

WHISTLER/SWINBURNE: “BEFORE THE MIRROR”

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William Fredeman was a man of the manuscript and printed book epoch if there ever was one. He also knew, however, that a printed book, like a manuscript, has never been just the disembodied words that might be printed or reprinted without loss in any type size and font on any sort of paper. A book is a material object, and the form of its materiality is part of its meaning, as is the case for manuscript material. Moreover, as William Fredeman also knew, books have also always in one way or another been multimedia productions, most obviously in the case of illustrated books. Fredeman’s magnificent collection of Pre-Raphaelite materials, like his published writings, took that particular group of artists, poets, bookmakers, and artisans, the Pre-Raphaelites, as a paradigmatic example of the need to go back to originals in order to study adequately the literature of the printed book epoch. This small paper attempts to reflect on changes in such study being brought about today by new communications technologies. These radically change our modes of access to the sort of material that Fredeman collected in his own library as the then indispensable means of access to the cultural meanings embodied in Pre-Raphaelite productions.¹

The transformations now being wrought by new communications technologies in shaping humanistic research and teaching are hard to define and understand, partly because we are in the midst of them. The digital revolution now going on, however, is clearly as radical and as irreversible as the move from a manuscript to a print culture. Email, faxes, computerized library catalogues, composition on the computer rather than in longhand or on the typewriter, the increasing use of computers and networks in instruction, the availability online of more and more material, the move from linear print media to multimedia hypertext, the online publishing of articles and monographs that is altering the way research results are disseminated--all these are rapidly and irrevocably transforming the way teachers and students of literature (and of other humanistic disciplines) do their work.

Jacques Derrida, in a striking passage written by one or another of the protagonists of *La carte postale (The Post Card)*, says the following:

The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies, 9 (Spring 2000)