

EROS AND THANATOS IN SWINBURNE'S POETRY:
AN INTRODUCTION

Swinburne's poem "Phaedra" begins in medias res. The first frantic words of the daughter of Pasiphae, wife of Theseus, and stepmother of Hippolytus are addressed to her son: "Nay, I will never loosen hold nor breathe / Till thou have slain me." In a later, plaintive and breathless ejaculation, she explains.

Nay, for I love thee, I will have thy hands,
Nay, for I will not loose thee, thou are sweet,
Thou art my son, I am thy father's wife,
I ache toward thee with a bridal blood,
The pulse is heavy in all my married veins,
My whole face beats, I will feed full of thee,
My body is empty of ease, I will be fed,
I am burnt to the bone with love, thou shalt not go,
I am heartsick, and mine eyelids prick mine eyes,
Thou shalt not sleep nor eat nor say a word
Till thou hast slain me. I am not good to live.¹

Here, as in most of Swinburne's passion poems, death does not just provide an alternative to sexual gratification: it constitutes the only total consummation to sexual desires that are by definition insatiable. Like the life in which they are the most potent single force, they can become fulfilled only when they are destroyed beyond regeneration. Complete gratification is accomplished by removing the possibility of desire. Swinburne's intuition of the relations between death and passion includes variations on what Ihab Hassan has described as "the consummation of the Sadian will . . . in death." After noting that "the limits of an omnipotent consciousness are murder and suicide," Hassan observes what is finally

the sad equation of Sade: man is orgasm, and orgasm is death. Prisoner of consciousness, he tries to escape through the language of macabre onanism. His visions mortify, desiccate the body, and open in the flesh an abyss wherein consciousness is swallowed. The sadian Self, seeking desperately to become another, finds release only in death.²

Although Sade may have expressed his vision of death as the final consummation of passion in a uniquely macabre manner, the applicability of the vision itself, if we are to believe modern psychology, is fairly universal. Swinburne, writing with an awareness of Sade's role in the developing consciousness of passion's power over our lives,³