

HAZLITT, WORDSWORTH, KEATS:  
A PRE-RAPHAELITE VIEW

Pre-Raphaelite art is romantic art in that it is naturalistic. When Richard Ellmann writes in another connection ("The Backgrounds of 'The Dead'"), "Joyce did not invent the incidents that conclude his story, the second honeymoon of Gabriel and Gretta which ends so badly. His method of composition was very like T. S. Eliot's, the imaginative absorption of stray material," he is (from a Pre-Raphaelite point of view) making two serious errors in judgment. In so far as Joyce exploited the possibilities of incident, he may be said to have "invented" (discovered) each incident he uses as a story-carrier. (Here incident satisfies Morris's view that Pre-Raphaelite art is "incident that tells a story.") Further, Ellmann goes astray when he uses the word "absorption." Let us say, rather, that Joyce assimilates "stray material" and then imaginatively welds it into a baroque moral emblem of such intensity that he has to borrow the religious term "epiphany" to describe it. In doing this, Joyce is contributing to the Pre-Raphaelite mode of art.

Not aiming at perfecting Nature or at informing phenomena egotistically, Pre-Raphaelitism is concerned with reproducing the real conditions (configurations of sense data) that have evoked or expressed a psychological state (sometimes evocation and expression exist symbiotically, mutually triggering or nourishing each other). But in addition to this sort of Lockean "mental" oppressiveness, there is also another kind of truth which, although not external, is just as real as the world that surrounds us. This truth is spiritual and seeks expression by means of the concrete or by means of dramatic statement. The landscapes of George Crabbe are psychologically true in the first way, and the sonnet-sequences of Rossetti and Meredith are true in the second.

It is generally agreed that English Romanticism was a spiritual movement which was attended by a widespread awakening of the senses. The democratization of the muse allowed poets to derive their inspiration from palpable and humble sources, and yet to add a human touch to whatever they undertook so that it became an occasion for engaging attention simultaneously at the various levels of consciousness and personality. Blake's "fourfold man" comes immediately to mind; but, with the Pre-Raphaelites, it would be wiser to remember their "Medievalism," and to bring the four levels of Medieval art criticism to bear on their work: literal, moral, allegorical, anagogic.

When Wordsworth announced that he was returning to nature and