

"TO SEE CLEARLY": PERSPECTIVE IN PRE-RAPHAELITE
POETRY AND PAINTING

Let observation, with extensive view
Survey mankind, from China to Peru...

--Dr. Johnson, "The Vanity of
Human Wishes."

It is only the roughness of the eye that
makes any two persons, things, situations
seem alike....While all melts under our
feet, we may well catch at any exquisite
passion...

--Walter Pater, "Conclusion"
to The Renaissance.

These two ways of seeing the world, the one extolling generalization, distance, and a concern for the whole, the other urging intense study of individual phenomena, particularity, closeness, and a respect for the uniqueness of things, illustrate clearly the 19th century writers' rejection of generalization and their acceptance of an aesthetic of particularity, as studied by Carol Christ in The Finer Optic.¹ Besides the clear contrast between the abstracting and the detailing eyes, though, another contrast appears: Dr. Johnson's "observation" has no trouble defining its central subject -- "mankind" -- and its position in relation to that subject: a distant, somewhat godlike post out in space, looking down on an earth shrunk so that "China" and "Peru" can seem visible at the same time and their essential features will stand out clearly. Pater offers no comparably solid platform from which to see things, but only an unstable, melting universe in which every thing, every person, and every situation must be studied in and for itself. In short, Johnson offers both generalization and a perspective from which to generalize, whereas Pater offers neither. Readers or viewers of mid-Victorian poems and paintings notice this characteristic immediately: the works seem flat, leading hostile contemporary critics of some paintings to berate their "'absence of perspective'"² and Matthew Arnold to see the hallmark of contemporary poetry as "attention...fixed mainly on the value of the separate thoughts and images" rather than on the "action" as a whole.³ Although most Victorian poets and painters show some deviation from Johnson's kind of magisterial use of perspective toward Pater's absent or shifting perspective, the abandonment of illusionist perspective as an ordering principle appears most clearly in Pre-Raphaelite poetry and painting. The stylistic lack of perspective in these works, furthermore, suggests a world-view and a psychological state in which intense, inclusive perception becomes a value in and for itself, taking the place