

SWINBURNE'S "NOTES ON THE ROYAL ACADEMY EXHIBITION, 1868"

From 1855 to 1859 Ruskin regularly produced his Academy Notes on the annual Royal Academy exhibitions. His trenchant views and the general influence of Pre-Raphaelitism had been stimulating to English art. But after 1860 both Ruskin's interest and criticism in general began to flag. Publishers urged the critics to pay attention to the Academy shows. In 1867 Macmillan published William Michael Rossetti's Fine Art Chiefly Contemporary, a collection of Academy and miscellaneous reviews dating from 1861. In 1866 F. T. Palgrave's Essays on Art, also including Academy reviews, had been brought out by the same publisher, and its author observed how far behind the French we were even in this field. In France "reviews of the chief exhibitions of the year are now collected in permanent form"; "it is thought a similar attempt might be found interesting at home."¹

It was John Camden Hotten², Swinburne's current publisher, who suggested that a new series of Academy Notes should be undertaken by William Rossetti and Swinburne together, to celebrate the Academy centenary in 1868. William Rossetti recorded on April 23rd, 1868: "Called at Swinburne's to talk over the project started by Hotten, that S. and I should do a pamphlet on the R. A. as the beginning of a series somewhat like that by Ruskin."³ Four days later a meeting between Hotten, Swinburne and Rossetti concluded that the pamphlet "altogether would be the same thickness as Ruskin's, but would contain more matter."⁴ In practical terms this meant that it would be in two parts. Swinburne unenthusiastically volunteered to add to Rossetti's professional account "a second section saying whatever he chooses to say." "Rather a dislocated scheme",⁵ concluded his associate, wishing to discourage repetition of the Notes in 1869. However, once having accepted the idea, Swinburne wanted to lionise his friends among the non-exhibitors, Frederick Sandys, Whistler, and Dante Rossetti. This artificial padding upset the balance of his contribution. Dante Gabriel Rossetti in fact told him which works he would like to see mentioned, but could not scotch what he regarded as rather misleading paeans of praise from Swinburne; those parts of his Notes which related chiefly to Gabriel both the painter and his brother thought would "have been better left undone."⁶

On May 4th Swinburne and William Rossetti inspected the Royal Academy exhibits, and shortly thereafter their thin volume appeared, prefaced somewhat ominously, "The reader of this pamphlet will be apt to understand, from its very arrangement, the fact that each of the writers speaks solely for himself. Each chooses his own point