

## THE PRE-RAPHAELITE WINDOW

William Blissett

At the start I must define the subject, put a frame around the window motif in art. Deliberately I exclude a related but distinct, even opposite consideration – looking at, or looking in at, windows from the outside, as when we look casually at shop windows or closely into Joseph Cornell's boxes, or tingle with wonder at the myriads of lighted windows in the high-rises of a modern city. No: the fenestral picture looks out; it embraces an interior, a window or aperture, and a view through it to something exterior. It depicts or implies depth of recession – two planes, which can evoke two states of mind, two qualities of time, two tones of feeling. The use of the window motif has always required of the artist second thoughts, a refocusing of attention, an effort to catch the dimension of depth; and it makes the same demand on the viewer. Unlike the door, the window is a threshold of perception, not of action. You hesitate and decide at a doorway; you glance or gaze through a window, blankly, sharply, with dread, with curiosity, with longing. The perceiver remains *here*, but *there* opens out to him in imagination and futurity, promise or threat. The interior may be full or spare, lived-in or strange; it may range from the fortress to the prison, from safety to confinement, from cozy familiarity to crushing boredom. The exterior is the realm of at least potential movement, whether of danger or enjoyment, of exhilaration or routine. Interior and exterior in pictorial conjunction may co-exist in various degrees of harmony or discord, and either can stand for “appearance” to the other’s “reality.” But if an artist is not interested in exploring any of these possibilities, if the landscape outside is purely conventional (“park scenery”, in Walter Pater’s phrase), if the sky with clouds could just as well be called blue with white, if the street is the familiar scene of stage comedy, if the room inside is undifferentiated interior space, I do not count the picture among the fenestralia.<sup>1</sup>

Though abstractionism closed the shutters on the window picture, and collage bricked it up,<sup>2</sup> the twentieth century nevertheless saw a flourishing of