

Pre-Raphaelite and Darwinian: Some Thoughts on Passion for Detail and Longing for Form

In St. Paul's Cathedral a crowd gathered around the formidable figure of Mrs. Hunt. Standing before a version of *The Light of the World* by her husband William Holman Hunt, his widow proudly proclaimed: "... the white robe represents the Power of the Spirit." But her grand-daughter, later the authoress of a revealing Pre-Raphaelite autobiography, turned to a small boy standing near, and whispered: "It was great-grandma's best damask tablecloth... and she was very cross when Grandpa cut it up."¹

Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Charles Robert Darwin shared not only a common date of departure but also that peculiarly nineteenth-century relationship between the Power of the Spirit and Grandma's tablecloth. It is their shared passion for detail and their longing for form and meaning that join two seemingly divergent impulses—one an artistic anachronism, the other a significant scientific advance.

William Blake might call the analytical mind a devil and name it Urizen. William Wordsworth might claim that we murder to dissect. William Paley in his *Natural Theology* (1802)² continually employs the results of minute observation of physical phenomena in order to demonstrate the overall purposefulness of Creation. For Paley and his enormous following, the argument made a charmed circle. First it moved from induction to deduction, whereby the faultlessness of a flawless universe confirms our faith in an omniscient Divine Hand. Thus we observe that it is impossible to prick the end of a finger without drawing blood. Now if one of the functions of the circulatory system is to carry nourishment to every part of the organism, how minutely furnished and how superbly planned must be a system which completely covers even the tips of the digits! But the argument works the other way as well: moving from deduction to induction, we note the famous figure of a watch. If one discovers a watch, accurately ticking the exact time, lying on the rain-forest floor of an

uninhabited Pacific isle, one does not exclaim, "What an extraordinary growth!" Instead, one picks it up, asks, "Who made it?" and answers the question by a simple reference to the name of the designer modestly displayed on its face. So the a priori belief in a Divine Creator leads us to expect to find meaning and design in all His Creation.

Ingeniously as these observations lead from science to religion, from induction to deduction and back again, the shrimps of chapter twenty-six strain even the powers of the Victorian effusion. Surely, writes Paley, when we see young shrimps "bounding into the air from the shallow margin" of their little pools, their "signs of happiness" are only a tiny part of the general beatitude of all created beings. The pre-Darwinian could derive faith from scientific observation; the post-Darwinian would simply have classified the analogy as a Romantic fallacy.

But even Charles Darwin's *The Voyage of the Beagle* (1836), as it issues into *The Origin of Species* (1859), reflects to a surprising degree the double action of Paley's argument. From the side of observation there emerges the infinite detail of structural development—fifty thousand varieties of shells in one British chalk cliff—the simple one-celled life swimming beside highly articulated complex organisms, the roaring of volcanoes and the shaking of earthquakes, the long, slow aeons of geological strata, the intense struggle for survival of too-large a population in too-small an environment. All of these phenomena can be observed.

But it takes a very different cast of mind to deduce from these perceived details such conclusions as Charles Darwin draws:

- a. the selection of survivors is random;
- b. the sports or physical anomalies which aid in the survival of individuals become typed in later species;
- c. the one-celled organism develops through infinite gradations to the complex creature (despite Darwin's disappointment that so few