

“SHADOWS HOT FROM HELL”: SWINBURNE’S POETHICS

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Musings from the editor’s desk.

When Swinburne was helped from his deathbed in Bloomsbury to a cab bound for Putney in 1879 none of his friends would ever have guessed that he would outlive nearly all of them, not merely surviving but thriving for another thirty years. He lived the first half of his life as the Keith Richards of the Victorian era, risking his talent for the riotous affair of long nights of anarchic abandon, not to escape the boredom of endless hours but to extend the vigour of each fleeting day from dusk to dawn. The romantic attraction to this side of Swinburne’s life does not arise from the addiction to alcohol too often associated with the solitary artist agonizing over the search for *le mot juste*, but rather from the opposite direction: Swinburne was the late-night clubber who managed to embody the communal spirit of art envisioned by the Pre-Raphaelites as the ideal pursuit.

This art-club spirit motivated the Pre-Raphaelites to organize the Cyclo-graphic Society, the Literary Society, and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in the 1840s; *The Germ*, the Set Order of Galahad, *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, the jovial campaign at the Oxford Union, and the commune at Red House in the 1850s; Morris, Marshall, Faulkner, and Co. in the 1860s; and the fin-de-siècle Rhymers Club at the Cheshire Cheese in the ’90s. Sharing their devotion to art and poetry with a bohemian community of friends, the Pre-Raphaelites lived their lives for art. Stories were told of a naked Swinburne sliding down the bannister at Dante Rossetti’s Chelsea home while reciting *Sordello* forwards and backwards and of George Meredith grumbling that he could no longer work amidst such chaos. This distinction between the two friends is exactly the point of our romantic attraction: Swinburne could work

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