

FROM THE ARCHIVES:
ALICE MEYNELL QUESTIONS THE INTERDISCIPLINARY
NATURE OF PRE-RAPHAELITISM

Alice Meynell wrote the following essay, published in *The Art Journal*, 44 (March 1882): 85-87, as a review of two new books of poetry: Thomas Woolner's *Pygmalion* (Macmillan, 1881) and Dante Rossetti's *Ballads and Sonnets* (Ellis, 1881). Meynell attempts to dismiss the common assumption that the Pre-Raphaelites converge the genres as painterly poets and poetic painters, a cliché that oversimplifies a number of issues. She explains that the public's fascination with the connections among the arts of painting, sculpture, and literature is not shared by the artists themselves. Rather, as specialists, artists focus on the distinctions among the arts, respectful of the boundaries of each medium because each one requires a different talent and temperament. Painting is a perceptive and intelligent art, while poetry is a meditative and intellectual art. Meynell qualifies her racialist distinction between the intelligent "Latin" races and the intellectual "Teutonic" races by acknowledging Woolner and Rossetti as exceptions ("of course the exceptions are numberless"). However, the two are not exceptions to her central thesis that each medium is distinct. Woolner is a sculptor whose poems are "word-sculptures"; his poetry thus remains distinctively descriptive. Rossetti is a poet whose pictures remain meditative; his poems are a poet's poems. Of the two Pre-Raphaelites, Meynell selects the literary Rossetti as the norm. Quoting from William Michael Rossetti's manifesto sonnet on the front cover of *The Germ*, Meynell concludes that the Pre-Raphaelite revolution "was rather a literary than a pictorial movement..., the result of reading and scholarship rather than of that observation which belongs essentially to the vividly realised moment."

The image of Meynell writing at her desk within reach of a now rare copy of *The Germ* long before Rossetti's paintings would become so accessible in books and galleries foregrounds a shift in accessibility during the past hundred and twenty years, a shift that has enlightened for us Meynell's "other side of the