

## SWINBURNE AS AN ART CRITIC

Swinburne's writing about art consists, mainly, of two pieces both published in 1868, his Notes on Designs of the Old Masters at Florence, and Notes on Some Pictures of 1868 (or, Notes on the Royal Academy Exhibition, 1868) done with William Michael Rossetti. He also wrote about Simeon Solomon's Vision of Love in 1871, an article dealing with Whistler's "10 O'Clock Lecture" in 1888, and an entire book on William Blake, as well as a series of poems on works by Rossetti, Frederick Sandys, Whistler, Courbet, and Fantin-Latour among others. The relationship between Swinburne's poems and works by such artists as Simeon Solomon, Flandrin, and Gerôme is intricate; here I shall confine my observations to his two long critical pieces of 1868.

As soon as Swinburne came into contact with artists, he encountered a new proposal about art in the form of two painted interiors designed by painters who were also poets: the main hall at Wallington, decorated between 1853-61 with eight scenes from Northumbrian history, by William Bell Scott; and the decoration of the Oxford Union debating hall with Arthurian scenes by D. G. Rossetti, William Morris, and Edward Burne-Jones. It is not unusual that painting and poetry should share sources of material, but these artists deliberately tried out ways of cultivating a new dependence, and Swinburne appears to have joined in, doubtless forming his critical approach as he did so. Here were schemes which placed paintings in sequences, with the Union frescoes illustrating Malory's Morte d'Arthur. No other painting in England at the time could so well have suggested a new relationship between literature and art.

When in January 1860 William Bell Scott sailed from the Northumbrian coast to visit Grace Darling's lighthouse, where he would paint one of his pictures for Wallington, Swinburne accompanied him. Scott produced his painting and Swinburne produced a poem. It is not clear whether Swinburne's poem "Grace Darling" (published in 1893) was inspired by the sea trip or by Scott's painting. At all events, it is interesting to see Swinburne participating in the production of a new style of art, hailed by the critics as an antidote to individual genre paintings. The new decorative manner was less obvious in Bell Scott's realistic scenes, done more or less in the original Pre-Raphaelite manner, than in the series organised by Rossetti from Malory's Morte d'Arthur for Oxford.

Among the frescoes on the upper walls of the Union debating hall, Rossetti painted "Sir Lancelot's Vision of the Sanc Grael", featuring Queen Guinevere, arms outstretched, barring access to the Holy Vessel