

EDWARD LEAR AND THOMAS SEDDON: THE PARADOX OF INQUIRY

Almost slipping off the bottom left-hand corner of William Holman Hunt's "The Awakening Conscience" is a carelessly discarded copy of Tennyson's "Tears, Idle Tears" set to music by Edward Lear. This bordering detail in a painting overwhelmed by more forcefully presented particulars is a visual reminder of Lear's own peripheral association with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a relationship which might have fallen away entirely had it not been mediated and kept alive by his long-lasting friendship with Hunt.¹

This friendship between the two painters produced many letters, most of which are unpublished. Recently one of them, a letter Lear wrote to Hunt on 7 May 1857 from Corfu, caught my attention because it not only makes explicit Lear's admiration for Hunt but also brings to the forefront two almost forgotten episodes in the Brotherhood's history. It serves as a reminder of the paradoxical nature of inquiry in which frequently the outsider, the figure hovering on the border, leads the investigator into the concerns of the center. In the case of this letter, it is Lear and his curiosity about the Brotherhood's efforts to honor Thomas Seddon, as well as his interest in the proposed Pre-Raphaelite College, which lets us see a nostalgic impulse present at the very center of the Pre-Raphaelite Movement in 1857: a time when the membership was splitting and Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his disciples were about to leave for Oxford and begin what historians of the Movement call "The Second Phase." In the jigsawed history of the Pre-Raphaelites, Seddon's death receives only peripheral attention; yet to his contemporaries it was the occasion which allowed members of the original group to re-assert, briefly, their commitment to their center and their founding principles and to preserve, temporarily, some modicum of unity. A similar impulse lies behind the plans for a Pre-Raphaelite College. And it was also an occasion which, without intending to, helped shape the Movement's future and set into motion the Brotherhood's implicit pre-industrialism.

Seddon was a minor associate of the Pre-Raphaelites, friendly with Hunt and Ford Madox Brown. In his early years, he had studied and practiced ornamental design; then he had turned to painting and helped to establish the North London School of Drawing and Modelling. Between 1853 and 1855 he travelled for a short time with Lear in Egypt,² and afterwards at length with Hunt. The two spent almost two years painting together in Egypt and the Holy Land (see Figure 1). After private showings in London of his "Oriental" work (March-June, 1855 and 1856), Seddon returned to Egypt to gather fresh subjects for