

Introduction

Poets and Pre-Raphaelites

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FOUR Pre-Raphaelite anthologies have been published in recent years,¹ all addressing themselves to the problem of defining what the term Pre-Raphaelite may signify in relation to poetry since, as a descriptive label applied to literature, it is in itself plainly meaningless. The most useful of their comments are the most general for, as W. E. Fredeman observes:

No single catalogue of external characteristics can convey the complexity of the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic or carry the burden of the term's definition.²

He runs through such a catalogue to illustrate his point:

a realism derived from the literal observation and truthful rendering of nature; a preoccupation with external detail for its own sake; the reintroduction of vivid colouration into painting; a predisposition to medieval themes and subjects, with overtones of an 'Early Christian' ethic; artistic sincerity in the treatment of subjects and emotions; the use of obvious literary sources as the inspiration for art

– the catalogue applies, with obvious modifications, to both poetry and painting but Fredeman dismisses it and others like it as 'inevitably misleading'.

¹ *The Pre-Raphaelite Poem*, edited by James D. Merritt (New York, 1966), *The Pre-Raphaelites*, edited by Jerome H. Buckley (New York, 1968), *The Pre-Raphaelites and their Circle*, edited by Cecil Y. Lang (Boston, 1968) and, most recently, *Pre-Raphaelite Writing*, edited by Derek Stanford (London, 1973).

² In his contribution on 'The Pre-Raphaelites' in *The Victorian Poets: A Guide to Research*, edited by Frederic E. Faverty, 2nd edition, (Cambridge, Mass., 1968).

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A reader who takes such lists seriously as a guide to the poetry is liable to conclude at best that the Pre-Raphaelite programme was arbitrary and he may well find it merely silly. The need, evidently, is for some grasp of what lies behind the various superficial characteristics. Fredeman writes that Pre-Raphaelitism in art and literature ‘was a revolt against the rules of the academicians and a re-assertion of faith in the truth of the creative expression of the individual artist as opposed to the stereotyped and conventionalised expression of pseudo-“classical” art’.¹ The phrasing of this is biased towards painting but it clears some ground for the poetry also. Lang takes us further when he writes that if Pre-Raphaelitism is to be used as a critical term for poetry ‘it has to mean something like “visualised poetry of fantasy” or “fantasy crossed with realism”’. This comment points valuably to a central area in the imaginative experience of Pre-Raphaelite poetry. Buckley is also helpful. Beneath divergencies of method and paradoxes and inconsistencies of theory, he writes, there is in Pre-Raphaelite painting and poetry ‘a certain community of spirit’:

Each of the painters and poets, in his own way or in more than one way, raised his protest against the comfortable assumptions of a matter-of-fact world. Each sought to recover the sense of wonder and mystery, the dream beyond the commonplaces of an order increasingly devoted to the mechanization of human life. Each strove to make his art the vehicle of a fresh intuition.

With these comments in mind it is possible to make some sense of the impulses which lie behind ‘heavy’ use of detail, mystery, medievalism and the rest. As is commonly recognised and as the Pre-Raphaelites were the first to acknowledge, Pre-Raphaelitism was a development out of the Romantic movement of the earlier years of the century. Holman Hunt bought a copy of Keats’s then little-known poems for fourpence one day in 1848

¹ W. E. Fredeman, *Pre-Raphaelitism, A Bibliocritical Study* (Cambridge Mass, 1965), p. 2.

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and carried it back to be the delight and inspiration of his companions. In 1847 Rossetti acquired for ten shillings from a British Museum attendant a manuscript book of Blake's (o tempora . . .) and was among the first to recognise his genius. Later he worked hard as collaborator in Gilchrist's edition and he preached Blake's merits as poet and painter all his life. The five English poets for whom he wrote sonnets (published in 1881) were all Romantics, Chatterton, Blake, Coleridge, Keats and Shelley. 'The excellence of every art is its intensity', Keats wrote, and: 'What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth . . . I have never yet been able to perceive how any thing can be known for truth by consecutive reasoning . . .'¹ The two remarks might well be taken as the distinguishing notes of that 'community of spirit' which Buckley finds among the Pre-Raphaelites, for intensity, whether in the painter's delineation of pregnant moments or Rossetti's concentrated attempts to articulate his inner life in verse, is a hallmark of Pre-Raphaelitism. As for the relation between truth perceived by the imagination and truth arrived at by consecutive reasoning, Pre-Raphaelitism takes its stand unequivocally by the imagination. Buckley again writes helpfully: '...the Pre-Raphaelites achieved their difference by repudiating the world that was too much with their contemporaries. To the mechanical standardisation of parts they opposed the fresh apprehension of detail. To the quantitative measurement of large impersonal things, they preferred the qualitative analysis of their own intense perceptions.'

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood as it was formed in 1848 was only a group of boys, as Rossetti himself in later life dismissively described it, rebelling in immature arrogance against the teaching of their masters. But they were very talented boys and one of them was brilliant.

¹ Letters to George and Thomas Keats, 21 December 1817, and to Benjamin Bailey, 22 November 1817.

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They were able to inject into an increasingly mechanistic society a reminder of other values where analysis and calculation played no part and where 'utility' whether in its physical or moral applications was of no concern. Their art was not the only channel through which the quality of nineteenth-century life was being attacked, though the attacking forces were sometimes reluctant to recognise their allies. In particular, those who waged their campaign on social and political fronts did not necessarily enjoy having their own conventional prejudices disturbed in the field of art. Dickens, for example, reacted with notorious virulence to Millais' attempt to imagine intensely the life of Christ in the house of His parents. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood as such had only a short span of existence but Pre-Raphaelitism as a call for a fresh vision, a challenge to orthodoxies and assumptions and a resistance to the depersonalising pressures of the industrial world, had a continuing and vigorous life throughout the century. It lingers yet and our own even more commercialised society makes, ironically enough, a good thing out of Pre-Raphaelite posters and calendars and even shopping bags to take to the supermarket.

Manifestations of Pre-Raphaelitism at the end of the nineteenth century were many and various. One of the best known in its own day and for years afterwards and one of the least known now is Watts-Dunton's novel *Aylwin*. Watts-Dunton was a solicitor, a poet and a critic. He is best remembered now for his care (some would say his abuse) of Swinburne in his later years but he was also an intimate friend of Rossetti's and admired him greatly. One of the most evocative passages in Max Beerbohm's splendid and witty essay 'No. 2, The Pines', recounting a visit to the Swinburne-Watts-Dunton ménage, describes the paintings of Rossetti women looming 'vivid and vital' on the walls. Watts-Dunton composed several accounts of Rossetti and *Aylwin*

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contains one of them, fictionalised and romanticised. More important in relation to the novel's Pre-Raphaelite connections, however, is the sub-title *The Renascence of Wonder*, for *Aylwin* bears only too abundant witness to the late Victorian yearning for some escape from a mechanistic universe. Celtic superstition, gypsy second sight, gnostic lore, spiritualism – a whole gamut of anti-rational beliefs and practices is run through in the novel. At the centre of it are painters, D'Arcy (Rossetti) amongst them, who are open to the mystery of things and refuse to shut their minds to possibilities which science counts impossible. 'We have our philosophical persons, to make modern and familiar, things supernatural and causeless', says Lafeu in Shakespeare's *All's Well that Ends Well*. 'Hence is it that we make trifles of terrors, ensconcing ourselves into seeming knowledge when we should submit ourselves to an unknown fear.' Watts-Dunton says the same, rather less cogently. His message, his case for a renaissance of wonder, is a late version of romanticism and he traces its lineage consciously and pointedly through the Pre-Raphaelites. *Aylwin* was an outstanding best-seller. It went through twenty-six editions by the time of Watts-Dunton's death in 1914 and was reprinted throughout the 1920s. It is scarcely heard of now.

An outgrowth from Pre-Raphaelitism which is more publicised nowadays was the aesthetic movement of later years of the century. As with Pre-Raphaelitism, argument has raged and still rages over definitions and implications. The aesthetes claimed their inheritance from Rossetti and there can be no doubt of his great influence upon them but the connection has not done much good to his reputation or to that of the Pre-Raphaelites in general. There is no reason to argue the pros and cons of aestheticism here but a few observations are relevant. In so far as aestheticism was a decadent movement they were Pre-Raphaelite ideas which were in decay. The sense of beauty may easily become a self-

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inclosed cult, belief in the truth of the imagination may create what Oscar Wilde called 'a separate realm', liable to impoverishment by lack of contact with the general life, and intensity may become a feverish pursuit of sensation – any sensation – for its own sake. Aestheticism bred the Rhymers' Club of the 1890s and a generation of writers whose tragic non-fulfilment Yeats observed when he was young. They incurred ridicule and opprobrium but in fact the voice of moral outrage against contemporary romanticism had been making itself heard for some time. Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* of 1866 defied moral orthodoxies and conventional assumptions much more flagrantly than previous Pre-Raphaelite work had done and when Rossetti published his own first volume four years later he came in for a discharge of accumulated animosity. Yet Rossetti sought to tone down Swinburne's stridencies and he himself never subscribed to the immoralist tendencies of later aestheticism. Art for art's sake is a formula of divers possible meanings, some of which Rossetti would have endorsed, but the idea that art should have reference to itself alone he did not accept. As he grew older he became more and more seriously convinced that he had something to say about his life's experience which he was impelled to record not for his own relief simply, but that other men might read and note.

II

The extent to which Pre-Raphaelitism is to be seen in the context of nineteenth-century developments of romanticism has been briefly indicated. The Pre-Raphaelites played a vital and central role as breachers of artistic convention on the one side and as champions of fidelity to a new 'truth' on the other. What was involved in Pre-Raphaelite 'truth' now needs more discussion. In 1851 Ruskin put the weight of his already considerable

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Joan Rees

Excerpt

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reputation behind the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood painters in two famous letters to *The Times* and in the same year he wrote in his essay, *Pre-Raphaelitism*, that painters should 'be truthful. It is more difficult and worthy of the greatest men's greatest effort, to render, as it should be rendered, the simplest of the natural features of the earth.' When, six years earlier, he had been to Italy, another aspect of 'truth' had made a great impression on him. In a letter to his father in 1845 he wrote of the frescoes he had seen in Pisa: 'the Campo Santo is the thing. I never believed the Patriarchal history before, but I do now, for I have seen it . . . Abraham and Adam, and Cain, Rachel and Rebekah, all are there, real, visible, created, substantial, such as they were, as they must have been . . . Abraham sits *close* to you.'¹ The two qualities celebrated by Ruskin, fidelity to natural detail and dramatic immediacy in the treatment of a scene, comprise a great deal of what the Pre-Raphaelites meant by 'truth'. But here, to complicate the issue, comes in Lang's observation that something which is not realism – he calls it 'fantasy' but that is not altogether a satisfactory word – is crossed with realism in Pre-Raphaelite poetry. Buckley is similarly thinking of ambiguities in Pre-Raphaelite 'realism' when he writes of the painting that in the best work of Millais and Hunt, 'their realism becomes surrealistic, and it is not surprising that Salvador Dali could see a kinship between their painting and his own'.

Useful assistance in pinpointing the issues involved in this matter comes from the younger Rossetti brother, William Michael. In his capacity as deeply conscientious secretary to the Brotherhood, William Michael wrote a sonnet for the cover of *The Germ*, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood magazine which, started in January 1850, ran to four monthly numbers and then collapsed. Its

¹ Quoted by Richard L. Stein, *The Ritual of Interpretation* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1975), p. 122.

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propagative qualities, however, far outlived its short career. The sub-title, evolved by Dante Gabriel, was 'Thoughts towards Nature in Poetry, Literature and Art' and William's sonnet tries to describe what it is that the small band of contributors are getting at. 'When whoso merely hath a little thought', he begins:

Will plainly think the thought which is in him, –
Not imaging another's bright or dim,
Not mangling with new words what others taught . . .

When he has done this and conveyed it in 'that very speech the matter brought', then truth has been spoken and

. . . be the theme a point or the whole earth,
Truth is a circle, perfect great or small.

Truth, then, is looking freshly at a subject and recording scrupulously and accurately what one sees; but, although this metaphor offers itself readily by way of paraphrase, it is in fact a striking feature of the sonnet that William Rossetti writes entirely in terms of thinking rather than seeing. The same emphasis occurs in *The Germ's* sub-title, 'Thoughts towards Nature . . .' This title and William Michael's sonnet might almost lead an unprepared reader to expect a volume of metaphysical essays. Philosophical and psychological concepts must always be involved in any programme which invokes words like 'truth' and 'nature' and the Rossetti brothers were far too intelligent to be unaware of this. They were not philosophers but neither did they think that to follow Nature was a simple act of transcription and they understood that the 'truth' they sought was not a given fact but something relative to the individual mind. Two of Dante Gabriel's poems illustrate neatly the limits of 'realism' as he practised it. 'My Sister's Sleep' and 'The Bride's Prelude' both contain descriptions of domestic interiors with close attention to small detail but their effect has nothing in common with the work of the great Dutch painters. In 'My Sister's Sleep' physical observation is suffused with a sense of

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spiritual mystery and in 'The Bride's Prelude' the sights and sounds of a summer day enter an atmosphere charged with guilt and passion and derive an extraordinary, 'surreal', intensity from it. Rossetti's observation turned more and more inward as years went by and in the sonnet sequence *The House of Life* (Swinburne thought the image was again a domestic one, with the sonnet stanzas as rooms – Italian *stanza*) all his powers of observation are brought into the service of recording not the outer but the inner consciousness.

'Thought', like 'fantasy', may not be the best word to indicate what is blended with Pre-Raphaelite 'realism', though both words are applicable at different times and in different proportions and each points to an activity in the mind of poet or painter. What the quality and resources of this mind are will obviously determine the nature of the results. William Michael Rossetti is again useful as an illuminator. In September 1849 he began work on a poem which was eventually published under the title 'Mrs Holmes Grey'. W. E. Fredeman has described it as a key poem of the Pre-Raphaelite movement and draws attention to its 'Pre-Raphaelite penchant for ultra-realism in the depiction of detail'.¹ There is certainly no element of fantasy in it. The poem tells the story of a wife who becomes possessed by a revived and uncontrollable passion for a man she has known before her marriage and whom she now meets again. She pursues the man to his own home and importunes him with her passion. Eventually he tells her finally and firmly that he is unable to respond and that she must return to her husband, whereupon she falls dead at his feet. The story is a sensational one but it is told with unrelieved and deliberate flatness. Rossetti goes so far, indeed, as to recount the

¹ 'A Key Poem of the Pre-Raphaelite Movement: William Michael Rossetti's "Mrs Holmes Grey"', *Nineteenth Century Perspectives: Essays in Honour of Lionel Stevenson*, edited by Clyde de la Ryals (Durham, N.C., 1974), pp. 149–59.

climactic events in the form of a newspaper report of the coroner's inquest on Mrs Grey's death. The poem represents one aspect of Pre-Raphaelite 'truth' and 'realism', a literal account, so it would seem, of an episode, verse denying itself its prerogatives of rhetoric, rhythm and imagery and depending on the steady, unwavering gaze which defines the events and lets them stand out with sharp clarity. William Rossetti is rejecting the literary equivalent of the varnish which gave a dark patina to the (then uncleaned) paintings of the Old Masters and aiming at something like the clear bold colouring of early Italian painters; but there is more to it than that. The poem is prefaced by an epigraph from Poe: 'Perverseness is one of the primitive impulses of the human heart; one of the indivisible primary faculties or sentiments which give direction to the character of man.' The quotation and its source leave no doubt that William Rossetti's primary inspiration in the composition of the poem was interest in a psychological situation – more accurately, in *two* psychological situations, for the husband's state of mind after the death is as curious as the wife's before it. It follows that to concentrate on the remorseless factuality employed in the poem is to give a much less than adequate account of 'Mrs Holmes Grey' and also of its significance in relation to Pre-Raphaelite poetry in general. To begin with, it should be stressed that the method is being applied to material which is in itself very strange indeed and, beyond that, the full scope of the experiment needs to be recognised. William Michael declared that 'The informing idea of the poem was to apply to verse-writing the same principle of strict actuality and probability of detail which the Pre-Raphaelites upheld in their pictures',¹ but he explains further, in

¹ *Family Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti with a Memoir*, edited by W. M. Rossetti, 1895, ii, p. 63. The poem has recently been edited by W. E. Fredeman and is printed in *The P.R.B. Journal* edited by Fredeman (Oxford, 1975).