

DAVID RIEDE

Reassessing the Pre-Raphaelites: The Case of "Faustine"

Admirers and promoters of the Pre-Raphaelites have traditionally given two primary reasons why we should read their works. First, it is quite reasonably argued, the Pre-Raphaelites ("last Romantics" all) carried the ark of the Romantic tradition from Shelley and Keats through the Philistine infested deserts of the Victorian age to Yeats—they maintained the great tradition. Second, their resistance to philistine culture helped to establish the autonomy of art, helped to establish a powerful artistic counter-culture. But my having been asked to speak about why we should continue to read Pre-Raphaelite poetry in light of recent developments in critical theory implies that these traditional, literary-historical reasons need to be buttressed. And indeed, due to the radical questioning of traditional literary history by contemporary theory, and particularly by the "new historicism," we do need to re-examine the importance and value of Pre-Raphaelite art and poetry. What I would like to do tonight is briefly call into question the prevailing assumptions in very general terms, and then consider how we might begin to look freshly at Pre-Raphaelite poetry by examining a specific poem, Swinburne's "Faustine," from a "new historicist" perspective. What I hope will become evident is that our understanding of Pre-Raphaelite poetry, and of the Victorian age, can only gain by a refusal to praise it simply on the grounds of its being more or less timelessly "Romantic," or on the more than dubious grounds that it is somehow "counter-cultural."

To begin with, our celebration of the Pre-Raphaelites as faithful Romantics has been from within the ideological framework of

Romanticism—from Graham Hough's *The Last Romantics*, to Oswald Doughty's biography of Rossetti, *A Victorian Romantic*, to Jerome McGann's innovative and influential *Swinburne: An Experiment in Criticism*, to my own praise of Swinburne's Romantic mythmaking, and beyond—Pre-Raphaelite Romanticism has been praised on its own unquestioned terms by a still Romantic criticism.¹ But contemporary criticism, and especially the new historicism championed by McGann, among others, exhorts us to separate ourselves from the Romantic tradition, to move from commentary within the tradition to critique from without.² We need, therefore, to continue to appreciate Pre-Raphaelite works within their Romantic contexts, but also to recognize that Romanticism is not a term that automatically bestows value, but merely describes a limited ideological framework.

Some reasons why we cannot happily go along promoting the Pre-Raphaelites on the old Romantic grounds become obvious as soon as we look closely at the ideological implications of the praises bestowed by traditional literary historians. The twin praises of Pre-Raphaelitism for maintaining the tradition and for counter-cultural insurgency ought immediately to strike us as not complementary, but contradictory. The preservation of tradition is inherently conservative; the production of a counter-culture, as we normally think of it, is radical. The problem becomes clear with even a cursory inspection of the descriptions of Pre-Raphaelite counter-culture offered by the best of the traditional critics. Jerome Hamilton Buckley, for example, says that the Pre-Raphaelite move-