Swinburne as Critic and Aesthetician

Wendell V. Harris

English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920, Volume 8, Number 5, 1965, pp. 308-309 (Review)

Published by ELT Press

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/375398/summary
1. Swinburne as Critic and Aesthetician


Though Swinburne's critical essays make up no inconsiderable portion of his published works—comprising some 2200 pages of the Bonchurch edition according to my own rough count—they have been accorded scant attention. Studies of Swinburne have tended to cite his criticism only as it reveals his responses to the charges of obscenity levelled against his poetry or when it in some way directly illuminates that poetry. But Swinburne was very much in earnest as a critic, and was passionately, if at times too intemperately, dedicated to the defense of what he regarded as the proper aesthetic standards.

The object of Mr. Peters' book is to set Swinburne's criticism before us in a way which will reveal its consistency and judiciousness. To this end the eight chapters are organized around such specific aspects of Swinburne's critical principles as his interest in and use of synaesthesia, his devotion to the idea of "creative tension," and his rather fully developed concepts of the various kinds of artistic form. I am not sure that the resulting discursive presentation is the best way to awaken interest in the critical Swinburne—a carefully selected and fully annotated anthology of the best portions of his critical writings might have accomplished that purpose better. But one has no right to quarrel with a book because it is not another thing altogether, and what Mr. Peters sets out to do has been done well.

Considerable thought has been given to making the volume as useful to the reader as possible. Conveniences abound. There are thirty clearly reproduced illustrations of works of art which drew comment from Swinburne—though some readers may find the reproductions themselves more interesting than Swinburne's evaluations, which generally lack the incisiveness of his literary criticism. The 'Code of Short Titles, Abbreviations, and Dates' is most helpful, both as a check-list and as a means of providing a simplified documentation. The indexing is extensive and intelligently analytical (though unfortunately Blake's name has been omitted except in connection with the WILLIAM BLAKE indexed under Swinburne's works). Generalizations about Swinburne's aesthetic principles and critical dicta are supported by an abundance of examples, and his debts to such men as Blake and Coleridge are developed through careful analysis and illustrative quotation.

Swinburne was admirable as a phrase-maker. To describe Wordsworth as regarding nature as "a vegetable fit to shred into his pot and pare down like the outer leaves of a lettuce for didactic and culinary purposes" or to define Clough's weakness as a tendency to deal too much in "cobwebs of plea and counter-plea" and "jungles of argument and brakes of analysis" are, however unfair, pungently memorable. However, he rarely arrived at the striking insights into the nature of things which Blake, Arnold, or Pater, in their own ways, were at times capable of. Moreover, his aversion to formal systems deprived him of the means of grounding his aesthetic concepts in an imaginative structure which could give coherence and depth to his judgments. For instance, his concept of "gathering form" as one of the kinds of internal organization in a work of art remains, at least to me, merely a vague metaphor in the absence of any really substantive investigation by Swinburne into the relationship between form in art and form in the external world.
Nevertheless, even though Swinburne is not entirely satisfying as a critic, his critical essays merit the analysis Mr. Peters has devoted to them. His study is useful in reminding us that Swinburne wrote criticism not merely to relieve his spleen and answer his detractors. It also serves a purpose in demonstrating the vitality of Swinburne's interest in the whole range of literature and, to a lesser extent, in the painter's art. "Demoniac youth" he may have seemed in his more perverse poetry and splenetic prose, but there is sufficient sanity in his criticism.

Finally, Mr. Peters' careful collation and close interpretation helps to demonstrate that at least part of what has frequently been dismissed as fuzzy nineteenth-century impressionistic criticism may in fact be grounded in substantive principles. Differences in vocabulary should not blind us to the value of such criticism as that of Swinburne and the best of his contemporaries. To discuss a poem in terms of "justice and chastity of form" is not necessarily less cogent than to explicate its symbolic structure. In the case of many a poem it may well be more to the point.

University of Colorado
Wendell V. Harris

2. Thomas Hardy: A Survey and A Reassessment


Professor Carpenter's study is, in some ways, typical of other books in the Twayne series: he has devoted considerable space to discussion of all Thomas Hardy's work, the well known and the not so well known; he has eschewed the relentless pursuit of a carefully restricted thesis in favor of a broader interpretative approach; and he has supplied useful student helps—a chronology, a nicely annotated bibliography, and an index. Despite these several bows to Twayne convention, however, his book is much more than a cautious introductory survey. While it will serve the beginner admirably, it will also be of considerable significance to advanced students interested in an important reassessment of a persistently misunderstood author.

Prof. Carpenter's ability to synthesize and apply the insights of contemporary scholarship assists him in this process. The references to such important recent Hardy critics as Albert J. Guerard and Samuel Hynes and, equally, references to Freud, Jung and other modern theoreticians suggest both the author's far-ranging scholarship and his desire to interpret his subject from a mid-twentieth century point of view. The section on poetry, for example, builds on the scholarship of R. P. Blackmur and Mr. Hynes, probably the two most influential critics of Hardy's poetry.

The book is most emphatically not, however, a derivative weaving-together of the highlights of modern Hardy criticism. Instead, Prof. Carpenter has applied his own considerable critical talents to the analysis of specific works and to some of the problems of Hardy's life. His discussion of "The Two Hardys" (the Public Hardy of taciturn mien and proper attitudes, and the Private Hardy fascinated by fate, suffering and death) sheds some new interpretative light on one of his subject's oddities. Similar penetrating analysis of individual works, is, I believe, the book's most impressive virtue. One expects to read about THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE or "The Convergence of the Twain" in this book, but it is much less