

SWINBURNE AND THE MODERN POEM

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Is Swinburne a modern poet? The question is one to which both Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot replied influentially in the negative. In the wake of their critiques of Swinburne, the answer has seemed obvious: he is a Victorian, pure and simple. Indeed, the musical “excess” for which his work is known and what Eliot notably perceived as its radically internalized perspectives distance him from a modernism that would learn from Baudelaire to be both urban and urbane. Yet even this formulation is problematic: Swinburne was, after all, Baudelaire’s first English admirer and, as the novel *Love’s Cross Currents* amply shows, he had early learned to manage the ironic manner that would become a hallmark of Modernist writing. In prose, at any rate; poetry, for Swinburne, would be quite another matter. There modernity was maneuvered into a kind of irrelevance, tacitly denigrated as the realm of progress and moral platitude. Indeed, one contemporary reviewer noted approvingly of *Atalanta in Calydon* that the poet has “with rare artistic feeling, let scarcely a trace appear of modern life. The poem is all alive with the life of a classic past” (qtd in Rooksby *A.C. Swinburne* 114). How could Swinburne be thought of as a “modern” poet if he so effectively bracketed out the very *trace* of modern life? For Pound and Eliot, Swinburne was not “modern” because he was not “Modernist,” and while that second term was not yet part of their vocabulary, the assumption was clear that the new poetics was defined not just by an engagement with an ostensibly “modern” subject-matter but by forms of ironic distancing that would also help keep it at bay.¹

I suggest here that it might be helpful to think of a kind of “modern” poem that preceded the “Modernist” one (the latter category having arguably become so hegemonic that it has now quite swallowed the former one). And, importantly, this “modern” poem was above all one that thrived in a *European* rather than in a narrowly national context. I mean this in the sense that Walter Benjamin does when he tells us that *Les Fleurs du mal* was “the last book of poems to have had a European wide resonance,” the last book, that is, after Macpherson’s *Ossian* and Heine’s *Buch der Lieder* (*Arcades* 331). Benjamin does not think of Swinburne’s poetry in this way – he just comments tersely