

**Semel et Semper (...) and I tell him it's a beastly chouse: country house communities under French influence in *Lesbia Brandon*, A.C. Swinburne's impossible novel.**

*Lesbia Brandon* is an autobiographical novel by Algernon Charles Swinburne. It is also an impossible, endlessly funny novel. It challenges genres and genders in many ways. The prose in it is interspersed with verse and lyrics. It comprises the script of a cross-gender panto. It includes dialogues in English and French, scattered with demotic Latin and slang, hardly fit for the stage, while suiting the cabaret better.

Swinburne never finished the novel. The title is apocryphal and belongs to a first edition, 'for private circulation only', of part of the original MS as it was bungled by a notorious book thief. Yet the book is no spoof, since its existence is documented extensively in letters by Swinburne in particular. The MS is today extant in the form of 178 leaves of various papers, mostly watermarked foolscap, available at the British Library (Ashley MS 5264. Also Ashley MS 1953 for the lyrics). The dates are 1859, 1863, 1864, 1865, and 1866.

Letters also evidence hints of a community of contemporary readers, or rather audiences, Swinburne regularly reporting on the feedback he got after reading the MS in settlements to friends and relatives in London throughout the 1860s.

Our hypothesis is that the novel's incomplete, fragmentary state is no accident. Nor is it primarily linked to the nature of the project. Nor even to a lack thereof! Nor again to the writer's incapacity to carry out his project! The narrative shows no signs of such blocks or overall failure, but it unfolds serially, *semel et semper* (once and always) ... as if according to the motto of the once Catholic Swinburne family. This motto seems to underscore the seriality of the novel. It might be the only adequate title for it!

Or again: the novel wobbles like a lopsided feat of cabinet working, its various and sundry parts defiantly bound together, as if out of 'time out of joint', or through nothing but the amount of 'play' that makes the novel wobble, like some strange closet bursting with skeletons — '(...) and I tell him it's a beastly chouse'. The term 'chouse', repeated four times in the novel, evidences a puzzling community of slang and French. It sounds like a gamey burden (of sins) that belongs with the country house people born and bred there: *Roman des origines et origines du roman*.

Or again: the narrative unspools like « (...) un câble qui maintient le navire à quai, et ce câble est fait de fibres, cependant sa force ne lui vient pas d'une certaine fibre qui le parcourait d'un bout à l'autre, mais du fait qu'il y a un nombre considérable de fibres qui se chevauchent. » (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Le cahier bleu et le cahier brun*, tr. fr. M. Goldberg et J. Sackur, Paris, Gallimard, 1996, p. 150).

The paper purports from here to question the drive of the obtaining community of meaning in Swinburne's text (as frayed strands), notably as that drive makes itself metaphysical through humour, bent as it is on embracing, or again crocheting in multiplicities. Wittgenstein's concept of *Sprachspiel*, or language-game, will be used as philosophical background to questioning the role of language in that regard.

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