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Dali and the Pre-Raphaelites

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Some art critics believe that Pre-Raphaelite influences extend to such twentieth century artists as the Surrealists. For example, Marcel Jean in *Histoire de la peinture surréaliste* (1959)¹ refers to the English Pre-Raphaelites as the precursors of surrealist painters in the nineteenth century. Moreover, a reporter for *Time* of 29 April 1946, describing the Pre-Raphaelite exhibition held at the Fogg Museum of Art,² cited the Pre-Raphaelites as "Victorian Surrealists" and simplified the problem as follows:

Like the modern surrealists, they painted their dreams—the difference was that their dreams concerned the beautiful and good.³

However, these references lack positive proof and concrete details of the influence of the Pre-Raphaelites on the Surrealists.

As early as 1936, however, Salvador Dali (1904-) had already written an article entitled 'Le surréalisme spectral de l'éternel féminin préraphaélite' in *Minotaure* no. 8.⁴ From this, it is certain that he was the first and only surrealist to recognize the significance of the Pre-Raphaelites. He himself boasted of this fact in his autobiography *The Secret Life of Salvador Dali* (1942):

London brought to Paris a gleam of Pre-Raphaelism (sic) which I was the only one to understand and to savor.⁵

Pre-Raphaelite accomplishments have seldom been evaluated in relation to surrealists like Dali. And because Pre-Raphaelite influences upon twentieth-century art have

been overlooked by scholars, it is significant, at the outset, to clarify the real aspects of their connection by describing the Pre-Raphaelites' influence on Dali.

Of first importance is Dali's essay in *Minotaure*. This essay was, par excellence, written in a style of his own:

Les peintres préraphaélites nous apportant et nous font resplendir les femmes à la fois les plus désirables et les plus effrayantes qui existent, car il s'agit de la sorte d'être qu'on aurait le plus de terreur et d'angoisse à manger: ce sont les phantasmes charnels des "faut souvenir" d'enfance, c'est le viande gélatineuse de plus coupables rêves sentimentaux. (47)

Although Dali's intention is not clear, his essay has two main goals. The first is to accuse Cézanne of being the ringleader of a degenerated Modern Art.⁶ To prove that Cézanne is guilty of degrading Modern Art, strange as it may sound, he makes a comparison between Cézanne's apples and the Adam's apples of Pre-Raphaelite women. The latter must mean Rossettian women with such throats suffering Basedow's disease as Elizabeth E. Siddal in *Beata Beatrix*. To Dali, who declared in 1933 that "la beauté sera comestible ou ne sera pas,"⁷ Cézanne's apples merely contenting themselves with visual purity are anti-epicurean apples that do not provoke his appetite at all ("Le surréalisme" 48). The second goal is to admire Pre-Raphaelite beauty, especially the subtle depiction of drapery. Dali tries to explain it in terms of "geodesic" and "chainet":

La morphologie préraphaélite se résume dans la gravité tiède, faible des "chafnettes dépressive" du