

Sibylle Baumbach, Birgit Neumann, Ansgar Nünning (Eds.)

with the assistance of Isabel Dinies, Madelyn Rittner, Frances Walburg

# **A History of British Poetry**

**Genres – Developments – Interpretations**

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## 21. POETIC GENRES IN THE VICTORIAN AGE III: ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE

VIRGINIA RICHTER

### 1. Victorian Elegiac Poems

The Victorian period is frequently viewed as a self-confident age, committed to progress, industrialisation and imperial expansion. It is part of the many contradictions of Victorian culture that simultaneously it was deeply preoccupied with death. In this sense as in many others, Queen Victoria, for decades in mourning for her deceased husband Prince Albert, was a fitting emblem of her age. In fiction, the fascination of the hereafter found expression in the rise of the ghost story; in poetry, in the pervasiveness of elegy. As Valentine Cunningham (2011: 329) has suggested, “[m]ourning is so ubiquitous in Victorian verses that elegy, the poetry of mourning, is simply the period’s most omnipresent genre”. Poems of the period not only lament the passing of individual persons – such as Arthur H. Hallam, Alfred Tennyson’s friend, in the latter’s *“In Memoriam A.H.H. OBIT MDCCCXXXIII”* (O’Gorman 2004: 88-165; written in 1850) or the French poet Charles Baudelaire in Algernon Charles Swinburne’s (1837-1909) *“Ave Atque Vale: In Memory of Charles Baudelaire”* (ibid.: 500-06; written in 1867/78) – but evoke a more general sense of desolation, of being forlorn in a godless world, that may be connected to growing scepticism and religious doubt in the wake of Darwinism, as well as to long-term processes of modernisation and secularisation. Next to elegies dedicated to persons we find, therefore, numerous nature poems in an elegiac mode that describe nature not in pastoral terms, but as a bleak environment that no longer bears the promise of redemption through aesthetic experience, as in Romantic poetry. Hence, “Victorian poems are multiplied scenes, extended cries, of desolation” (Cunningham 2011: 324).

As Peter M. Sacks (1985: 1) has shown in his magisterial study, the elegy has been a social form since its beginnings in Greek elegiac couplets, connected to ritual and dedicated to “the experience of loss and the search for consolation”. Initially, the themes of elegiac poetry were broader than the treatment of grief and consolation; they encompassed “a fairly broad range of topics, including exhortatory martial epigrams, political philosophy, commemorative lines, or amatory complaints” (ibid.: 2). Formally, the elegy can range from the concise elegiac couplet in alternating dactylic hexameters and pentameters, as in the classical Greek model, to the quatrains in iambic pentameters of Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard” (1751) or the *vers libre* of Walt Whitman’s elegy to Abraham Lincoln, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed” (1865), and finally to narrative poems of epic length, such as Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, composed of quatrains in iambic tetrameters. Latin elegies

directed their focus at the amatory complaint, the loss of a lover. A similar narrowing down of the thematic compass, in contrast to the genre's formal diversity, can be observed in the English tradition: "the definition that gradually gathered currency, particularly after the 16<sup>th</sup> century, was that of a poem of mortal loss and consolation" (Sacks 1985: 3).

However, elegies do not simply describe individual grief; according to Sacks, their function is threefold: they "set free the energy locked in grief or rage and [...] organize its movement in the form of a question that is not merely an expression of ignorance but a voicing of protest" (ibid.: 22); they address this question to someone else, so that the focus is shifted from the lost object to the outside world – in psychoanalytic terms, this constitutes part of the work of mourning, and prevents the subject from becoming enmeshed in hopeless melancholia; and finally, they create the illusion that some force or agent may have prevented the death in question (ibid.). Consequently, even earlier elegies, such as John Donne's "A Valediction: forbidding Mourning" (1611/12, 1633), are not simply acquiescent even if they affirm both the inevitability of death and the enduring connection of souls, the living and the departed, beyond death. Elegies have always been complaints, registering the mourner's protest against untimely loss, against cracks in the smooth ordering of the world. Ultimately however, elegy in the Christian tradition bases its consolatory power on the promise that death will be overcome and, one day, the mourner will be reunited with the lost object. Possibly the most striking departure of the Victorian elegy from this tradition, despite the epoch's continuing albeit troubled embeddedness in Christian faith, consists in the theological scepticism that penetrates the genre, resulting in the breakdown of the consolatory function of elegy and culminating in the insistence, in Swinburne's elegiac poems, that death is final.

In different ways, Tennyson, Christina Rossetti, Matthew Arnold, Thomas Hardy and, above all, Swinburne can be considered as representatives of this specifically Victorian investment in the elegiac mode. Arnold's most widely anthologised poem "Dover Beach" (O'Gorman 2004: 312f.; written in 1867) describes its speaker's sense of forlornness in the face of religious doubt which neither the contemplation of nature nor love can effectively counter; Cunningham (2011: 367) calls the poem "the period's most melancholy of elegies for the dying of faith". Similarly, Hardy's nature poetry is pervaded by a sense of contingency; nature is no longer ordered and harmonious, run according to a divine plan, but governed by meaningless, directionless processes of growth, struggle and decay, or 'hap' (see, for example, Hardy's "Nature's Questioning" [1898], "The Darkling Thrush" [1900], "Hap" [1866/98]). Even a poet who is comparatively firmly embedded in religious faith, the Catholic Rossetti, cannot escape the Victorian fascination for corruption, decay and death – as when, in "Song: When I am dead, my dearest" (1848/62), she looks forward to her own death and her possibly, but not certainly, surviving consciousness thereafter: "Haply I may remember, / And haply I may forget" (ll. 15f.) – and is in fact affected by the ubiquity of contingency. In Rossetti's poetry, "death is the sad, depriving *hap*, the inevitable chance of life, what

always happens, and which might bring its own kind of *happiness*, consciousness and memory in some afterlife, or might, *haply*, not do that" (Cunningham 2011: 346). While Victorian elegiac poetry strives to fulfil one of the traditional purposes of the genre, consolation in face of the (individual) experience of death – a task in which it only partly succeeds, as in Tennyson's *In Memoriam* – it takes on a wider resonance: Victorian elegies mourn the passing of God which, if far from being a certainty, has become at least a distinct possibility. In Cunningham's (2011: 364) words, elegy has become theologised.

The dying of faith, giving a particular poignancy to personal loss because it adds finality to the immediate experience of deprivation, is often negotiated in reference to traditionally idyllic places – the beach, the woods, and above all, the garden – which now have lost their consolatory power. The restfulness and seclusion of gardens provides only a transitory solace at best, as in Arnold's "Lines Written in Kensington Gardens" (1852) or in Hardy's "Lausanne: In Gibbon's Old Garden" (1897/1902). In the elegiac nature poems by Arnold and Hardy, doubt is the dominant stance. The diminishing of faith leaves humankind behind in a bleak world in which nature has been stripped of its consolatory power:

The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.  
But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
Retreating, to the breath  
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
And naked shingles of the world.

(Arnold, "Dover Beach", ll. 21-28; cited in: O'Gorman 2004: 312f.)

The fullness and brightness of a world kept safe by the "Sea of Faith" has given way to a naked and dreary environment, no longer sheltered by the certitudes of belief. The individual who has to come to terms with this world stripped of consolatory illusions, this place which knows "neither joy, nor love, nor light / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain" (ll. 33f.), is plunged into melancholia, an enduring, fruitless depression rather than the productive work of mourning that will result in the overcoming of loss. The speaker's appeal to a beloved – "Ah, love, let us be true / To one another!" (ll. 29f.) – seems rather ineffectual and paltry in the face of the great metaphysical desolation spreading around the couple. Despite the beauty of the night, the shining moon and the calm sea, the poem's mood, and the speaker's psychological stance, is one of ingrained sadness, confusion and incertitude.

Swinburne pushes the sceptical or, in fact, hopeless questioning of meaning in the natural world even further, to a forceful denial of redemption and resurrection. If there is an offer of consolation in his elegiac poetry, it consists in the conscious embracing of an atheist position, an affirmation of the finality of death which at least does away with an illusion. The certainty of faith has been replaced by the certainty of non-belief, arguably a less painful position than the sense of dislocation expressed in

“Dover Beach”. As Melissa F. Zeiger (1997: 26) has argued on behalf of “*Ave Atque Vale*”, Swinburne’s elegy for Baudelaire departs from the English tradition of pastoral elegy in being “pointedly unconsoled, even anti-consolatory”; Swinburne here “undertakes a revision of elegiac ideology, re-examining the originary status of Orpheus, especially in his role as an exemplary figure of male power, and the relation between winners and losers and between gain and loss” (ibid.; for a model interpretation of “*Ave Atque Vale*”, see Sacks 1985: 204-26). While Swinburne uses the – at the time of writing, premature – report of Baudelaire’s death to develop his own poetics and position himself as the rightful inheritor of a poetic tradition reaching from Orpheus and Sappho to the French poet, in his elegiac nature poetry he offers an exploration of the creative – and concomitantly destructive – forces of nature. But these poems, too, have a metapoetical dimension: the ambivalent creativity of nature is juxtaposed to poetic creativity, to *poiesis*, which, after God’s demise, is the one remaining power that can endow the emptied world with form and meaning (for an extensive analysis of Swinburne’s oeuvre, see McGann 1972).

## 2. Swinburne’s “A Forsaken Garden”

In “A Forsaken Garden” (O’Gorman 2004: 506-09; written in 1876), there is no explicitly named and embodied poetic persona, but a poetic voice is present through the formal and stylistic performance of the poem. This masterful and at the same time impersonal creative positioning gives shape to the shapeless processes of decay slowly transforming an abandoned plot of land. The garden, an artificially created place, originally built for human enjoyment but now depopulated, is battered and progressively erased by the indifferent forces of nature, the wind and the sea. The only event taking place in this forlorn spot is the reversal of human civilising and domesticating endeavours, the slow decay of the garden. The garden, formerly an idyllic spot where lovers met, becomes a “waste place” (l. 19). This semantic level – the annihilation of human striving for order, sense and beauty – is countervailed through the poetic form: Swinburne’s elegy is carefully ordered, meaningful, albeit *ex negativo*, and aesthetically powerful even while it affirms the oblitative power of death.

“A Forsaken Garden” was first published in the *Athenaeum* (July 1876), then in Swinburne’s volume of poetry, *Poems and Ballads, Second Series* (1878). It takes up a well-established poetic topos, the garden, to reflect on desolation and death. Traditional connotations of the garden, such as the beauty and harmony of nature in its domesticated state, the contemplation of seasonal cycles of plant life, as well as religious references are here reversed and negated. Specifically, as Francis O’Gorman (2003: 349) has shown, the poem draws on Judaeo-Christian discourse:

But its invocation of such material in a secular context, its deliberate resituating of the material of religion in an alien context, acts not to Christianize the poem’s references but to ironize the discourse it appropriates. Much of the texture of the poem, and its secular energies, derive from such allusions, drained of their theological substance, and

made to serve purposes not their own. At the most obvious level, the poem’s upsetting of Judaeo-Christian terms is plain in its topography. The Garden of Eden in Genesis is the locus of perfect life and first love, but also the natal place of death and corruption. Swinburne’s hidden garden, once the home of love and life, is overtly the fiefdom of death.

Swinburne’s garden is neither a *locus amoenus*, a beautiful place suitable for love and courtship or aesthetic enjoyment, nor Eden – it is “without promise of redemption” (ibid.: 349) – but, as the title indicates, a “forsaken” place. However, its verbal description is rich and sensuous in the highest degree. While the invocation of this deserted piece of land seems a far cry from the poetry for which Swinburne has become best known, his exploration of human passion in its erotic or even perverse guise (as in his poems “Dolores” and “Anactoria”, both 1866), “A Forsaken Garden” is connected to his more explicitly ‘fleshly’ poems both formally and through its imagery, as well as through the presence of a second major theme typical of Swinburne’s works: the exploration of psychological states such as “intellectual perplexity, spiritual frustration, and finally a sense of unfathomable loss” (Harrison 1982: 690). The sense of loss and an ultimate futility, for Swinburne often a corollary of the erotic, here becomes the inevitable result of natural processes and the passing of time.

Swinburne is justly celebrated for his “powerful control of metre” (Cronin 2012: 70) and the sensuous richness of his sound patterning which often contrasts with the bleak or deliberately provocative content of his poems. Typically, the soundscape of “A Forsaken Garden” is almost lush, its metre and rhyme scheme tightly organised and complex. This sophisticated aesthetic achievement frames an experience of sensual denial, a description of nature deprived of vitality and continuously edging towards the moment of ultimate extinction. The tension between the seductiveness of form and the barrenness thematised in the text contributes to Swinburne’s “challenge to the reader’s aesthetic principles, the challenge, for example, to the principle that in verse sound should remain the servant of sense, [which] is coupled with an attack on ethical conventions” (ibid.). In this case, the ethical challenge does not consist in the representation of sado-masochistic sexuality but in the post-Darwinian insistence that death is final, that neither intersubjective love nor the love of God offer any promise of redemption. While the natural world described in the poem is entropic and meaningless, the poetic form does not show any signs of deterioration of authorial control.

The poem consists of ten stanzas, each composed of eight lines with the rhyme scheme ababcdcd; masculine rhymes in the even lines alternate with feminine rhymes in the uneven ones. This rhyme pattern is maintained rigorously throughout the poem. The metre is almost as regular. The first seven lines of each stanza consist of tetrameters (four stresses per line), the abbreviated final line contains only three syllables, respectively two stresses (/ x /). While the number of stresses in the longer lines is fairly regular, the number of syllables varies considerably. In fact, Swinburne preponderantly uses anapests together with iambs, as well as trochaic inversions and other, less familiar feet. This variable use of different metric feet within an otherwise rather

rigid formal pattern produces a fluid rhythm that contributes to the free acoustic flow of the poem, as can be seen in the first stanza:

In a coign of the cliff between lowland and highland,  
 At the sea-down's edge between windward and lee,  
 Walled round with rocks as an inland island,  
 The ghost of a garden fronts the sea.  
 A girdle of brushwood and thorn encloses  
 The steep square slope of the blossomless bed  
 Where the weeds that grew green from the graves of its roses  
 Now lie dead. (O'Gorman 2004: 506)

Swinburne here employs different feet with great confidence to vary the rhythm, in fact making it quite difficult to identify the metre in each case. In the first line, we find four anapests with an additional unstressed syllable at the end (x x / | x x / | x x / | x x / | x); in the second, a row of anapests is varied by a iamb in the second foot (x x / | x / | x x / | x x /); then, two iambs are followed by an anapest and the rare amphibrach (x / | x / | x x / | x / x); the first quatrain closes with the sequence iamb, anapest, two iambs (x / | x x / | x / | x /). A similar alternation between, mainly, anapests and iambs can be observed in the second quatrain, concluded with the short cadence / x /, a cretic, in line eight. This flexible execution of the tetrameter contributes to the poem's rhythmic modulation, possibly in tune with its description of the movements of wind and waves, but at variance with the final stasis of a dying and dead nature.

The effective sound patterning of "A Forsaken Garden" is compounded by the high density of rhetorical figures of repetition, for example by internal rhymes such as "inland island" (l. 3). On the phonetic level, the poem abounds with alliterations: from double and triple repetitions of matching initial consonants – "a coign of the cliff" (l. 1), "[t]he ghost of a garden" (l. 4), "grew green from the graves" (l. 7), "branches and briars" (l. 14), "thicket of thorns" (l. 27) – to whole alliterative sequences – "the low last edge of the long lone land" (l. 10), "[t]he wind that wanders, the weeds wind-shaken" (l. 23) – and a combination of alliterations, in the following example of the consonants 's' and 'w': "[a]nd the same wind sang and the same waves whitened" (l. 45) which also happens to be an assonance, with the vowel 'a' repeated six times in the line. The sing-song sound of the wind and waves evoked in this line is further heightened by the use of the nasal consonants 'm' and 'n'. Swinburne thus manages to pack three kinds of acoustic rhyme into a single line: alliteration, assonance and consonance. A superlative sound density is achieved when he juxtaposes the voiced velar plosive 'g' with the sibilant fricative 's', producing an alteration of hard and hissing sounds, in a couple of lines that also plays on the etymological closeness of 'guest' (OE *giest*, *gæst*; Old High German *gast*, Latin *hostis*, originally meaning a stranger) and 'ghost' (OE *gást*, *gêst*): "Would a ghost not rise at the strange guest's hand? / So long have the grey bare walks lain guestless" (ll. 12f.). In this waste place, the guest and the ghost are similarly unexpected and spectral.

The first line, with its use of the archaic "coign" (a projecting corner) and its high density of rhetorical figures, establishes a sense that we are confronted with a poem

that is not only carefully crafted and even erudite, but contrived and precious. However, on the morphological level this impression is misleading. Swinburne uses mostly words of Germanic origin, and preponderantly words of one or two syllables. In that sense, his language is 'simple'. The effect of linguistic complexity and even artificiality is achieved through the poem's sound patterning, the ample use of rhetorical figures, especially repetitions, and syntactic construction. On the syntactic level, figures of repetition abound. The frequent use of anaphora, for example, is striking, often in a sequence of three: "And" at the beginning of lines 44-46, "Not" in lines 58-59 and 61, "Here" in 65-66, and "Till" in 73-75. Terms of negation are placed in a syntactically conspicuous manner, as in the epanalepsis or cyclos ('ring') we find in line 25 where "not" is placed in the initial and the final position of the line: "Not a flower to be pressed of the foot that falls not". The line is noticeable not only for its cyclical structure, but also for the grammatical inversion of the second negation, "the foot that falls not" instead of "the foot that does not fall", which also gives this line a slightly drooping rhythm suggestive of the absence of life evoked here. "Not" is again repeated at the end of line 27; with the final "not" in line 25, this also constitutes an epistrophe. Taken together with "never" in line 28, the fourth stanza – as well as the eighth – emerges as one of the passages where negation is most strongly foregrounded through intense rhetorical patterning.

Syntactical repetition also appears in the form of parallelisms, for example right at the beginning: "In a coign of the cliff between lowland and highland, / At the sea-down's edge between windward and lee" (ll. 1f.). The garden's liminal position *between* topographically antithetical zones, underlined by the equivalent positioning of the adverb, is thus shown to constitute one of its defining features. Parallelisms also occur in the third stanza – "The thorns he spares when the rose is taken; / The rocks are left when he wastes the plain" (ll. 21f.) – or later, when the poem addresses its central motif, the relationship between death and (the absence of) change: "Here death may deal not again for ever; / Here change may come not till all change end" (ll. 65f.). Again, we can observe the emphatic use of "not", accentuated by its grammatical inversion and the syntactically concordant position in both lines. These examples, by no means complete, shall suffice to indicate the highly complex formal organisation of the poem achieved through rhetorical figures, mainly anaphora, epistrophe, repetition and parallelism.

Kirstie Blair (2012: 1) has suggested that "when Victorian poetry speaks of faith, it tends to do so in steady and regular rhythms; when it speaks of doubt, it is correspondingly more likely to deploy irregular, unsteady, unbalanced rhythms". This is certainly not true of Swinburne's poetry where the repudiation of faith does not result in formal insecurity expressed in unsteady rhythms; rather, formal control seems to replace the ethical and theological norms lacking, or coming under attack, in the poems. (Nor, incidentally, would I subscribe to Blair's claim with regard to the sceptical poetry of Arnold and Hardy.) Swinburne's 'faithless' or anti-religious stance is not expressed through faltering rhythm, but through a pronounced semantic nihilism, an

accumulation of negations. While negation is most prominent in stanzas four and eight, it runs through the entire poem, for example in the repeated use of the suffix ‘-less’: “blossomless” (l. 6), “guestless” (l. 13), “restless” (l. 15), “scentless” (l. 34) and “loveless” (l. 55). In this sequence of adjectives, terms denoting sensual enjoyment, emotional fulfilment, hospitality and peace are reversed to denote isolation and barrenness.

This sense of negation and negativity is heightened further by the choice of words belonging to the semantic clusters ‘isolation’, ‘barrenness/bleakness’ and ‘death’. Among the first we can name the topographical descriptors of the garden: the garden is situated in a removed spot, “a coign of the cliff” (l. 1) at the sea’s “edge” (l. 2); it is “[w]alled round” so that it constitutes “an inland island” (l. 3); apart from the rocks that form a wall it is additionally enclosed by a “girdle of brushwood and thorn” (l. 5). In addition to being at the extreme “edge” of the land (ll. 2, 10), the garden is situated on a “steep [...] slope” (l. 6) so that the plot falls “southward, abrupt and broken” (l. 9). Topographically, the garden is as inaccessible as it can be, forming a removed “long lone land” (l. 10) that could only be penetrated by a very determined visitor: “Through branches and briars if a man make way, / He shall find no life but the sea-wind’s” (ll. 14f.). The topos of isolation is closely connected to the barrenness and bleakness of the garden: the “dense hard passage” (l. 17) would lead the potential visitor to “the strait waste place that the years have rifled / Of all but the thorns that are touched of no time” (ll. 19f.). The constituent elements of the garden – rocks and thorns – are themselves hard, stark and dry; they deny life even if they are, like the thorns, organic and therefore alive. Only one of the plants produces a “gaunt bleak blossom” (l. 34) but this appears to have little chance to mature into fruit on a ground “where life seems barren as death” (l. 36).

Death, of course, is the poem’s leitmotif. It is already invoked in the first stanza when we learn that the garden in question is not ‘alive’, but “[t]he ghost of a garden” (l. 4). The garden is so thoroughly assigned to the realm of the spectral and the dead that not only the originally planted roses, but their inheritors who fed on their corpses, the weeds, are dead, leaving behind an absolute barrenness: “the blossomless bed / Where the weeds that grew green from the graves of its roses / Now lie dead” (ll. 6-8). In the second stanza, the garden’s solitude is disturbed, in the conditional (“If a step should sound [...] Would a ghost not rise”, ll. 11f.), but the imaginary visitor would, again, discover only a negativity: “He shall find no life” (l. 15). In stanza three, death appears only indirectly in the description of the garden’s destitution (“the strait waste place”, l. 19; “he wastes the plain”, l. 23). In stanza four, the sterility and emptiness of the forsaken garden are compared to “the heart of a dead man” (l. 26): everything is dry and withered, the only plant that grows here is a “thicket of thorns” (l. 27), no animals live here, “the nightingale calls not” (ibid.).

From now on, the terms “death”, “dead” and “to die” – an extended *figura etymologica* – are used in every stanza with the exception of the eighth. The central antithesis in the second part is not that between life and death – life is assimilated to

death: “life seems barren as death” (l. 36) – but between death and love. In stanzas six and seven, a past is imagined in which the garden was still in bloom and a pair of lovers were clinging to the belief, or rather, the illusion, that their love would overcome death. In the eternity of the sea – rather than the transitory garden – the male lover hopes to find an analogy for their enduring passion: “look forth from the flowers to the sea; / For the foam-flowers endure when the rose-blossoms wither, / And men that love lightly may die – but we?” (ll. 42-44). Love, he suggests, only needs to be strong enough to conquer death. But this appeal to the continuance of the sea, and hence, of love, is a pathetic fallacy. On the one hand, love does not last forever – “In the lips that had whispered, the eyes that had lightened, / Love was dead” (ll. 47f.) – and on the other, even if it did, it will be annihilated by death while the sea, neither pitying nor protecting the lovers, remains indifferent:

Shall the dead take thought for the dead to love them?  
What love was ever as deep as the grave?  
They are loveless now as the grass above them  
Or the wave. (ll. 53-56)

Death obliterates everything: passion itself, remembrance and the human subjects without whom the emotions lack their medium. The dead are dead; in the grave, they become pure matter that is as indifferent as the ephemeral grass and the eternal waves. The vast array of human emotions is as transient as the diversity of plants in the garden; in the end, both “roses and lovers” (l. 57) are gone and forgotten. While this harsh analysis is slightly softened in the eighth stanza where death is not mentioned explicitly, and the cessation of life is compared to sleep which frees the departed from pain as well as from pleasure, the finality of death and the overall entropic trajectory of the poem are once more confirmed in the two last stanzas. Back in the present of the forsaken garden, we are faced with a site where the cycle of life has run its course, and where in a final stasis nothing remains but to wait for the one change still to happen, the final event of death. Death signifies not only annihilation, but an ultimate stopping of time. The poem firmly denies the theological narrative of a future beyond death, of redemption:

Here death may deal not again for ever;  
Here change may come not till all change end.  
From the graves they have made they shall rise up never,  
Who have left nothing living to ravage and rend. (ll. 65-68)

The entropy in the garden is so absolute that even death itself is affected by it. All changes happening now are of a negative order: the cliffs crumble, the rocks are eroded. The final act, death, will not come as an event, a catastrophic disruption, but as the cessation of even this deterioration: when all things have fallen apart, “all change [will] end” (l. 66). If this world has long lost its creator, in the end it will also lose its destroyer: “As a god self-slain on his own strange altar, / Death lies dead” (ll. 79f.). The poem’s erasure of human and divine agency is concluded by this final negation when even death ceases to be an agent.

Michael A. Joyner has questioned the efficacy of the poem's entropic trajectory which he equates with an erasure of diachronic temporality. Joyner (1997: 100) claims that the speaker's attempt to represent the garden in a framework of synchronic temporality – an erasure of the past and the future – is bound to fail: "As much as the speaker wishes to construct a garden in which progressive (diachronic) time does not exist, the ongoingness of time and the living and dying which take place within it, both in the human and the phenomenal realms, will not be denied". Despite the poem's insistence on the ultimate transitoriness and meaninglessness of life, change, temporality and, consequently, "the social significance of the garden and human relationships" (ibid.: 103) persist, against the intention of the speaker, because "natural process and its shaping language give to the garden an abundance of social significance" (ibid.). However barren and deserted the garden may be, the poem cannot really perform its anti-humanistic agenda because its medium, language, is by definition human and dialogic, that is, social. Even if, at the end, the roses, thorns, lovers and death itself lie dead, a speaker and, implicitly, an addressee are still present. While I do not agree with Joyner's suggestion that the poem's temporal positioning is synchronic – a bygone past and a future are clearly invoked, although the latter is conceived as the end of time – his point about the social and temporal nature of language is important. The speaker's poetic performance – the poem itself – implies that not every human consciousness has been, or will be, erased by the annihilating touch of death; there is a discursive outside from where the garden's entropy can be described and thereby given meaning, albeit through a process of negation. This constitutes, as I have tried to show in the formal analysis, the performative discrepancy of Swinburne's elegiac poem: while its semantic proposition signifies 'nothing', the tight formal organisation speaks to us of *poiesis*, a creative force that continues to be firmly in place. Death may be dead, but the poet is not.

### 3. Conclusion

While an elegiac mode, going hand in hand with the expression of religious doubt, was pervasive in the poetry of the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Swinburne's insistence on the finality of death and the impossibility of consolation constituted a fairly radical position within Victorian scepticism. The 'solution' Swinburne offered, his emphasis on aesthetic form in the very act of depicting a morally or theologically unpalatable content, forms a bridge between more moderate poets such as Arnold and the aesthetes and decadents of the *fin de siècle* who were often connected, overtly or covertly, to sexual deviance – in the case of Arthur Symonds and Oscar Wilde, to homosexuality. Swinburne shared the *fin-de-siècle* poets' interest in mapping a field of autonomous art clearly differentiated from the aesthetic and moral norms of the middle class, a delimitation achieved through the explicit representation of the morally shocking and the disgusting, as well as through the high valuation of the aesthetic.

In both regards, Swinburne was also a precursor of Modernism. While Modernist poets, generally speaking, turned away from the elaborate metre of their late Victorian predecessors towards *vers libre*, protagonists of the Modernist movement such as Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot similarly pursued a poetics of aesthetic autonomy. In Eliot's work in particular, we can find an echo of Swinburne's intertwining of *poiesis* and abjection. Swinburne's exploration of the loss of faith through his invocation of the garden's "strait waste place" ("A Forsaken Garden", l. 19) thus receives its Modernist answer in the desolate landscape of Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1963: 61-86; written in 1922). However, Eliot's poem, while saturated with images of death and decay, eschews the final stasis of "The Forsaken Garden". Out of Eliot's "dead land" (l. 4) life stirs in spring, but consolation is equally absent: "you know only / A heap of broken images, where the sun beats, / And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief, / And the dry stone no sound of water" (ll. 21-24). As Cunningham (2011: 16-19) has argued, Modernist poets as well as critics such as I.A. Richards and William Empson who contributed decisively to the canonisation of Eliot and his peers were dismissive of Victorian poetry and instead valorised the metaphysical poets and the Romantics. However, lines of influence and shared concerns can be traced between the poetry of Swinburne and Eliot, indicating that the concept of clearly separate literary periods needs to be re-negotiated, and that Swinburne's poetic voice continued to resonate throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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