

PRE-RAPHAELITE EMBLEMATICS IN *THE GERM*

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That Victorian religious belief was shaken by key scientific, historical, and economic developments is a critical commonplace, as is the related theory that ontological doubts conspired to provoke linguistic uncertainty: without faith in the originary speech-act, to what extent could human signs be understood as relating unproblematically to ideas or things? Questions about the intersections of faith, doubt, and language have enormous implications for the study of Victorian poetry. As E. Warwick Slinn reminds us, poetry displays “the effects of language as a locus of ideological contestation or struggle for legitimation, and expos[es] conceptual certainties as unstable fields,” precisely because poetic language brings attention back to “its own linguistic action” (68). Yet in the same article, Slinn admonishes scholars of Victorian poetry for neglecting this subject. “If we purport to be studying the most sophisticated and highly organized language use in our culture,” he asks, “why is language itself not always the underlying question?” (61-62). In this essay, I want to suggest that the emblem – a Renaissance tradition of literature revived in the nineteenth century – offers a unique way of approaching issues of language and representation, especially within the context of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. Conceived on the one hand as a didactic tool in which natural objects stand in for rhetorical or spiritual truths, and on the other as a hybrid verbal-visual language which promises to supply the communicative deficiencies of both image and text, emblems are a self-conscious attempt to establish a system of signs with inherent, necessary, and stable meanings. By looking closely at selected poems from the Pre-Raphaelite movement’s collaborative inaugural magazine *The Germ* (January-May 1850), I want to argue that reading Pre-Raphaelite literature with an awareness of its engagements with the emblem tradition can provide new insights into connections between faith, doubt, and practices of representation.

The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies, 20 (Fall 2011)