PRE-RAPHAELITES' IDENTITY AS A GROUP

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Abstract:While most art criticism of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century denied the Pre-Raphaelite group a prominent place in British art, and critics like Clive Bell were convinced that "The Pre-Raffaelites call in question the whole tradition of the Classical Renaissance, and add a few more names to the heavy roll of notoriously bad painters. …" (Bell, 1914: 184-6), during the 1960s, the perception of the Pre-Raphaelite art began to change and finally succeeded in asserting the Pre-Raphaelite canon. The paintings belonging to the members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, exhibited between 1849 and 1851, contained elements that subsequently were to range Pre-Raphaelite art within the category of masterpieces and entitled art historians to reconsider the grounds that settled the association. Their achievements seem to show an obvious strife for cohesive approaches connected to technique, the use of materials and subject matter.

Keywords: Pre-Raphaelites, art, brotherhood, group identity, common purposes

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood seemed to have been mainly a male group, although *The Germ*, their magazine published in 1850, contained poems by Christina Rossetti. If we are to consider Prettejohn's citation (Prettejohn, 2007:38) of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theory (1992: 1-21) of "homosocial desire", which designates "the social bonds between persons of the same sex" and was created by analogy with 'homosexual', we may conclude that the 'homosocial' behaviour of the members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood should be understood as a combination between their artistic and professional interests and a powerful mutual appreciation, which resulted in a consistent association.

The RoyalAcademy of the time was exclusively opened for male artists and certain critics see the Pre-Raphaelites' male group as an entity eager to take part in a "test of strength" with the official art establishment of the epoch. Unlike the members of the Royal Academy, the 'Brothers' came to be seen as having successfully attached "affective bonds" to their professional ambitions. (Prettejohn, 2007: 40)

The *P.R.B. Journal*,which appeared on May 15th, 1849, mentioned a series of group activities that emphasized the Pre-Raphaelites' daily habits, their artistic strife, and their discussions on art and literature. Readers could learn about their gatherings at Millais's studio, where they examined a drawing by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Dante Drawing the Figure of an Angel on the First Anniversary of the Death of Beatrice*, about Millais, who had Frederic George Stephens as a model, or about Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who used to read his poems. The *Journal* appeared to accomplish their initial intention of recording everyday activities and testified on the group's support in the carrying out of the work of each of its members. Mutual help included critical observations, posing as a model, recommending subjects or giving technical advice, so that the Pre-Raphaelites' works were, in fact, the result of a collective effort.

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The common endeavour of the members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood also included the practice of posing as models, in the case when professional models were hard to find or too expensive to be paid.



1. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The First Anniversary of the Death of Beatrice (Dante Drawing the Angel)*, 1849, City Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham, United Kingdom

Art historians have also noticed that certain Pre-Raphaelite pictures included 'group portraits' of the fellow-members of the Brotherhood, a characteristic that can also be interpreted according to the collaborative effort of the association. Let's notice, for instance, Millais's *Isabella,*where Frederic George Stephens posed for Isabella's brother, holding the glass of wine on the left side, Walter Deverell appeared behind Stephens, Dante Gabriel Rossetti sat on the right side, drinking, and William Michael Rossetti lent his traits to Lorenzo. Similar collective portraits are found in pictures by Hunt, *Rienzi Vowing to Obtain Justice for the Death of his Young Brother Slain in a Skirmish between the Colonna and the Orsini Factions*, or Ford Madox Brown, *Jesus Washing Peter's Feet*. (Prettejohn, 2007: 42-3)



2. Ford Madox Brown, *Jesus Washing Peter's Feet*, 1852-6, Tate, London, United Kingdom

It is supposed that the Pre-Raphaelites' habit of posing for each other might have its origins in the German group that was established in 1809 under the name of *Lukasbund* , the Brotherhood of St Luke, which was later known as the 'Nazarenes'. It was Ford Madox Brown who met certain members of this group living in an abandoned monastery in Rome, by 1840s, and wearing odd costumes and long hair; the name itself , 'Nazarenes', seemed to have derived from their resemblance to the biblical characters.

Nonetheless, recent researches consider that the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was not the first English art group that was attracted by the Nazarenes. By 1840, the artists embracing revivalism approached the German mural works made by the Nazarenes and by their followers in Germany, with a view to use them as guidance for the mural decoration of the new House of Parliament. As a consequence, the paintings exhibited by the Pre-Raphaelites in 1849 were accurately interpreted, by certain critics of the time, as ranging within revivalism, be it of pre-Renaissance source or of German origin.

Year 1850 witnessed a shift of the critical discourse of the period in connection to the Pre-Raphaelite paintings: these were characterized as distasteful and repugnant, as a result of

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having magnified the shortcomings of early Italian art. (*Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 1850) It appeared that the Pre-Raphaelites' pictures could no more compare to the works of the Nazarenes or to those of the other revivalists (William Dyce, John Rogers Herbert).
Nowadays art historians consider that the reason critics showed to be so hostile towards the Pre-Raphaelite pictures exhibited in 1850 was the discovery of the existence of the Brotherhood itself as an organised entity of revivalists. (Prettejohn, 2007: 48) As long as revivalism was approached at an individual level, it seemed not to disturb contemporary criticism, but the moment it came out as a deliberate and focused strife of an art association that might alterthe artistic environment and art history, its meaning obviously came to represent something different. By 1850, the Pre-Raphaelites already ceased signing their works with the P.R.B. initials; nonetheless, by the same year, critics became aware of the fact that the group's name – Pre-Raphaelite – was synonym with the refusal of exactly those art models praised by the artistic institutions of the time. Among such vivid criticism, Charles Dickens's attack of the Pre-Raphaelites appeared in *Household Words*, Dickens's own periodical, and mocked the idea of brotherhood.

As stated previously, certain critics consider that the hostility the Pre-Raphaelites encountered by 1850 would not have shown in the case the group lacked common purposes and strong effect. The critics had already learnt that Millais, Hunt, and Rossetti worked according to associative grounds. Hunt (*A Converted British Family Sheltering a Christian Missionary from the Persecution of the Druids* – 1849-50) and Millais (*Christ in the House of His Parents* – 1849-50) showed at the RoyalAcademy, while Rossetti (*Ecce Ancilla Domini!* – 1849-50) preferred an exhibition that did not involve the selection of the paintings by a jury. Their three main pictures exhibited in 1850 had religious subjects that matched revivalist style. But, while the usual revivalist pictures of the period (William Dyce's *Jacob and Rachel*, for instance) were balanced and elegant, the Pre-Raphaelite paintings of 1850 looked unusual and atypical. (Prettejohn, 2007: 52)



3. William Holman Hunt, *A Converted British Family Sheltering a Christian Missionary*, 1850, AshmoleanMuseum, Oxford, United Kingdom



4. John Everett Millais, *Christ in the House of His Parents*, 1849-50, Tate, London, United Kingdom

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5. William Dyce, *Jacob and Rachel*, 1850, Leicester Arts and Museums Service, Leicester, United Kingdom

Rossetti's painting *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* ('Behold the Handmaid of the Lord') is considered to be clearly connected with the early Italian painting: its subject, the Annunciation, had been commonly employed by the early Renaissance art, yet, the manner it expressed revivalism is seen, by recent critics, as entirely new. Unlike early Renaissance pictures, *Ecce Ancilla Domini* strikes the viewer owing to its simplicity and the emblematic white colour. Oversimplification is, nonetheless, counterbalanced by the use of a deep red combined with the white of the lilies.



6. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Ecce Ancilla Domini !*, 1849-50, Tate, London, United Kingdom

Hunt's picture hada long title, *A Converted British Family Sheltering a Christian Missionary from the Persecution of the Druids*, and is considered to display an intricate religious symbolism. But the painting's most important features reside in its expressiveness, its disturbing environment, focusing on a crowd of women, men, and youngboystrying to comfort the missionary, its minute details, and vivid colours.
Christ in the House of His Parents by Millais has been interpreted by critics as displaying a certain compositional archaism together with the depiction of accurate details and individualized figures.

The three pictures mentioned above can be considered explicit examples of a revival art that abandoned the harmonious character of the conventional revivalist styles. Such an art that focused on vivid colours, minute detail, fragmentariness of composition, and irregularities could only draw critics' blame; it was an art that seemed able to 'demolish' the compositions of both the Academy members and of the familiar mid-century revivalists.

The year following the stir caused by the Pre-Raphaelite paintings of 1850 showed Dante Gabriel Rossetti continuing to avoid public exhibitions, making designs for pictures, and experiencing new watercolour effects.

Millais showed three pictures at the exhibition organised by the RoyalAcademy in 1851: *The Return of the Dove from the Ark*, *Mariana*, and *The Woodman's Daughter*. The first one is a composition of two feminine figures on a biblical subject, while the other two explore literary subjects that have their origin in Coventry Patmore and Tennyson and show a slight change of their author's practices of 1850: rounder faces and bodies as well as the giving up of the too elevated categories of subjects.

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7. John Everett Millais, *Woodman's Daughter*, 1851, Guildhall Art Gallery, London, United KingdomAshmolean Museum, Oxford, United Kingdom



8. John Everett Millais, *The Return of the Dove to the Ark*, 1851,

Hunt also participated in the RoyalAcademy exhibition of 1851 with *Valentine Rescuing Sylvia from Proteus* that was a transposition of Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. The scene shows Valentine, who found his friend, Proteus, trying to seduce his own lover, Sylvia; Proteus's lover, Julia, also takes part in the scene, disguised as a male page. As in the case of Millais's paintings made in 1852, it is possible to grasp in Hunt's new works the abandoning of highly elevated subjects for ones of "private morality" as well as a tendency towards the painting of rounded bodies, as opposed to his previous human figure angularity. (Prettenjohn, 2007: 57)

In 1851, Ford Madox Brown exhibited at the Royal Academy his first important painting, *Geoffrey Chaucer Reading the 'Legend of Custance' to Edward III and His Court at the Palace of Sheen, on the Anniversary of the Black Prince's Forty-Fifth Birthday*, considered to possess the characteristics of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood works.

The Pre-Raphaelite mode was also approached at the time by Charles Allston Collins, who, although was not an official member of the association, shared the Brotherhood's style.



9. Ford Madox Brown, *Geoffrey Chaucer Reading the 'Legend of Custance' to Edward III and his Court, at the Palace of Sheen, on the Anniversary of the Black Prince's Forty-Fifth Birthday*, 1847-51, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sidney, Australia

It became clear that, by 1851, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood emerged into a 'school' that compriseda wide range of expressiveness. The

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critics of the time maintained the caustic tone of the previous year, but their attacks were counterbalanced by William Michael Rossetti's reviews as an art critic for the *Spectator*. Accordingly, in the RoyalAcademy review of 1851, W. M. Rossetti published an unsigned article, where he showed that the Pre-Raphaelite group represented an avant-garde entity and that the existing categorization, including "Academicians, Associates, and outsiders", failed to show the real hierarchy of values among the artists. (*Spectator*, 1851)

Year 1850 was also the moment when John Ruskin took the decision of writing in *The Times*,in order to defend the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Ruskin, who had already written a significant work on the theory of art, *Modern Painters*, published two letters on Pre-Raphaelitism, in the journal, and a pamphlet, which was subsequently mentioned by other newspapers.

In his first letter to *The Times*, Ruskin reconsidered the Pre-Raphaelites' course towards the past and focused on an entirely new field, Pre-Raphaelites' truth-to-nature. As a result, after 1851, the epoch's art criticism gradually left aside their objections to the group's retrogression, early Renaissance art or revivalism, and favourable reviews began to set forth and emphasize the naturalist character of their art.

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