TIME REPRESENTATIONS IN ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE'S DRAMA: EXPERIMENT AND INVENTION IN THE GREEK PLAYS[1]

Abstract: *A third of Swinburne's work is devoted to theatre, both in writing and in reading, both as a Victorian stubbornly obsolete playwright and as a critic of old Elizabethan literature. Moreover, his entire career began under Thalia's auspices (with a volume containing two small texts) and ended in the same tune, with a little Gothic fancy, forged by theatrical mise en scene and prosodic experiments. It is therefore of crucial importance to find what are Swinburne's temporal premises and assumptions when insisting on the development of a played-out dramatic scheme (among other things, he stated that he had never been writing for the melodramatic Victorian audiences and that, in fact, he had always had in mind the Elizabethan public and the reputed representations at the Globe). Beyond his reputation either as a "fleshly" poet or as a "diffusive" critic, drama might be a key likely to unlock his controversial and prolix work.*

Keywords: *split-structure, ideology, sexuality*.

1. Hellenism: Imitation and Assimilation

Nothing from Algernon Charles Swinburne's Oxford activity would reveal to Benjamin Jowett, his teacher and tutor, the student's lifetime passion for the Pagan world, pieced together at an early age from Walter Savage Landor's *Hellenics* and from the scattered Greek excerpts in the Etonian anthology *Poetae Graeci*. Among them, the young artist's soul caught fire after having read Sappho's tempestuous lyrics. The poet would also try several times to translate the obsessive lesbian tunes but, perfectly aware of his treason, he grew more and more convinced that such lines could not have been assimilated by the English language unless framed (as inter-texts) in original works. Moving towards the sunset of his life, *Anactoria*'s father tends nevertheless to leave behind the flag of 'arduous causes' and, in his 1906 *Dedicatory Epistle* (Algernon Charles Swinburne, 1966: 90 *et sqq*), asserts that the Pindaric ode – with its tertiary structure – should be a more reasonable way to shape long lasting poetry. As a matter of fact, the vacillation between imitative (prosodic experiment) and creative translation (textual immolation of originals) brings the Victorian writer to an outstanding Postmodernist view on literature. Moreover, lots of Swinburne's other literary and epistolary productions[2] undoubtedly confirm not only enthusiasm but also his profound knowledge of Antiquity, equalling Milton's forerunning competence and insight (Cecil Y. Lang, 1959: xiv). Edmund Gosse, Swinburne's most authoritative biographer (yet, not the most trustworthy), mentions some recitative episodes when the 'devilish' poet used to hypnotize his audience with lengthy fragments from *Oresteia*, a tragedy most probably learnt by heart (Edmund Gosse, 1917:110). This biographical account demonstrates the 'undeceiving' admiration some of Swinburne's contemporaries expressed soon after his career had begun; John Ruskin says:

> "*[Swinburne] is infinitely above me in all knowledge and power, and I should no more think of advising him or criticising him than of venturing to do it to Turner if he were alive again... He is simply one of the mightiest scholars of his age in Europe... In power*

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[2] E.g. *Phaedra*, *Itylus*, *Anactoria*, *Hymn to Proserpine*, *Sapphics*, *At Eleusis*, *Hymn to Man*, *Genesis*, *Thyresias*, *The Last Oracle*, *Thalassius*, *On the Cliffs*, *Athens*, *Aperotos Eros*, *A Nympholept*, etc.

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> *of imagination and understanding he simply sweeps me away before him as a torrent does a pebble. I'm tighter than he is, so are the lambs and the swallows, but they're not his match*" (*apud* Gosse, 1917:155);

Whereas others, like Benjamin Jowett, praise the expelled student's "inner point of view" (Edmund Gosse, *op. cit:* 110) on the Greek language rather than his 'grammarian skills'.

2. Between Aeschylus and Euripides

Better strained and a little bit less immoral than the other **'**Bolgies of his **'**infernal**'** work, Swinburne's two "Greek" plays - *Atalanta in Calydon* and *Erechtheus* - brought him a certain complaisant regard from the critics who, immediately after their publication, traced out either the Romantic 'riot' from Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* or the genuine Hellenistic inspiration from tragic authors, such as Aeschylus or Euripides. Swinburne himself took great pride in restoring the primary tragic structures at a time when the audience's or the readership's sensibility had been shaped after Tennyson's lyrically suffused rhymes, after Browning's dramatic monologues or after popular melodramas. *Atalanta…* actually represents his first victory on the literary market**,** as, pushed forward by Lord Houghton and its editors, the play bestirs some interest among the already consecrated authors; among others, Matthew Arnold, who had long been practicing with the Greek themes and prosody – although unsuccessfully, would younger Swinburne judge upon the master's *New Poems* – by trying to accommodate the Hellenic meters to the Anglo-Saxon spirit. Endowed with a fine ear and extremely schooled, Swinburne alone seemed to be able to bear the laurels of 'tragic' glory: in spite of their disconnected mythical kernel, the two plays were updating a 'series' of characters that, fighting against some basic elements - like the boar of Calydon, Althaea's fire, Poseidon's enraged seas or Eumolpus' barbarous fury -, actually edify a model of ideal citizenship inspired by the general behaviour 'within the bounds' of the Greek *polis*.

There is no evidence of Swinburne's intention of writing a tragic 'cycle' as such, after the celebrated models of *Oresteia* or *The Persae*. Yet, in both cases, the tragic author starts from small 'shatters' of Euripides' lost plays; therefore, his artistic option of enveloping the remnants of the old myths in a new poetic outfit could be included in a more general creative mood that fuels bold experiments, such as rewriting, imagining or inventing old sources. The play upon sources gratifies friends and exhausts enemies. However, in spite of manifestly thematic lineage, Euripides' kinship is obstinately rejected: the author of *Medeea* is considered *'monotonous, insipid, feeble, immoral; endless commonplace – sophisticated and affected in expression, as well as in thought – undignified and exaggerated – Homer and other tragedians mixed with puerilities'* (*apud* Marion Clyde-Hyder, 1920: 10*)*.

Notwithstanding Swinburne's sparse outbursts of confession, the reading guide from "Pall Mall Gazette" showed how 'true to the bone' his Hellenic inspiration had been and how aesthetically significant (Cecil Y Lang, *op. cit.*: 131-135). At the top of the list were ranked Shakespeare, Aeschylus and the Bible, the only 'common note' of the three titles being the tragic theme of one's blind and hopeless fight 'against' either destiny or 'against' man's unconscious passions. However highly appreciated for his skill of diminishing tragic pathos to the essence of purely ritual gestures, as in a 'dumb show', 'as of a picture striving to speak' (Algernon Charles Swinburne, 1886), Aeschylus is still not secured a place of priority in his preferences: 'a sense of righteousness' maintains a unique center of gravity that breaks tragedy apart from

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reality, and makes it taste a bit artificial, says the fastidious reader (Algernon Charles Swinburne, 1962: 131-135). Shakespeare, on the other hand, features out a more down-to-earth world, one governed by injustice, human passions and eternal chance, reason why one is unable to grasp just a single meaning and focus just on a single story. Beyond his need for balance, the Victorian playwright might have known how real masterpieces specifically grow out of doubt, excess and pain.

Therefore, with all his hate against Medeea's father, Swinburne was more sensitive to the psychological interpretation of the fatalistic theme than to its the metaphysical one, being closer to the individual, sensitive and 'epidermis' pain rather than to the generic human suffering. The 19th century individualist mentality 'erases' the tragic conceptual 'outlines' in a way that could be traced out to the two plays, which, in spite of their Aeschylean structure, evince a Euripidean psychological disposition, as Marion Clyde Hyder aptly upholds:

"The characters of Swinburne's Greek plays are peculiar in this respect; in action and in the contemplation of action they are Aeschylean, while in retrospection and in sentiment they are strongly Euripidean" (Marion Clyde Hyder, *op. cit.*: 22).

Some Swinburnians pointed at the fact that, when looking at Ancient Greece, the poet uses the 'hungry' eyes of a Latin or of a Renaissance humanist (J. W. Mackail, 1909: 21). Others thought that the cosmic impetus - comparable to old Pagan cosmogonies - and the elemental vision pertain to a pre-Socratic vision, more or less related to Oriental philosophy (Edmund Gosse, *op. cit.*: 117).

In other words, the Victorian writer fails to be 'Greek', while he manages to remain a 'child of his times'. Greatly inclined toward hybridization of genres - lyric and dramatic - or, pretty much disinterested in formalist issues, in Bayley's opinion (John Bayley, 1952), the last survivor of the English Neo-Romanticism thought of himself, from the beginning until the end of his career, as rather a playwright than a poet, which he considered to be a 'circumstantial condition'. The overlapping between elements of drama and of poetry in his practical options finally brings forth an original hybrid: the 'theatre of creation' - most of the times a synonym to "art" and "poetry" *sur le vif*-, which he considered to be an inner dialogic structure, generating a never-ending 'performative' show. This way, the "mad" Swinburne manages to enclose the true song of his self or the true story of his prejudiced society (Donald Thomas, 1979: 83). Nevertheless, all the allegoric readings discouraged – as Swinburne used to emphasize upon the necessity of metaphoric interpretations against the allegoric habits of Puritan comprehension (Algernon Charles Swinburne, 1868: 151) – the Greek world, pieced up in *Atalanta...* or *Erechtheus*, functions as a mysterious metaphor, resembling to Keats' ancient urn. Any precise disclosure or key of reading would break it again into pieces.

The proper way to understand his dramatic works – Swinburne himself suggested in the same *Dedicatory Epistle* – is to undo, reverse, and possibly track back his 'strains and pains' to structure, to **'**characterize' and to 'synthesize' pre-existing amorphous ideas. Consequently, he thought that his lifetime toils on a 'historical tragedy' such as *Bothwell* (running over 500 pages) should be enough to credit it as a piece of dramatic knowledge and skill. Neither *Atalanta…* that 'spouted' him into celebrity, nor *Erechtheus* would be lately considered by the mature Swinburne his 'hits' because they would not stand the so-called test of 'indivisibility' (as applied, with maximum critical fastidiousness, to Byron's poetry**)**: *Atalanta in Calydon*, on the one hand, *"was perhaps too exuberant and effusive in its dialogue, as it certainly was too irregular in the occasional license of its choral verse, to accomplish the design or achieve the success which its author should have aimed at"* (Algernon Charles Swinburne, 1966:94);

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Erechtheus, on the other, with all its careful craftsmanship, did gain some trust but could not stir the author's enthusiasm either. A bit more of a 'dramatic insight' (so many times praised in the Elizabethan works) and a bit less of a real 'dramatic gift' (J. W. Mackail, 1909:23) determined Swinburne to finally understand that it was not the epic's canvass or the lyric garment that substantiated the drama, but the Greek etymologic meaning of *hybris*. And this could have been effected only if the playwright refrained from "undefacing" the legend with "improvement", or from "undeforming" it by "transformation" (Algernon Charles Swinburne, 1966: 99). The real secret was to catch the moral truth of the myth and… to refuse the fits and wits of originality.

3. Mythic past and historical present: a page's two sides

In a nutshell, what *Atalanta*'s author should have depicted – respecting the strict lines of the original myth – looks like the 'stony' tension of the characters engraved on the frontispiece of the Tegea temple, where the hunting of the boar of Calydon has been immortalized. The heroes are Atalanta, Artemis' sworn maiden, and Meleager, Althaea's son. On the level of godly passions and furies, the story sets against each other the pure goddess of hunting and the lustful goddess of love, who dispute over the mortals' souls. Enamored beyond measure of the maiden huntress who had come from Arcadia and had been granted with Artemis' protection, Meleager behaves in a most knightly fashion and gives in the spoil to his beloved. Carried away with enraged passion, when his uncles blame him of courtesy and a too keen sense of justice, Meleager kills both of them, eventually deceiving his mother. Althaea, in her turn, although warned by the three Fates of her own son's tragic death, does not stand such an infamy and punishes him by throwing back in the fire the brand that had been taken away and hidden for so many years. The secret of the hero's fate had been enclosed in the omen that Meleager would live as long as the brand kept on burning. Having delayed the tragic prophesy, the loving mother still could not help revenging the shocking death of her kinsmen.

The other story, re-devised in *Erechtheus*, actually seems a foundation myth, developed round the theme of the required sacrifice. The gods that dispute supremacy are the wise daughter of Zeus, Athena, and the untamed god of the seas, Poseidon. Menaced by the Thracian king, Eumolpus, also son of Poseidon, Erechtheus is informed by the oracle that unless the family decides to sacrifice the youngest daughter, the city cannot be cleared out of the danger. Pushed forward and solaced by Praxithea, exemplary queen and devoted mother, Chthonia meekly accepts to die unwedded, though, on a wider level of symbolism, her sacrifice signifies a metaphoric marriage with the ideal republic of Athens, whose sons would also become her sons. Struck with the image of outrageous cruelty against their younger sister, Protogeneia and Pandora commit suicide. The tragic gesture brought to a dramatic closure, Erechtheus' armies push back the villainous and barbarian armies and finally Eumolpus gets wounded by the Athenian king's avenging spear. Now is the moment when the divine meddling actually decides the odds of the human battle: immensely grieved by Erechtheus' victory over his son, Poseidon punishes the victor by mercilessly killing him.

The most knowledgeable experts in Ancient culture undertook the difficult task of identifying the primary literary sources of the Swinburnian Greek plays. Whereas some of them consider that the Victorian playwright's plot stands nearer to Ovid's tale in the *Metamorphoses* (there, Althaea is already a character rounded with psychological insight), others think that 'old references', such as Pausanias, Apollodorus, Hyginus,

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Suetonius, Callimach, Hesiodus or Theocritus serve only as background to some 17th and 18th century layers. For instance, Samuel C. Chew believes that after reading *As You Like It* in a sexual key, *Atalanta*'s conception diverged towards the theme of sexual ambiguity (Samuel C. Chew, 1929: 58).

Other Swinburnians, like Georges Lafourcade or John A. Cassidy, do not hesitate to 'guess' Sade's unmistakable grin behind the 'supernatural rhymes' of *Atalanta*... In spite of their classical intentions, the plays *Atalanta* and *Erechtheus* manifest a sheer violation of the laws of dramatic unity, especially the unity of space (John A. Cassidy, 1964: 87) in a way that operates a certain disjunction between the characters' parts and the choruses' (noticed as soon as the play was published)[1]; the former, for instance, is written in a high and dignified iambic tone, whilst the latter follows the exuberant pattern of blank verse (Ian Fletcher, 1973: 34); these elements lead some scholars to compare the "tragedies" with contemporary melodramas or operas. This goes especially with *il gran finale* in *Atalanta*…, when, either in trios or solos, characters sing their assigned lines (John A. Cassidy, *op. cit*.: 88). But the melodramatic 'contagion' goes further into the tragic plot which 'splinters' into tableaux endowed with a certain artistic autonomy. Therefore, the 'Greek plays' develop a singular split-structure, whose foreground and background hardly have anything 'in common'**.**

More than the interpolations of a cruel and androgynous Elizabethan imaginary, "the exuberance of form", "the angry fatalism" and "the direct challenge of the religious ideals in Victorian England" (Samuel C. Chew, 1929: 61) clearly demonstrate that even Apollonian texts, such as the Greek plays, actually relate to the same *Dionysian matrix* that gave birth to *The Triumph of Time*, *Hermaphroditus*, *Faustine* and *Laus Veneris* (Donald Thomas, op. cit.: 80-81). The surefooted stylistic imprints about this matrix are not difficult to uncover: "*Come with bows bent and with emptying of quivers,/ Maiden most perfect, lady of light,/ With a noise of winds and many rivers,/ With a clamour of waters, and with might*" (*Atalanta in Calydon*); "*We shift and bedeck and bedrape us,/ Thou art noble and nude and antique;/ Libitina thy mother, Priapus/ Thy father, a Tuscan and Greek./ We play with light loves in the portal,/ And wince and relent and refrain;/ Loves die, and we know thee immortal,/ Our Lady of Pain*" (*Dolores*). Therefore, all the characters 'suffer' a sort of psychological and poetical expansion, beyond the limits of their prescribed etymological and mythical roles, that splits up the whole dramatic structure. For example, surpassing her squarely hygienic and purifying mission (according to the etymology of her name), Althaea (from Gr. *altainein*, "to heal") acts like a Romantic heroine with a bit of scorn in her witty words, with a bit of delayed dreaminess in her gestures and with a bit of incestuous inclination towards her own powerless, effeminate and infantilized son. Let us see her "motherly" pain when she induces her son's death:

> *"Yea the smoke bites me, yea I drink the steam/ With nostril and with eyelid and with lip/ Insatiate and intolerant; and mine hands/ Burn, and fire feeds upon mine eyes; I reel/ As one made drunk with living, whence he draws/ Drunken delight; yet I, though mad for joy,/ Loathe my long living and am waxen red/ As with the shadow of shed blood; behold,/ I am kindled with the flames that fade in him,/ I am swollen with subsiding of his veins,/ I am flooded with his ebbing; my lit eyes/ Flame with the falling fire that leaves his lids/ Bloodless; my cheek is luminous with blood/ Because his face is ashen"* (Algernon Charles Swinburne, 1924: 84).

[1] Connop Thirlwall, apud Edmund Gosse, *op. cit.*, p. 115: "The tragic action, as it seems to me, is not brought out in stronger relief, but rather effaced by the intense unbroken murkiness of the background".

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Similarly, Meleager (from Gr., *meleagros*, "the dark hunter") 'hides' an Oedipal, contorted side, rhetorically developed with queer symmetry to his mother's lustful and fierce 'recalling' him to her womb. While painfully passing away, the highlight of his bequest is limited to the after-death confirmation of his manliness: *"Let no man/ Defile me to despise me, saying:/ This man died woman-wise, a woman's offering, slain/ Through female fingers"* (idem: 101). Just as the fragile Meleager, Atalanta is suspected of sexual inversion, proved by her manly frigidity and self-sufficient sexuality: *"Why, if she ride among us for a man,/ Sit thou [Meleager] for her and spin; a man grown girl/ Is worth a woman weaponed"*(idem: 44)**.**

Consequently, Swinburne's generic 'care' (he used to emphasize upon the fact that all his plays were 'tragedies') represents just a formal pretext, characteristic of the Victorian frame of mind, whose lifestyle and cultural ground draw on the dialectics of hiding and showing identities, of exchanging private and public space. Whereas the writer's chameleonic assiduity manages to conquer and to import into the present as many literary forms and genres as possible, Swinburne never loses sight of his contemporary history. Half antimonarchic rebellion and half uncanny Victorian sexuality (Mario Praz, 1966: 53), these **'**Greek plays' draw attention to everything else apart from their Greek-ness.

As far as *Erechtheus*'s plot is concerned, Swinburne overtly develops a fragment from a lost play by Euripides (preserved in a Lycurgus' speech) adorned with rich mythological details from several sources such as Apollodorus, Pausanias or Ovid. All in all, the story is about the relationship of two women, Praxithea and Chthonia, who, by giving up all the womanish frailties (love, seduction, coquetry, danger, secrets, etc.), touch a higher level of spirituality, coming to eventually understand and promote completely 'abstract' and quite manly emotions, such as patriotism. In this play, the splitting between the etymological meaning of names and the characters' actual discourses is more discrete, as Swinburne appears to have refused invention and psychological 'depths'; however, Chthonia's speech 'contains' an undertone of dark bitterness when she is saying that she 'receives fate' with "one thought's load" about the profitless and fruitless life of her body**.** Like Althaea, Praxithea is very tempted to shout "ill words" at gods, when she remembers the tender breastfeeding moments: *"now this breast/Once thine/ Shall rear again no children (...)/ Nor ever will small silent mouth/ Draw the sweet springs dry for an hour that feed/ The blind blithe life that knows not"* (Algernon Charles Swinburne, 1904: 34-38). Furthermore, one could still 'hear' in Praxithea's touching patriotism the outspoken inflexions of the Italian theme, which was nurturing the writer's thoughts around 1870 (and not only his[1]). In this case, although the classicist 'figuration' and the highly strained structure of the play might lead the reader astray, yet Swinburne's recent history pulsates, swaying one's attention towards a political reading, in resonance with the lyrical pieces in *Songs before Sunrise* (Samuel C. Chew, op. cit.: 127). This is the only reasonable explanation for the artificial intrusion of Athena's speech at the end of the play. After a long period of 'dumbness', the goddess delivers an ideologically pacifist message that 'shoots' directly to contemporary debates about Italy:

[1] The Italian national movement, states Samuel C. Chew (*op.cit.*, pp. 96-99), united the English Romantic Poetry under the same colors. That is why Swinburne's obsession with the ideal republic should not be inscribed in the long list of biographical oddities. On the contrary, it should be perceived as a sort of English national debate round the republican government and democracy and its immediate applicability.

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> *"That time nor earth nor changing sons of man/Nor waves of generations, nor the winds/ Of ages risen and fallen that steer their tides/ Through light and dark of birth and lovelier death/ From storm toward haven inviolable, shall see/ So great a light alive beneath the sun/ As the aweless eye of Athens (...) thine eyes/ Shall first in man's flash lightning liberty,/ Thy tongue shall first say freedom (...) time and change,/ Masters and lords of all men, shall be made/To thee that knowest no master and no lord/ Servants; the days that lighten heaven and nights/ That darken shall be ministers of thine/ To attend upon thy glory, the great years/ As light-engraven letters of thy name/ Writ by the sun's hand on the front of the earth"* (Algernon Charles Swinburne, 1904: 176).

Therefore, the elemental forces, irreconcilable previously, can be interpreted as allegories of great powers that shared an interest in unifying or splitting the Italian national state.

However interesting, the chronologic threefold layers and cross-references – the ancient Greek world, the Elizabethan teratology and the present English/European history - produce a gap in the internal architecture of the plays that disperse and splinter into a foreground hieratic movement and a particularly autarchic background where, sprayed by molten lava, a secret life goes on obstinately independent. The choruses acquire such an autonomy that, by the end of his career, Swinburne "resented their popularity" (Rikky Rooksby, 1997: 115). He might have felt that this strangely fanciful background splits into pieces the general design of the dramatic conflict to such an extent that the virtual reader could 'lose his soul' among the beauties of Paradise[1], risking to miss the cathartic moment or the high ethical meaning of the tragic plot.

Yet, this poetical background does not function solely as a rhetoric paraphernalia or digression. In its larger than life movements (season cycles, battles between elements), the cosmogonic background evinces a cyclic spatial-temporal vision, derived from a "theism" inspired by Shelley' s 'church of rebels', overtly expressed not only in Swinburne's fiction but also in his critical prose. The 'deaf and dumb' conflict – irreducible to strict and well-defined antagonist terms – reduces to the basic instincts (love, fear, pain, pleasure life, death, etc) or to the furies of nature (the seas, the thunder, the fire, the time), all of them schematically personified as in the Middle Ages mystery plays. One could infer that the whole artistic construction is built on a temporally cyclic paradigm, in Frye's terminology (Northrop Frye, 1982), totally different from the concept of progress and exalting instead the idea of perpetual "change".

Metaphors of cosmic cycles or, on the contrary, of ideological revolutions, the subjects of the Swinburnian 'Greek plays' specifically lack the very soul of Ancient tragedies: *hybris*. Endowed with excessively turbulent pathos, the characters do not fight with destiny but with themselves. Myths do not fulfil any minimum epic function, while real life goes on 'elsewhere'. Its secret sound can be 'heard' in the choral fragments, where the playwright steps outside the stage and envisages the conflicts on a cataclysmic scale, larger than theatre perhaps.

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[1] This is the tone of Edward Thomas' reading perception in his book, *Algernon Charles Swinburne: A Critical Study*, London, Martin Secker, 1912, *www.archive.org*.

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