

2018 - Issue One

Through a Glass Darkly: Musings on Pre-Raphaelite Bodies

LÉONIE CALDECOTT

In 1850, Charles Dickens attended the annual exhibition of contemporary artists at the Royal Academy of Art. There he saw a painting that incensed him so much that in his magazine *Household Words*, he went into critical overkill. The painting, *Christ in the House of His Parents*, was by a twenty-one-year-old painter named John Everett Millais, who had entered the Academy at the precocious age of eleven. It showed the child Jesus in his father's workshop, having sustained a wound in his left hand, being tended to by his mother and St Joseph. Dickens described it in the most scathing terms:

You behold the interior of a carpenter's shop. In the foreground of that carpenter's shop is a hideous, wry-necked, blubbering, red-headed boy, in a bed-gown, who appears to have received a poke in the hand, from the stick of another boy with whom he has been playing in an adjacent gutter, and to be holding it up for the contemplation of a kneeling woman, so horrible in her ugliness, that (supposing it were possible for any human creature to exist for a moment with that dislocated throat) she would stand out from the rest of the company as a Monster, in the vilest cabaret in France, or the lowest gin shop in England...Wherever it is possible to express ugliness of feature, limb, or attitude, you have it expressed.

The Times of London also attacked the setting used by Millais, insisting that his "attempt to associate the Holy Family with the meanest details of a carpenter's shop, with no conceivable omission of misery, of dirt, of even disease, all finished with loathsome minuteness, is disgusting." The painting proved to be so controversial that Queen Victoria asked that it be removed from the exhibition and brought to her so she could examine it. History does not record her personal reaction to the painting, unfortunately.

Ground-breaking artists are not always well received. The British art historian [Richard Dorment](#) describes Millais' early paintings as being "to visual art what the poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins are to literature." This is an interesting connection to make, for Hopkins represents a crucial moment in British culture, when the language of Catholic faith surged into full cultural expression after centuries of muffling. Not as pastiche or a revival of ancient poetic forms: but in a startlingly modern, even experimental voice. Which is not to say that Catholic Christianity had no expression at all between the Reformation and the nineteenth century revival. Yet in a culture that from the sixteenth century onwards turned towards the material and the mercantile, the fully sacramental spirituality of Catholic culture inevitably struggled to find expression. In the 18th century, the poetic voice of Milton received

its visual counterpart in the strange and unique mystical art of William Blake. But it took the Pre-Raphaelite revolution in the revolution-rocked middle of the following century, before religious symbolism in the visual arts integrated itself fully with the biological realism for which that century is also known. Arguably, it was the Pre-Raphaelites who enabled English humanism to catch up with English devotion: to catch up, belatedly, with what the Catholic world experienced during the Renaissance. In order to do this, they turned for inspiration to the period just before the Counter-Reformation. The period before Britain was sundered from Rome.

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood came into being around 1848, when a group of young artists rebelled against the teaching methods and aesthetic norms prevalent in the Academy. At a time when the late medieval and early Renaissance period was not widely known in England, the group took inspiration from the discoveries of the art critic John Ruskin during his Italian travels; Ruskin was in fact to become one of their main critical champions. They were particularly fascinated by drawings from the Campo Santo in Pisa. Millais was one of the original group of seven, along with the evangelically influenced William Holman Hunt (whose most famous painting is *The Light of the World*), and the passionate polymath Dante Gabriel Rossetti (brother of the Anglican poet Christina Rossetti). Rossetti's younger brother William Michael, in his family memoir published in 1895, remembered the first "bond of union among the members" of the PRB thus:

One—to have genuine ideas to express. Two—to study Nature attentively, so as to know how to express them. Three—to sympathise with what is direct and serious and heartfelt in previous art, to the exclusion of what is conventional and self-parading and learned by rote. Four—and most indispensable of all, to produce thoroughly good pictures and statues.

The art historian Elizabeth Prettejohn has written that for the Pre-Raphaelites, "religious painting was a more significant practice than it has been in virtually any other movement in modern art." [1] This has far-reaching historical significance, for after Henry VIII put into motion the long, drawn-out sundering of England from Rome, we became a culture that prioritised word over image. From Raphael to Michelangelo, continental Europe saw a great outpouring of visual art, whereby the human body became a vehicle for the contemplation of divine purpose. In England, religious sensibility poured instead from the pen: that instrument whereby a forbidden religious culture could play itself out in the safety of verbal ambiguity. Catholic images became embedded in aural code. Italy had Leonardo. England had Shakespeare.

To be or not to be: devotion denied was driven into the deniability of word-play, as Clare Asquith's work has so compellingly proposed. *The Merchant of Venice* ends with a symbolic re-enactment of the suppressed Easter Vigil, repeating the words *in this night* eight times: but the symbolism of the forbidden liturgical content has had to be re-cast, disguised, as a declaration of love by a man for a woman. Meanwhile the soul of an entire nation began to slip passively down-stream, like the pale Ophelia of Millais' famous painting. If *Hamlet* is, as Asquith avers, the play which most characterises a certain aspect of England's gradual passing from the universal Church—as exemplified by the indecisive Sir Philip Sidney, who met with the future martyr Edmund Campion in Prague and was convinced, though not enough to take a stand—then the *Ophelia* which has so obsessed lovers of Pre-Raphaelite art represents a woman associated "not simply with chastity, but with sterility and childlessness." [2] That woman is the English nation, embodied by the "Virgin Queen," Elizabeth I, who

in order to keep everyone happy could marry no-one. Ophelia is her pale reflection, a nation drifting away, going with the flow, having lost its spiritual moorings.

This is why Pre-Raphaelite art is exciting for the archaeologist of faith and culture. Not because it was made by Catholics: it wasn't. Nor even because it was consistently Christian in its remit. While the Pre-Raphaelites received, through their "older brother" Ford Maddox Brown, a little influence from the work of the earlier German Nazarenes, their focus on religious subjects was intertwined with a Romantic fascination with what we would consider today as depth psychology. Its fascination lies in the fact that they had their fingers on the pulse of the fundamental human questions that inevitably reared their heads again, three centuries after the iconoclasm of the English Reformation put paid to religious image-making.

Various PRB artists (and the term itself is a loose definition) were touched by either Evangelicalism or Anglo-Catholicism. Both William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones (who came on board a decade later than Millais and his co-conspirators) were affected by the Oxford Movement during their early years at Exeter College, Oxford, and toyed with ideas about celibacy and monasticism. But they were also swept up in the Romantic revival of all things medieval, notably the Arthurian vision of William Tennyson, just as Rossetti had been enraptured with—and painted extensively from—the vision of his namesake Dante.

And that is, in a sense, why this disparate movement of early bohemians, irrespective of the chaos in some of their private lives, acts as the spiritual canary in the cage at the beginning of the modern era. They epitomise the desire to rediscover the cultural roots which informed an age before the Great Divorce: the strong pure lines of early Renaissance painting, the transcendent made immanent in the human form, not to mention the illuminated manuscripts produced by monastic hands (Morris would pore over these in the nearby Bodleian library and they influenced his later decorative style). They were swept up in the myths and legends of a Christian Europe which had once shared a vision of faith, political vicissitudes notwithstanding. The story-book ethos associated with late medieval and early renaissance culture swept the Pre-Raphaelites irresistibly into its embrace, whether they connected all the theological dots or not. It is possible to see their "pre-Raphael" artistic sensibility as a search for the authentically human experience which the dominant culture around them, cut off from its sacramental roots, had failed to offer.

For this reason the Pre-Raphaelite movement (if such a disparate phenomenon can be classified so neatly) had a profound social dimension. If we read what William Morris wrote at the end of the century about the Arts and Crafts movement that took shape in him partly as a response to PRB ideas, we get a sense of this vision, which has echoes of Blake's earlier railing against the "dark satanic mills" of the Industrial Revolution:

Apart from the desire to produce beautiful things, the leading passion of my life has been and is hatred of modern civilization... What shall I say concerning its mastery of and its waste of mechanical power, its commonwealth so poor, its enemies of the commonwealth so rich, its stupendous organisation—of the misery of life! Its eyeless vulgarity which has destroyed art, the one certain solace of labour? ... The hope of the past times was gone, the struggles of mankind for many ages had produced nothing but this sordid, aimless, ugly confusion... This was a bad lookout, especially

so to a man of my disposition, careless of metaphysics and religion, as well as of scientific analysis, but with a deep love of the earth and life on it, and a passion for the history of the past mankind. [3]

Even for those artists who were not “careless of metaphysics and religion,” this attention to social reality played a central role. Let me try and illustrate this by going back to that “scandalous” painting by Millais, which coincidentally hit establishment walls just as the Catholic hierarchy itself was being re-established in 1850 (a number of critics have linked the hostile reaction to it with reaction to this formalisation of the Roman Catholic revival). There is nothing backward-looking in *Christ in the House of His Parents*: it doesn’t ape early Renaissance painting. Yet in its physical precision and its forceful colouring, it stands in stark contrast to the highly mannered output of the academicians. It breaks every rule in the book, contextualising the Christian ethos in what are highly contemporary terms. The workshop of the Holy Family is just that: *a place where work is going on*. The wood shavings on the floor are rendered in acute and realistic detail. The characters in the workshop look like 19th century working-class people—just what Dickens found abhorrent. Our Lord looks undernourished. His mother is gawky. In short, Millais has picked his sacred subjects up and dropped them into the midst of his own era. That’s the “realism” side.

But then there is the symbolic element: and here, the closer we look, the more we see. Beginning with the “accidental” wound in the Christ-child’s hand: a stigmatic blooming of real human blood which prefigures the Passion. This is the vulnerable Christ, the Christ who suffers anguish and pain the way a child does: *given over to the challenge of it*. The very awkward tension in the figure of Mary expresses her maternal participation in the spiritual crisis to come. Joseph leans in directly from his place at the work-bench to offer protection. John the Baptist approaches with a basin of water (a possible reference to the High Anglican emphasis on the necessity of infant baptism). It is at once a realistic rendition of an imagined New Testament scene (also referencing Zechariah 8:6), and a deeply symbolic reminder of what really is at stake in this scene. Looked at through the eyes of faith, the table becomes an altar, the back wall a rood screen. The sheep congregating outside are the faithful, waiting for their shepherd, who is to be wounded and given over for them. There is a dream-like quality to the painting, precisely because like a dream, it clothes itself in the physical reality which is the human lot, whilst pointing to the spiritual realities which for sacramental Christianity infuse that physical world. It is at once mystical and incarnational. It brings the English genius back into the service of religious art. No wonder it offended the protestant sensibilities of its day, every bit as much as John Henry Newman’s abandonment of the Anglican communion to go into what he called the “one fold of the Redeemer,” did a few years before.

In the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford there is a truly strange Pre-Raphaelite artefact: a wardrobe which was commissioned and decorated by Edward Burne-Jones as a wedding present for William and Jane Morris. It uses a story from Chaucer’s *A Nun’s Tale*, about the Blessed Virgin resurrecting a boy who has been martyred for singing the *Alma Redemptoris Mater*, by placing a grain of wheat on his tongue. Apart from the figure of the young man rising up out of the earth in a pose which recalls a devout soul receiving Holy Communion, the other notable figure is the Blessed Virgin herself. The model Burne-Jones used for the Virgin was the bride herself, Jane Morris, née Burden, originally introduced to Morris not as a suitable candidate for matrimony, but as one of the many “stunners” that Dante Gabriel Rossetti was so adept at recruiting as artist’s models. She came from an impoverished family living in cramped quarters off Oxford’s Holywell Street, and was transformed into a princess through the power of the paintbrush. Her face alone launched a thousand ships that in normal circumstances would never

have seen the light of day.

The story of Jane's marriage to Morris and her continuing entanglement with Rossetti is too long to tell here, but the visual power of the idealised female as a physical "carrier" for PRB ideas was captured tellingly in an account that Henry James sent to his sister after spending an evening at the Morris home.

"Oh, ma chère, such a wife! Je n'en reviens pas—she haunts me still. A figure cut out of a missal—out of one of Rossetti's or Hunt's pictures—to say this gives but a faint idea of her, because when such an image puts on flesh and blood, it is an apparition of fearful and wonderful intensity. It's hard to say whether she's a grand synthesis of all the pre-Raphaelite pictures ever made—or they a 'keen analysis' of her—whether she's an original or a copy. In either case she is a wonder." After dinner, he continued later, "Morris read us one of his unpublished poems, from the second series of an 'Earthly Paradise', and his wife, having a bad toothache, lay on the sofa, with her handkerchief to her face. There was something very quaint and remote from our actual life, it seemed to me, in the whole scene: Morris reading... around us all the picturesque bric-à-brac of the apartment (every item of furniture literally a 'specimen' of something or other), and in the corner this dark silent medieval woman with her medieval toothache."[4]

Last year the National Gallery staged an exhibition entitled *Reflections*, which sought to explore the connection between Jan Van Eyck's famous *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434, acquired by the National Gallery in 1842) and the work of the Pre-Raphaelites. In spite of the obvious fact that the techniques experimented with by the PRB are connected to those used by the Netherlandish master (using a white ground to give colours and physical detail greater vibrancy, for instance) the show did not receive great critical approbation. For the symbolically inclined, however, it made for a happy hunting ground. The couple in the Van Eyck painting express far more than a simple domestic reality. They are surrounded by symbols which point beyond exterior appearances: the foremost of which is a convex mirror on the wall behind them, in which two witnesses to their marriage are reflected. This kind of mirror is an object which reappears multiple times in Pre-Raphaelite paintings and homes such as Kelmscott Manor. Rossetti supposedly owned nine of them (among dozens of other mirrors). Mirrors feature in paintings ranging from Holman Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience* (1854), to his much later rendition of the Tennyson poem *The Lady of Shalott* (1886–1905), with its overwhelming psychological symbolism of broken looms, floating threads of wool and hair, all unmoored from the gravity of a realised life. For the Lady of Shalott was under a curse: she must not leave her weaving under any circumstances. She could view the world only through a glass darkly, and not in reality. Falling in love with Sir Lancelot as he rode by, and following him to Camelot, brought her only tragedy.

The unborn child hidden under the delicate hand of the Arnolfini bride, far less the fecundity of the Mother of God, appears in fact in stark contrast with the sinuous Pre-Raphaelite women such as this legendary lady, or Millais' *Mariana*, frozen in their moments of romantic yearning. Indeed, if the idealised PRB women move from their stasis as "image" they often find themselves cursed, like Ophelia, or her model Lizzie Siddal, with a half-life. Or like Elizabeth I, who was dis-abled by her very

inheritance—her religiously and politically divided kingdom—from the possibility of joining herself to a spouse or transmitting life. This is the woman as symbol, as the object of fervid imagination: not a creature of flesh and blood, capable of realising her creatureliness in the fullness of nuptial union and fertile unfolding to new life. The human body, for the Pre-Raphaelites, thus stands at a slight remove from both the fullness of physical life and the fullness of sacramental life: frozen at the ambiguous crossing point between Redemption and Fall.

Behind all these bodies there lies another Body suggested by the Eucharistic/Marian juxtaposition on the wardrobe given to the Morrises by Burne-Jones, even if its maker was not fully conscious of it. The figure of Mary on the wardrobe doors is offering a *grain of wheat* as the means of bringing the fervent young man back to life: her manner of placing it on his tongue, and his manner of receiving it, are redolent of nothing so much as the eucharistic mystery. This is woman as Sophia: the vessel, or transmitter, of Christ's wisdom in giving his own body for us—under the form of bread. I cannot attest for Burne-Jones' intentions in using this image, but it seems as though he is intuitively feeling his way towards the link between the matrimony he is celebrating with this wedding gift, and the paschal mystery which his high Anglican explorations will have put him in touch with. Not all explorers will reach the promised land, at least not within sight of this world. There comes a time when the quest requires not just the opening of the wardrobe doors, but passing within its contents to a new kind of landscape. The medieval nostalgia of the nineteenth century tells us that the quest for the missing Grail is initiated; but Lancelot will not be the one to fulfill it. Like the accursed knight, the Pre-Raphaelite brothers were looking through a glass darkly, unable to fully assimilate the reality which their hearts yearned after. But at least they were looking: really looking.

Léonie Caldecott is the UK editor of both [Humanum](#) and [Magnificat](#). With her late husband Stratford she founded the Center for Faith and Culture in Oxford, its summer school and its journal [Second Spring](#). Her eldest daughter Teresa, along with other colleagues, now work with her to take Strat's contribution forward into the future.

[1] Elizabeth Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites* (Tate Publications, 2000), 243.

[2] Clare Asquith, *Shadowplay, The Hidden Beliefs and Coded Politics of William Shakespeare* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005), 155. Asquith says that in *Hamlet*, Ophelia symbolises “the still new establishment religion into whose embrace those in power were attempting to draw Sidney's generation.”

[3] In the journal *Social Justice* (1894).

[4] Quoted in Fiona MacCarthy's biography, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (Faber and Faber, 2010), 229.

Keep reading! Click [here](#) to read our next article, *Taking Beauty Seriously: An Interview with Artist Donal Mac Manus*.

