

THE "THERE" OF GEORGE MEREDITH'S PRE-RAPHAELITE POETRY

People often like to talk about the "what-ness" of an art work -- its quiddity. In what follows, ubi (where) replaces quid as the aesthetic focal point, for I believe that art provides us with a kind of homeland; and home is not what but where the heart is. Asking the question where, we may hope to arrive at the answer there. With regard to the Pre-Raphaelites and their rebellion against servile imitation in the arts, such a homeland is freedom itself and to be gained by "ornamental" rather than utilitarian avenues, for the value of every soul is more closely allied to Beauty than to Use. This way of thinking, of course, is hardly Victorian; clearly it is Mediaeval. As Ruskin put it ("The Nature of Gothic"): "But in the mediaeval, or especially Christian system of ornament, this slavery ["Servile ornament"] is done away with altogether; Christianity having recognized, in small things as well as great, the individual value of every soul." Each soul is invited to express the "Naturalism"¹ of its belongingness architectonically,² to contribute its "story"³ as an archetypal part to an Archetypal Whole, to realize and express itself as part of a "There" Cathedral historically actualized. Like its aesthetic blueprint (Ruskin's "reading" of St. Mark's), all Pre-Raphaelite art presents a kind of alpha-omega Tabernacle, the Source and Goal of an essentially religious experience, offering itself as an opportunity for contemplation by way of its cortex⁴ of ordered natural detail. ("Con-reflects the working together of all the natural details in "incarnating"⁵ the "templum," "incident"⁶ structuring "story.") Here is irradiated⁷ by "There."⁸ Enhanced by the Nous, Pre-Raphaelite art, properly understood, is noetic.

But let us, in order to develop these ideas and apply them to the poetry of George Meredith, return to more familiar ground, that of "mediaevalism" and "natural detail." Sir Kenneth Clark writes (The Gothic Revival,⁹ pp. 245-246):

...Pugin, for example, had designed his floriated ornament from an ancient botanical work; Scott became a serious student of botany, and gave in the Architectural Museum a lecture "of a very impassioned character," to the effect that all mediaeval detail might be found in nature. But a difficulty arose: for the foliage of the Early English style no natural origin could be found. "One night," says Scott, "I dreamed that I had found the veritable plant. I can see it now. It was a sere and yellow leaf. . . I was maddened with excitement and pleasure."