

THE PRE-RAPHAELITE LITERARY PAINTERS¹

Stephen Spender

The greatest artistic movement in England during the nineteenth century was Pre-Raphaelitism. William Gaunt in his two volumes, *The Pre-Raphaelite Tragedy* and *The Aesthetic Adventure*, shows how Re-Raphaelitism was the source of the art joined with socialism of William Morris and of the aesthetic movement. The painting of Burne-Jones, and a good deal else associated in the public mind with Pre-Raphaelitism, he shows to have been really a corruption of the original impulse which, indeed, seemed doomed to be corrupted.

Perhaps the most significant feature of Pre-Raphaelitism was that it was an insular movement of English artists, who, although they claimed to go back to the painters before Raphael, eschewed the continent, particularly the influence of France. This insularity and a sense of self-sufficiency survived when all the other Pre-Raphaelite principles ceased to be observed.

Anyone who has read Holman Hunt's *Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (which made an unforgettable impression on me when I was fourteen) will realize that Pre-Raphaelitism is a misnomer as far as the pictures painted by the Pre-Raphaelites are concerned. The Pre-Raphaelites knew almost nothing of the painters before Raphael, but they held certain principles which they were supposed to apply to the painting of pictures. Most of these principles were attempts to reduce the truthful painting of nature to a set of rules; they lacked the new vision of nature which gave such energy to the French Impressionists. Holman Hunt's famous excursion in search of natural truth and biblical atmosphere, to paint a goat, supposedly the Scapegoat, by the shore of the Dead Sea, was the *reductio ad absurdum* of Pre-Raphaelite theories. Nothing could have had less in common, by the way, with the spirit of the Italian primitives, who would have painted the goat in their backyard, and made the onlooker see that it was inevitably the Scapegoat. Of the search after fidelity to nature, William Gaunt writes: "There could be no such thing as absolute truth to nature.... They had embarked on a search for something that did not exist. They were quite ignorant of the fourteenth century, which was to be their starting point."

The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies, 10 (Spring 2001)

It is true that the search after absolute truth to nature is an empty one in art, for the plain reason that nature's aspects are infinite and no artist can depict infinite-

sidedness. All he can be true to is a certain insight into nature, like that which filled the mind of Wordsworth when he was a boy. It is true also that the Pre-Raphaelites were ignorant of the painters before Raphael. However, to say that they were 'quite ignorant of the fourteenth century' is to forget that Rossetti knew Dante and translated the *Vita Nuova*. What, though, does Mr. Gaunt think the Pre-Raphaelites did stand for? Here is his answer:

The starting-point was something which never had existed; but this tissue of absurdity began to palpitate like a grain of chemical substance, defying analysis, with its inward energy, becoming more instead of less intense. Pre-Raphaelitism was a misunderstanding they all misunderstood. It was a reform and a dream. It was real and unreal. It was modern, it was in the Middle Ages. It was a reasonable conclusion on fanciful premises, a fantasy resulting from a practical proposal. It was an escape from the age and a means of converting it. It was a circle in which the future and the past chased each other round. It was a dimension in which people and things were actual and yet phantom. It was to die and be born again, to shoot an uncanny ray through the material opacity of the times, to sparkle like radium in the leaden tube of Victoria's reign; through literature art, religion, politics, even tables and chairs.

A good deal of careful consideration has gone into this passage, which is rather badly written. It glamorizes its theme too much, and the attempt to introduce analogies from science about substances which defy analysis and radium sparkling through lead is not helpful. Of course, there is something quintessential in every artistic achievement which defies analysis. After we have related Pope or Keats or Wordsworth to his age, studied his music and imagery, explained how the texture of his mind and senses is woven into his language, there remains something, that is to say, the poetry itself, which 'defies analysis' in *The Rape of the Lock*, *The Ode to A Nightingale*, or the *Lines Written near Tintern Abbey*. All our criticism can do is to isolate that which 'defies analysis' and relate it to its time and place, and to our time and place also.

Questions which have puzzled many people about the Pre-Raphaelites all have this aim of isolating from the propaganda of the movement and its supporters and opponents, from the behaviour and history of personalities, the right real thing, the essential Pre-Raphaelite achievement, and attempting to estimate its significance. What was the true aim of Pre-Raphaelitism? Is the supposed Pre-Raphaelite quality in the works of the Pre-Raphaelite artists an aesthetically distinguishing feature, or is it superficial and almost irrelevant? If there are such things as specifically Pre-Raphaelite works of art, how do they compare with works produced by other artists belonging to other movements? Do we accept the definition of Pre-Raphaelitism invented by the Pre-Raphaelites, or shall we discover that really the movement was united by some common factor or factors quite other than their declared aims?

Mr. Gaunt's book contains most of the material required for answering these and other questions, though one may turn also to Ruskin and to Holman Hunt, to Evelyn Waugh's brilliant biography of Rossetti, and, for a later period, to James Laver on Whistler.

Mr. Gaunt, in a passage immediately before the one just quoted, writes:

The group had acted as the medium for the Romantic spirit of the century whose essence was a love of the past and of unsophisticated nature. It was linked with Romantic Poetry, with the Gothic and religious Revival, with the reaction against the Industrial Revolution; with Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley, Pugin and Pusey, the anti-Victorian thinkers Ruskin and Carlyle, though with the Italian masters of the later Middle Age, who provided its curious name, it had very little to do. It had also the realist, reforming spirit of 1848.

This suggests, what is surely true, that the inspiration of Pre-Raphaelitism was verbal, literary, poetic, rather than of painting. The influence which the Pre-Raphaelites shared far more than their pedantic formulae for the technique of painting were Keats's *Isabella* and *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. Keats, Shakespeare, the Bible, Dante, suggested to them the subjects and scenery of their pictures. The truest experience which they shared was literary, and Millais betrayed the Pre-Raphaelites not when he abandoned their rules for imitating nature, but when he lost touch with the Pre-Raphaelite communication with the spirit of Romantic poetry and produced paintings which were as badly poetic as *The North-West Passage* and *Bubbles*.

It is understandable, therefore, that Pre-Raphaelitism went out of fashion at a time when painters and critics demanded an unmitigated painter's vision in painting; and that it has become rather fashionable again now that literature has crept back into painting by the back door of Surrealism.

If one were to ask what is the supreme example of Pre-Raphaelite achievement, the answer would surely be some such poem as Tennyson's *Mariana*, with pictures such as this:

About a stone-cast from the wall
 A sluice with blackened waters slept,
 And o'er it many, round and small,
 The clustered marish-mosses crept.
 Hard by a poplar shook alway,
 All silver-green with gnarled bark:
 For leagues no other tree did mark
 The level waste, the rounding gray ...

Nothing could be more perfect here than the creation of detail which stimulates the inward eye of the reader as with a muscular movement. Again, in the *Lady of Shalott*:

Willows whiten, aspens quiver,
 Little breezes dusk and shiver ...

The reader creates a picture of this out of his own store of memories of things half seen which he is now stimulated to see as though for the first time. Yet it is literary

observation, too sharply emphasized on one detail of expression for painting, for the painter's skill unlike the poet's lies in suggesting detail by giving the whole landscape, instead of suggesting a landscape by evoking one detail. There is a difference of emphasis between the poetic effect and the effect in painting. Poetry must be sharp and particular exactly in the situation where painting must be vague. What could be more perfect in poetry than Shakespeare's famous "the swallow dares." The force of this is that it gives us a thrilling sensation of the word "dares." True, the swallow does "dare" to come at the approach of summer, but how passionate, tender, warm are the feelings which crystallize around this word "dare," which seems keen and sensitive as though balanced on a razor edge of meaning when used in conjunction with the swallow, soaring in a heaven of our minds, as it seems.

Yet imagine painting the audacious swallow, and one envisages at once the difference between the poet's and the painter's visual imagination. Detail in poetry is an illusion of particularity, it is a generalized conception imprisoned within narrow limits of sensation. The aspens that quiver and the little breezes that dusk and shiver are aspens and breezes that the reader thinks for himself, though sharpened and shaded by Tennyson to the pitch of poignancy. Paint them and they become what the artist sets before the onlooker's eyes. The limitation of poetry is that the poet can, in fact, never make the reader see exactly what he sees in his own mind; he can only stimulate him to focus the same sensations around an object which is really an invisible x in a kind of equation of qualifying experience. It is the sensation of *quivering* and *dusking* and *shivering* that sets up a shudder of comprehension in the reader's whole being as it focuses upon an object which it projects.

Thus, the attempt to paint poetry according to the Pre-Raphaelite formula of truth makes the mistake of *copying* poetry in painting. To-day the Victorian criticisms of the Pre-Raphaelites amaze us. They are nearly all devoted to attacking the distorted faces and bodies of the figures in Pre-Raphaelite paintings. The most famous of all these attacks is Dickens's in *Household Words* on Millais's *Carpenter's Shop*. He describes the figure of the Virgin Mother as

a kneeling woman so horrible in her ugliness that (supposing it were possible for any human creature to exist for a moment with that dislocated throat) she would stand out from the rest of the company as a monster in the vilest cabaret in France or the lowest gin-shop in England.

The extravagance of this and other attacks should not blind us to the fact that there is a certain truth in them which we ignore; because we have long grown accustomed to discount the expressions of the Pre-Raphaelite figures which are usually irrelevant or disconcerting, so that we look to Pre-Raphaelite pictures for other qualities. Yet the Victorian attacks point to a very fundamental criticism of Pre-Raphaelite painting. This is, that the Pre-Raphaelite "truth to nature," that is to say, photographic exactitude, fails when it attempts to illustrate poetic truth and

produces effects of ugliness, absurdity and inane irrelevance in the paintings which followed strictly the Pre-Raphaelite formulae. There is a youthfulness and sincerity about Millais's early work (Millais was obviously a very nice person) which puts his later painting in the shade: yet *The Carpenter's Shop* is on the wrong tack because it fails to create visual symbols: instead it introduces truth on two contradictory levels, poetic atmosphere and an attempt to create photographic likenesses of the Virgin Mother, Joseph, and Our Lord. Poetic truth and photography are at war in it as in so many Pre-Raphaelite paintings. The Pre-Raphaelite formula for painting *The Carpenter's Shop* was to get every detail of a carpenter's shop right, buy a sheep's head from the local butcher's and paint several dozen of it, crowding each other out in such a way that one did not have to paint any of the sheep's body (which the butcher could not provide) then find a suitable carpenter and a suitable Mary and a suitable Christ, get them to have the right dramatic expression on their faces, and paint it exactly. Often one notices in Pre-Raphaelite painting that just when the painter should be endowed with transcendent imagination, the model is expected to supply it by assuming an expression which the painter then imitates, with perfect truth to nature. Much of Pre-Raphaelite painting is just painted charades or dumb crambo by friends of the Pre-Raphaelites dressed up to fill the roles.

Rossetti, however, who never followed the Pre-Raphaelite precepts so rigidly observed by Holman Hunt, was a poet who invented poetic symbols in painting. If one grants that *The Light of the World* and the *Scapegoat*, with their vacuous expressions, are faithful to the letter of Pre-Raphaelitism, it is Rossetti who really understood something of the spirit of fourteenth-century poetry in his painting. He was by nature a poetic symbolist painter. The crowded repetitious objects in his paintings are put there not because they are considered necessary according to the Pre-Raphaelite precepts, but because he collected objects which he loved, and their images in his pictures are crystallizations of aspects of his own personality, having the same symbolic significance of a projected egotism as the tower, the sword, the winding stair, etc., in the poetry of Yeats. Rossetti, who was truly a literary painter --with all the limitations and defects of one--hated painting out of doors, regarded Holman Hunt's painstaking pilgrimages to Palestine and elsewhere as ludicrous, cared little for the countryside, collected bric-a-brac, was far removed from the 'nature artist' as it is possible to imagine anyone being; he was a lovable and rather monstrous personality.

Romantic poetry then was and is the 'irreducible mystery' of Pre-Raphaelitism, a poetry that lends a strange beauty to the work of some of the minor Pre-Raphaelites, such as the exquisite *Death of Chatterton* in the Tate Gallery. A thin vein of poetry shines through the early painting of Millais, though I find it difficult to regard Millais as a 'traitor' to Pre-Raphaelitism, for he was too much a painter to be a poetic illustrator like Rossetti, and, of course, he was too much a painter also to be fanatic of obsessive rules like Holman Hunt. Pre-Raphaelitism introduced him

to Keats, but to little else. In his later life, whenever he wished to show that he had not forsaken his Pre-Raphaelite origins, he attempted an illustration of poetry, but the little trickle of poetry of his own had long ago dried up, and in any case, was not relevant to his great gifts which lay in the direction of painting for its own sake. Advertising is a debased form of poetry having about the same relation to the real thing as jazz music has to music, and it is natural that the weak poetic painter of *The Carpenter's Shop* and the *Boyhood of Raleigh* should end by painting the most staggeringly successful pictorial advertisement for soap that appeared in the nineteenth century in England.

No, the tragedy of Millais has little to do with Pre-Raphaelitism. It is the tragedy of a born painter, not of an illustrator, the tragedy of many Anglo-Saxon painters of great talent, of Sargent, or Orpen, of Augustus John and others, the tragedy also of most of our architects and to some extent of our leading novelists. It is the tragedy of our tendency to use art as a ladder by which to climb into one of the great professions, corresponding to that of the law or of medicine, the profession of Academic portraitist and landscape painter, in a country where there is no true Academic tradition. Too often our painters begin by being arty and end by being practitioners of Royal Academy photography and scene painting.

Rossetti was a poetic illustrator with a highly individualized style of his own. His skill, and that of the lesser Pre-Raphaelites, cannot be compared with the great continental achievements of the time. In painting, most of the Pre-Raphaelites should perhaps be regarded as poetic amateurs corresponding to the charming Sunday painters of France. The aesthetic aims of the movement were too unpainterly to produce anything but amateurs. A larger talent must either break away, like Millais, or unconsciously reveal the absurdity of the movement, like Holman Hunt. The lesser Pre-Raphaelites, Ford Madox Brown, Arthur Hughes and Charles Collins, produced pictures having a charming home-made quality, such as Brown's *The Last of England*, which must be judged as something entirely by itself, not related to any main tradition.

Yet, as Mr. Gaunt points out, Pre-Raphaelitism, even if not in the main line of achievement, canalized a considerable impulse in English life. This was the resistance of poetic ideas to the nineteenth century and to the Industrial Revolution. There is a clear and pure stream here which flows from Goldsmith's *Deserted Village* through the paintings and poetry and letters of Blake and his circle, through the Pre-Raphaelites and Ruskin, William Morris and the early socialist movement to the Aesthetic Movement of the nineties, where it becomes somewhat muddied, but not, in the last analysis, corrupt. Indeed, the strength and the weakness of this tendency in English life is its insistence on the value of a childlike, sometimes childish, innocence. If one compares it with the corresponding stream of France, one sees that the French and the English movements flow in opposite directions.

The difference is that between puritan protestantism and Latin catholicism. The Latin catholic tendency is to accept evil as a reality of existence, damnation as part of the whole human condition and hell as a part of the divine hierarchy; the

protestant puritan tendency is to refuse to touch evil or to be conscious of having touched it. The Pre-Raphaelites represented the cult of a misconceived mediaevalism, an attempted refusal to be contaminated by the modern world which was, in fact, a refusal to recognize that the basic condition of life of every contemporary is that he is involved in the guilt of the whole society in which he lives. Thus the Pre-Raphaelite poetry maintained the balance of a precarious innocence which was a refusal to recognize facts, an innocence which only Holman Hunt, who never grew up, entirely accepted, which, with Rossetti, toppled over into morbidity, with Ruskin into madness, and which collapsed into the success story of Millais.

Yet somehow the Pre-Raphaelites and even the aesthetes after them, retained a certain innocuousness, an unworldliness, surrounded as their poise, which later became a pose, was with abysses. The sins of Rossetti and Wilde were the sins of children, and so were their punishments. Under his veneer of worldly wisdom and cynicism, Oscar Wilde also retained the belief in youth and innocent purity and, when he failed to preserve his ideal, he sought out punishment. Never did a man so openly court retribution for a crime which, after all, society need never have noticed.

One of the worst penalties of Pre-Raphaelitism was that it cut English painting almost completely off from the continent. In his volume *The Aesthetic Adventure* Mr. Gaunt amusingly shows how little the English artists who went to Paris at the end of the century knew of the great movement in French art.

The French view of life was exactly the opposite of that of the English. It was, in brief, the idea of redemption through corruption with the world instead of self-preservation from corruption. Criticisms of both attitudes can, with justice, be made. But it may be said in favour of the movements in French art and literature during the nineteenth century that the poets and artists did not lay themselves and their work open to the charge that they were too inexperienced, innocent, unworldly for this era of industry and commerce and great scientific purposes. The French artists wrung their triumphs of transcendent beauty from a hard realization of the standards of the age in which they lived. Thus, more than any other people in the world, they saved poetry and painting from the most dangerous of all charges that have been laid against the arts in England: that they belonged to a childishly imaginative and undeveloped level of consciousness which man had outgrown in the scientific and industrial era of Victoria, and of Bismarck, and of Napoleon III.

Note

1. First published in *New Writing and Daylight*, 6 (1945), 123-31.