

Edward Lear and the Pre-Raphaelite Impossibility: Reflections on the Lear Exhibit: The National Academy of Design, New York, September 10 – November 3, 1985

In 1852 Edward Lear met William Holman Hunt when the painter Robert Martineau brought Hunt to Lear's studio to see Lear's topographies. Hunt, who was about to leave for Clive Vale Farm near Hastings, Sussex, invited Lear to join him and agreed, in exchange for Italian lessons, to tutor him. For the next three months, Lear observed Hunt at work, took notes on his procedures, and painted.¹ Having received limited formal training and believing himself in need of "improvement," Lear revered Hunt and was always to feel indebted to him for his instruction.

Initially Lear's enthusiasm for "Daddy" Hunt included other members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. For instance, he admired the work of his artistic "uncles": John Everett Millais and Thomas Woolner. In fact, such was the fervor of his confidence in these artists' abilities that Lear determined to become one of them. Consequently, for the following few years, in an attempt not only to conform to Hunt's methodology but also to emulate the Brotherhood's style, Lear painted several large oils which he exhibited at the Royal Academy. Recently, at the National Academy of Design, three of these canvases were on display: "The Quarries of Syracuse" 1852; "The Mountains of Thermopylae" 1852; and "The Temple of Bassae" 1854. Their unusually forbidding presence among his delicate watercolors, intricate animal studies, and almost careless nonsense drawings was startling, if not alienating. In the context of his other pieces, these grand oils jostled the subject of Lear's brief, but earnest, flirtation with the Pre-Raphaelites to the surface, and, in particular, reintroduced the question of why, finally, he was unable to be one of them and enjoy that sense of belonging or acceptance he seemed desperately to desire.

Vivian Noakes, Lear's biographer, suggests that the Brotherhood's requirement that an artist must paint in the presence of his subject was responsible for Lear's abandoning his resolve. Certainly the practical problems

involved in moving 5, 6, and 7 foot canvases from place to place to find the exact shape, light and shade, and the delays while waiting for the rain to cease were overwhelming. For example, when Lear went to Windsor Castle (July 1852) at Lord Derby's request for a painting, to his "disgust" he discovered that the weather contradicted his intentions: "the castle . . . has been for 2 days jet black."² Then when he attempted to paint sheep for that picture's foreground, the problems multiplied. In her biography, Noakes includes Lear's account of his difficulties. His words describing his Pre-Raphaelite dilemma are worth repeating, for they capture his zeal, tenacity, and, perhaps, his willingness to recognize the nonsense of it all:

I have been trying all sorts of ways to paint sheep of a good size. First, I went to a friend the Rector of Gt. Berkhamsted—but his sheep were so wild I could do nothing, & being caught, made so great a noise that my friend became nervous, & I obliged to go away, lest he should preach from Samuel's question about the bleating of sheep in his ears.

Then I went to Hastings, but though I made many small drawings, I could not find good South Down Sheep near enough, or otherwise available to be painted large on so large a canvas.

Lastly, I came here:—but infinite obstacles owing to the size of the picture, the shearing of the sheep, the growth of the lambs &C &C &C &C &C, have at last worn me out utterly, & therefore I shall give up all idea of doing the sheep as large as I intended, & confine myself to a simple foreground of green, with distant sheep³

It is understandable that Lear was attracted, and therefore vulnerable, to the Brotherhood's insistence that an artist copy directly from nature because earlier he had pursued such a course when making his preparatory sketches for his bird and animal