drama deliberately underplayed. In this way, Swinburne, too, exhibits a series of images, a montage of everyday life that is simultaneously realistic and very carefully displayed.

Just at the time that he was reading *La Cousine Bette*, Swinburne was starting to write prose fiction. In an 1861 letter to Lady Trevelyan he writes, 'I am trying to write prose, which is very hard, but I want to make a few stories each about three or six pages long' (i.e. 'Dead Love', published in *Once A Week*, October 1862, and 'The Portrait', 'The Chronicle of Queen Fredegond', and 'The Marriage of Monna Lisa', all first published in 1909).³⁸ Swinburne's adulation of Balzac extended so far that he wished to model his own prose fiction on that of the master, and it is very likely that *La Cousine Bette* played a role in this fashioning, as he was reading it during such a pivotal time. In previous chapters, *Lesbia Brandon* has often been described (in Swinburne's own words) as 'a sort of étude à la Balzac *plus* the poetry' (*Letters* 1, 224). This could allude to a number of things: the naughtiness of his subject matter, the casual cruelty of many of his characters, the singular tragedy to which he aspired. Indeed, one wonders why he did not refer to *A Year's Letters* as an 'étude à la Balzac' as well, for the meticulous craft by which the novel was assembled is worthy of the author who wrote 'This account is, to the

³⁸ These are discussed in the chapter on Swinburne and Boccaccio.

drama that follows it, what premises are to a proposition, and what the prologue is to a classical tragedy' (*Bette*, 148).³⁹

On a specific note, Swinburne quite possibly alludes to the drawing-room scenes in *Lesbia Brandon*, reminiscent of the parlours in *La Cousine Bette*. There, under a veneer of manners and polite conversation, shocking transgressions occur very casually. For Swinburne, Balzac's Parisian society may have something in common with the aristocratic British *milieu* of his childhood. The figures that appear in Balzac's —Vautrin, Madame Marneffe, and Lucien de Rubempré, for example — may be the inspiration for Swinburne's characters, such as Lady Midhurst and the aesthete Mr. Linley. Henry James remarked of Balzac, 'what it comes back to ... is the intensity with which we live — and his intensity is recorded for us in every page of his work' (James, *Balzac*, 85). It is this intensity that attracts and holds Swinburne: an intensity that he perceives in few others, Shakespeare among them.

It is sometimes thought that Swinburne was alone in his admiration of Balzac, and that it required Henry James' praise of the French novelist for literary circles to notice:

Balzac was not a well-known writer in England when the young James started to write about him. If anything he was scandalous rather than celebrated, the kind of French writer that someone like Swinburne admired. Dickens knew some of his work but most English novelists did not. When George Eliot returned the copy of *Le Père Goriot* that James had lent her she shuddered and called it a 'hateful book'. Even Charlotte Brontë viewed him with distaste (Gervais, 315).

As Walter Kendrick shows, however, the French novelist's position in England and the British response to him were rather more complex than mere 'drawing-room hypocrisy can account for'.⁴⁰ Undeniably, an air of scandal accompanied Balzac's work. But his English reception might have been coloured by politics and accessibility as much as by prudery. Indeed, lack of access might have been a significant obstacle to a wide

³⁹ Ce récit est au drame qui le complète ce que sont les prémisses à une proposition, ce qu'est toute exposition à toute tragédie classique'.

⁴⁰ Walter Kendrick, 'Balzac and British Realism: Mid-Victorian Theories of the Novel', *Victorian Studies* 20 (1976), 5-24 (p. 6).

readership of Balzac in mid-Victorian England: ‘Until at least the 1870s, Balzac was available to English readers primarily in snippets, tucked away here and there in the pages of periodicals which themselves had far from general circulation’ (Kendrick, 7). Readers fluent in French — typically British intellectuals such as Swinburne — were aware of the novelist and his merits well before their Anglophone counterparts; these elite readers were consuming his works in the original while much of Britain remained ignorant of them.

Around this issue of access, then, crystallises a larger political issue. The restrictions of language signify restrictions of class: the elite read Balzac; the lower middle-class was excluded from this linguistic private circle. Thus, Balzac, whose *La Comédie humaine* was intended to encompass the experience of diverse classes, occupations, and inhabitants, ironically became — with a few exceptions⁴¹ — the province of the highly privileged in mid-Victorian England. An author whose art was democratic in its very inception, he spent several decades with a readership as exclusive as that of the Decadents who followed him.

This is of course a generalisation, and Kendrick warns against a reductive view of Balzac’s position in England: for example, the exaggeration that the translation of Balzac into English represents the democratization of literature in the late Victorian period. The reading of Balzac did not by itself demarcate class lines. Nor did the elite read his ‘scandalous’ work without compunction, savouring the corruption of his characters; many ‘were deeply troubled by an art which compelled their admiration but turned their artistic morality inside-out’ (Kendrick, 9). This dichotomy was one that would trouble English letters for the next half-century. How could something of such ‘literary merit’ depict such ‘goings-on’? (Kendrick, 10). British critics were torn between praising Balzac’s

⁴¹ G. H. Lewes reviewed *Le Cousin Pons* in *Fraser’s Magazine* in December 1847 in the same review as *Jane Eyre* (under the general title ‘Recent Fiction, French and English’).

skilfulness and decrying the horrible people and actions that he depicted. This discomfort channelled concern about not just his themes, but also his flagrant text: ‘Balzac’s moral degeneracy was compounded by his chaotic style (French writers were proverbially supposed to be ‘clear’), his insatiable appetite for brute fact, his melodramatic imagination and his unhealthy fascination with the paranormal — which is precisely what later attracted W. B. Yeats’ (Robb, 422).

For his early English readership, however, his work was confusing, unsettling, and — disturbingly — unbelievable while remaining unnervingly believable. The concept that Balzac’s reality, while extremely *realistic*, was nonetheless fictional, was one that Victorian readers often avoided — their critiques of his novels often turned into critiques of the French themselves. To some, Balzac was an honest narrator of French doings, unflinchingly describing the degeneracy that existed across the Channel. This was, in many ways, a consolation — the author had surely not dreamed up such wickedness and written it with scientific detail; instead, he was a scientist who had observed it, or a painter who had copied from life.

George Henry Lewes, one of Balzac’s early advocates, was similarly torn. In ‘Balzac and George Sand’,⁴² he calls the author’s focus on adultery an aesthetic, as well as moral flaw, mitigated only by his unrivalled skill at characterisation. Lewes’ deep uncertainty about Balzac is the same uncertainty that would haunt English literary criticism until the end of the century and beyond. Kendrick writes, ‘The morally worst of novelists is artistically almost the best, and Lewes cannot resolve the problem of to what degree art in its own right can supplant the moral values of its represented world’ (Kendrick, 14). The same question plagued critics of Emily Brontë, of Robert Browning, and of Swinburne himself. However poetic the prose or keenly-observed the poetry,

⁴² George Henry Lewes, ‘Balzac and George Sand’, *Foreign Quarterly Review* 33 (1844).

however mellifluous the rhyme, what evil (i.e. *Wuthering Heights*, ‘Porphyria’s Lover’, ‘Dolores’, ‘Anactoria’) lurked within? Lewes finds himself confronted with fictional people and situations that would be morally condemned in the world. The world of Balzac’s text, on the other hand, lives in its own right, and while framed with great artistry, nevertheless contains great evil. The living world and the living text, when juxtaposed, demand differing moral judgements, and it is this contrast that Victorian critics were unable to reconcile.

In his essay, Lewes inches towards the idea that moral and aesthetic judgements are separate, that great aesthetic achievement can make up for questionable morality. In *William Blake*, Swinburne asserts something quite different:

So profound and extensive a capacity of moral apprehension no other prose writer, no man of mere analytic faculty, ever had or can have. This assuredly, when men become (as they will have to become) capable of looking beyond the mere clothes and skin of his work, will be always, as we said, his great especial praise; that he was beyond any other man, the master of morals — the greatest direct expounder of actual moral fact (*WB*, 103).

His Balzac is a moralist, but one unlike any conventional meaning of the term. He is an eminent moral ‘expounder’, a master of observation and analysis whose uncanny ability to peel away the hypocrisy and ‘mere clothes and skin’ of the world (as Swinburne suggests one must do with his work) and focus upon fact makes him a powerhouse of moral exposition. Swinburne suggests that Balzac does a ‘preacher’s or interpreter’s work’, and in this phrase lies the key to his explanation. Like a preacher, he pronounces, explains, and expounds; a pure artist ‘suggests’, while Balzac ‘asserts’. He is a moral interpreter; he explains the ways of men to men.

Swinburne was not alone in his admiration, but he was also one of the first English writers to perceive that there was more to Balzac than scandal. He was one of the earliest to notice the immense artistry of *La Comédie humaine*, the enormous scope of such a project. This is perhaps because Swinburne, like James, takes the prose project as

seriously as his contemporaries took drama or verse. The novel, with all its possibilities, becomes the terrain of experimentation and play, of high tragedy and low comedy; in fact, as we already know, it becomes for Swinburne an analogue to the Elizabethan drama. Thus, Balzac, ‘who rolled up his sleeves and plunged into the fray’ (Gervais, 322), incarnates the artist as actor and playwright, a realist and visionary, his fingers blotted with ink, suffering ‘with those he sees suffering’. Living a life peopled by his characters (on his deathbed, he famously asked, not for his own doctor, but for Bianchon, the doctor of *La Comédie humaine*), Balzac stands for the indefatigable intensity and passion of the artist, ‘lost in his creations to the point where the real and the imaginary became one’ (Gervais, 321). This commitment, with its devotion both mental and physical, is highly compelling.

His intensity, however, became code for decadence and scandal, and his realism for sordidness. The *Foreign Quarterly* had warned its readers ‘to beware of Balzac, whose works are insidious and wanting in delicacy, and whose ideas flout natural manners and natural thinking as ridiculous, intimating that only Parisian refinement can make a human being estimable’ (Decker, 1150). Leslie Stephen argues that Balzac’s visions are ‘those of the opium eater’, not true to life, but reflective of ‘a diseased and exaggerated cynicism’ (Decker, 1153). These allegations sound similar to those levelled against the Decadents: ideas that ‘flout natural manners’, visions that are ‘diseased’ and riddled with the cynicism and ennui of urban life. What they neglect, however, is that the over-refined Parisians of Balzac’s novels are just one portion of his landscape, which includes rural life as well. These accusations further neglect Balzac’s satire: the *Comédie humaine* pokes fun at ‘Parisian refinement’, and undermines the notion that ‘natural manners and natural thinking’ can ever truly exist. Conventionally, they should be found

in the pastoral villages of France; yet Balzac repeatedly proves that these villages, too, contain their share of conniving, social climbing, and scandal.⁴³

Even James himself feels that Balzac has ‘no sense of morality’ (Decker, 1153-54), but rather an all-encompassing sense of reality. It is here that Swinburne was decades ahead of even his brilliant successor. His argument is sound: why should Balzac be held to a higher standard than Shakespeare, widely accepted and acknowledged, not only as an artistic master, but as a repository of English culture? Both writers depict humanity in its highest and lowest forms: the paternal love and oppression of Lear is mirrored in the plight of Père Goriot; Vautrin bears similarities to Iago; the young cavaliers of Shakespeare are distilled into the dreaming, scheming Lucien Rubempré. By the late century, Swinburne’s opinions would be generally shared. Wilde would write of Balzac:

He was, of course, accused of being immoral. Few writers who deal directly with life escape that charge. The morals of the personages of the *Comédie humaine* are simply the morals of the world around us. They are part of the artist's subject-matter; they are not part of his method. If there be any need of censure it is to life, not to literature, that it should be given. Balzac, besides, is essentially universal. He sees life from every point of view. He has no preferences and no prejudices. He does not try to prove anything. He feels that the spectacle of life contains its own secret. 'Il crée un monde et se tait' (30).

James’ essays on Balzac, coupled with these changing literary tastes, also rendered the novelist much more palatable to an English audience. He was praised for (in Hamlet’s phrase) ‘holding the mirror up to nature, for depicting vice and virtue side by side without confounding them, for not always punishing the wicked and arranging for the good to "live happy ever after," and for the sincerity of his criticism of life’ (Decker, 1156). As Wilde argues, ‘he sees life from every point of view ... he feels that the spectacle of life contains its own secret’. As the *fin de siècle* approached, such an interest in the growing enigma of the modern world became a powerful enticement toward Balzac’s prose; his

⁴³ The novels of the *Comédie humaine* with a rural setting, viz. *Eugenie Grandet* (1833), are not addressed in this chapter. They do, however, process many of the same themes and even overlap characters with the Parisian novels.

‘chaotic style’ was welcomed in a chaotic world, both the melodrama and hard fact of his urban tales became increasingly relevant and interesting. The literary criteria that Swinburne had proposed, decades before, were finally coming into vogue: ‘depicting vice and virtue side by side without confounding them’. No longer decried for describing people and manners that were not ‘natural’, Balzac was now praised for ‘holding the mirror up to nature’. Further, his style and flair would be instrumental in attracting a host of later writers, especially ‘those who were also subjected to censorship and tended to apply aesthetic rather than moral criteria: Baudelaire, who came to see Balzac as an ideal version of himself; Dostoevsky, who translated *Eugenie Grandet* (1833) at the age of twenty-two; and Gustave Flaubert, whose *L’Education sentimentale* (1869) is in some respects a Balzac novel run backwards’ (Robb, 422).

For all his reputation as a creator of documentary, Balzac exerted a far more vital influence on Swinburne, Wilde, and others in his capacity as an experimental writer. Wilde declared, ‘But Balzac is no more a realist than Holbein was. He created life, he did not copy it’.⁴⁴ This capacity to innovate upon life, to untangle its meaning through observation and invention, and to paint its deviations daringly, was the true attraction for Swinburne. As David Bellos has said, Balzac ‘steered a course between the Scylla of Naturalist “excess” and the Charybdis of symbolist decadence’.⁴⁵ In a similar vein, Lady Midhurst describes what she finds in Balzac: ‘lightning, and a noise of water and wind ... reading Balzac is all but eating the fruit of knowledge and seeing men with the eyes and the sense of gods ... An intellect of that size and weight makes its own opportunities and enforces its own licences’ (*LB*, 255-57). Such licence and immoderation, make Balzac’s writing large, grand, and multitudinous — make it, as Wilde wrote, ‘fervent and fiery-

⁴⁴ Oscar Wilde, ‘The Decay of Lying’ (1891), in *Intentions* (London: Heinemann, 1891), pp. 23-45 (p. 15).

⁴⁵ David Bellos, *Balzac Criticism in France, 1850-1900: The Making of a Reputation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 176.

coloured', a dream that allows us to believe that 'the nineteenth century, as we know it, is largely an invention of Balzac' (Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', 29). Leslie Stephen meant, of course, to be critical when he described Balzac's visions as those of an 'opium eater', the output of a 'diseased and exaggerated cynicism' and an unhealthy 'pleasure in dwelling upon horrors from which a healthy imagination shrinks'. But he actually furnishes us with the language to describe Balzac's decadent, or avant-garde, effect. His novels are meticulous and accurate, but they are also dreamlike, highly metaphorical, and do not shrink from a 'surprisingly forthright' treatment of unconventional relationships and desires.⁴⁶

Two of the central and most decadent relationships in *La Comédie humaine* are those between the criminal mastermind Vautrin⁴⁷ and two handsome parvenus: Lucien de Rubempré and Eugène de Rastignac. Both are ambitious young men of limited means who seek social advancement. The darkly seductive Vautrin becomes a mentor to both of them, but while Rubempré follows his advice (and dies tragically), Rastignac spurns it and achieves social success through his charm and manipulations (usually of women). The passion and homoerotic tension between Vautrin and his two young dandies becomes an important thematic current, just as Herbert and Denham's sadomasochistic tutoring sessions and Lord Henry and Dorian's relationship will be. The part-didactic, part-mentorship, and part-sexual exchange between the older and younger man is convincingly portrayed, and repeats itself throughout the decadent oeuvre. Several passages from *Le Père Goriot* (1835) illustrate the intensity between Eugène de Rastignac and Vautrin. The penniless Rastignac is pleased, having extracted funds for high living from his naïve family. Vautrin, however, seems to scorn his methods:

⁴⁶ Sven-Johan Spänberg, 'Green flowers and golden eyes: Balzac, Decadence and Wilde's *Salome*', in *Humane Readings: Essays on Literary Mediation and Communication in Honour of Roger D. Sell*, ed. by Jason Finch (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 2009), p. 64.

⁴⁷ For more on Vautrin's homosexuality and its aesthetic significance, see the chapter on Gautier.

Eugène was searched by an unfathomable look from Vautrin, which stung him like a lash...

‘Yes, Mamma has been bled white,’ said Vautrin, ‘so now you can sow your wild oats, go out into society and fish for heiresses, and dance with Countesses with peach-blossom in their hair; but take my advice, young man, practice shooting.’ And Vautrin aimed an imaginary gun at an adversary ... And so Rastignac could not long remain under fire from Vautrin’s batteries without knowing if this man was his enemy or his friend. It seemed to him that this strange being examined his feelings every moment and read his inmost heart, while Vautrin himself was so closely sealed that he seemed to possess the still depths of a sphinx, who knows all, sees all, and keeps silent.⁴⁸

Characterising Herbert’s punishments at the hands of his tutor, Denham, Swinburne writes:

Denham had always a fair pretext for punishment and was not unjust or unkind; and in time Herbert had learnt to be quiet and perverse; it had grown into a point of honour with him to take what fate sent him at his tutor’s hands with a rebellious reticence, and bear anything in reason rather than expose himself to an intercession which he could not but imagine contemptuous; and thus every flogging became a duel without seconds between the man and the boy (*LB*, 205).

Both relationships simmer with an unresolved pederastic violence (‘duel’, ‘under fire’), the clash between the younger man’s intense desire to please his mentor and his desire to mutiny. A ‘rebellious reticence’ marks both encounters; both Rastignac and Herbert feel exposed and vulnerable in the company of these silent and unreadable men, who, sphinx-like, examine and read the ‘inmost heart’ of others while revealing nothing of their own. There are shades of Vautrin in Denham: hypermasculinity, occasionally sadistic aggression, but simultaneous humanity and capacity to love. Where Vautrin adores and tragically loses all the boys he loves, Denham adores and tragically loses a woman — Lady Wariston, the desired object of another woman, Lesbia Brandon.

In contrast to Rastignac, Lucien de Rubempré accedes to Vautrin’s plans. In

⁴⁸ Honoré de Balzac, *Old Goriot (Père Goriot)*, trans. by Marion Ayton Crawford (London: Penguin, 1951), pp. 120-22. ‘Oui, la maman s’est saignée, dit Vautrin. Vous pourrez maintenant faire vos farces, aller dans le monde, y pêcher des dots, et danser avec des comtesses qui ont des fleurs de pêcher sur la tête. Mais, croyez-moi, jeune home, fréquentez le tir... Rastignac ne pouvait donc pas demeurer longtemps sous le feu des batteries de Vautrin sans savoir si cet homme était son ami ou son ennemi. De moment en moment, il lui semblait que ce singulier personnage pénétrait ses passions et lisait dans son coeur, tandis que chez lui tout était si bien clos, qu’il semblait avoir la profondeur immobile d’un sphinx qui sait, voit tout, et ne dit rien.’

Illusions perdues (1837), they make a pact to advance him in society; this continues in *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes*, but a love affair damages the scheme. Lucien ends up in prison, where he confesses all, betrays Vautrin, and eventually hangs himself. His end is tragic not only in the world of *La Comédie humaine*, but because it represents a failure of love between men. Wilde's Vivian famously remarked, 'One of the greatest tragedies of my life is the death of Lucien de Rubempré. It is a grief from which I have never been able to completely rid myself. It haunts me in my moments of pleasure' (Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', 15). The figures of Rubempré, Rastignac, and Vautrin assume great significance for Balzac's decadent successors, who rely upon his 'treatment of such varieties of sexual desire as homosexuality and lesbianism' as a touchstone of artistic candour and experimentation (Spänberg, 64).⁴⁹ Further to this, we can imagine that Balzac's portrayal of 'male social circles' occupied by literati and their patrons, and the 'passage of a young writer or artist through these endlessly shifting networks'⁵⁰ would be highly compelling for Swinburne and Wilde. Both are preoccupied by and return repeatedly to the notion of the artist as a young man,⁵¹ and the many forms that male aesthetic development can take. For both as well, such development is bound up in sexuality, sexual experimentation, and the selective pressures of social engagement, all 'fruit of knowledge' and experience found in Balzac's novels.

The sexual ambiguity of Balzac's characters sets a compelling precedent for precedent. As with Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, the presence of the androgyne becomes a key motif of decadence, as well as a proof of aesthetic principle. The double nature of the androgyne relates to the duality of art — its merging of feminine and

⁴⁹ *La Fille aux yeux d'or*, not addressed here, encompasses the lesbian relationship between Paquita Valdes and the Marquise de San-Real, which turns tragic when a man is introduced as a third in their affair.

⁵⁰ Samuel Shaw, 'British Artists and Balzac at the Turn of the Twentieth Century', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 56 (2013), 427-44 (p. 439). An excellent approach to Balzac's reputation amongst fin-de-siècle artists and writers including Beardsley, Symons, Yeats, and Henry James.

⁵¹ A prolonged exploration of this notion in Swinburne can be found in the chapter exclusively on *Lesbia Brandon*.

masculine traits, acknowledgement of the generative power of sexual union, and its ultimate purity in completeness. The androgyne epitomizes ideal beauty, the sexless, yet simultaneously sexual, perfection of art. Swinburne's mythology constantly returns to the androgyne, from his muse Sappho to those in his own verse and novels: the 'two loves' united in 'Hermaphroditus' and the beautiful boys Herbert Seyton (who looks exactly like his sister) and Redgie Harewood — to the seductively masculine Lesbia Brandon. Paglia offers the androgyne as a proxy for Balzac's place as both a realist and a decadent:

Balzac also belongs to the history of nineteenth-century Decadence. Many of his major characters are double-sexed ... Balzac, like Goethe, is dual. As a novelist, he is documentary and analytic. As a Romantic, he is perverse and occult. It is from sex-crossing Romantic imagination that his androgynes come (Paglia, 390).

Lucien du Rubempré is a quintessential male androgyne:

He had his abundant, silky fair hair waved and perfumed, so that it streamed down in glistening curls. On his brow shone the audacity which he drew from the sense of his own worth and the future which lay before him. His woman's hands were carefully manicured, his almond-shaped finger-nails pink and well-shaped. His white, rounded chin offered a gleaming contrast to his black satin collar. Never did a more attractive-looking young man step down from the 'mountain' of the Latin quarter.⁵²

Cousine Bette herself is the dark and 'coarse female androgyne', a fierce mixture of Vautrin-like scheming and repressed womanhood. Balzac's novel *Seraphita* (1834), written around the same time as Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin*,⁵³ deals with the tragic love triangle between Seraphitus/Seraphita (a perfect androgyne), Minna, the woman he (Seraphitus) loves, and Wilfrid, the man who loves her (Seraphita).⁵⁴ Being

⁵² Balzac, *Les Illusions Perdues*, ed. by Patrick Berthier (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2006), pp. 252-53. 'Ses abondants et fins cheveux blonds, il les fit friser, parfumer, ruisseler en boucles brillantes. Son front se para d'une audace puisée dans le sentiment de sa valeur et de son avenir. Ses mains de femme furent soignées, leurs ongles en amande devinrent nets et rosés. Sur son col de satin noir, les blanches rondeurs de son menton étincelèrent. Jamais un plus joli jeune homme ne descendit la montagne du pays latin'.

⁵³ Swinburne's relationship to Gautier and *Mademoiselle de Maupin* is treated at length in the chapter 'Swinburne and Gautier'. Madeleine de Maupin cross-dresses as Théodore, a young nobleman who becomes the object of affection of two lovers, male and female. These affections are consummated on the same night, after which Théodore disappears, leaving his lovers together.

⁵⁴ Hughes mentions Balzac's *Seraphita*, *Sarrasine*, and *La Fille aux yeux d'or* as works that treat hermaphroditism, 'dual love' and sapphism and that might have shaped *Lesbia Brandon* (Hughes, 'Commentary', *LB*, 404-405).

incapable of giving herself/himself to either lover, Seraphita ‘vanishes like Théodore, but, unlike him, by returning to her celestial origin and becoming a seraph’ (Spänberg, 68). The novella *Sarrasine* (1830), which Paglia calls a ‘a pivotal work in the shift from High to Late Romanticism’ (Paglia, 390-91), focuses on the doomed love of the sculptor Sarrasine for Zambinella, an enchanting singer. Sarrasine’s obsession grows; he abducts Zambinella and discovers that she is a castrato. Devastated, he shouts, ‘Have you sisters who resemble you? No. Then die! But no, you shall live. To leave you your life is to doom you to a fate worse than death’, and overcome by murderous rage, he tries to kill her, only to be killed himself by a cardinal’s guards.⁵⁵ Paglia explains, ‘this is not the Renaissance, where a lucky twin steps forward to deflect homoerotic impulses into marriage. Sarrasine’s sexual error ends in his death. He is a Decadent victim to art, a new religion craving martyrs ... Balzac shows sexuality as something incomprehensible and deranging’ (Paglia, 392-93). Swinburne channels similar tragedy in the baffled homosexual desire of Lesbia Brandon, who loves Lady Wariston with full and complete awareness of its hopelessness. Yet the sterility of androgynous love, which evokes rage and despair in Sarrasine (‘you, who can give life to nothing, have swept all women off the face of the earth’ (322)), actually creates lyric and beauty for Lesbia. On her deathbed she dreams of a Proserpine with Lady Wariston’s face, who then transforms into Sappho’s lover and finally Sappho herself, falling off a cliff into the sea. The Sapphic transmutation of love between two women into rhythmic verse and finally into the rhythm of water itself, beating against the northern cliffs, suggests a fertility and creative richness different from the barrenness of Balzac’s androgynes.

⁵⁵ Honoré de Balzac, ‘Sarrasine’, in *The Member for Arcis; The Seamy Side of History; And Other Stories* (Boston: Estes & Co, 1901), p. 322. ‘As-tu des sœurs qui te res- semblent ? Non Eh ! bien, meurs ! Mais non, tu vivras. Te laisser la vie n’est-ce pas te vouer à quelque chose de pire que la mort’.

The migration of this aesthetic realism, from Balzac to Swinburne, reflects important ideological changes through the latter half of the century. His *La Comédie humaine* was courageously progressive, and his example in matters of theme, language, and style emboldened Swinburne. The doubleness of Balzac's art, with its analytic social realism and its transgressive, post-Romantic imagination, lends *La Comédie humaine* its refractive nature. Contrary to what many late-nineteenth-century critics believed, it does not merely 'hold up a mirror to nature'. Its images are drawn from reality, but they are the product of turning 'discovery almost to invention', the massive imaginative effort of a supreme analyst and avant-garde thinker. In his own work, Swinburne was to learn from Balzac the skill of social observation and satirical discourse; more importantly, however, he found in Balzac the presence of the romantic or aesthetic in the everyday, the ability to study the human drama in its many and varied forms, and the ceaseless, untiring work of the artist, living in his writing as fully as he did in the world.

8. *A Year's Letters*

‘Not an event in the whole course of things; not I think so much as an incident... We must be content never to make a story’

- Helena, Lady Midhurst, *A Year's Letters*

A Year's Letters, by ‘Mrs. Horace Manners’, was serialized in the *Tatler* between August and December of 1877. Swinburne wrote it in 1862-63, concurrently with his striking early work in verse: *Atalanta in Calydon*, *Chastelard*, and *Poems and Ballads*. In 1905, he acknowledged the book as his and it was reprinted as *Love's Cross-Currents*,¹ though its first title proved more apt and enduring. The slim volume would be the only novel entirely written by him published in his lifetime (*The Children of the Chapel*, which Mary Gordon called ‘a joint production’ was published in 1864, with a second edition in 1875), a tightly plotted tour-de-force in thirty letters, recounting the ‘slow tumescence of two adulterous love affairs, which threaten to tear down the tightly-woven social fabric of an aristocratic English family’.² Of all Swinburne’s prose efforts, *A Year's Letters* is the most contained and designed, most recognizably a novel, though one unlike almost anything in the English language.

I have discussed Swinburne’s contributions to the criticism of prose fiction and, in turn, the way in which those enthusiasms contributed to his aesthetic development. His own novels are fascinating, startling, ‘unique in English Victorian fiction’, depicting ‘a world for which we have not been prepared by even the smooth lawns of Tennyson or the great ladies of Coventry Patmore’.³ This world is anti-bourgeois, and his novels quite clearly demonstrate Swinburne’s defiance of middle-class convention. Of the two, *A Year's Letters* is on the surface ‘relatively proper; Swinburne consented to a slight

¹ Collected as *Love's Cross-Currents* in *Bonchurch* vol. 17, 67-258.

² Jeremy Mitchell, ‘Swinburne – The Disappointed Protagonist’, *Yale French Studies* 35 (1965) 81-88 (p.87).

³ Edmund Wilson, ‘Introduction’, in *The Novels of A.C. Swinburne*, ed. by Edmund Wilson (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1962), pp. 3-39, (p. 22).

expurgation', whereas *Lesbia Brandon* is more daring and avant-garde (Wilson, 'Introduction', 22). *A Year's Letters* has fared well with critics who celebrate its 'delicate tonal strokes' and 'brilliant finish'.⁴ In resurrecting the neglected mode of epistolary fiction and using it to tell a rather shocking story, Swinburne generates a special and subversive tension. The epistolary form deliberately evokes a particular time: it revisits the era of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* and libertinage, boudoir machinations, characters like Valmont and de Merteuil — *provocateur* and *provocatrix*. It places a distinctly English novel in an *ancien régime* tradition of intellectual and erotic play. It imposes special structure and constraint upon a work whose cleverly understated form belies its incendiary content. Finally, it makes us, the readers, delighted *voyeurs*. Swinburne 'belonged to the top nobility' and he well knew that the English aristocracy holds infinite interest (Wilson, 10). He knew, too, that it is a world of limited access. As I have discussed in the earlier chapter on his criticism of the Brontës, just as he wished to understand their background in order to parse their work, we must better know his *milieu* to understand his writing. Part of the appeal of his novels is that they show his world as it is: to outsiders, gilded, fabulously eccentric, and neurotic; to its inhabitants, accustomed, familiar. Swinburne brings us within the locked doors and shuttered windows; his novels 'take us into the house and let us see the kind of life that is lived there' (Wilson, 21-22).

A Year's Letters covers one year in the life and hopeless liaisons of the Cheyne family. These affairs, much like those of *Lesbia Brandon*, are rooted in the finances and marriages of several generations. The conservation of the family's social and economic status becomes the preserve of its *grande dame*, Lady Midhurst, who manipulates, coaxes, disentangles, and occasionally ensnares her young relatives in service to the family name and her own ends. The Prologue, in which Swinburne summarises the family

⁴ Francis J. Sypher, 'Introduction', in *A Year's Letters*, ed. by F.J. Sypher (New York: New York University Press, 1974), pp. xi-xxxviii (pp. xvi – xvii).

history, describes the death of old Lord Cheyne, ‘noted philanthropist’ and axe-grinding bore, whose son Edmund is a mediocre poet and liberal idealist (*AYL*, 7). Lord Cheyne has two siblings: Mr. John Cheyne and Helena Cheyne, Lady Midhurst. John Cheyne, second son, ‘had lived at a great rate for years; born into the regency period, he had grasped the receding skirt of its fashions; he had made friends with his time, and sucked his orange to some purpose before he came to the rind’ (*AYL*, 10), and eventually having spent his inheritance, marries an heiress of undistinguished birth, Miss Banks. Their children are Frank and Clara, the former a lover, the latter a cool social climber. Lady Midhurst’s daughter is Amicia and her grandchildren are Reginald Harewood (by Amicia’s first husband Captain Philip Harewood) and Amy (given name, Amicia, for her mother, by Amicia’s second husband Frederick Stanford). In the game of the novel, the two sides of the family are pitted against each other in efforts to win the title. Lady Midhurst and Clara Cheyne become primary adversaries. Clara attempts to acquire the title through winning the affections of her cousin Edmund, the new Lord Cheyne. Lady Midhurst thwarts her by supplanting her with her own granddaughter, Amy, who eventually marries Edmund. Frank Cheyne and Amy are in love, while Amy’s brother Redgie worships Clara. As the year unfolds, matters reach a head when Amy’s husband, Lord Cheyne, drowns, and Amy gives birth to a ‘posthumous baby’ (*Letters* 3, 251). The drowning, ‘though it takes place off-novel, as it were, is the only event in the book’ (Mitchell, 87), a fact that conveys just how singular *A Year’s Letters* really is. Save for this ‘off-novel’ death, a watery end forecasted in prior fragments and reiterated in *Lesbia Brandon* and successive verse,⁵ its action is entirely contingent on conversations (letters), and the relationships that these exchanges uncover and develop. Amy’s baby is, of

⁵ The Seytons of *Lesbia Brandon* have a doomed relationship to the sea, which swallowed up a male ancestor of Herbert Seyton (alter ego of Reginald Harewood and Algernon Swinburne). The sea assumes a vital role in *Lesbia Brandon* as described in the succeeding chapter and functions as a major actor in all of Swinburne.

course, Frank Cheyne's, and in the ultimate irony, Frank gains the title for a few months before losing it to his own child. 'After the sea has acted, love dies' and Lady Midhurst 'maintains her ironic social imperative' (Mitchell, 87). Due to her tireless efforts, all concludes according to plan. She 'exults in her victory and in the retreat from the field of the children of her stupid brother John and Miss Banks' (Sypher, 'Introduction', xix). The aristocratic line is preserved. No illicit romances are countenanced, and the four lovers part ways, to general societal satisfaction.

F.J. Sypher has eloquently argued that in *A Year's Letters*, one finds oneself 'close to the undisguised center of Swinburne's genius' (Sypher, xii). In some ways, this centre lies in his childhood. The novel is thick with autobiography, its themes, culled from Swinburne's experiences intellectual and visceral, encompassing romantic idealism, anti-sentimentality, social satire, family loyalty, family hatred, bravery, chivalry, and snobbery, 'a full list with appropriate discussions could be titled, Sorbonne style, "Swinburne, sa vie et son oeuvre"' (Sypher, xvi). Here, 'nearly every theme of Swinburne's writing (which includes his own letters) is touched upon' (Sypher, xvi), and at their heart is his upbringing in Northumberland and on the Isle of Wight, which he recreates with fondness and satire in *A Year's Letters* and, more hauntingly, *Lesbia Brandon*. Central to the Swinburne mythos is the romantic disappointment of this youth, the 'evidences of an unhappy love affair' hinted in his poetry and novels.⁶ The leading theory is that of a doomed love between him and his cousin Mary Gordon. Cecil Lang, whose knowledge of Swinburne's correspondence remains unmatched, states quite firmly that 'I think that Swinburne was deeply in love with Mary Gordon' and that 'the testimony of the poems, the plays, the prose is overwhelming' (Lang, 'Lost Love', 129).

⁶ Cecil Y. Lang, 'Swinburne's Lost Love', *PMLA* 74 (1959), 123-30 (p. 126).

If this were indeed the case, it makes the choice of setting for *A Year's Letters* and its disastrous consanguineous relationships even more poignant.

However rich an autobiographical interpretation of *A Year's Letters* might be, I believe that Sypher grasps something much more important when alluding to the 'center of Swinburne's genius'. This is of course a direct rebuttal of Meredith's famous opinion that Swinburne's writing lacks an 'internal centre from which springs anything that he does'.⁷ Instead, Sypher implies that *A Year's Letters* is Swinburne's attempt to discard his many 'disguises' — 'the center is there, always perceptible, exerting its power over every line. The problem is that it takes on such dazzlingly various aspects that it evades definition' (Sypher, xi) — the verse, prose, and satirical *dramatis personae* (Dolores, Lucrezia Borgia, Chastelard, Meleager, Tristram), and take us into the core narrative of his development as a writer and thinker.⁸ Edmund Wilson argues the same essential point: 'Swinburne had a story to tell which he does not tell explicitly in his poetry but which he does partly tell in his fiction', a 'personal story' that 'enable[s] one to recognize as one may not have done before exactly who and what Swinburne was' (Wilson, 9-10). In such a way, Swinburne's prose might serve as a key to this 'internal centre', for encapsulated within *A Year's Letters* and much of his prose critical writing are the recurring themes of his repertoire. His fiction, as Wilson suggests, captures a certain version of 'sa vie et son oeuvre'.

The textual history of *A Year's Letters* is intricate, though not quite as much as that of *Lesbia Brandon*. As early as 1862, Swinburne signs a letter to fellow Sade devotee Richard Monckton Milnes, 'Redgie', after his fictional counterpart, Reginald Harewood, from *A Year's Letters*. To William Rossetti in 1866, he writes of his 'first

⁷ George Meredith, *Letters of George Meredith*, letter to a friend in 1861 (New York: Scribner & Sons, 1912), p. 55.

⁸ An aesthetic development to which I refer in the chapter on *Lesbia Brandon*, suggesting that both of these novels are 'Portraits' of Swinburne, the artist, as a young man.

attempt at serious prose work, perpetrated in '62' (*Letters* 1, 158), and to Theodore Watts in 1877 of a 'maiden attempt (in 1862-3) at a study of contemporary life and manners' (*Letters* 3, 277). The period when he wrote *A Year's Letters* seems to have been pivotal for Swinburne. Two years since he failed to take a degree from Oxford in 1860,⁹ his letters reveal that he was extraordinarily busy. They brim with enthusiasm for new schemes, and ideas, his 'latest grinds' (*Letters* 1, 16). What distinguishes this time, however, is the breadth of his reading and the sheer variety and ambition of his literary endeavours. As early as 1859, he suggested that 'Mary Stuart's amour with Chatelet [sic]' might be a 'good dramatic subject' (*Letters* 1, 28).¹⁰ In an 1861 letter to Lady Trevelyan, he declares that he has 'done a lot of work since I saw you — Rossetti says some of my best pieces', and as previously discussed, 'trying to write prose ... a few stories each about three or six pages long. Likewise a big one about ... Lucrezia' (*Letters* 1, 38-39). Later: 'I have done three prose stories of a mediaeval kind, about as long and moral as those of Boccaccio's' (*Letters* 1, 41). In 1862, he proposes writing the famed critical piece on William Blake (*Letters* 1, 59-60).

Swinburne, it seems, entered into a post-Oxford period of remarkable and diverse productivity. He was experimenting with genre, writing not just verse, but also dramas, essays, and prose. Of the latter, his projected *Triameron* series of Boccaccian short stories, was the earliest, followed by a farcical French piece, *La Fille du Policeman*, in 1861. The subsequent 'Kirklowes' narrative fragments tell of the family Harewood:¹¹ a father whose 'chief recreations are reading the Bible and flogging his son Reginald'

⁹ For more see R. Rooksby, 'The Case of Commoner Swinburne', *The Review of English Studies*, 41 (1990), 510-520.

¹⁰ Chastelard. Lang calls the misspelling a '*lapsus calami*' in Note 5, *Letters* 1, 28. *Chastelard: A Tragedy* (1865), *Bonchurch* vol. 8, 1-133.

¹¹ Likely composed around 1861-2, see T.A.J. Burnett, 'Some Reflections on the Text of Swinburne's Unfinished Novel, the so-called *Lesbia Brandon*', *Victorian Poetry* 47 (2009), 777-86. MS. Ashley 5257, British Library. Called 'Reginald Harewood' by R. Hughes in his edition of *Lesbia Brandon* (London, 1952) and mentioned by F.J. Sypher in his Introduction to *A Year's Letters* (1974).

(Sypher, xxi), Reginald himself (Swinburne's alter-ego, refined in *A Year's Letters*, revisited as Herbert Seyton in *Lesbia Brandon*), and his sister Eleanor (a prototypical Lady Wariston,¹² perhaps), 'an amoral sensualist' who marries Frederick Ashurst, but has an affair with a Mr. Champneys who ultimately drowns in the Channel (his death anticipating Edmund Cheyne's, and the character himself a clear type for the morbid tutor Denham). 'Kirklowes' prefigures both *A Year's Letters* and *Lesbia Brandon*, the former written between 1862 and 1863, and the latter begun sometime in 1864. Between these, in the winter of 1863 to 1864, Swinburne also collaborated with his cousin, Mary Gordon, on her children's parable/novel, *The Children of the Chapel*.¹³ Set in Elizabethan England, it is a strange cautionary tale that takes as its subject a historical footnote: young boys who were taken from their families to join the singing Children of the Chapel, then cast off as soon as their voices broke. Though intended for children, it does not shy away from graphic descriptions of cruelty — schoolboy flogging and a sadomasochistic tutor/pupil relationship (Master Gyles and Arthur Savile) similar to the one between Bertie and Denham in *Lesbia Brandon*. There are both intra- and extra-textual clues that these passages belong to Swinburne: 'Shortly before her death, Mrs. Disney Leith told Lafourcade, Swinburne's biographer, of her cousin's creative role in the novel's flagellation scenes, a role not at all inconsistent with Swinburne's proclivities'.¹⁴

As we have seen, Swinburne was hesitant to affiliate himself with *A Year's Letters*, and its deferred publication history bears witness to the moral climate of the day, which 'did not favor the kind of story Swinburne had to tell' (Sypher, xi). His letters reveal many refusals even under (or perhaps because of) the Manners pseudonym,

¹² see chapter on *Lesbia Brandon*.

¹³ A longer and deeper analysis of the text of *The Children of the Chapel* appears in Krishnan, 'Swinburne the Novelist', MSt. Thesis, New College, Oxford, 2007.

¹⁴ Robert E. Lougy, 'Introduction', in *The Children of the Chapel*, ed. by Robert Lougy (Athens: Ohio UP, 1982), pp. ix-xlix (p. xxxiv).

including by J.B. Payne of Moxon's, which had published *Atalanta in Calydon* in 1865.¹⁵

This was in part owing to the novel's themes, which, though elegantly packaged, still included incest, adultery, illegitimacy, and unabashed, unapologetic manipulation and reverse psychology. Perhaps, too, it was due to the whiff of Frenchness about *A Year's Letters*, a dangerous continental savour. Swinburne burlesques this provincialism in an opening letter from the faux editor to Mrs. Horace Manners:

A long sojourn in France, it appears to me, has vitiated your principles and confused your judgment. Whatever may be the case abroad, you must know that in England marriages are usually prosperous; that among us divorces are unknown, and infidelities incomprehensible. The wives and mothers of England are exempt, through some inscrutable but infallible law of nature, from the errors to which women in other countries (if we may trust the evidence of tradition) are but too fatally liable. If I understand aright the somewhat obscure drift of your work, you represent at least one married Englishwoman who prefers to her husband another man unattached to her except by illicit ties. This may happen on the continent; in England it cannot happen (*AYL*, 3).

This riff on bourgeois sensibility shows Swinburne's understanding of how his novel might be read, and his delighted reaction that it might be interpreted as too French, too 'continental'. Its successor *Lesbia Brandon* was in comparison more risqué, and therefore received even more discouragement. Sypher theorises that Swinburne initially distanced himself from *A Year's Letters* because it was too autobiographical and liable to cause a family upset, for 'perhaps certain incidents and characters were too recognizably drawn from the author's own experience, and might have caused embarrassment in certain quarters' (Sypher, xxvii). But he never lost interest in the novel, and when Thomas Purnell asked him to consider serialization in *The Tatler* a decade after its writing, he wrote gleefully, imagining his alias's reaction:

On receipt of your letter this morning I regret to say our mutual friend of past years, Mrs. H. Manners, was taken with strong hysterics ... 'If,' she said, 'if poor Horace her lamented lord had lived to see this day, he would have been a proud and happy man. *He*,' she said, with acrimonious emphasis, 'always believed in my

¹⁵ Sypher discusses this in his Introduction, for more see *Letters* 3, 251; *Letters* 1, 155-156, 158, 162, 169.

genius as a novelist, the *others*' (too evidently and pointedly alluding to my unoffending self) 'never did.' Nevertheless our fair friend wishes to know what, if anything, she would under the circumstances get for her immortal work, for the mere fame which might accrue to her from its publication I have her own authority for saying that she does not care a damn ... As an honest woman she cannot think at her age of giving herself for nothing to a total stranger...' (*Letters* 3, 244-45).

Later, discussing George Meredith's response to the novel, Swinburne asserts:

Meredith, among others, praised it [*AYL*] ... especially the leading idea of the tragicomic catastrophe by which the young and inconsiderate 'hero' incautiously cuts himself out of a title and estate to which he is presumptive by the simple and natural process of imprudently begetting a child on the wife of his hitherto childless kinsman — which, of course on said kinsman's decease brings matters to a general deadlock, as nobody *can* stand forward and say what everybody knows or suspects as to the parentage of this fatal baby ... This catastrophe I still think original, not improbable or unnatural (*Letters* 3, 251).

Meredith praises *A Year's Letters* for its intricate plot and tragicomedy, the ironic vicissitudes to which its characters are subjected, and a story so convoluted as to seem 'improbable' and yet, as Swinburne affirms, not 'unnatural'. In short, this is a novel that is both highly wrought and organic, simultaneously artificial and natural. More than a century after it was first published, serious critical commentaries on *A Year's Letters* are still few in number. Among these, F.J. Sypher's illuminating Introduction to the 1974 edition and Edmund Wilson's useful essay (1962) on *The Novels of Swinburne* are perhaps most significant. Scholarly work on the text has not, however, progressed much beyond introductory remarks. For a novel that Swinburne defined so carefully and a social world that he recreated with almost 'scientific realism' (Sypher xviii), whose entanglements and characters encapsulate so many of his enduring preoccupations, a more careful approach is required.

There is ample evidence that prose fiction in kaleidoscopic forms preoccupied Swinburne at this time. These inspirations and impulses bleed into *A Year's Letters*, which appears to have been written swiftly and surely, with fastidious planning. F.J.

Sypher provides a tremendous service to Swinburne prose scholarship by carefully outlining the manuscript history of the novel.¹⁶ On the back of the ‘Kirklowes’ fragments are ‘random jottings of names’ that Swinburne used in *A Year’s Letters*, such as Reginald Harewood, Ernest Radworth, the Cheynes; other documents include a table of contents, a ‘tabulation of the number of letters written by each correspondent’, and an informative partial outline with dates that Sypher reproduces in full in his Introduction to the novel.¹⁷ This outline reveals a thinker at once comic, pithy, and devastating (qualities one does not typically associate with Swinburne). It includes abstracts like this: ‘Ly M. writes to give a bad account of A ... Dim hint of dawning kid’, ‘Captain H. desires Redgie to get to work ... Style muscular-Xtian’, ‘Account of interview with Clara. Will not give up. Abject atrocities of the osteologist. Ruat cœlum.’¹⁸ Style Cecco,¹⁹ ‘Announces advent of A.’s kid: a boy. Remarks at large ... Desinit [sic] in piscem. Style bland-savage, dashed with satiric virtue’.²⁰ These deft sketches show Swinburne’s grasp of his narrative and keen sense of the sort of story he wanted to tell. They also give us a glimpse of his vivid, unconventional, and dark sense of humour, which spares no one, not even his fictional alter ego Redgie. The sketches draw on an encyclopaedic scholarly background, summing up voice and motivation in short, forceful descriptions. Most tellingly, they use literature as a shorthand, such as Horace’s epigrammatic *desinat in piscem*²¹ to explain the beautiful beginning and wretched end of the affairs (Lady Midhurst later making it clear:

¹⁶ see Sypher’s Introduction to *A Year’s Letters* (1974).

¹⁷ see Sypher, xxiv-xxv.

¹⁸ Fiat justitia ruat cœlum (Let justice be done though the heavens fall)

¹⁹ Likely to be a reference to Renaissance poet Cecco Angiolieri (1260-1312), contemporary of Dante, whose poems combine parody, satire, and a tendency toward light-hearted, risqué, and exaggerated tropes.

²⁰ Algernon Swinburne MS. Ashley A1851, reproduced in Sypher, Introduction, xxiv-xxv.

²¹ Horace, ‘desinat in piscem mulier formosa superna’ (a beautiful woman above ends in a fish below), *Ars Poetica*, line 4.

‘I admit it is rather a case of girl’s head and fish’s tail’ (*AYL*, 156)) or ‘style Cecco’ to denote Redgie’s conditional,²² almost parodic effusions about Clara:

‘She is so gentle and perfect when he is there: and I feel like getting mad. Well, somehow I let her see I knew what an infernal shame it was; and she said wives were meant for the work ... I daresay I talked no end of folly, but I was regularly off my head. Unless she throws me over I never will give her up... It gives one the wish to be hurt for her. I think I should let him insult me and strike me if she wanted it. Nothing hurts me now but the look of her ... You know Lady Midhurst is set dead against her, and full of the most infernal prejudice. The best of them are cruel and dull about each other’ (*AYL*, 137).

Swinburne’s gift in *A Year’s Letters* is both to identify with and ridicule his characters, doing so with authentic depth and sincerity but also prodigious humour and an unremitting satirical eye. He is able to channel individual perspectives, passions, and voices — ‘*ancien régime* (Lady Midhurst), Muscular Christian (Redgie’s father, Captain Harewood), schoolboy-intense (Redgie)’ (Sypher, xvii) — while simultaneously maintaining a bird’s eye view of the story. For example, his ability to mock Redgie is ‘proof of a powerful faculty for detached analysis’ that, even at a young age, he ‘could see himself as Redgie through the mercilessly sympathetic eyes of Lady Midhurst’ (Sypher, xix) or another reader.

This suggests something about the ‘internal centre’ of Swinburne’s production: the capacity for deep feeling and identification with many different characters, but — and this is often missed — a synchronous objectivity. Swinburne the writer generates many narrative voices and an impressive array of emotions, but, underlying and ‘exerting its power over every line’, is his facility for observation and philosophical detachment. Also principal is an ingrained pragmatism, based perhaps in his aristocratic upbringing or romantic disappointments: the conviction that courtly love, ideal love, cannot thrive and is subject to worldly influences such as social status, family name, or money. And as

²² Cecco is perhaps most well known for the sonnet ‘S’i’fosse foco’ (‘If I were fire’) which continues a series of subjunctives that begin, ‘If I were fire, I would consume the world’.

such, its ideal form appears in art, the beauty of the aesthetic ideal. Nowhere are these fundamental principles more evident than in *A Year's Letters*, where Redgie demonstrates the youthful, idealistic, enamoured Swinburne, while Lady Midhurst embodies his lifelong duality — a passionate love of beauty coupled with an enduring cynicism and conviction of love's futility.

The plans for *A Year's Letters* show us a disciplined Swinburne. He plots with a severity quite different from his process for 'Dolores' — 'I have added four more jets of boiling and poisonous infamy to the perennial and poisonous fountain' (*Letters* 1, 122) — which Jerome McGann admiringly calls the composition of 'new strophes for his snake of a poem'.²³ In contrast, this novel is quite literally annual instead of 'perennial', and the genre demands restraint from Swinburne. *A Year's Letters* has been called stylish for its tight construction, and its author praised for his panache and 'skilful handling of the epistolary form'. As a consummate letter writer and lover of the epistolary novel, his mastery of the genre is not entirely unexpected. Its 'patterns of persuasion and digression' and 'delicate tonal strokes' testify to his subtlety and 'keen dissection' (Sypher, xvi-xvii) of psychology and interaction. The shadowy language textures and satirizes the novel's key disclosures: Lord Cheyne's violent end and Amy's illegitimate child. Both typically sensational elements, they occur quietly in *A Year's Letters*, mixed with sardonic comedy. Clara writes to her aunt of Amy's 'wretched loss', the sailing accident that befalls Lord Cheyne when the entire family is on the boat, and noting most acidly that Amy 'kept hold of her brother [who was also submerged], chafing and kissing his face and hands' though she 'never so much as touched her husband's hand' (*AYL*, 96-98). In turn, Lady Midhurst writes bracingly to her granddaughter, 'show honour and regard to Cheyne's memory by controlling and respecting yourself to begin with' (*AYL*, 100). The various reactions to

²³ Jerome McGann, *The Scholar's Art: Literary Studies in a Managed World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 44.

Cheyne's death include Clara's sarcastic hints of a loveless marriage and Lady Midhurst's argument for fortitude and endurance. These reactions not only elaborate the personalities of this society, but also show us how they use letters as weapons and modes of strategy. After Amy's delivery of a male heir, Lady Midhurst writes to Clara with supreme understatement, 'Amy and your brother, you doubtless remember, gave symptoms of being touched, as flirting warmed to feeling; they had begun playing the game of cousins with an over-liberal allowance of sentiment' (*AYL*, 156-57). Having effectively outmanoeuvred Clara, Lady Midhurst protects her granddaughter Amy by underplaying her relationship with Frank and adhering to her philosophy of pragmatism and endurance.

Significant events occur *between* letters, while many momentous occurrences are only obscurely mentioned. Lady Midhurst writes to Clara, 'Amicia is in a very bad way indeed...her face seems to me changing'. She later describes her as a 'sleepy sick child' (*AYL*, 143). In the most veiled manner, Amy's condition is suggested without explicit description. In her letters to Frank and Clara, Lady Midhurst attributes Amy's decline to grief and guilt; the rather simple physical explanation is of course her pregnancy. Of Amy's mysterious ailment, Frank writes to his sister Clara, 'it is quite clear, you know, that they expect a confinement' (*AYL*, 155), a statement that emerges through the fog of 'persuasion and digression' that characterise Lady Midhurst's letters (*AYL*, 155). Amy's impending confinement, in fact, has never been 'clear' at all, save in the pregnant language of her grandmother's descriptions. In a society where illicit relationships are permitted or expected as long as they do not incite talk (the word 'rumours' is ubiquitous in Lady Midhurst's letters) or break lines of succession, the most fundamental conditions — love, illness, pregnancy — are only indirectly described. But this is not just a humorous depiction of upper-crust hypocrisy. Swinburne gives a picture of social

artfulness and linguistic deliberation that sets his world apart from the bourgeois conventionality he so despises, and by leaning on suggestion, misdirection, and obliqueness, he creates a particular aesthetic atmosphere for the novel. This sphere is one where conversation is art and language holds unimaginable power, and its most powerful inhabitant is Lady Midhurst. Her hints and guileful missives reflect her ‘insight and analytic ability’ (*AYL*, 14) and confirm her as an English successor to Madame de Merteuil, Laclos’s rational ‘Titaness’ (*LB*, 254).

Lady Midhurst is the agent of several major threads in the novel: irony and ‘suffering at the hands of fate’ (Sypher, xix), but also aesthetic warmth and appreciation for beauty. These qualities intermingle, particularly during the dénouement. Much of the novel’s effect is predicated on the ironic unravelling of individual passions for a greater cause: a cause that, for much of the novel, is concealed from the lovers. This overarching structure takes the place of fate, and Lady Midhurst is the instrument. For Lady Midhurst, this greater cause is paramount, and her articulation of it only emerges clearly at the end. When the cousins are separated, and gossip has been satisfactorily silenced, she says that, had passions been consummated and marriages taken place, it ‘would have made our friends open their eyes and lips a little’ (*AYL*, 184). This is an understated summing-up, but it is not in Lady Midhurst’s character to gloat. Having engineered, for pages, the steady fragmentation of her family’s liaisons, she steps back from her work, qualifying it with only a simple declaration. Sypher argues, ‘the success of the Cheynes lies, one imagines, in their ability to produce every few generations someone like Lady Midhurst who can keep the members of the family in place’ (Sypher, xix). Lady Midhurst represents survival. More, she represents the understanding, so integral to Swinburne’s aesthetic, of ‘life’s inevitably tragic development for all spirited men and women: tragic

because satisfying our passionate impulses is ultimately impossible'.²⁴ There are some things, Lady Midhurst repeatedly affirms, that simply must be done, and therefore sacrifices must be made and attachments broken.

But Lady Midhurst is not the villain of the piece; not, as Clara describes her, a bitter old woman, with venomous 'fangs' and a 'grey fierce old face' (*AYL*, 75). She is a stunner, 'clear-skinned, with pure regular features, and abundant bright white hair', whose daughter and granddaughter have inherited her 'singular beauty and personal grace', 'looks and carriage' (*AYL*, 12). It is possible to view her as a fresh iteration of Swinburne's mesmeric *femme fatale*. She draws out his latent sadomasochism in the form of Redgie's surrender to her. Sypher has acutely noted that Redgie alternately despises and worships Lady Midhurst, taking 'a kind of sensual pleasure in kneeling down before his betters' (Sypher, xix). At one point she even threatens that if he were but younger, she 'should like of all things to get you a good sound flogging' (*AYL*, 86). If Redgie signifies the poet, the 'demoniac youth'²⁵ and inspired genius, then Lady Midhurst is both his nemesis and his obsession. Their relationship is very literally marked by sadomasochism, as she offers him pleasure (her love and constant assurances that he is her favourite) and extreme pain (the denial of his affair with Clara). He is quite willing to prostrate himself before such a worthy idol. Like Dolores, Faustine, Mary Stuart, Lucrezia Borgia, Lady Midhurst becomes an aesthetic symbol: the object of the artistic gaze and yet another disguise through which Swinburne plays out a 'complex drama, filled with guilt and mystery, with aspirations and losses, passionate loves and hatreds' (Sypher, xi-xii).

What Swinburne achieves through this minimalist epistolary form is something more complex than has been hitherto noticed. 'In most novels of the sort, the author's narrative frets at the limits of probable correspondence' (Sypher, xvi-xvii), yet here we

²⁴ Antony H. Harrison, 'Swinburne's Losses: The Poetics of Passion', *ELH* 49 (1982), 689-706 (p. 690).

²⁵ Ruskin's description of Swinburne.

are given one entirely contained within such limits. Apart from the Prologue, there are no authorial intrusions, no disruptions by an omniscient voice. It requires especial skill to tell such a pure story without destroying the impression or illusion of reality. And such sustained illusion contributes to the steadily building tension of the novel. Accomplished examples of their genre, the letters 'are as far as one could wish from the *prose* of most nineteenth-century novelists' (Sypher, xvii), and with each one (and the development of each character's psychology), we are further implicated in their mutual fated involvement. Amy's simple, timid voice; Clara's status-minded boldness; Redgie's young Swinburne-esque romantic idealism; Frank's infatuated chivalry; and finally Lady Midhurst's consummate skill, eloquence, and irony: these Swinburne captures with both sensitivity and neutrality. The effect is to force the reader into the heart of the letters, interlocutor of these many dramatic monologues.

The monologues, or perspectives, of the four younger characters are well drawn. Two sets of siblings (one pair, Amicia and Redgie, who bear striking resemblance to one another, just like Herbert Seyton and Margaret Wariston in *Lesbia Brandon*) form two sets of lovers. All in tragic positions, they suffer from the crucial, central Swinburnian struggle between passionate or ideal love and the demands of the world (the established social and economic order). The love between pairs of cousins – possibly rooted in Swinburne's autobiography as previously noted — returns in *Lesbia Brandon*, where family and sex intersect in even more dizzying ways. Consanguinity becomes an ideal of both platonic and erotic love, for childhood play with its joint interests and activities (cf. moorland rides, singing, border ballad recitations, or sea swims in *Lesbia Brandon*) becomes the intellectual and aesthetic stimulation that for Swinburne is inextricable from sexual fascination. His literary collaboration with Mary Gordon may be an example of this intersection between art and romance. As Redgie says to Clara, 'I do know you

perfectly, as I love you' (*AYL*, 75), or Frank to Amy, 'I love nothing now seriously that does not somehow belong to you' (*AYL*, 84). The shared experience of growing up together and perfect mutual knowledge transform into a bond as much a genetic as romantic. This sense of belonging to each other is encapsulated within a single family, and supplies the common Romantic themes of introspection and interiority. Given Swinburne's profound attachment to the memories and experiences of his childhood, his 'incestuous liaisons seem inevitable rather than perverse', a ideal version of love uncorrupted by the world.²⁶ The repetition of cousin love in both *A Year's Letters* and *Lesbia Brandon* reflects perhaps his 'urgent' 'need to tell his personal story, to return to those early impressions and emotions which he had never fully described' (Wilson, 27) and to explore them more fully through various iterations. We see a marriage between what Swinburne considers a natural urge (the holy compulsion towards one's kin) and a key aesthetic principle. Through the consanguineous bond, Swinburne is able to explore much that preoccupies him: childhood joy (linked to later, passionate love), unrequited affection, the exigencies of life and a consequent turning-inward of one's self, and the ultimate sterility of such love. Both couples are paired and connected in 'tortuous paths of desire'.²⁷ All four lovers are related to Lady Midhurst, who thus, despite being the voice of expediency and logic, also becomes a romantic progenitor. As such, she may be a candidate for the novel's philosophic centre, the figure who most compellingly unites the many strands of Swinburnian thought. Not only the agent of fate and circumstance, she has a keen appreciation for beauty and recognizes the tragedy of these doomed love affairs. As she writes to Clara:

I too have had everything handsome about me, and I have had losses. You see, my dear, the flowers (and weeds) will grow over all this in good time ... When

²⁶ Elizabeth A. Guzynski, 'Oedipus Is Burning: Fate, Desire, and Masochism in Algernon Charles Swinburne's *Atalanta in Calydon*', *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 54 (1999), 202-229 (p. 208).

²⁷ Christopher Lane, *The Burdens of Intimacy: Psychoanalysis and Victorian Masculinity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 75.

recollection makes us sorry, we can remember that we shall forget ... We must let things pass; when their time is come for going, or when if they stay they can but turn to poison, we must help them to be gone. And then we had best forget (*AYL*, 155-56).

In this steady multiplication of entanglements and passions, Swinburne produces a strange kaleidoscopic portrait of love. In the end, we learn, all passions will come to naught; due to the draconian rules of social convention and their actor, Lady Midhurst, these loves will end in sterility. The bittersweet ambitions, the pain and pleasure of one year, are chronicled in *A Year's Letters*; yet hanging over them is the inevitable conclusion, that 'the time to count up and pay down comes for us all', and to borrow Lady Midhurst's brave expression, 'we have no pleasures of our own; we hold no comforts but on sufferance' (*AYL*, 155).

I have suggested that *A Year's Letters*' components mirror the dramatic monologue, for although we have access to the characters' personal letters, we are not really meant to read them. This creates an odd voyeuristic sensation, Wilson's idea of being secretly 'taken into the house' and seeing 'what kind of life is lived there'. Taken in this light, the novel's 'brilliant finish' comes with pain, disappointment, and surprise. As the letter closes on Lady Midhurst's somewhat unpleasant triumph, we too are closed out of this intriguing world. But 'things', she writes, 'are much better as they are', a statement referring to the prudent, although tragic, outcome of the love affairs. At the same time, it alludes to the relationship between the reader and the text, reminding one of Margaret's poignant declaration in *Lesbia Brandon*: 'Things in verse hurt one, don't they? hit and sting like a cut. They wouldn't hurt us if we had no blood, and no nerves' (*LB*, 332-33). Words have physical power and the potent ability to 'hit and sting like a cut'. Swinburne aspires to this vigour, the ability to bring his readers 'face to face' with sensation through powerful language and powerful explication. Such language can 'hurt one', as much or

more than a physical wound. Stories cannot be inert, they alter us as we read. And the story he tells here is deeply personal, with a capacity to affect just as much as his verse.

The practice of art, then, permits the creation both of high beauty and extreme pain, an acute dichotomy in which Swinburne firmly believes. This is what Margaret declares, and the conclusion of *A Year's Letters* insinuates something similar. Lady Midhurst's machinations (which several critics have correctly identified as supremely aesthetic), though admirable, clever, and in service to family appearance and status, cause deep sorrow. *A Year's Letters*, for all its polish and restraint, is a desperately painful story. Beneath its biting humour and elegant style are the same joys, pains, and tragedies as much of Swinburne's other work. For Wilson, 'Swinburne's obsession with cruelty makes itself felt more sharply in these works [novels] than it does in his other writings, because they are made to take place not in a world of history or myth but in Swinburne's own personal world' (Wilson, 35). This interpretation lends new weight to Lady Midhurst's bittersweet declarations; as fascinating as it is to peek into the shuttered world Swinburne depicts, it is also uncomfortable, poignant, and affecting.

This study argues that Swinburne was attempting to tell a very particular story in *A Year's Letters*, as well as seeking a specific mode for the novel, characterised by profane subject matter (extramarital affairs, illegitimate children, incestuous attachment, sadomasochistic passion) and exquisitely controlled, subtly suggestive language within a demanding novelistic form. But in the character of Lady Midhurst he creates the crucial and pivotal figure. 'This book', Swinburne once wrote, 'stands or falls by Lady Midhurst; if she gives satisfaction, it must be all right; if not, Chaos is come again. From the Galilean or gallows-worshipping point of view, I am aware that she and I must be all together condemnable' (*Letters* 1, 158). He clearly aligns his narrative energies with Lady Midhurst. She is his mature literary and philosophical voice. He gives her paramount

importance as the great ‘fabulator’²⁸ and ‘internal centre’ of the story, its secret, manipulating, yet eminently humanistic genius. She drives *A Year’s Letters*, wheedling, persuading, negotiating, and arranging. But it is not her social scheming that defines her; rather, it is her many other qualities: among them, a capacity for detachment and thoughtfulness. Her French strain furnishes her with a keen, enduring appreciation of beauty. But her understanding of the transience of things, the need for all people eventually to ‘count up and pay down’, and her resilience are eminently English. As she herself says, in an echo of Swinburne’s nationalistic pride, ‘what a far better thing it is to live in the light of English feeling and under the rule of English habit’ (*AYL*, 157). She constantly calls herself a ‘bore’ or avers that she wants to disclose the ‘real, simple truth’ (*AYL*, 87-89). The truth is of course neither simple nor readily available, and the moral calculations of *A Year’s Letters* are as complex as anything in Swinburne’s oeuvre. Lady Midhurst’s reflection upon the year, reproduced in the epigraph to this chapter, sets the tone for this unique addition to Swinburne’s production. ‘We must be content never to make a story’, she writes, despite the scandalous events of the year. Reserved, understated, and forever ironic, she exists as one of the greatest characters in English fiction.

²⁸ Prospero, Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*.

9. *Lesbia Brandon*

‘The most important MS. I have of unpublished prose and verse combined’

- Swinburne (*Letters* 4, 33)

Lesbia Brandon sent the American poet H.D. into ‘an electric coma’ when she read it in 1952. ‘The book is really the turn of the tide’, she enthused, ‘I have waited for the “romantics” to come really back ... so now, I can just get caught up in the tide, no more swimming against the breakers’.¹ This language resonates with that of the novel, whose central image is its protagonist, Herbert Seyton, diving into the sea: ‘he could not swim further in the heavy reflux sea that shifted and seethed; keeping half afloat in front of the breaker, he was drawn out again towards it by the fierce rapid reflux, lifted into it and with it as it came in gathering up all the strength and stream of the sea’ (*LB*, 214). The relationship of the artist to the sea is of paramount importance for Swinburne, and is part of a long literary tradition flowing from Sappho to the tragic figures of his verse, renewed and sometimes embalmed in the ocean. H.D., along with other feminist writers such as Willa Cather and Renée Vivien, viewed Swinburne as a key figure in the sexual revolution, his work linking Sappho and Hellenic poetry to Romanticism, Decadence, and eventually Modernist ‘fluid explorations of sexuality and gender roles’.² For these poets, the previously undiscovered and explicitly titled *Lesbia Brandon* seemed to signal ‘a shift in male literary history ... away from the poetics of male desire toward its disruption in the fluid sexualities of Decadent Romanticism’ (Laity, 461-62). It is widely held that

¹ H.D. to Norman Holmes Pearson, 8 Aug. 1952, MS Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven, cited in Cassandra Laity, ‘H.D.’s Romantic Landscapes: The Sexual Politics of the Garden’, in *Signets: Reading H.D.*, ed. by Susan Stanford Friedman and Rachel Blau DuPlessis (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), pp. 110-127 (p. 110).

² For a detailed discussion of Swinburne’s impact on modernist women poets, see Cassandra Laity, ‘H.D. and A.C. Swinburne: Decadence and Modernist Women’s Writing’, *Feminist Studies* 15 (1989), 461-484 (p. 463).

Swinburne's poetics made him a feminist precursor;³ however, we can also perceive his influence on conventionally masculine authors such as James Joyce. *Ulysses* liberally alludes to Swinburne's 'Dolores' and the 'sweets of sin', suggesting that Molly is to Leopold Bloom a sort of virgin Venus, or darkly chaste temptress.⁴ The sea is equally fundamental to Joyce's urban landscape, as when his Dubliners gaze across its distance, or — in the opening of *Ulysses* — 'the sea, the snotgreen sea, the scrotumtightening sea', 'Isn't the sea what Algy calls it: a great sweet mother?' (*Ulysses*, 1.77-78), a half-pastiche, half-longing invocation of 'the sweet sea, mother of loves and hours,' 'A barren mother, a mother-maid' ('Triumph of Time', *Poems* 1, 36, ll. 62-67).

Thus, Swinburne is an important touchstone, not only for H.D. and the female modernist poets, but also for the male modernist tradition. A careful analysis of *Lesbia Brandon* might significantly contribute to our understanding of his role in this regard. Despite its title and eponym, *Lesbia Brandon* abundantly displays 'the poetics of male desire'. It is a novel as much about Herbert Seyton as it is about Lesbia, taking as its chief theme his development from schoolboy to man. It can be interpreted as a *Bildungsroman* much akin to *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and though Joyce never read *Lesbia Brandon*, the affinity between Herbert Seyton and Stephen Dedalus spans the fifty-year gap between their writing, suggesting that a richer understanding of Swinburne's novels and aesthetic framework might be achieved if we consider his work in conjunction with its literary successors.⁵

³ As did those of his contemporaries, including Pater and Wilde.

⁴ See Michael Crumb's monograph, 'Sweets of Sin: Joyce's "Ulysses" and Swinburne's "Dolores"'. *James Joyce Quarterly* 28 (1990), 239-245.

⁵ James Naremore in 'Style as Meaning in *A Portrait of the Artist*', *James Joyce Quarterly* 4 (1976), 331-42, discusses that Joyce has been accused of writing 'purple prose' in the style of Swinburne, and that he deploys language similar to the 'sensual and violent imagery of Swinburne'; In 'James Joyce: Barnacle Goose and Lapwing', *PMLA* 71(1956), 302-20, M. Beebe reflects on the allusions to 'The Triumph of Time' in *Ulysses*.

T.A.J. Burnett has recently made a persuasive case for a fresh edition of *Lesbia Brandon* in his ‘Some Reflections on the Text of Swinburne’s Unfinished Novel, the so-called “Lesbia Brandon”’,⁶ examining the bibliographic puzzles in the manuscript and arguing that:

It is surely time for the text to be revised, and a new commentary to be written on Swinburne’s most ambitious attempt to complete and publish a novel: a novel, moreover, which he saw as ‘the most important MS [he had] of unpublished prose and verse combined’ (Burnett, 785).

Rikky Rooksby is also quoted, arguing that ‘of all his unfinished projects, it is the most important. Had he completed and published it in the 1860’s it would have created a scandal to match that which greeted his *Poems and Ballads* (1866)’ and ‘ironic and romantic by turns, “Lesbia Brandon” brings together all of Swinburne’s preoccupations’.⁷ Burnett’s careful work also makes it is apparent that Swinburne was working on it for a number of years, ‘In the MS sixteen different types of paper are used...eight have watermarks including a date. The dates are 1859, 1863, 1864, 1865, and 1866’ (Burnett, 779). Swinburne knew that he was writing something unique. In 1866 he told W.M. Rossetti of his ‘unfinished hybrid book’ (*Letters* 1, 258) and in 1867 describes to Richard Burton, ‘I have in hand a scheme of mixed verse and prose — a sort of etude à la Balzac *plus* the poetry — which I flatter myself will be more offensive and objectionable to Britannia than anything I have yet done’ (*Letters* 1, 224). In previous chapters, I have alluded to the influence of Brontë, Balzac, Laclos, and other novelists on *Lesbia Brandon*; now I will devote my attention to the mechanisms by which he constructed his radical and hybrid text, drafting the particular story he wished to tell.

At the centre of *Lesbia Brandon* is Herbert Seyton, orphaned within a few pages of the beginning and adopted by his sister and her husband. Dying, his delirious father

⁶ T.A.J. Burnett, ‘Some Reflections on the Text of Swinburne’s Unfinished Novel, the so-called “Lesbia Brandon”’, *Victorian Poetry* 47 (2009), 777-86.

⁷ Rikky Rooksby in a letter to T.A.J. Burnett, July 26, 1996, quoted in Burnett, ‘Some Reflections’, 785.

bids ‘someone keep Herbert from the water and send for him if the boy disobeyed’, saying that ‘my father wouldn’t hear of it ... his own was lost at sea. I should have done better. Ay but lost on land for all that — cast away and broken’ (*LB*, 193). So the sea appears almost before the tale begins, an embodiment of Bertie’s boyish desires and rebellion against parental authority. We learn that Herbert’s great-grandfather was ‘lost at sea’, family apocrypha that charges the water with danger. His father also mysteriously pronounces that “‘she thrives, though ... I said her children would never thrive if she married: she’ll die a barren stock — barren’” (*LB*, 193). The ‘she’ is presumably Herbert’s sister, Margaret Wariston, and the conflation of femininity, barrenness, and the tale of a (male) Seyton ancestor ‘lost at sea’, suggests a space fraught with sexual peril, where men can lose themselves in that ‘barren mother’, the ‘mother of loves and hours’. For the Seytons, the sea is lover and killer. By saturating their history with its presence, Swinburne suggests that Herbert’s mystical connection with the water is neither random nor idiosyncratic, but genetic and almost predestined. The story of the lost great-grandfather also instils in us a sense of dread, a premonition that the Seyton family might be doomed to calamity. As we subsequently learn, Herbert’s father dies with another great and pressing secret — ‘I should have taken the little thing and kept it for all that’ — he has fathered another child, whose identity is only revealed at the close, in a bitterly incestuous tragedy (*LB*, 193). Encircled by the theme of water — as enigmatic as desire or death — the opening establishes *Lesbia Brandon* as a mystery, melodrama, and, at core, family romance.

By structuring his story around the coming of age of an orphan, Swinburne nods to the orphans and *parvenus* of Dickens, Balzac, or Stendhal. At the same time, he produces a new sort of protagonist, who struggles not for upward mobility, but the fulfillment of beauty. Looking ahead to prose successors, Herbert Seyton’s aristocratic

entitlement resembles that of the orphaned Dorian Gray,⁸ with the distinction being that Herbert's love of beauty is pure because it finds objects in nature or others,⁹ whereas Dorian's turns egotistically inward to self. Unlike the strivers Julien Sorel or Lucien Rubempré, Herbert Seyton is born privileged. Swinburne, of course, was of a similarly advantaged background, 'unique among important English writers of the nineteenth century in that he belonged to the top nobility' (Wilson, 'Introduction', *Novels*, 10). *Lesbia Brandon* is deliberately set in this milieu, his effort to 'take us into the house and let us see the kind of life that is lived there' (Wilson, 21). 'What Swinburne has to tell', writes Wilson, 'for the reader habituated to Victorian fiction, is likely to prove rather startling ... a world in which the eager enjoyment of a glorious out-of-door life of riding and swimming and boating is combined with adultery, incest, enthusiastic flagellation and quiet homosexuality' (Wilson, 22). Though audacious in theme, the novel is even more daring in its disruption of the traditionally bourgeois *Bildungsroman*. Swinburne intends an upheaval of the genre by introducing a European savour, new language, character types, preoccupations, and a revision of its boundaries that will be 'objectionable to Britannia'.

At Ensdon, the Waristons' home, Herbert immerses himself in his natural environment, and from the first has a deep, almost compulsive attachment to the sea. His brother-in-law is alarmed when Herbert's 'face trembled and changed, his eyelids tingled, his limbs yearned all over: the colours and savours of the sea seemed to pass in at his eyes and mouth; all his nerves desired the divine touch of it, all his soul saluted it through the senses', but his sister merely remarks, 'it's the sea' (*LB*, 195). Herbert's growing up is an aesthetic education, 'water and wind and darkness and light made friends with him; he

⁸ Like Joyce, Wilde could not have read *Lesbia Brandon*, but the notion of a new sort of protagonist was clearly in the literary atmosphere.

⁹ As noted in the chapter on Brontës, the beauty of nature/love of nature is for Swinburne always pure and transcendent.

went among beautiful things without wonder or fear' (*LB*, 196). Always, he finds his way seaward, feeding 'his eyes for hours on the fruitless floating fields of wan green water ... till the soul of the sea entered him and filled him with fleshly pleasure and the pride of life' (*LB*, 197). Herbert's relationship to the sea is echoed in this passage from *Portrait of the Artist*, when Stephen Dedalus finds his great resolve near the river:

The water of the rivulet was dark with endless drift and mirrored the highdrifting clouds. The clouds were drifting above him silently and silently the seatangle was drifting below him; and the grew warm air was still: and a new wild life was singing in his veins ... He was alone and young and willful and wildhearted, alone amid a waste of wild air and brackish waters and the seaharvest of shells and tangle and veiled grey sunlight and gayclad lightclad figures.¹⁰

The language brims with sensual animation, 'fleshly pleasure and the pride of life', 'a new wild life was singing in his veins', and both locate the water as a vital source of aesthetic inspiration. Joyce's alliterations — 'alone and young and willful and wildhearted, alone amid a waste of wild air and brackish waters' — vibrate with Swinburnian prosody. For each young man, the mouth of the river and the coast represent a locus of transition from childhood to manhood. 'Where was his boyhood now? Where was the soul that had hung back from her destiny' (*Portrait*, 185), Joyce writes of Dedalus in this moment. The breakers and waves do battle with Herbert, whose muscular struggle against them comes to embody the physical and sexual strife of his adult life: 'he rioted in the roaring water like a young sea-beast, sprang at the throat of waves that threw him flat ... grappled with them as lover with lover' (*LB*, 205-06). The sea also becomes a place for revelation and an unveiling of purpose, as when Dedalus experiences — in a very Swinburnian series of life-affirming declarations — the 'call of life to his soul not the dull gross voice of the world of duties and despair, not the inhuman voice that had called him to the pale service of the altar' (One is momentarily reminded

¹⁰ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. by Seamus Deane (New York: Penguin, 2003), p. 185.

of Swinburne's pale Galilean), and affirms that he will 'create proudly out of the freedom and power of his soul ... a living thing, new and soaring and beautiful, impalpable, imperishable' (*Portrait*, 184). Of Herbert's discoveries during his seaside solitude, Swinburne says: 'all cruelties and treacheries, all subtle appetites and violent secrets of the sea, were part of her divine nature ... these things he felt without thinking of them, like a child; conscious all over of the beauty and the law of things about him, the manner and condition of their life' (*LB*, 198). Both Stephen and Herbert come to a greater understanding of the 'law of things' around them and the 'manner and condition of their life', and in doing so reveal their future roles as artists: to 'create proudly' out of this vital beauty, freedom, and power.

The classical presence is strong in *Lesbia Brandon*. It suffuses the ocean lore: Sirens, the original femmes fatales; Odysseus, lost in its distractions for a decade; Sappho, Swinburne's idolized poet, flinging herself into its depths. It appears quite concretely in the text: strolling on the sands with his tutor Denham, the adolescent Bertie unoriginally declares, 'in every row ever heard of there was a woman somewhere', to which Denham responds, 'from Troy to Actium downwards'. The conversation then turns to sirens, with Bertie: 'I think they were right to put a lot of women in the sea: it's like a woman itself: the right place for sirens to come out of, and sing and kill people' and then he mentions Ulysses' women: 'Circe, and Calypso, and Penelope ... I'd rather have seen Circe, I think.' (*LB*, 211-12). Prefiguring his later hopeless passion for Lesbia, Bertie chooses the most inaccessible and perhaps most cruel of the three, the sorceress whose love is twinned with vengeance. She is a Hellenic Dolores, at whose hands men are emasculated, bestialized; but she is also a great fabulator, a female Prospero who holds dominion over her island and its inhabitants. Circe, like the sea, represents both allure and danger for Herbert, and Lesbia will come to mean both to him as well. Stephen Dedalus,

too, summons a classical figure: ‘he seemed to hear the noise of dim waves and to see a winged form flying above the waves and slowly climbing the air ... a hawk-like man flying sunward above the sea’, Icarus (*Portrait*, 183). Dedalus’ mythological ancestor escapes the sea, transcends it by ‘flying sunward’ to his ruin. His ruin, of course, means a fall seaward, but his flight means ‘forging anew ... a new soaring impalpable imperishable’ art (*Portrait*, 183). This is something quite different from *Lesbia Brandon*, and the primary disagreement is that of flight against plunge, transcendence against immersion, Dedalus denying ‘the sluggish matter of the earth’ by flying above the ‘noise of dim waves’ and Seyton submerging himself in their depths. For Dedalus, the sea, like the earth, signifies the palpable, the perishable, the mortal, the ‘sluggish’ aspect of humanity that he rejects. For Seyton, it is rich with the possibilities — love, passion, fear and danger — of mortality. While Joyce and Swinburne perceive the sea as a key site of aesthetic revelation, loaded with mythological and humanist lore, its symbolic value is rather different to each.

Lesbia reworks the association between submersion, mortality, and renewal later in the novel when she speaks of Lethe, the *Ameles potamos*, river of unmindfulness, ‘pale and rapid and steady’ in her dream, a ‘smell of meadowsweet on the banks’ like the Ensdon woods. She herself is in an artificial oblivion, drugged on opium and dying for the love of Lady Wariston. Her trance underworld is frightening precisely because it is familiar, for she sees ‘nothing anywhere that was not like something I had seen already’. In this river of oblivion, she is haunted by remembrance, ‘haunted with the fear that there might be nothing new behind death after all; no real rest and no real change’. The goddess of death Proserpine, who appears in so much of Swinburne’s verse (for example, ‘Hymn to Proserpine’ and ‘Garden of Proserpine’ both in *Poems and Ballads, First Series*) is a terrible figure resembling Lady Wariston, cold and ‘pale and pleased’, ‘the dead element

was vital for her' (*LB*, 345-46). Margot Louis has argued that Swinburne's Proserpine poems and her appearance in *Lesbia Brandon* are part of his 'pessimism of the *fin de siècle*', which maintains that the universe is 'godless, its torment a weary weight sustained by the blind will to live' and that the 'yearning for immortality is after all based on the assumption that life per se has value'.¹¹ For Lesbia, this is a false assumption; the horror of immortality is its resemblance to mortality, an ordeal denying sensual pleasure and love. Contrast this with Herbert, whose physical engagement with beauty (despite his disappointed love) makes for a joyous aesthetic evolution. The water in Lesbia's dream is quite different from that of Herbert's youthful play. Her river is a pulse or nervous palpitation, 'pale and rapid and steady'; his sea a 'fierce rapid reflux'. The two images of water suggest a twinned aesthetic integral to the Swinburnian mode. Louis has rightly said that pessimism — qua mortality and the prospect of salvation beyond this world — is a central element to his work, and this is well expressed in the character of Lesbia, incidentally also a poet and sensitive. The weight of life and her unattained passion, 'the dream foregone and the deed forborne' is her enduring tragedy ('The Triumph of Time', *Poems* 1, 34, l. 12). But there is a strong counterbalancing optimism in the person of Herbert, the young, perceptive, deeply-feeling artist, who, like Stephen Dedalus, must suffer and strive and eventually hear 'the call of life to his soul', a call that manifests as aesthetic, romantic, and — just like Swinburne or Joyce themselves — republican passion.

Alongside (and principal to) Herbert's development as a sensual and aesthetic being is his development as a lover. Bertie's passion for Lesbia Brandon is at the core of the novel. We have mentioned in the chapter on Gautier his first glimpse of her. Before that fateful evening, his sister jokes that he will marry Lesbia because she is 'evidently

¹¹ Margot K. Louis, 'Proserpine and Pessimism: Goddesses of Death, Life, and Language from Swinburne to Wharton', *Modern Philology*, 96 (1999), 312-46 (pp. 313-15).

the right age and style', pronouncing in the manner of an ironic oracle 'I foresee that Lesbia Brandon is your fate' (*LB*, 230). This certainly proves to be the case. The double irony, of course, is that she (Lady Wariston) becomes in turn Lesbia's fate. But Lady Wariston is opaque, a figure of masculine projection, as are so many of Swinburne's femmes fatales, and thus less interesting than the textured psychological portrait of Herbert. Our primary concern is the impact of Lesbia on Herbert's growth as an artist. This Swinburne details sensitively, from inception to close, as Herbert falls into a desire that is as immersive as his early boyhood swims in the turbulent sea. During their first conversation, their mutual passion for literature ripens into a growing interest and flirtation. Herbert craves her approval, and when she compliments him, 'he thrilled and flushed through all his pores at the thought that this first praise should come from this quarter'. They discuss Hugo's *Les Burgraves*, and their shared knowledge of this obscure play signifies their twin otherness. They recite it to each other in furtive delight, each line a masonic watchword familiar only to the two of them. The physical thrill of finding a kindred soul is the same one that Herbert feels in the sea or when reading Hugo, 'overpowered by the weight and splendour' of it (*LB*, 275).

Between this first meeting and Herbert's declaration of fervent love, very little of the manuscript remains. This loss is a shame, for obvious reasons. As it is, the story skips ahead quite rapidly to the chapter 'On the Downs', and the relationship between the two is already very different. First, Herbert is no longer a child, but a young man of twenty-four. Moreover, he has retained his childhood passion for Lesbia, which, Heathcliff-like, has become firm, fixed, and ardent:

'Only upon my honour I think, I do quite believe, as far as a fellow can know about himself at all, if you liked, if you thought it would amuse you, I would go right over the cliff there and thank God. I should like to have the chance of pleasing you, making a minute's difference to you ... I don't want to die for nothing like a fool in a book. But if you did! ... I believe I should die thinking it would make you smile to yourself when you thought of it. I'm not worth anything

else but I don't believe another man in the world loves you quite like this' (*LB*, 284).

This impassioned speech gives us a very different Herbert. A decade into the chronology of *Lesbia Brandon*, Swinburne reveals a protagonist with altered and enlarged sensibilities, from the animal vigour of his boyhood to a more refined, yet simultaneously more passionate, engagement with sensual things. He drinks in Lesbia, fixing 'his eyes upon the fiery beauty of her face' in the same way that he earlier absorbed the beauty of the sea, which 'seemed to pass in at his eyes and mouth; all his nerves desired the divine touch of it, all his soul saluted it through the senses'. Lesbia watches his face 'all thro' like a still fire, intense and hopeful, wholly ready for death or life' (*LB*, 284). His childhood relationship to beauty as a conduit of feeling is here made manifest, especially in his avowed willingness to die if it would give Lesbia a moment of pleasure or would make a 'minute's difference'. The proposal to throw himself over the cliff for Lesbia is a clear reference to Sappho, in which Herbert, not Lesbia, plays the part of the wounded poet. Swinburne has a great ability to marry this sort of sublime melodrama to the amusingly prosaic, as when Herbert scoffs, 'I don't want to die for nothing like a fool in a book', an irony that the reader will (though he cannot possibly) appreciate.

Some have interpreted Herbert's heartfelt passion as almost wholly autobiographical. Swinburne's unconsummated love for his cousin, Mary Gordon (later Mary Disney Leith),¹² is accepted as an inspiration for much of his poetry ('The Triumph of Time', in particular). It is perhaps also an inspiration for his prose. The worship of an unattainable woman is certainly a frequent trope — embodied by the disinterested Lesbia and married Clara Radworth in *A Year's Letters*, or numerous femmes fatales in the verse

¹² For more on this, see 'Swinburne in Love' in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 11 (1970), 1415-26, and 'Swinburne's Prose Heroines and Mary's "Femmes Fatales"' in *Victorian Poetry* 9 (1971), 249-56, both by F.A.C. Wilson.

— as is the ecstatic suffering felt by the poet as devotee. The consanguineous relations in both novels are also arguably inspired by Mary and Algernon's cousin-love. Speculating that his relationship with Mary is the sole basis for these affairs, however, does him a disservice and neglects the extensive literary tradition from which he draws inspiration.

As H.D. effused, Swinburne brought back the romantics with *Lesbia Brandon*, and with them the richly symbolic incestuous relationship. And while incest is an ancient theme, with important classical examples, Swinburne draws on the Romantics' interpretation of it. The Romantic emphasis on a shared childhood experience and sympathetic bond between brother and sister that cannot be recreated with another, along with the wholeness felt by siblings when together and dissolution when apart, saturates the novel. Alan Richardson identifies three main forms of sibling love in English Romantic literature: (a) 'the erotic relation between a foster-brother and sister, who have been raised as siblings',¹³ (b) 'that between a brother and sister who are remarkably close, share a common fate, but do not become sexually involved, and (c) 'what we normally think of as Romantic incest, that between a brother and sister who do become sexually involved'.¹⁴ All three are present in *Lesbia Brandon*. For the first, Lesbia and Herbert have a pseudo-sibling bond; she frequently calls herself his 'old sister' and Bertie her little brother. She uses this language to rebuff him, while their sibling closeness nurtures his attraction to her, a sense of mutual understanding and artistic sympathy. In addition, they share a half-brother, Mr. Denham (the product of a relationship between Lesbia's

¹³ Of which Heathcliff and Catherine are an important example, cf Richardson (full ref. below): 'Heathcliff, as a fascinating and debased incarnation of the Byronic hero, with his mysterious and lucrative absence and his spiritual mastery over those around him, embodies the not so unconscious desires of Cathy, who in her impotence is virtually forced to choose the eligible but etiolated Linton over her poor and nameless soul-mate' (753) not only within the tradition, but as we have seen in the 'Swinburne and the Brontës', within Swinburne's conception of the successful Romantic novel.

¹⁴ Alan Richardson, 'The Dangers of Sympathy: Sibling Incest in English Romantic Poetry', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 25 (1985), 737-754 (p. 739-40).

mother, Margaret,¹⁵ and Herbert's father, Fred Seyton). Margaret and Herbert incarnate the second form. The novel opens with a long description of Margaret's features, followed by an explanation that her brother 'was so like her that the description may serve for him with a difference' (*LB*, 190). The dying Lesbia says to him, 'you were very like your sister once about the mouth and eyes' (348). When they sing ballads together, brother and sister exalt in a mutual thrill: 'the verses had bitten and stung them sharply; they felt through all the nerves of the body and soul the delight of mad and violent devotion, and their blood beat with the senseless and splendid rapture of martyrs conscious of a losing cause' (258). One suggestive scene finds Margaret singing to Herbert as he masochistically worships her beauty, breathing 'the hot fragrance of her face and neck', trembling with 'intense and tender delight', kissing her feet and her neck, and expressing that he 'should like [her] to tread me to death' (264-65). Although there is no hint of sexual consummation, it is evident that Herbert takes his relationship with his sister as a prototype for his later romantic surrender to Lesbia. Their likeness, as well, follows the Romantic twin motif, which suggests 'mutual reflection and an implicit identification' (Richardson, 748). Herbert's love of Margaret is in part a love of himself, or of those qualities in him that are reflected in her, an 'ineffaceable brand of love upon his thoughts' which gives 'a new tone and colour to his life', vivifying the aesthetic of his daily life (*LB*, 265-66).

Finally, Denham and Margaret represent the third (and most familiar) type: the siblings who become sexually involved. Tragically, they are long unaware that Denham is the Seytons' half-brother. As Denham whips, flogs, and tames Bertie's adventurous, maritime energy, he is equally tormented by his lust for Lady Wariston. Denham loves and hates along the same edge of desire, playing Tannhäuser to Margaret's cold Venus,

¹⁵ After whom Seyton's firstborn, Margaret, Lady Wariston, the object of Lesbia's affections, is named – further irony.

and ‘soon suffered more from the sister than the brother at his hands’ (204). As they argue about whether Bertie should be flogged, Swinburne provides us with a long and somewhat mesmeric passage on Denham’s impressions of her: ‘suffering, self-contempt, envy, and the rage of inverted love and passion poisoned in the springs ... her god-like beauty was as blind and unmerciful as a god. Hating her with all his heart as he loved her with all his senses, he could but punish her through her brother, hurt her through his skin; but at least to do this was to make her own flesh and blood suffer for the pain inflicted on himself’ (218). The resemblance between the siblings is infuriating to Denham, who translates his frustrated desire and rage against the sister into increasingly violent punishments for the brother.

Denham’s orgy of language and brooding, sensual reflections upon Margaret are a principal example of the hybrid ‘mixed verse and prose’ at work. It is productive to consider *Lesbia Brandon* alongside Swinburne’s poems, particularly those that were written concurrently. One passage in particular possesses salient parallels to ‘Anactoria’, Swinburne’s linguistically and physically violent tribute to Sappho, spoken by the poet to her lover:

I would my love could kill thee; I am satiated
 With seeing thee live, and fain would have thee dead ...
 I would find grievous ways to have thee slain,
 Intense device, and superflux of pain;
 Vex thee with amorous agonies, and shake
 Life at thy lips, and leave it there to ache (‘Anactoria’, *Poems* 1, 58, ll.23-30).

Denham’s language is similar: ‘Deeply he desired to die by her, if that could be; and more deeply, if this could be, to destroy her: scourge her into swooning and absorb the blood with kisses; caress and lacerate her loveliness, alleviate and heighten her pains; to feel her foot upon his throat, and wound her own with his teeth’ (*LB*, 225). There is a remarkable congruence, and Denham’s meditation reads as a poem in a paragraph form. ‘Anactoria’ is discussed for its ambiguous language, ‘often leav[ing] unclear who is doing what to

whom, an indefiniteness that includes rather than excludes the imaginable alternatives' (Dellamora, 71). The same can be seen in Denham's violent reverie, though there is a clear mutual progression of ferocity: her foot crushes his throat, he bites her own. The almost-twin voices of Sappho and Denham play with the nature of amorous language; they join his muscular rage and agony to the lyric and feminine appetite, and by extension his Sapphic sister Lesbia, a hint of the 'fluid sexuality' noted by H.D. Or, as Denham himself says, 'sex ends at a certain point –male and female coalesce' (308). The two are linked not only by blood but also by their erotic suffering. Both love Margaret and, although Denham's fantasies are physically consummated, both commit suicide in despair: one by gun, the other by poison.

Denham and Margaret develop a painful mutual passion, the details of the affair obscured in the fragmentary text.¹⁶ Herbert is aware of his tutor's attraction and baits him by praising his sister ('nobody could be more beautiful'), the 'shy sly light in his eyes' irritating him enough to hit his pupil doubly hard. Denham, however, does derive perverse pleasure from hinting of his passion to Herbert: 'he liked to play about the dull and steady flame of his desire. He would never directly talk to Herbert of his sister; but would indulge himself by turning the boy's mind that way, that he might talk of her under a veil ... he would return now and then to flicker heavily about the light, to flutter angrily about the fire, which allured him but could not scorch' (210-11). The 'flame of his desire' proves as treacherous and addictive as the capricious and violent sea, and Margaret's attraction an illusive Siren song. A Hardy-esque predisposition dooms all the Seytons to

¹⁶ Randolph Hughes introduces the possibility of a third figure in Denham and Margaret's affair, a 'tie of some sort between [Denham] and another woman; either she was his mistress or his fiancée or his wife'. He suggests that this other woman could be Lesbia, but then offers a good deal of evidence to the contrary. I am also not convinced that Lesbia is the other woman, but agree with Hughes that, if so, it would be a 'masterpiece of subtle entanglement' (and double, triple incest) that 'Swinburne could never have bettered!' (see Hughes, 'Commentary' on *Lesbia Brandon*, 336).

such romantic and mortal peril: the drowned grandfather, Fred Seyton, Herbert, and Denham himself.

Denham is the ward of the dried-up aesthete Linley, the ‘sinister sadist and Baudelairian’ (Hughes, 200) a ‘shaven satyr’ who tends to ‘rambling cynical declamation’, collects art ‘of a secret kind’, and ‘live[s] much in Paris’ (230-32). It is from Linley that he discovers the catastrophic nature of their verboten love: ‘Your father was hers: when you went to Ensdon I gave you the charge of your little brother. There’s the material about you of a bad novel and a good comedy’ (309). Linley offers the cynical view of this incestuous melodrama, and is a voice of irony. The quip about a ‘bad novel and a good comedy’ echoes Herbert’s vow not to ‘to die for nothing like a fool in a book’, and reflects a certain literary introspection, Swinburne’s acknowledgement of his novel’s rising melodrama and somewhat vertiginous coincidence. This does not distract, however, from the poignancy of this coincidence. Denham returns to Ensdon, tells Margaret of his discovery, acknowledges the futility of their transgressive love and shoots himself in the heart as she depressively sings border ballads by the fire. Indeed, their fated romance is very much like those ancient Northumberland ballads,¹⁷ propelled by the collusive forces of circumstance and the intractable hand of fate. The very energy that attracted them, ‘the same emotional intensity that facilitates the union of brother and sister’, unluckily betrays them ‘into a violation of the primary social law, and the inevitable intrusion of death — society’s revenge — destroys either one or both siblings’ (Richardson, 753-54).

The relationships in *Lesbia Brandon* are entwined and introspective, its world enclosed in solipsistic intensity. Many of the characters are reflections of each other, and

¹⁷ Profoundly important for Swinburne’s development and for Herbert’s literary development in *Lesbia Brandon*. I have discussed this at greater length in Krishnan, ‘Editing Swinburne’s Border Ballads’, *Modern Language Review*, 104 (2009), 333-352.

their mutual desire is an appetite as narcissistic as it is romantic. Margaret and Herbert mirror each other, and their deep attachment derives from this sense of self-identification. Lesbia and Denham, both interlopers in the Seyton world, are described as similarly dark, brooding, forbidding, aloof, destroyed in some way by their unfulfilled desire. Looking at Margaret and Herbert, Denham thinks ‘two creatures more beautiful never stood together ... either smiled with the same lips and looked straight with the same clear eyes’ (225). Lesbia’s provocative dying desire is to have Bertie dress up in woman’s clothes, a reminder of the sister whom he resembles ‘about the mouth and eyes’ (348). These doubles — the twin golden beauty of Herbert and Margaret; the dark intensity of the siblings Denham and Lesbia — create a symmetric but tragically shattered pattern of misaligned desire. The striking resemblance between Herbert and Margaret is noticed not only by lovers but by the connoisseurs Linley and Lady Midhurst, whose hyper-refined senses take pleasure from the siblings’ aesthetic balance of masculine and feminine. The suggestion that they form a perfect whole recollects not only the pure harmony of Romantic sibling-lovers, but also the influence of Gautier, the androgyne, Hermaphroditus. Anyone who looks upon them has the sensuous experience of seeing beauty double, and this renders them maddeningly and irresistibly attractive to all who can see.

The *Bildung* of Herbert occurs in the setting of these Romantic impulses, but also, I would argue, in that of a family romance. For literary critics, the term has loosely come to mean a genre where the core family unit stands in for a larger political and societal structure. Political theorists use it to describe the ‘collective, unconscious images of the familial order’¹⁸ that underlie a collective political unconscious or a heuristic for the

¹⁸ Lynn A. Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. xiii.

‘differences, contradictions and social struggles’¹⁹ occurring in a society. The original term, coined by Freud in 1909, maps an individual’s journey of self-discovery, in which a young child who initially believes his parents to be omniscient and omnipotent steadily detaches himself from the known and constructs his own truths and knowledge, a process of self-creation much like that of the nascent artist or thinker:

The freeing of an individual, as he grows up, from the authority of his parents is one of the most necessary though one of the most painful results brought about by the course of his development ... There are only too many occasions on which a child is slighted, or at least feels he has been slighted, on which he feels he is not receiving the whole of his parents’ love, and, most of all, on which he feels regrets at having to share it with his brothers and sisters. His sense that his own affection is not being fully reciprocated then finds a vent in the idea, which is often consciously recollected from early childhood, of being a step-child or an adopted child.²⁰

Stephen Dedalus practically shouts this self ‘freeing’ when he declares that his ‘soul had arisen from the grave of boyhood’, that he ‘would create proudly out of the freedom and power of his soul’ (184), and Herbert too must forge such a self-identity out of the chaotic and murky romance of his family’s past. As I have maintained, *Lesbia Brandon* is a tale of the Seyton family and Herbert’s place within this family and, ultimately, the world. The family romance acknowledges the conscious and unconscious recollections of early childhood (i.e. Herbert swimming in the sea, the impressionistic montage of his father’s death), the tremendous influence of parental love upon a child’s development (the many orphans and foster-children: Herbert, Denham), and emphasis upon family relationships as a permanent, inward pattern of the way this child eventually interacts with the world. The family romance also situates the fate of family members within the history of the family itself: the ruinous circumstances surrounding Denham, Margaret, Lesbia, and Herbert are rooted in an original sin: the affair between Fred Seyton and Margaret

¹⁹ Mitchell Greenberg, *Subjectivity and Subjugation in Seventeenth-Century Drama and Prose: The Family Romance of French Classicism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 18.

²⁰ Sigmund Freud, ‘Family Romances’, *Collected Papers* (5 vols), ed. by James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1959), pp. 74-78.

Brandon. This relationship has given rise to a sequence of events and configuration of players that leads, ultimately, to tragedy.

This tragedy is never more apparent than in Lesbia's death scene, which Hughes calls 'one of the most beautifully and movingly sad things in literature' (Hughes, 365), and a remarkable example of virtuoso writing. Bertie visits Lesbia, who has taken poison, killing 'herself off by inches, with the help of eau-de-Cologne and doses of opium' (Rooksby has also pointed out her consumptive symptoms), an aesthetic death. Fragrance and darkness shroud the entire room save the white figure of Lesbia: 'she was white, with grey lips; her long shapely hands were pale and faded'. She is dying, Swinburne seems to imply, the death of the decadent artist, attenuated by thwarted passion, 'whose life had been long sapped and undermined from the roots by some quiet fiery poison'. This sense of fading and decay, of a life that has been quietly, steadily consumed by 'fiery poison', makes this one of the supreme aesthetic moments of the text, a moment which addresses many of Swinburne's preoccupations — romantic wholeness, family romance (the deathbed is the most domestic of all scenes), hopeless passion, cruel irony, and inexorable fate: 'close curtains shut out the twilight', her hands were 'pale and faded', and a lamp fills the room with 'silver shadow'. The pale woman, her grey lips, and the silver touches of shadow in the room contrast with the 'hot and haggard hue' of her face, her 'brilliant and soft' eyes and hair (*LB*, 342). Bertie has entered, he feels, into a 'lurid' place, a liminal space between life and death, and the language of this passage is evocative and impressionistic. It is shadowy yet luminous, dark, yet lit by the glowing paleness of one body. This is ghostly terrain, and Lesbia Brandon becomes in her last moments of life symbolic of the tenuous barrier between life and death.²¹

²¹ See the earlier chapter on Swinburne and the Brontës for a comparison of Lesbia Brandon and Emily Brontë, whose deathbed scene, related by her sister Charlotte, evidently had great impact on ACS.

The passage is moving precisely because it successfully couples verse-like description with more traditional prose dialogue. Lesbia tells Herbert, 'I am dying upwards. My head is as clear as my voice'. He, feeling 'horror and fear', is worked upon by the circumstances: 'the morbid and obscure fascination of obscure disease began to tell upon her listener: his nerves trembled in harmony with hers' (*LB*, 344-47). The rhythmic and hypnotic repetition of words, familiar from Swinburne's verse, causes the reader to 'tremble in harmony' with the text. Barely two words separate obscure from obscure, and yet their cadence create an almost excruciating tension. The reader's nerves thrill with Herbert's, resonating in 'harmony' with Lesbia's slow and painful death. It evokes the 'stinging' sensation that Herbert mentions at the start of *Lesbia Brandon* ('words sting and bite'), a visceral reaction to language. And yet, simultaneously, we are fully aware of the sense of the scene: a death-bed tragedy as powerful as that enacted in *Wuthering Heights*. When Lesbia shouts, 'Let me go! Let me die! will you?' and later, when Bertie reacts in shock, 'You have done me no harm; don't be vexed' (*LB*, 348), we are reminded of the poignant encounter between Cathy and Heathcliff.

Lesbia Brandon is in many ways a more visceral novel than *A Year's Letters*; yet their underlying patterns are strikingly similar. Both centre upon aristocratic families and feature impressionable young protagonists; both explore unfulfilled passion and incestuous love. Randolph Hughes's claim for *A Year's Letters* is equally applicable to both: 'the incidents, the interest, the excitement are almost exclusively psychological: the adventure is simply that of processes in minds dynamically in relation to one another in a situation that is arriving at a point of crisis' (Hughes, 298). For although *Lesbia Brandon* is a more bracing novel, with its passages of thrilling night-rides and Bertie's elated swims in the sea, its momentum comes from the interconnection and steady disintegration of human relationships. Entanglements abound, as we have seen. The ending, too, is

more desperate: while *A Year's Letters* ends with separation, *Lesbia Brandon* concludes with the suicide of Denham and the slow, grotesque death by self-poisoning of a consumptive Lesbia.

Lesbia Brandon offers an intensification of *A Year's Letters*. Here the stakes are more serious: passions are more wildly abandoned, sadomasochism highly pronounced (the flogging scenes are excessive for almost anyone's taste); the characters experience deeper joys and sharper pains. Here, the hands of fate, which in *A Year's Letters* are embodied by Lady Midhurst, operate alone. Swinburne's fascination with the inevitable and fatalistic, an absorption that holds full sway in 'Atalanta in Calydon', is here further explored. The important central development, however, is that of Herbert Seyton. He comes to being and grows to manhood in the setting of a tempestuous domestic climate, a solemn family history marked by tragedy, early death, and illicit passion, yet becomes a lover of the sea and of art, a man whose appreciation of beauty (in people, nature, music, and literature) is keen and visceral, and whose ultimate fate (insofar as such can be decided in an incomplete, and forever incomplete novel) is to be, much like his author, of his family but not chained by his family, a radical and visionary, whose search for figures to inspire passion and writing would never quite end. Randolph Hughes noted that the figures in *Lesbia Brandon* are 'somewhat strange', but also 'very real', because for Swinburne strangeness 'authentically belongs to life' (Hughes, 377). The novel too is strange. But it is also very real.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined Swinburne as a critic and practitioner of prose fiction. It has endeavoured to assess him in ways additional to and separate from his traditional status as a verse writer, and establish him as an engaged reader, commentator, and creator of the short story and novel. It has also suggested that his critical and creative contributions to prose fiction would influence writers who followed.

Swinburne was a spirited and prescient critic of the Brontës, who used the language of poetry and drama to elevate the novel and suggest that it ought to aspire to the status of high art. Swinburne felt a deep regional and spiritual affinity with Emily Brontë, coincidentally also a poet and novelist, whose work was deemed risqué, extreme, perhaps even dangerous like his own. In defending Emily he was unafraid to move beyond the critical pale and express judgements that would ultimately seem prophetic. His assessment of Wilkie Collins was balanced and scrupulous. He used his discussion of Collins's novels to make larger points about the state of the popular novel, to draw historical comparisons between sensation fiction and Elizabethan and Renaissance drama, and to show off his encyclopaedic knowledge of literature.

The greatest influences on Swinburne's distinctive conception of the novel were French and Italian writers. Baudelaire provided a philosophic, and Hugo an aspirational and ideal foundation for Swinburne's thought. Notably, neither directly shaped his prose. Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin* had a more direct impact on Swinburne's fiction. Gautier's works gave Swinburne a window into aesthetic autonomy — the sexual and artistic liberation of the androgyne, the trope of metaliterary writing, and the literary application of the credo of *l'art pour l'art*. Boccaccio had a similar, direct importance. In Swinburne's *Triameron* and 'Chronicles', we see the deep philosophical significance of

the Middle Ages and Renaissance for Swinburne. The structure of the *Decameron*, as well as its bawdiness, voluptuous sexuality, and humanism, had enormous impact on Swinburne's proposed *Triameron* and the discrete short stories that survive. These are interesting not only thematically, but because they bend genre in ways that are predictive of his novels.

Swinburne's most considerable models, however, were Laclos and Balzac. There are direct relationships between *Les Liaisons dangereuses* and *A Year's Letters*, which have been identified by previous critics but not considered as fully as they are here. Balzac's *La Comédie humaine* threads throughout Swinburne's letters, novels, and criticism. Laclos's innovations in genre, style, and the setting of his novel in libertine *ancien régime* France were all extremely attractive to Swinburne, whose masterwork *A Year's Letters* is a tightly-plotted, structured, and brilliant study in such romantic espionage. Balzac's engrossing world of novels and absorbing commitment to literature were both philosophically and practically appealing to Swinburne, and the French author is mentioned in almost every piece of prose the former produced.

Swinburne's own novels: the complete *A Year's Letters* and the incomplete *Lesbia Brandon*, are very different works. Both are transgressive and innovative; both will yield rich returns in future study. I agree with T.A.J. Burnett that an authoritative text of *Lesbia*, in particular, would be of immense use, and would lead to renewed interest in a text that is lyrical, enigmatic, and fascinating. *A Year's Letters* is a tour-de-force in epistolary form, its driving energy the graceful elderly schemer Lady Midhurst, a character who stands with the greatest ironic matriarchs in English fiction. Beneath its surface, however, the novel is also a disturbing portrait of romantic love quelled in service to family name, practicality, and social status. In it, Swinburne is able to take us into the centre of his biographical experience and yet manages to write with objectivity

and detachment, to laugh at his youthful fictional alter ego, convincingly voice many ages and genders, and produce a novel in letters that ranks among the best of its type. My view of *Lesbia Brandon*, on the other hand, is that it is a sort of fragmentary *Bildungsroman*, a portrait of the poet as a young man and model of poetic prose. Despite its incomplete condition, it raises the stakes of *A Year's Letters* and takes us into a family romance at once lyrical, macabre, and tragic.

Swinburne is both an important critic of the novel and an innovative writer of prose fiction. There is much work still to be done on his critical writing and novels. This study seeks to begin that process by providing a view of a different Swinburne: a versatile writer whose prose should one day become as familiar as his verse.

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