

SWINBURNE AS POET: A RECONSIDERATION¹

Veronica Forrest-Thomson

*Yet the words sufficed
To compel the recognition they preceded.*
– T.S. Eliot, “Little Gidding”

A new look at Eliot’s essay on Swinburne will help the student of literature to restore Swinburne’s reputation as poet. For, although intended as dismissive, the essay in fact points to several areas where a positive analysis may begin. There are two ways to approach the subject; first, the way of indignation; second, the way of recognition. I shall take them in that order.

I. Indignation

The way of indignation consists of getting angry that Eliot should condescend to Swinburne, and its method of proceeding is to take up the various accusations and demonstrate their inappropriateness. “The material, the human feeling..., in Swinburne’s case does not exist. The morbidity is not of human feeling but of language. Language in a healthy state presents the object, is so close to the object that the two are identified,” says Eliot (327). And without raising objections about the pejorative moral tone of “morbidity” we are justified in examining this distinction between morbidity of material – whether “human feeling” or other – and morbidity of language. “Morbidity” in this case clearly means an in-turning incestuously. Morbidity of material would be illustrated by a poem which dwelt on subjective emotions without outside reference. Morbidity of language would be one in which the words refer to nothing outside themselves, where the “object,” as Eliot says, has disappeared and the poet lives entirely among words (327). This distinction between language and object is very dubious when applied to any poetry. It is especially