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“Visionary Vanities”: Leaves from the Pre-Raphaelite Apocrypha

As for all the prattle about the pre-Raphaelitism, I confess to you I am weary of it, and long have been. Why should we go on talking about the visionary vanities of half-a-dozen boys? We've all grown out of them, I hope, by now. (Hall Caine *Recollections*: [1882] 219)

Rossetti's disclaimer to Hall Caine made towards the end of his life reflects on a persistent pre-occupation by devotees of the Pre-Raphaelites with the anecdotal, biographical side of the men and women, poets and artists, associated with the movement, which, to date, this journal, my own work on the group, and common usage notwithstanding, no one has succeeded in satisfactorily defining. Howard Mumford Jones's lament, in his 1956 survey, that the embarrassment of studying the Pre-Raphaelites is that we know more about the lives of its associates than we do about their work is less true now that the Pre-Raphaelites have become academically respectable than it was thirty years ago. Yet, paradoxically, while the Pre-Raphaelites are now regarded as an important phenomenon in the history of English and western European art and literature, academic interest has not so far had its customary deadening effect, and the Pre-Raphaelites continue to have a popular appeal and following, as the attendance at the 1984 Tate Gallery retrospective confirmed.

While the perennial attraction of the movement underscores its vitality, it depends to an even greater degree on the foibles and eccentricities of the individual artists and poets, whose private lives were characterized by bizarre and amusing excesses and extravagances that lie outside the norms of ordi-

nary behaviour. The paucity of documentation has also, in many instances, undoubtedly contributed to speculation about their separate and collective activities and interrelationships, which are the subject of hundreds of genuine and apocryphal anecdotes, many of them enormously amusing, related in the memoirs of the period. Successive biographies and histories of the movement have drawn on this material, often as a substitute for accurate accounts, but no collection of them has as yet been assembled. This essay is intended as an introduction to such an anthology.

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Reviewing Max Beerbohm's *Rossetti and His Circle* (1923), Chauncey Brewster Tinker, in a perceptive and witty essay entitled "The Amusing Pre-Raphaelites," examined both the wistfulness and the "unconsciously comic" element in their lives and art. "Whatever they did," Tinker writes, "revealed the hidden want, the thoughts too deep for tears, and the divine despair whereof the poets sing." The link between the wistful and the comic manifested itself in the daily lives of the group, in their banding together, in their raucous and irreverent attitudes towards the establishment, in their ecstatic Bohemianism, and especially in their penchant for what Tinker calls "undeniably queer" ladies, with their Rapunzel-like hair, their "eyes . . . too bulgy and . . . necks too swanlike to be wholly beautiful," and their lips and mouths, especially those by "glorious Gabriel . . . so ludicrously developed as to be somewhat maw-