



Paganism in Late Victorian Britain

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Preface

- 1 In Chapter II of his unfinished novel *Lesbia Brandon*, A. C. Swinburne describes at length Herbert's delight at being lashed by the tumultuous waves. During this cruel ritual, the 'admirably ignorant' hero 'cr(ies) out to the sea . . . as to a mother that talked with him' and is turned into 'a small satisfied pagan' (Hughes 9–10). Beyond the author's sadistic fantasies, what this unexpected reference to paganism reveals is Swinburne's interest in a sensual and animistic conception of a Mother-Nature to which he would revert in his later poetry, notably in 'Hertha'¹ which he described in a letter of October 26, 1869 to William Michael Rossetti, as 'another mystic atheistic democratic anthropologic poem' (Lang 2:46) dedicated to 'Mother-Earth', the Teutonic goddess of fertility:

Before ever land was,
Before ever the sea,
Or soft hair of the grass,
Or fair limbs of the tree,
Or the fresh-coloured fruit of my branches, I was, and thy soul was in me.

First life on my sources
First drifted and swam;
Out of me are the forces
That save it or damn;
Out of me man and woman, and wild-beast and bird; before God was, I am. (ll. 6–15)

- 2 These provocative lines, which ironically distort the words of Christ in the temple,² are evidently much indebted to the Romantic mythopoetic impulse.³ And yet 'Hertha', as well as most of Swinburne's pagan verse and prose, also interestingly unveils original perspectives on paganism. Breaking away from earlier conceptions of pagan mythology as a purely elitist construct, the atheistic poet indeed envisaged the possibility of giving an 'anthropologic' twist to his own subversive paganism. This is particularly evident in his Demeter and Persephone poems depicting the unfolding of bloody rituals, which Margot K. Louis has analysed as illustrative of the Victorian 'anti-Olympian topos' (Louis 2009, 14) which paved the way, in the 1860s, to a new appreciation of 'the orgiastic and ecstatic elements of the chthonian rites' (Louis 2005, 342).
- 3 In this sense, Swinburne partly anticipated anthropological approaches to 'primitive cultures' discussed by E. B. Tylor in his eponymous essay of 1871, as well as later explorations by the Cambridge Ritualist Jane Ellen Harrison into the complex relations between art and ritual. Harrison was an enthusiastic reader of both Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* (1872) and of Swinburne's Eleusinian poetry and Hellenic plays (which she quoted in her essays⁴). Her research on the primacy of ritual, alongside James Frazer's investigations into 'rustic ceremonies' (Louis 2005, 351) in *The Golden Bough*, brought about a series of revealing paradigmatic shifts: from the elitist to the primitive, from the centrality of the Christian reference to multifaceted forms of paganism, from the Olympian to the Chthonian, from the patriarchal to the matriarchal, and from the Christian Word to the more sensual performative dimension of ritual.
- 4 It is this specifically late Victorian favouring of 'ritual over myth' (Louis 2005, 329) this new interest in paganism as an alternative form of spiritual experience and its relation to artistic creation which this volume aims at exploring by focusing on the works of major late Victorian authors such as Thomas Hardy, Walter Pater, Arthur Machen, and Oscar Wilde, who were very much aware of contemporary scientific investigations into myth and religion. These Victorian authors were not only fascinated by paganism—whether Hellenic, Roman, Egyptian, or Celtic—as a polytheistic and anti-Christian religion (to paraphrase the definition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*), but also by the possible creative interactions of Christianity (and particularly Catholicism) and paganism. These tensions are analysed in section I of this volume. But the artistic potentialities offered by the Nietzschean revision of

the Apollonian model in favour of the Dionysian (explored in section II), as well as by the syncretic combination of varied forms of ritualistic performance proved equally inspiring to authors and artists of that transitional era, as shown, for instance, by the experience of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (section III).

- 5 The articles selected for this special issue of *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* therefore provide an enriching overview of the multifaceted question of paganism in the later years of the 19th century. Contributions range over a significant variety of genres, from novel to short story, and from poetry and drama to journalistic prose. A study of the pictorial representations of Dionysian paganism is also included in the volume as it sheds a revealing light on the links between poetry and painting during that period which embraced the sensual and performative aspects of ritualistic practice.
- 6 If the term paganism was used for centuries by Christian authors to stigmatize the superstitious beliefs of the ignorant peasantry (pagan deriving from the late Latin *paganus*, signifying ‘rustic’), it is quite clear, therefore, that the word partly lost its pejorative connotations in the later years of the 19th century as it became increasingly used by Neo-pagans in search of alternative forms of spirituality in a materialistic age. No longer a learned reference or a derogatory label, paganism at the turn of the century thus opened up new uncharted creative spaces for both the literary elite and the ‘admirably ignorant’, from Swinburne’s Herbert to Hardy’s Tess.

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Notes

1 This poem is taken from Swinburne’s *Songs Before Sunrise* (1871).

2 As noted by L. M. Findlay, 1.15 echoes John 8.58 ‘Before Abraham was, I am’.

3 Line 15 may also be an allusion to Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*, p. 304: ‘The primary imagination I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.’

4 In her 1913 essay on *Ancient Art and Ritual*, pp. 93–4, Jane Ellen Harrison also included a quotation from the Chorus’s description of the Panathenaic processions in Swinburne’s play *Erechtheus*, culminating in the timeless celebration of ‘Athens, a praise without end’.

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