

## WILLIAM HOLMAN HUNT ON POETRY

Like other members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, William Holman Hunt took poetry seriously. This artist, who was one of the most earnest of Victorians, wanted an earnest poetry capable of guiding man in a time of shifting opinion and shaken belief. Although on occasion he tried his hand at poetry -- just as he also did at bas reliefs, sculpture in the round, furniture and dress design -- he certainly was no poet, at least no poet in words. Nonetheless, from the beginning of his career to its close he remained one of the most poetic, most literary, painters in the Pre-Raphaelite circle. Holman Hunt's reliance upon literary sources, his skillful use of complex symbolism, and his devotion to inscriptions on his frames and within the picture all bespeak his basic notion that the painter's image had to associate itself closely with verbal discourse.<sup>1</sup> In other words, Hunt was one of a long line of humanistically oriented artists who believed that for painting to achieve greatness it had to remain the sister of poetry. For this reason, if no other, his conceptions of poetry are of interest.

As one might expect from the artist who painted The Lady of Shalott as his last major work and statement of aesthetic principles, Tennyson was his favorite contemporary poet. Unlike Rossetti, Swinburne, and others associated with the Pre-Raphaelites, Hunt did not qualify his praise of the man he called "the kingly poet"<sup>2</sup> once Tennyson achieved great popular fame. One major reason for his continued delight in the works of Tennyson would seem to be that he shared so many conceptions of the nature and purpose of art with him. Like the Poet Laureate, he wished men of creative imagination to be prophets, moral and spiritual guides, and also like Tennyson he was concerned throughout his entire career with making public use of his most personal beliefs. In addition, Hunt, like the poet, remained fascinated by experiences of conversion and illumination as subjects for art throughout his career.<sup>3</sup> The painter's public statements of praise for Tennyson, however, make the relatively pedestrian point that the "wholesome tenor" of his work followed that "of his predecessors, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and other protestors against adoration of license and outlawry" (i.326), which we find in Byron and Shelley.

Characteristically, Hunt's defiant praise of Tennyson on moral grounds -- he was writing with the recent experience of the Yellow Nineties in mind -- takes the form of a detailed reminiscence of his defence of the poet decades earlier. Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood relates that when Hunt visited Oxford in 1850, he was surprised to discover that the Fellows of one unnamed college