A MID-VICTORIAN LITERARY TEMPEST

A BOMBSHELL that struck literary England a little past the last mid-century has been reechoing in the recently published "Life of Algernon Charles Swinburne," by Edmund Gosse. The shell was the volume called "Poems and Ballads," a cursory knowledge of which probably places it in many minds as one of the bad books of literature. As we read the book to-day, Mr. Gosse observes, "it is difficult to reconstruct the social order" into which the poems obtruded like the above-mentioned explosive. "So far as could be perceived at the time, the 'sixties formed the most quiescent, the most sedate, perhaps, we might even without offense continue, the least effective and efficient period in our national poetry." Tennyson, of course, was writing the "Idylls of the King," and his "smooth blandness was terribly welcome to the mid-Victorian reading public." Tennyson—"the starched and embroidered Tennyson of the 'Idylls'—held the field of poetry all to himself, imperially resigning a corner here or there to a devoted disciple, like Jean Ingelow." Browning and Matthew Arnold had been rebuffed into temporary poetic silence. "It was the epoch of the crinoline, when not merely could a spade never be called a spade in the most restricted circles, but the existence of that or any other such domestic utensil was strenuously denied." The Preraffaelites—Rossetti, Burne-Jones, William Morris—were acceptable in a limited circle. George Meredith had written "Modern Love," and Christina Rossetti had achieved a popular success with "her brilliant, fantastic, and profoundly original volume of 'Goblin Market,'" but—

"Neither in 'Goblin Market' nor in 'Modern Love' was anything to be found that could be charged with disturbing those proprieties which had now practically slumbered in English literature since the publication of 'Don Juan.' Here might be a treatment of versification, of natural scenery, even of character which was unfamiliar and therefore blameworthy, but there was nothing, or next to nothing, which could mantle the cheek of innocence with a blush. The friends of Algernon Swinburne were amply aware that, so far from avoiding all possibilities of offense in this direction, he was prepared to turn the pudic snows of Mrs. Grundy's countenance to scarlet, and they had observed a certain impish gusto in his anticipation of so doing. He was even impatient to invade the Respectabilities in their woodbine bower, and to make their flesh creep while he did so. In comparison with the crudities and the audacities which are nowadays poured out upon our indifference, the particular mutinies of Swinburne's lyrics may appear to be mild and almost anodyne. But the age was not accustomed to expressions of sensuous or of heterodox opinion. It had never had presented to it, even 'on gray paper with blunt type,' anything which bore the least resemblance to 'Anactoria' or 'The Leper.'"

If the friends of Swinburne were excited over the prospect of stinging the *bourgeois* moral self-satisfaction of the British public they little reckoned what he could produce:

"No one had anticipated the storm of censure which now broke over Algernon's radiant and mocking head. He might, however, have defied the common reviewer, since he had not a few supporters in the press, with Joseph Knight prominent among them. But an antagonist arose whose authority could not be disregarded and whose ferocity was terrible. By far the most powerful organ of literary opinion in 1866 was *The Saturday Review*, in which, on the 4th of August, appeared a very long article entitled 'Mr. Swinburne's New Poems,' an article that not merely transformed the fortunes of that particular edition or volume, but created a prejudiced conception of the poet from which it is not too much to say that he suffered until the end of his life.

several phrases—such as 'The lilies and langours of virtue, the roses and raptures of vice,' or 'Thou art noble and nude and antique,' which immediately became hack-lines and the prey of parodists. A quotation from this very powerful and mordant review may be given as the model of what was from this time forward to be alleged by Swinburne's opponents:

"'Mr. Swinburne riots in the profusion of color of the most garish and heated kind. He is like a composer who should fill his orchestra with trumpets, or a painter who should exclude every color but a blaring red and a green as of sour fruit. There are not twenty stanzas in the whole book which have the faintest tincture of soberness. We are in the midst of fire and serpents, wine and ashes, blood and foam, and a hundred lurid horrors. Unsparing use of the most violent colors and the most intoxicated ideas and images is Mr. Swinburne's prime characteristic.'

"But the moral charges were far severer than the literary. The poet was called 'an unclean fiery imp from the pit' and 'the libidinous laureate of a pack of satyrs.' He was accused of an 'audacious counterfeiting of strong and noble passion by mad, intoxicated sensuality.' He had 'revealed to the world a mind all aflame with the feverish carnality of a schoolboy over the dirtiest passages in Lemprière.' All this and more, in the columns of the leading literary newspaper of the age, formed a loud and clear call for conclusive public reprobation."

We discover that Swinburne was too high-spirited to be crusht, but those animadversions, and the temper in which he received them, probably account for the suspicion that was leveled upon him from some quarters for most of his life:

"It is notoriously difficult to reply with grace to a charge of indelicacy, which, in our chilly climate, is equivalent to a charge of want of good sense and good manners. The victim may bow the head, like Dryden, or attack the plaintiff's attorney, like Byron; Swinburne adopted an attitude which more closely resembled that of Congreve under the lash of Jeremy Collier. He denied the truth of his critics' animadversions, questioned their good faith, and lavished contempt on their pretensions to purity, learning, and taste."