

Introduction



THE PRE-RAPHAELITE BROTHERHOOD (PRB), an artistic confederation founded in London in 1848, numbered among its members four painters – Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, and James Collinson (who soon dropped away). A fifth, Ford Madox Brown, was closely associated with the group. The works of these artists were animated by characteristics of Realism and by features associated with later Symbolism. They were also historicizing and, as well, anticipated important aspects of Impressionism. This combination of elements, viewed with knowledge of subsequent artistic developments, has often appeared to later critics and historians as self-contradictory and confused. But there is no reason to consider that, as employed by the Brotherhood, they are inherently so. To the contrary, the primary literature of Pre-Raphaelitism indicates that these artists – whose works are, after all, now judged as major nineteenth-century creations – were cognizant of and embraced the diverse nature of their movement. It is precisely the Pre-Raphaelites' own understanding of their undertaking at the time of its inception and the intellectual environment in which it developed that I am, to the extent possible, interested in recovering. Although we can never entirely retrieve the thoughts and nuances of that era, bound as we are by our own perspectives and prejudices, we can achieve significantly greater understanding of their intentions than has yet been realized.

Pre-Raphaelite Painting and Nineteenth-Century Realism

This book, begun as a study of Realism in Pre-Raphaelite art, which I then considered but one aspect of the style, evolved into a more comprehensive project, a reconsideration and revision of prevailing assumptions about the character of the movement in its initial years. In it, I challenge the long-standing, widespread assumption that the Pre-Raphaelites never developed a coherent theory of art and, concomitantly, I endeavor to reconstruct their inceptive artistic philosophy and demonstrate its manifestation in representative early works. Additionally, I seek to establish some of the intellectual and philosophical sources important to the Brotherhood.

As is frequently the case with artistic movements, the Pre-Raphaelites' years of cohesiveness as a group were relatively few. The original seven members had already begun to disperse in the early 1850s, and William Holman Hunt's departure for the Holy Land in 1854 is often cited as the terminal date of the PRB. Lack of physical proximity, however, did not mean that the Brotherhood's philosophy of art was abandoned. I believe that Hunt accurately represented their sense of continuing commitment at the time: "I was but pursuing in my chosen region the principles which my fellows and I had agreed upon, and which they were to follow in their own ways at home."¹ Although the artists later moved away from the original painstaking style (Hunt to a lesser extent than the others), their progress in that direction was individual and varied. In some cases, iconographic and formal characteristics developed in the 1840s persisted even to the 1890s. Indeed, many of the most representative examples of early Pre-Raphaelitism were completed after 1854. Madox Brown's *Work*, begun in 1852, was not finished until 1865. The earliest studies for Rossetti's *Found* date to 1853, but he worked on the definitive canvas intermittently until his death in 1882. Similarly, there is an extant 1850 sketch for Holman Hunt's *Lady of Shalott*, but the Hartford version of that subject was completed in 1905. *The Blind Girl* and *Autumn Leaves*, transitional works that retain much of the early PRB aesthetic and are among Millais' most admired paintings, were produced in 1856. Therefore, although I have directed most attention to the years between 1848 and 1854, I have, in choosing examples, been flexible in regard to chronology. But because the art and philosophy of the second generation of Pre-Raphaelites should, I believe, be treated separately, I have not considered works by William Morris or Edward Burne-Jones.

Central to the Pre-Raphaelite enterprise, and mine, is the "Realism" that informs its early works. Although categorization in terms of style or movement is problematic both because of the elusive nature of the concept and its now

¹ William Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, London, 1905, Vol. II, p. 75.

Introduction

controversial status, it is basic and necessary to my study. Pre-Raphaelite primary literature locates this art within the context of contemporaneous Realism and, to arrive at a truer understanding of it, so must we. Neither my investigation of Pre-Raphaelite Realism nor my reconstruction of its theory are intended to validate the Pre-Raphaelite enterprise, but rather to cast light on it. I have, I would also note, no interest in enhancing the stature of Pre-Raphaelitism through association with what some perceive as linear stylistic developments on the Continent. Frequent (often invidious) comparison with that artistic evolution has, I believe, created significant misunderstanding of Pre-Raphaelitism.

After I scrutinized the primary documents of the movement, it seemed clear to me that Realism was more than just one aspect of the first phase of Pre-Raphaelite art. Rather, it appeared that early Pre-Raphaelitism, as a whole, was essentially an expression of Realism, comprising the English form of that nineteenth-century style. Indeed, William Michael Rossetti identified Pre-Raphaelitism in precisely this way – as the English manifestation of Realism. One of the original seven members of the PRB, he knowledgeably compared the Brotherhood's version of Realism with that practiced in France; his judgment in this regard must not be discounted, for it is surely important to reach an understanding of how the artists and their collaborators defined for themselves the nature of their enterprise. Modern scholars have recognized Realist proclivities in Pre-Raphaelite painting (at least as far as they are consonant with French Realism), but its historicism, painstaking execution, and complex symbolism have typically led them to conclude that the Pre-Raphaelites misunderstood the essential nature of the style. Such assessments reflect an inappropriately narrow application of a French paradigm to English art. The Pre-Raphaelites developed a version of Realism expressive of their own cultural milieu. It is well to remember, in this regard, that Realism was an international movement, open to considerable variation, and associated with artists as diverse as Courbet, Menzel, and Eakins. As is generally true of style, Realism is identified not so much by a single immutable definition as by a confluence of characteristic, although multifarious, features. Hence, another central goal of this study is to delineate the distinctive character of Pre-Raphaelite Realism. We shall see that aspects of Pre-Raphaelitism that appear anomalous to Realism if judged by French standards are, in fact, part of a consistent and carefully considered English artistic philosophy responsive to many of the same cultural and historical forces (particularly the impact of Positivism, the political disquiet attendant on the uprisings of 1848, and the accompanying ascendancy of bourgeois-industrial culture) that gave rise to the Realist sensibility on the Continent. Of particular importance in this regard is the question of Pre-Raphaelite historicism, for the group's insistence on treating both modern and historical subjects has

Pre-Raphaelite Painting and Nineteenth-Century Realism

been viewed as indicative of their misunderstanding of Realism. We shall see, to the contrary, that their commitment to both temporal modes is consistent with their distinctive and shared Pre-Raphaelite Realist vision and derives from British philosophical thought that began with Newton. Once cast in the context of Realism, the nature of early Pre-Raphaelitism and its formative influences appear in a new light. I would, therefore, ask the reader to reserve judgment about the parameters of Realism. I am, after all, using the term as William Rossetti used it, and an examination of the Pre-Raphaelites' idea of Realism will at least afford new understanding of their interests and intentions.

If early Pre-Raphaelite art is perceived as most essentially a manifestation of the Realist impulses of its era, then an analysis of the character of Pre-Raphaelite Realism approximates an examination of the basis of the movement itself. As I have indicated, the first of my goals is to arrive at an understanding of the theoretical principles of the PRB at its inception and to reconstruct the intellectual and philosophical forces that helped to shape them. In this regard, it has seemed to me that generally accepted ideas about the nature of Pre-Raphaelitism rely too heavily on a few, often-repeated, "significant" events in its intellectual history. Two that center on John Ruskin have been especially emphasized: Ruskin's suggestion that the group had evolved its artistic principles by following his admonition to "go to nature . . . rejecting nothing," and William Holman Hunt's expression of admiration for Ruskin's typological reading of Tintoretto's *Annunciation*. We shall find that the importance of the latter has been exaggerated and the ascription of fundamental influence to the former is erroneous. Although John Ruskin has long been viewed as integral to the development of Pre-Raphaelitism, and his ideas are widely assumed to have provided the intellectual basis for the movement, the relation of one to the other has not been thoroughly examined. I engage in such an analysis here, focusing on *Modern Painters* II – the Ruskinian text repeatedly linked to the formation of the PRB – and a number of related documents, specifically in regard to the question of their consonance with the ideas expressed in Pre-Raphaelite painting and in the artists' own statements of purpose. Careful study of these documents has revealed areas of incompatibility with Pre-Raphaelite ideology numerous and significant enough to rule out Ruskin (or major ideas associated with him) as their only or primary theoretical model. Although it is certainly not my intention to deny his considerable role in the history of the movement, it does seem clear to me that Ruskin's greatest impact occurred *after* he came to know the artists. His importance as a formative influence at the inception of the movement has been overestimated. We shall find that, because the PRB has been closely associated with Ruskin's theocentric art theories as, for example, in typological approaches to the movement, too much emphasis has been placed

Introduction

on religiosity in its works, obscuring both the largely metaphorical nature of spiritual imagery in Pre-Raphaelite art and the wider philosophical vision of which it is part.

The philosophical and artistic influences reflected in Pre-Raphaelite art were more varied and complex than the literature currently indicates. Hence, another of my purposes is to explore additional possibilities. For example, I connect Brotherhood works to the empirical tradition in English philosophy and examine the considerable influence of Thomas Carlyle on Pre-Raphaelite thought – a topic that, although not overlooked, has been discussed at length only in relation to typology. In attempting to discover a cohesive and inclusive theory of Pre-Raphaelite painting, I also focus on the early documents of the movement: in some cases, scrutinizing anew familiar examples; in others, examining some long neglected. In most cases, I have analyzed these sources in their entirety in an attempt to achieve as complete an understanding of the writers' intentions as possible and, to some extent, to rectify the distortions inherent in reliance on the handful of well-known, out-of-context quotations frequently repeated in Pre-Raphaelite literature.

The numerous expressions of admiration for Thomas Carlyle, as well as acknowledgments of influence and indications of beliefs held in common with him in Pre-Raphaelite publications, memoirs, and diaries, make an investigation of his relationship to the movement's theory necessary and central. The Pre-Raphaelites' interest in and high regard for him is not surprising. It is scarcely possible to overemphasize the importance of Carlyle's impact on British intellectual life in the 1840s, the time of the Brotherhood's formation, when his books were eagerly read by an ardently admiring audience that included the most important cultural figures of the day, with Thackeray and Dickens among them. Dickens, in fact, dedicated *Hard Times* to Carlyle, asked him to read *The Chimes* before publishing it, and declared that he had read "that wonderful book," *The French Revolution*, "for the 500th time." Carlylean ideas pervade many other Victorian novels, including Kingsley's *Yeast* and *Alton Locke*, in which they are specifically acknowledged, and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*.² The publications that established his exalted position in British literary and intellectual life (*Sartor Resartus*, 1834; *The French Revolution*, 1837; *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, 1839; *Chartism*, 1840; *Past and Present*, 1843; *Cromwell*, 1845) are, we shall see, discussed in Pre-Raphaelite publications, mentioned in personal writings, and alluded to in Brotherhood paintings. The formation of the PRB coincided with the moment of Carlyle's greatest intellectual and moral

² On this, see John D. Rosenberg, *Carlyle and the Burden of History*, Cambridge, MA, 1985, pp. 3–14; and Kathleen Tillotson, *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties*, Oxford, 1956, pp. 150–6.

Pre-Raphaelite Painting and Nineteenth-Century Realism

authority, and the members of the group participated in the admiration for him that was so widespread among artists and writers of the time. They assimilated his ideas to a far greater extent than has been recognized.

In 1979, two books, George Landow's *William Holman Hunt and Typological Symbolism* and Herbert Sussman's *Fact into Figure: Typology in Carlyle, Ruskin, and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, examined the hitherto neglected topic of the role of typological or prefigurative symbolism in Brotherhood works, providing new and significant insights into meaning. Both scholars place importance on the religious dimension of this symbolic system (which particularly focuses on the foreshadowing in the Old Testament of figures and events in the New Testament), concluding that it provided the artists a way to combine their desire for heightened verisimilitude with a sense of the sacred. They find that this combination reflects the central core of Pre-Raphaelite theory. Sussman, for example, describes Ruskin's *Modern Painters II* as a work that "in its explication of Renaissance religious painting through Protestant typological exegesis exerted the single most important theoretical influence upon the Brotherhood." And Landow concludes that "Hunt and his Pre-Raphaelite associates drew largely upon typological symbolism for their chief inspiration," and locates their "religious sources" in "a much broader attempt to reconcile realism and symbolism."³ The Pre-Raphaelite credo, then, is seen to consist in a fusion of Christianity and empiricism expressed through typology.

But typology is not comprehensive enough to provide a theoretical basis for Pre-Raphaelite painting. It represents one aspect of Pre-Raphaelitism, but does not afford its entire philosophy of art. The group's early theoretical discussions are concerned with a variety of topics apart from typology. As might be expected of Realist artists, they focus on, among other things, questions of subject matter and period setting and the meaning of fidelity to nature and psychological truth. Typology is mentioned only briefly and viewed quite negatively.⁴ Even the representation of time and movement in time, which is related to the question of typology, is expressed in a variety of other ways. Narrative provides one important approach. Sometimes, as in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "St. Agnes of Intercession," a secular, supernatural variant of typology is employed. In this narrative, the life and work of a modern artist are foreshadowed in the experiences of one centuries older, but no religious meaning is intended. Some works are set unambiguously in the present. Others evoke a vast sweeping movement

³ Herbert L. Sussman, *Fact into Figure: Typology in Carlyle, Ruskin, and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, Columbus, OH, 1979, p. xvii; and George P. Landow, *William Holman Hunt and Typological Symbolism*, New Haven, CT, and London, 1979, p. 166.

⁴ Holman Hunt's admiring remarks on Ruskin's *Modern Painters II*, previously mentioned, comprise an exception and are taken up again later in discussion of that volume.

Introduction

through time and multiple historical references well beyond the scope of typology's dual eras. Pre-Raphaelite painting, as we will see, is fundamentally concerned with issues relating to time, but these issues and the methods of expressing them are too varied, complex, and extensive to be contained within the limitations of typology, which represents but a subset of this wider temporal vision.

The first section of my study is centered on art theory (with occasional and brief discussion of works illustrative of the points being made). I have endeavored to understand the painters' conception of Pre-Raphaelitism through careful exegesis of their own and related publications. This aspect of my work intersects with issues addressed in recent poststructuralist and feminist scholarship regarding the use of primary documents, especially the memoirs, biographies, autobiographies, and correspondence of the artists and their associates. Although the primary sources I use are mainly theoretical rather than biographical, this question directly concerns my methodology and, therefore, warrants discussion. Griselda Pollock and Deborah Cherry addressed the problematic nature of the current use of primary sources in their influential review of the two publications accompanying the 1984 Tate exhibition, *The Pre-Raphaelites and Pre-Raphaelite Papers*,⁵ and in a 1984 article, "Woman as Sign in Pre-Raphaelite Literature."⁶ They deplored a number of practices associated with the use of biographical material in particular, including what they saw as a general failure to consider the multiplicity of historical forces bearing on these writings, the accompanying willingness to accept them as neutral archival material, and a tendency toward the retrospective imposition of artistic intention on the 1848 group whereby statements culled from late writings are unquestioningly applied to the formative stage of the movement, to create a manifesto despite the fact that (they believe) none originally existed. They observed that critical and historical discussion of the Brotherhood has emphasized the individuality and separate artistic development of its three major artists – Rossetti, Hunt, and Millais – in order to establish an *oeuvre* for each, thereby undermining or precluding an understanding of Pre-Raphaelitism as a coherent, unified artistic movement. In addition, they contend that late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century portrayals of Rossetti as the originating genius of the movement incited the relatives and disciples of Hunt and Millais to focus their later

⁵ Leslie Parris, ed., *The Pre-Raphaelites*, Tate Gallery, London, 1984; and Leslie Parris, ed., *Pre-Raphaelite Papers*, London, 1984.

⁶ Deborah Cherry and Griselda Pollock, "Patriarchal Power and the Pre-Raphaelites," *Art History*, Vol. 7, No. 4, December 1984, pp. 480–95; and "Woman as Sign in Pre-Raphaelite Literature: The Representation of Elizabeth Siddall," in Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and Histories of Art*, London and New York, 1988, pp. 91–114.

Pre-Raphaelite Painting and Nineteenth-Century Realism

biographies and reminiscences on issues of leadership, independence, and originality, thereby further compromising the notion of a cohesive movement and additionally fostering an overemphasis on individualism. Although they believe the current denial of unity in the practice and theory of the PRB derives from the self-interested nature of the primary literature, Cherry and Pollock seem to find that the Pre-Raphaelites were, in fact, an artistically disparate group, for they contend that the Brotherhood's only manifesto was provided by later scholars "according to the paradigms of modernist art history" whereby "an avant-garde group always provides the future with a declaration of their rebellious intent." This spurious "manifesto," they find, "constructs the PRB as an avant-garde which did not exist."

In "Woman as Sign," they focused on Elizabeth Siddal and observed that representations of her in William Michael Rossetti's reminiscences were "deeply implicated in nineteenth-century ideologies of class and gender, of the artist and romance." They maintain that such memoirs and biographies, as "historically shaped" documents, must be understood in the context of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century biographical forms, in which they function as quasi-fictional literature whose romantic artist-protagonists' exploits are presented in ways calculated to enhance their fame and increase their sales. Beyond the specific problems inherent in the use of texts, of course, Cherry and Pollock address the more general question of methodology. More recently, Pollock has advocated that "cultural texts" can be usefully analyzed only "if the frame of reference within which that analysis is made is no longer that of art history."⁷

Problems inherent in the use of artists' biographies and autobiographies were subsequently considered by a number of other scholars who focused particularly on one of the central Pre-Raphaelite primary documents: William Holman Hunt's almost universally cited *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*. Both Marcia Pointon and Laura Marcus were sympathetic to the "radical agenda" proposed by Pollock and Cherry, but considered it "impossible to accomplish."⁸ Marcus expressed objections to traditional art-historical employment of these volumes similar to those raised by Cherry and Pollock regarding William Michael Rossetti's memoirs. She similarly faults insufficient scholarly contextualization, uncritical acceptance of their pervasive self-aggrandizement, and the perpetuation of excessive art-historical concern with individual (male)

⁷ Griselda Pollock, "Trouble in the Archives," *Women's Art Magazine*, No. 51, 1993, p. 13.

⁸ See Marcia Pointon, "Introduction," in Marcia Pointon, ed., *Pre-Raphaelites Re-Viewed*, Manchester and New York, 1989, p. 7; and Laura Marcus, "Brothers in Their Anecdote: Holman Hunt's *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*," in *ibid.*, pp. 11–21.

Introduction

artists. To negate Hunt's memoirs as sources of "authenticating evidence," she too eschews their classification as autobiography, but rejects Cherry's and Pollock's suggestion of a novelistic rubric. Instead, Marcus proposes Benvenuto Cellini's autobiography as a counterpart to and precedent for Hunt in his self-conception of the author as artist-hero conveying both the historical specificity and artistic immortality of his achievement and concludes, therefore, that Hunt's writing belongs to a biographical subgenre of artistic autobiography. Pointon, interestingly, indicates differences between Hunt's first version of his experiences in the Middle East, recorded in his travel diaries, and that given later in his memoirs, noting that both are embellished and edited. She places the memoirs within the tradition of travel and ethnographic literature and focuses particularly on the strategies through which they, and the paintings related to them, express Hunt's colonizing ideology.⁹ Julie Codell also considered Hunt's *Pre-Raphaelitism* with regard to issues of gender, racism, and imperialism.¹⁰ She too found it appropriate to change the work's literary classification, coining the term "bio-history" to describe Hunt's approach that, in order to "construct a revised history of art based on national and racial characteristics," excises intimate details of the life, emphasizing instead the artist's work, his role in the development of Pre-Raphaelitism, and his and the movement's place in British history.

Despite such extensive reconsideration of the uses of primary material, these documents remain important for Pre-Raphaelite studies across a range of methodologies, as may be seen in recent volumes of collected essays that incorporate both poststructural and traditional procedures. Biographical material continues to be consulted and, in some circumstances, is approached in traditional ways, even within the context of the deconstruction of Pre-Raphaelite primary literature in the service of elucidating poststructural issues. Codell, for example, accepts Hunt's travel diaries and letters as valid indicators of his feelings and intentions at the time of writing. And among the scholars who contributed the essays based in material culture that comprise Pointon's *Pre-Raphaelites Re-Viewed*, Laura Marcus notes and seems sympathetic to conventional uses of biography in recent histories of working-class subjects and women, for which they have been deemed appropriate because they are employed in elucidating "lives outside dominant cultural narratives."¹¹

⁹ Marcia Pointon, "The Artist as Ethnographer: Holman Hunt and the Holy Land," in Marcia Pointon, ed., *Pre-Raphaelites Re-Viewed*, pp. 22–44.

¹⁰ Julie F. Codell, "The Artist Colonized: Holman Hunt's 'Bio-History,' Masculinity, Nationalism and the English School," in Ellen Harding, ed., *Re-Framing the Pre-Raphaelites: Historical and Theoretical Essays*, Aldershot, Hampshire, England, 1996, pp. 211–29.

¹¹ Marcus, p. 14.

Pre-Raphaelite Painting and Nineteenth-Century Realism

Pre-Raphaelite primary sources are abundant and have always been important – indeed, essential – to art historians. They remain so today. The nature of my task, to understand the theory of Pre-Raphaelite painting as the artists themselves defined it, required extensive study and interpretation of their own statements and those of their collaborators. I have, therefore, consulted the primary literature assiduously, although I would again emphasize that the documents I address are more often theoretical and critical essays than personal reminiscences and correspondence. The recent reevaluations of Pre-Raphaelite primary literature have provided a significant service to scholars of the movement, heightening awareness of its subtexts and of the relationship between content and context. These sources are certainly not unproblematic: Class, cast, and gender biases; well-known romantic rivalries; individual loyalties; the desire for preeminence; period forms of writing; and the obvious problems of accuracy and agenda in reminiscences written as much as half a century after the events described are all matters for concern. Clearly, one must use these documents, but one should also read them with awareness of the circumstances in which they were written and with some degree of scepticism. Still, despite such difficulties, I believe the theoretical and critical essays, and even the biographical documents I cite, do reveal a valid philosophy of art. I am not, after all, concerned with the matter most bound up with prevarication and manipulation of evidence in Pre-Raphaelite primary literature, that of establishing the dominant or most important or original of the members. Nor am I interested in emphasizing the individual nature of these artists' accomplishments. It is the character of the enterprise as a whole that interests me. In regard to theory, ideas advanced in primary treatments of the individual members of the group usually echo and support each other. There is a high degree of unanimity in their declarations of intent, the matter with which I am most concerned. As ensuing discussions demonstrate, the Pre-Raphaelites were quite consistent concerning theoretical matters. Further, with regard to theory, the documents are also consistent across time. The early (1850) theoretical essays in *The Germ*, for instance, are consonant with numerous statements concerning the ideas animating Pre-Raphaelitism at its founding written by William Michael Rossetti through the 1880s and beyond, and with theoretical positions conveyed in William Holman Hunt's 1905 memoirs, as well as with Dante Gabriel Rossetti's writings of 1863. Finally, and perhaps most telling, the theoretical ideas expressed in these literary sources find clear and demonstrable counterparts in early Pre-Raphaelite painting. In regard to PRB statements of theory, examination of a broad range of writings reveals a consistency concerning the essential nature of their goals that supports the notion of a shared ideology. It appears that theoretical declarations by the artists and their followers can be profitably