

EZRA POUND AS PRE-RAPHAELITE POET

"I think the artist should master all known forms and systems of metric and I have with some persistence set about doing this, searching particularly into those periods, wherein the systems came to birth or attained their maturity. It has been complained with some justice that I dump my notebooks on the public."¹ Thus Ezra Pound attempted to explain his experimenting. Paradoxically, this man who was so concerned with tradition presents considerable difficulty when we try to place him within a given tradition: he freely took ideas and forms from classical, medieval, romantic, Victorian, Oriental sources -- in short, from any and all sources. In what traditional context, then, can we read and understand the poetry of Ezra Pound? Obviously one could answer that Pound's poetry follows different traditions at different times, and this is certainly true, as is a corollary statement that there are times when his poetry belongs to no particular tradition. But whatever else may be said, it is certainly true that Pound's early poetry exhibits marked affinities with Pre-Raphaelite theories of Art -- more so than with any other single tradition. Several critics of Pound's early poetry have discussed the various influences shown in it, some of these critics paying special attention to the Pre-Raphaelite elements. This criticism usually notes certain correspondences between individual poems of Pound and certain Pre-Raphaelite poems in respect of diction, rhythm, subject matter and so on -- correspondences which are certainly important -- but none of this criticism approaches systematically a question basic to our understanding and evaluating of the early Pound: Was he or wasn't he a Pre-Raphaelite poet?

No doubt many students of Pound's poetry will dismiss this question as purely academic, but an examination of that body of verse in light of Pre-Raphaelite principles is bound to enhance our understanding of the individual poems and their significance in Pound's development. It is not enough to note similarities between Pound's poems and Pre-Raphaelite poetry, because catalogues of similarities do not necessarily define a tradition or a literary movement. Nor are Pound's pronouncements on the Pre-Raphaelites necessarily indicative of his own position relative to Pre-Raphaelite tradition. Pound was often inconsistent and would criticize poets and traditions that had had great influence on him. Certainly it is legitimate that he should do so; the Pre-Raphaelites themselves levelled many criticisms against their own movement. In addition, Pound's important prose commentaries were not printed until after the publication of most of the early poetry and might reflect a changed attitude.² The only valid way to evaluate Pound's position in the Pre-Raphaelite tradition is through an examination of the extent to which his poems reflect the