DISMANTLING THE CANON:
THE PRE-RAPHAELITE LIST OF IMMORTALS

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In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.
　　　　　　　　– Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" 255

To make the past present, to bring the distant near.
　　　　　　　　– Thomas Macaulay 96.

Among the radical subversions pursued by the Pre-Raphaelites was their uncanny merging of personal and historical identities, a merging that highlighted the relativity of past and present relations, denied Victorian views of history as linear and progressive, and interjected chance and desire into history to collapse temporal distance and spatial logic. Although the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's discovery of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italian "primitives" is considered revolutionary, I suggest that their more radical challenge was to the very formation of a cultural narrative in their "list of Immortals," an esoteric, even quirky list of artists, writers, and political figures important for diverse, unarticulated reasons to the young, rambunctious Brotherhood. Like Walter Benjamin's fictitious collectors, these artists were "finder[s] of new sources" of culture hitherto ignored or debased (Benjamin, "Edward Fuchs" 55-56); in the process, they exposed history's constructedness by rehabilitating forgotten or disregarded pasts to upend hegemonic past-present temporal relations as signifying "progress."

　　　The "list of Immortals" has been much discussed since Isobel Armstrong drew attention to it in 2012, but its ramifications for a Pre-Raphaelite theory of history remains to be analyzed. How did a list that is parodic, intentional, and radical, embodying an achronological, anti-canonic, subjective, and unstable construction of the past come to be compiled? Artists are uniquely aware of history; the past weighs heavily on them in their training. Unlike writers, artists not only look at the works of their predecessors, but their art