INTRODUCTION

Upon the death of Tennyson (1892) Queen Victoria remarked, "I am told that Mr. Swinburne is the best poet in my dominions".[1] But Mr. Gladstone demurred and eventually it was Alfred Austin (1835-1913), not Algernon Charles Swinburne, who came to be crowned with the poet-laureateship. Swinburne was a person who always stood the chance of being misunderstood, misrepresented and misjudged. He fell an easy prey to the simmering moral question and prudery of the nineteenth century. After his death his own age spoke only in the voice of Meredith stunned by the loss: "a part of our life torn away".[2] In what was his last letter to Theodore Watts-Dunton, Meredith expressed incredibility at the extinction of so vital an energy, and of praise of the genius of "The greatest of our lyrical poets, of the world's, one could say, considering what a language he had to wield".[3] Such an eloquent tribute was not paid to an unworthy man. By 1909, the year of his death, twentyfive unimpeachable volumes were issued from Putney; even a biography of the poet came out very soon after his death. Yet the hazy fog was still engulfing Swinburne, preventing the emergence of truth about him. "It was not before La Jeunesse de Swinburne appeared in 1926 that Swinburne was exhumed from

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1. Quoted in Hare, Humphrey. Swinburne : A Biographical Approach, London, 1949, p. vii.
2. Quoted in Waugh, T.E. A Study of Swinburne, London, 1926, p. 180.
3. Ibid.

the dank concealing clay to which the literary sextons had consigned him."[1] Without Lafourcade's scholarly elucidation and appreciation Swinburne would still remain what Gosse and Harold Nicolson would like him to be : "an inexplicable phenomenon".[2] "There will be those, doubtless," wrote the latter, "who will trace depressing and essentially erroneous analogies to Dr. Masoch and the Marquis de Sade".[3] Indeed, a major part of Swinburne's studies, beginning from Gosse's Life of Algernon Charles Swinburne published in 1917, have been devoted to consider how much and what sort of psychological truth underlies poems like 'Dolores' and 'Anactoria' in the process of ferreting out the raw materials; the most important question of what precisely the poet did with these materials has tended to get left by the wayside. "Gosse has started it all by a too obtrusive discretion in his biography."[4] His attempts in Life to skate round the more alarming poems as youthful extravagances, designed largely to shock served only to whet readers' interest for what was not being said. But his study suffers from inaccuracies. "In some cases he guessed with exquisite sensitiveness what he did not know, ... secondly, he was often prejudiced by his dislike of Watts-Dunton; and lastly, he did

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1. Hare, Humphrey. Swinburne : A Biographical Approach, London, 1949, p. vii.
2. Ibid.
3. Times Literary Supplement, Thursday, Nov. 4, 1965.
4. Ibid.

not see the 'modern' side of Swinburne's nature."[1] Lafourcade does not deny in Swinburne his early tendencies of masochism and sadism confirmed in his later life. In fact, "he clears the ground by considering frankly with careful documentation the exact course of Swinburne's sexual life."[2] But he warns against the danger "to say too much rather than not enough".[3] He observes a "connection between pain and sensibility, ... but not that he had reached a clear understanding of the nature of what he felt."[4] T.S. Eliot in his 1920 essay sums up Swinburne by saying, "... he is never merely the agonised tool of his own obsession."[5] Swinburne is not typically a Victorian as the major poets of the period are. He is "essentially modern."[6] He is "more akin to Proust and Gide, Lawrence or Joyce than either Tennyson, Browning, Leconte de Lisle, Zola, Meredith or Hardy."[7]

The period in which Swinburne was born defies any attempt to reduce it to a formal definition. Almost every Victorian thesis produces its antithesis. Nevertheless, one can detect in the period, whatever its buoyancy and promise, elements of a sort of fatigue which were quite alien to the earlier ages,

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1. Lafourcade, Georges. Swinburne: A Literary Biography, London, 1932, p. XIII.
2. Times Literary Supplement, Thursday, Nov. 4, 1965.
3. Lafourcade, Georges. Swinburne: A Literary Biography, London, 1932, p. 46.
4. Ibid, p. X.
5. Quoted in Times Literary Supplement, Thursday, Nov. 4, 1965.
6. Lafourcade, Georges. Swinburne: A Literary Biography, London, 1932, pp. X-XI.
7. Ibid, p. IX.

particularly the Elizabethan age. Certainly, the desperate unbelief that permeates much of Arnold's and Tennyson's poetry arises distinctly from Victorian cultural conditions, a contemplation of withering faith and unprecedented fear of encroaching materialism. The paralysis of doubt that is said to have gripped Arnold's generation is far removed from the divided aims of a disillusioned Hamlet. The Victorian society for ever was subject to tensions which militated against the complete spontaneity and singleness of purpose. If this is, in general, the Victorian temper, the fullest expressionof this temper is found in Arnold and Tennyson, the true representatives of the period. Though born in the same period (year of birth : 1837) Swinburne stands far, far aloof from Arnold and Tennyson in creative source and direction, in spirit and intent. He comes forward to tell a different tale.

Born a Victorian, Swinburne very much appears to be an Elizabethan in temperament. Also he weaves his garland of songs no less adroitly than the Pre-Raphaelites with their wistful and languorous mood and irradiance of colour. Again, he manifests a genuinely Hellenic mind having affinity with those of the Greek masters like Aeschylus and Sophocles. Further, he glories in man, and with Mazzini as his political hero, is an avowed republican beating his trumpet of liberty against tyranny and autocracy.

Swinburne thus strikes a radically different note from the other major poets of his age. He is an interesting study in as much as he does not fit into a stereotyped literary compartment. He prefers to sing uninterrupted by doubt and despair. It is not for him to diagnose the strange diseases of modern life and suggest remedies for them as it is for Arnold. In an era of moral fervour patroned by even the great Tennyson, of socio-economic turmoil generating doubt and distrust, and of indoctrination championed by Carlyle and Ruskin, Swinburne alone adhered unflaggingly to the theory of 'Art for Art's sake' in his poems and poetic dramas.

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However different Swinburne may have been from the major poets of his day, he was one with them and with the major poets of the earlier part of the century, that is, the Romantic poets from Wordsworth to Keats, in that he, like them, used poetry as the medium of drama against the discouraging conditions of the existing theatre. Besides the unfavourable condition of the theatre, there was another opposing force - the development of prose. Around 1800 prose was a fully-developed medium and stared verse in the face. It has been said that ever since the Commonwealth, "poetry had been dead __ dead ... in the most important sense; it had ceased to play an essential part in the

social life of the nation as a whole."[1] We need not examine if the statement borders on exaggeration, but in the light of it we can safely say that poetry's ubiquity in literary forms was lost; it was dead for the expression of objective imagination, for verisimilitude, and consequently, for appeal to the general mind. The supremacy of prose made the novel the predominant literary form of the age through which the largest possible audience could be secured. Rightly it has been remarked that as "the Elizabethan age was the age of the drama, the nineteenth century has been the age of the novel".[2] The vast novel-reading public whose taste at the turn of the nineteenth century was fostered by such works as Walpole's Mysterious Mother, and Lewis's Castle Spectre wanted in the theatre similar sensational mystery and horror-mongering incidents and emotions as were found in the blatant Gothic novels. Since there is truth in the dictum that "the drama's rule the drama's patrons give", the theatre with the patronage of such an audience became the purveyor of the sensational and spectacular melodrama and of the easy imitations of the works of Kotzebue. And then, the vast theatre halls with the picture-frame stage and scenic accessories were not fit for serious poetic drama so that Scott had to lament that "show and

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1. Murry, J.M. The Problem of Style, London, 1922, p. 40.
2. Ibid, p. 42.

machinery have therefore usurped the place of tragic poetry".[1]

During the Victorian period the development of prose and the novel became tremendous. And the state of the theatre suffered a further deterioration. The marked improvements in stage accessories did not shift the interest in a still greater degree to the eye. If the Romantic melodrama was sensational, the Victorian melodrama was absolutely spectacular and pantomimic. Aquatic and equestrian shows and acrobatics were considered relevant to drama, and were highly applauded by the audiences who came to the theatre to see and hardly to listen.

Yet all the leading poets of the century attempted at drama, making poetry the medium. They endeavoured to emulate the example of the English poets of the older generations. As Shelley put it, "Our great ancestors, the ancient English poets, are the writers a study of whom might incite us to do that for our own age which they have done for theirs."[2] Swinburne also said that his ambition "was to do something worth doing and not utterly unworthy of a young countryman of Marlowe the teacher and Webster the pupil of Shakespeare."[3] Their endeavour or ambition urged them to restore in drama the ancient sovereignty of words.

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1. Scott, Walter. Essays on Chivalry, Romance and the Drama (Standard Classics), 1888, p. 388.
2. Preface to The Cenci.
3. 'Dedicatory Epistle' in Swinburne's Collected Poetical Works, Heinemann, 1924.

To hold the attention of the audience they wanted to depend, like the old masters, on the situations which their dramatic power could create, and on the magic of words which their poetic power could call up.

Of all the major poets of the nineteenth century, who wrote poetic plays, Swinburne is the most conspicuous in several aspects. The first publication of his literary career was a volume containing two plays and the last publication was also a drama. He wrote his plays with absolutely no thought of the contemporary theatre. He wanted a stage of the antiquated time, and wrote his plays, as he himself said, "with a view to their being acted at the Globe, the Red Bull or the Black Friar".[1] The other poets were not so much indifferent to or disregardful of the contemporary theatre as Swinburne. Although Wordsworth said that he wrote his drama "with no thought of the stage",[2] yet he must have within his heart nurtured a desire to see it acted, otherwise there could not be that "harsh separation of Coleridge and Wordsworth, simply because Remorse happended to be acted."[3] Shelley wrote The Cenci with an avid eye to the stage, though he could not succeed in having it presented on the boards. Byron was a theatre-lover, and for a time was on the

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1. 'Dedicatory Epistle' in Swinburne's Collected Poetical Works, Heinemann, 1924.
2. Preface to The Borderers.
3. Nicoll, Allardyce. Early XIX Century Drama, London, 1930, p. 186.

sub-committee of management at the Drury Lane Theatre.

Compared to any of the nineteenth century poets, Swinburne had much greater devotion and seriousness of purpose towards writing poetic drama. His dramatic output, therefore, is the largest. He brought to bear upon his dramatic writing all the peculiarities and individual traits of his mind and imagination which stand prominent against the Victorian milieu.

I may now give a resumé of the chapters constituting the Thesis. Chapter I attempts to explain 'Closet drama' and to trace the ideas and circumstances that induced play-writing become, to a large extent, independent of actual theatre in the nineteenth century. Chapter II delineates the Victorian temper and milieu, making extensive references to Carlyle, Ruskin, Macaulay, Newman and others who were doctrinarians and preceptors for the society, and to Tennyson and Arnold who were uneasy at heart owing to their fear that the age was overtaken by a social malaise. Chapter III outlines Swinburne's intellectual development and the formation of his literary tastes through diverse influences, particularly those of Marquis de Sade, Baudelaire, Hugo, Gautier, which greatly contributed to make him different from the other Victorian writers and a votary of art for art's sake. Chapter IV briefly narrates the condition of the nineteenth century theatre, which led to the cleavage between the serious dramatists of the age and the stage. Chapter V makes a survey

of the poetic plays written by the early nineteenth century poets and the poets who were Swinburne's contemporaries. Chapter VI discusses the English plays composed on the Greek model by Swinburne's predecessors and contemporaries. The study includes Milton's Samson Agonistes, Shelley's Prometheus Unbound, Hellas, Arnold's Merope, and the plays of Robert Bridges. Chapter VII deals with Swinburne's Atalanta in Calydon and Erechtheus composed under Hellenic inspiration. It concludes on a comparative estimate of these plays vis-a-vis those of his predecessors and contemporaries. Chapter VIII is a discourse on Swinburne's dramatic trilogy on the life of Queen Mary of Scots, while chapter IX deals with the other plays of Swinburne. Chapter X which comprises the conclusion, makes some general observations on the strength and weakness of the efforts of the poets of the nineteenth century, particularly those of Swinburne, to enthrone poetry in drama.