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PRE-RAPHAELITE POETRY

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (later known as the Pre-Raphaelites) was a group of English painters, poets, and art critics, founded in 1848 by William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Michael Rossetti, James Collinson, Frederic George Stephens and Thomas Woolner who formed a seven-member "Brotherhood" modelled in part on the Nazarene movement. The Brotherhood was only ever a loose association and their principles were shared by other artists of the time, including Ford Madox Brown, Arthur Hughes and Marie Spartali Stillman. Later followers of the principles of the Brotherhood included Edward Burne-Jones, William Morris and John William Waterhouse.

Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB), founded in September 1848, is the most significant British artistic grouping of the nineteenth century. Its fundamental mission was to purify the art of its time by returning to the example of medieval and early Renaissance painting. Although the life of the brotherhood was short, the broad international movement it inspired, Pre-Raphaelitism, persisted into the twentieth century and profoundly influenced the aesthetic movement, symbolism, and the Arts and Crafts movement.

First to appear was Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (1849), in which passages of striking naturalism were situated within a complex symbolic composition. Already a published poet, Rossetti inscribed verse on the frame of his painting. In the following year, Millais's *Christ in the House of His Parents* (1850) was exhibited at the Royal Academy to an outraged critical reception. The master of a brilliantly naturalistic technique, Millais represented biblical figures with closely observed portrayals of the features of real, imperfect models. In 1850 the Pre-Raphaelites also produced a literary and artistic magazine, the *Germ*, which was something of a manifesto for their artistic concerns and ran for only four issues.

From the first, the Pre-Raphaelites aspired to paint subjects from modern life. In *The Awakening Conscience* (1854), Hunt represented a kept woman realizing the error of her ways, and in 1852 Madox Brown began the most ambitious of all Pre-Raphaelite scenes from modern life, *Work* (1852–1865). Although the brotherhood included no women, Christina Rossetti, sister of Dante and William, pioneered a Pre-Raphaelite style in poetry, and Elizabeth Siddall—model, muse, and eventually wife of Dante Gabriel Rossetti—produced distinctive watercolors and drawings that went unrecognized in her lifetime but received critical attention after the advent of feminist art history in the late 1970s.

The group sought a return to the abundant detail, intense colours and complex compositions of Quattrocento Italian art. They rejected what they regarded as the mechanistic approach first adopted by Mannerist artists who succeeded Raphael and Michelangelo. The Brotherhood believed the Classical poses and elegant compositions of Raphael in particular had been a corrupting influence on the academic teaching of art, hence the name "Pre-Raphaelite". In particular, the group objected to the influence of Sir Joshua

Reynolds, founder of the English Royal Academy of Arts, whom they called "Sir Sloshua". To the Pre-Raphaelites, according to William Michael Rossetti, "sloshy" meant "anything lax or scamped in the process of painting ... and hence ... anything or person of a commonplace or conventional kind". The group associated their work with John Ruskin, an English critic whose influences were driven by his religious background.

The group continued to accept the concepts of history painting and mimesis, imitation of nature, as central to the purpose of art. The Pre-Raphaelites defined themselves as a reform movement, created a distinct name for their form of art, and published a periodical, *The Germ*, to promote their ideas. The group's debates were recorded in the *Pre-Raphaelite Journal*.

The Characteristics of Pre-Raphaelite Poetry

The Pre-Raphaelites were a loose and baggy collective of Victorian poets, painters, illustrators and designers whose tenure lasted from 1848 to roughly the turn of the century. Drawing inspiration from visual art and literature, their work privileged atmosphere and mood over narrative, focusing on medieval subjects, artistic introspection, female beauty, sexual yearning and altered states of consciousness. In defiant opposition to the utilitarian ethos that formed the dominant ideology of the mid-century, the Pre-Raphaelites helped to popularize the notion of 'art for art's sake'. Generally devoid of the political edge that characterized much Victorian art and literature, Pre-Raphaelite work nevertheless incorporated elements of 19th-century realism in its attention to detail and in its close observation of the natural world. Those poets who had some connection with these artists and whose work presumably shares the characteristics of their art include Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Christina Rossetti, George Meredith, William Morris, and Algernon Charles Swinburne.

They were inspired by Italian art of the 14th and 15th centuries, and their adoption of the name Pre-Raphaelite expressed their admiration for what they saw as the direct and uncomplicated depiction of nature typical of Italian painting before the High Renaissance and, particularly, before the time of Raphael. The Pre-Raphaelite movement during the Victorian era was an idealistic reaction against the didacticism, moral fervor, and pre-occupation of poets and novelists with contemporary society. In the reign of Queen Victoria there was a growing tendency to make literature a handmaiden to social reform and an instrument for the propagation of moral and spiritual ideas. Literature became the vehicle of social, political, and moral problems confronting the Victorian age. Ruskin, Carlyle, Dickens were engaged in attacking the evils rampant in the society of their times. So the movement was against the pre-occupation of poets, prose writers, and novelists with the mundane problems of their times, that a set of high souled artists formed this group. The first characteristic of the Pre-Raphaelite Poetry is that it was a revolt and reaction against the conventionality of poetry represented by Tennyson. The poets of this school revolted against the harshening use of poetry to the service of social and political problems of the age. Tennyson concentrated on social, religious, and political life of the age. It was against this age bound poetry that the Pre-Raphaelites raised their revolt and introduced the new standard of the glorification of art rather than the glorification of fleeting and temporary values of mundane life.

The second characteristic is that the Pre-Raphaelites above all, were artists and their poems were artistic creation. Art was their religion. They were the votaries of *art for art's sake*. The poetry of this movement had no morality to preach and no reforms to introduce to the correctness of societal life. Life of beauty was their creed, and if in glorifying beauty they had to be sensuous,

the feared not the charges of the moralists and orthodox puritans. D. G. Rossetti's sonnets in *The House of Life* signalise love in its glory as well as desolation. He combines spiritual and sensuous aspects of love in his sonnets. The poets aimed both in poetry and painting at perfect form and finish.

The third characteristic of the Pre-Raphaelite Poetry is that the poets, to escape from the darkness and ugliness of contemporary society, turned their eyes to the good old days of medievalism when chivalry and knighthood, adventure and heroism were in the air. D. G. Rossetti was the hero of this return back to medievalism for poetic inspiration. His poems *The Blessed Damozel* (1850) and *Sister Helen* (1853) are medieval in outlook and form. *The Blessed Damozel* is equally inspired by *The Divine Comedy* by Dante. The other members of the school Hunt and Millais were a little skeptical of the medieval tradition. There is also a note of love for the middle Ages in Christina Rossetti's poems. Her *Goblin Market* (1862) is steeped in medievalism and supernaturalism. The poem tells the story of Laura and Lizzie who are tempted with fruit by goblin merchants, who resembles animals with faces like wombats or cats and with tails.

The fourth characteristic of Pre-Raphaelite Poetry is that this poetry reviving the Biblical theme, we can see it in the poem of Christina Rossetti's 'Eve' (1864) which deals with the theme of repent and sadness. The poem set in the Biblical era. It dates back to the time after the banishment of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. This poem is Christina Rossetti's attempts show to show the anguish and pain felt by Eve after she was banished from the Garden of Eden because of the sin she committed. The poem 'Eve' shows Christina's intellectual abilities and her deep knowledge in Catholic beliefs.

The fifth characteristic of the Pre-Raphaelite Poetry is that the poets of this school use metaphors to express their feelings. Christina Rossetti's poem 'A Sketch' uses metaphor in the lines:

The blindest buzzard that I know

In other points our friend's a m

ole.

In the poem she talks about her friend, terming him as 'buzzard' and 'mole'.

The Pre-Raphaelite Poetry's characteristics are very rich and very vast. It focuses on the glorification of art, escape from the darkness, and the ugliness of contemporary society, continuation of Romantic poetry, and gives a strong conception of scenes and situation, precise delineation, lavish imagery and metaphor. By these characteristics, the Pre-Raphaelite Poetry leaves a lasting impression in the English Literature.

The Brotherhood soon began to disperse. Collinson resigned in 1850, Woolner emigrated to Australia in 1852 (an event memorialized in Madox Brown's modern life painting *The Last of England*, 1852–1855), and it had effectively ceased to exist by the time of Holman Hunt's departure in search of religious subject matter in Palestine in 1854. The works produced from this trip—*The Scapegoat* (1855) and especially *The Finding of the Saviour in the Temple* (1860)—established Hunt as "the painter of the Christ." Millais moved to Scotland in 1856 and there created a series of poetic, lyrical works, including *Autumn Leaves* (1856), before turning to portraiture and more conventional forms of historical painting. Becoming a member of the Royal Academy in 1855, Millais soon joined the artistic

establishment and ended his life as president of the academy; from PRB, as one wag put it, to PRA.

A series of criticisms are leveled against Pre Raphaelite Poetry. 'The Fleshly School of Poetry' is a fierce attack on the Pre-Raphaelite school. Written in 1871, the essay was first published in *The Contemporary Review* under the pseudonym 'Thomas Maitland'. Principally, 'Maitland' focuses on the art and poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, brother to Christina Rossetti. After being publicly accused by Rossetti, the poet Robert Buchanan confirmed that he was the author.

Buchanan believed that Pre-Raphaelite art was excessively 'sensual' implying 'that the body is greater than the soul ...'. Appalled at what he saw as highly sexualised imagery, Buchanan declared Pre-Raphaelitism a source of moral corruption. A rather melodramatic vocabulary is used to convey his disgust, with Rossetti's work described as 'nastiness', 'trash' and 'morbid'.

Furthermore, Buchanan accuses the Pre-Raphaelites of being imitators of contemporary poets such as Tennyson, and asserts that the Brotherhood's popularity has been forced by its members slyly agreeing to praise and publicise each other.

Although Buchanan does grant Rossetti some praise, it is always brief and often double-edged. In addition to seeming prudish and, in Rossetti's words, 'malicious', Buchanan's criticism contains other flaws. As Rossetti points out in his response, 'The Stealthy School of Criticism', Buchanan unfairly draws on short quotations that are removed from the wider context of the poem and the collection they are published within.

Secondly, Buchanan looks at the poetry as purely biographical without an attempt to understand it as art. As Rossetti argues, ‘no such passing phase of description as the one headed ‘Nuptial Sleep’ could possibly be put forward by the author [...] as his own representative view of the subject of Love’.

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