

Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites in the 1850s

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In 1857, John Ruskin addressed the crowd at the Manchester Art Exhibition on 10 July and again on 13 July. This exhibition included a Raphael, several examples of Quattrocento painting and a significant body of Pre-Raphaelite art. Since 1851, Ruskin's name had been linked with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, or P.R.B., as the group's advocate against hostile critics. This address should have been an ideal opportunity for Ruskin to make positive comparisons between the Quattrocento works and Pre-Raphaelites contributions, at the expense of the Raphael. Instead, Ruskin gave a speech about the moral responsibilities associated with art and neglected to speak about the exhibited works. The listening crowd must have been surprised; Ruskin was famous for his letters to *The Times* in support of Pre-Raphaelite art. The essence of Ruskin's argument, later published as *A Joy for Ever*, was that rich ladies should give dresses to poor girls. He did also find the time to suggest that Renaissance art should be saved from Italian art restorers, "the monkeys who tear holes in the pictures (*Fesole/ A Joy for Ever*, p. 191)," but the Pre-Raphaelites go unmentioned.

This episode indicates the need to read Ruskin's writings in a chronological order; had Ruskin's speeches been made circa 1851 or 1852, he would most probably have seized the occasion to make an impassioned plea for understanding on behalf of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. In 1855 or 1856, however, Ruskin's audience might have heard, instead, a triumphant commentary on the success and influence of the Pre-Raphaelite school. The Manchester Art Exhibition was the perfect forum to put forward such arguments, but by 1857, Ruskin had tired of his role as the defender of the Pre-Raphaelites. Perhaps it would be truer to say that the role had been taken from him, for the school was no longer under attack from the Victorian press and Ruskin's function as the interpreter of Pre-Raphaelite art for the public had been gradually diminished.

Ruskin had appointed himself as the champion of the P.R.B. in May 1851, relatively late in the Brotherhood's short lifetime. The group had formed in 1848, with the chief purpose of defining themselves against members of the British Royal Academy who copied Raphael's technical style, and soon attracted much criticism and condemnation from the popular newspapers and art journals alike. Ruskin would certainly have been aware of the group by 1850, when he viewed John Everett Millais' painting, *Christ in the House of his Parents*, at the Royal Academy exhibition. He made no public comment at that time and a year had passed, with a new exhibition now on

display, before he decided to bring the P.R.B. under his protection. *The Times* newspaper ran reviews of the annual Royal Academy exhibition every May, generally dedicating several notices to its coverage. Ruskin could have chosen to write an article for *The Athenaeum*, or another such art journal, but instead he wrote a letter to *The Times* in answer to a review published on 7 May 1851. Ruskin liked to educate the public and perhaps he preferred to attain the highest possible readership.

The Times certainly treated Ruskin with respect; his letter was awarded a title, 'The Pre-Raffaelites', and a short editorial introduction. In contrast, the review that had supposedly prompted the letter, 'Exhibition of the Royal Academy: Second Notice', had failed to refer to the P.R.B. by name even within the article. Millais is also referred to as "Mr Millar", although the reviewer claims that the unnamed group are courting notoriety with their offensive paintings. Ruskin's status as "The Author of Modern Painters", as he signed the letter, allowed the Brotherhood to be given some rather more respectful attention. Significantly, Ruskin did not sign the letter as the typically anonymous "A Graduate" or "A Gentleman", the accepted custom for letters sent to *The Times* in the 1850s, but revealed his identity from the beginning. The Pre-Raphaelites and the author of *Modern Painters* were now linked together in Victorian perceptions.

Ruskin's tone is detached in this first letter (*The Times*, 13 May, p. 8) and he reminds the reader that he has no personal "acquaintance with any of these artists", a fact that would soon change. He criticises Raphael and the practice of copying Raphael, but also claims that the Brotherhood were not actually imitating "antique painting." He asserts that the P.R.B. were simply attempting to represent "stern facts [...] as all artists did [...] before Raphael's time." In answer to critics who were suspicious of medievalism, Ruskin claims that the Pre-Raphaelites were not particularly medieval at all. This was a notable factor in Ruskin's early defences of the group, but it would change. In 1851, the taint of the medieval was associated with a sympathy for so-called Romanism and at the time, Ruskin found this personally distasteful. *The Times* had accused Millais, Holman Hunt and Charles Allston Collins of "addicting themselves to a monkish style", having a "morbid infatuation" and indulging in "monkish follies" (*The Times*, 7 May, p. 8). Finally, the works are dismissed as un-English, "with no real claim to figure in any decent collection of English painting."

Ruskin's sequel to his original letter, published on the 30th of May, follows up on various points of criticism he wished to make about the exhibited Pre-Raphaelite works. Although Ruskin does not hesitate to list the errors he feels have been committed by the artists, he has clearly subjected the works to a close and respectful reading. The letter closes with the daring claim that the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood "may, as they gain experience, lay in our land the foundations of a school of art nobler than has been seen for three hundred years" (p. 8). This seems an effective counter to *The Times'* reviewer's accusation of an unworthiness to be English and the editorial comment in *The Supplement to The Times* was that the P.R.B. had found an "apologist" (p. 1). If Ruskin

was the group's apologist, however, he was still a wary advocate. His letter was also careful to warn the group away from "Romanizing tendencies" (p. 8).

Ruskin's pamphlet, *Pre-Raphaelitism*, continued to stress that the P.R.B. "will of course come to nothing" should they stray down the path of "medievalism or Romanism" (*Pre-Raphaelite Lectures*, p. 20). However, Ruskin's defences had now taken a new and decidedly evangelical tone. He had formed friendships with the Pre-Raphaelite artists on the basis of his letters to *The Times* and, just as significantly, he had been personally harassed by members of the public for his views. In the preface to his argument, Ruskin claims that the advice he had given in the first volume of *Modern Painters* had "at last been carried out, to the very letter, by a group of young men who [...] have been assailed with the most scurrilous abuse [...] from the public press" (p. 5). He had recreated the Pre-Raphaelites as his disciples and his essay contains a tone of moral outrage against their tormentors, the "common critics of the press" (p. 18).

"Pre-Raphaelitism" seems to have been written when Ruskin was quite furious and the result was an ideal answer to the key the Pre-Raphaelite movement, both in tone and content. *The Times* had characterised the Pre-Raphaelites as young upstarts who, at best, were guilty of the vice of craving public notoriety as they indulged themselves in a ridiculous artistic conceit. At worst, their method of painting was itself a vice, a depraved and unnatural way of rejecting Raphael's marvellous beauty. Ruskin adeptly reverses this notion, making the youth of the Pre-Raphaelites a definite virtue: "our older men having become familiarised with the false system [...] not knowing well the degree of harm they had suffered" (p. 17). He attributes indolence, sensuality and shallow pride to the practice of improving on nature as Raphael did, representing the P.R.B. as moral reformers who wish only to render a faithful representation of nature. From Ruskin's new standpoint, the Pre-Raphaelites resembled young martyrs, standing bravely against a hostile and corrupt establishment. The group of artists had become the heroes of Ruskin's narrative and from this point on, his defences were passionate, lacking his former detachment.

By 1853, Ruskin was prepared to redefine the once dreaded medievalism, to the extent that he could ironically refer to the Pre-Raphaelite movement as an artistic "heresy" (*Pre-Raphaelite Lectures*, p. 151) against the establishment in a lecture delivered at Edinburgh in November of that year. At this stage, Ruskin touches upon the Protestant dislike of "religious imagery" (p. 157) but decides that this is not the reason that God is absent from nineteenth-century art. He mentions the Reformation only to set it aside in a rather convoluted fashion, claiming that it was Raphael himself who was personally responsible for separating art from God, since his Vatican frescoes show Christ presiding over the world of theology and Apollo presiding over the world of poetry. Ruskin reinvents the formerly shadowy and suspect period of "Medievalism" (p. 153) as a time when the conventions of art harmoniously incorporated religious devotion. Most Victorians had a vague notion that medieval art existed at some point before Raphael, and Ruskin contributed to such impreciseness in this speech. In 1853, the

Victorian public knew so little about the so-called medieval period that it could function as a useful imaginative space for a critic or artist.

This speech of 1853, then, would seem to contradict Ruskin's earlier arguments, since he goes on to establish a link between the Pre-Raphaelite movement and this worthy medieval art. The Pre-Raphaelites were influenced by a wide range of artists and, quite literally, they were prepared to examine any available art that predated Raphael. While this sometimes meant examining Books of Hours (see Julian Treherz, 'The Pre-Raphaelites and Medieval Illuminated Manuscripts'), more often than not, they were influenced by the earlier stages of the Renaissance. A reading of *The Germ*, the group's short-lived publication, reveals that the artists had a confused notion of art history. Different periods are thrown together under the definition of medieval art and Rossetti invents a medieval artist for his essay 'Hand and Soul' rather than researching the background of a real individual. It seems ironic that a highly educated critic such as John Ruskin was prepared to exploit the gaps in his audience's knowledge to support the Pre-Raphaelites, while he was maintaining the importance of truth in art.

Raphael is made into an unwitting Lucifer in Ruskin's speech, representing "spurious beauty" (p. 169) in contrast to the Pre-Raphaelite school as a reforming church that is "beyond the power of temptation from this beauty" (p.169). The address is in sharp contrast to Ruskin's speeches at Manchester in 1857, both of which fail even to mention the movement. In 1853, however, Ruskin's argument takes the form of a clever parable. The very flaws of the Pre-Raphaelites are presented as virtues, in a holy sacrifice of any "sensibility to the ordinary and popular forms of artistic gracefulness" in exchange for "the more noble quality of sincerity" (p. 169). The Pre-Raphaelites are praised as England's "noblest children" (p. 174), yet Ruskin is quick to point out that Raphael had been Millais' age when the Renaissance artist painted "his greatest work" (p. 174). In a sense, Raphael's life is presented in parallel with the lives of the young Pre-Raphaelite artists, but the P.R.B. are shown to return to the medieval principles of truth and godliness just at the point where Raphael abandons them. With almost biblical righteousness, Ruskin brings the tale full circle and challenges his listeners to difficult, new (and yet ancient) principles of Pre-Raphaelitism.

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood itself lost its cohesion as a group in 1853 and no longer held meetings after this date. Ruskin, however, continued for some time to write about these same artists and the movement they had inspired in confident tones, with no note of disharmony. Fortunately, he had generally referred to the Pre-Raphaelites as a school and continued to do so in a seamless fashion. Having begun to defend the P.R.B. at a rather late stage, Ruskin seems to over-compensate by making no mention of the group's break-up in his critical writings. In his published notes on the Royal Academy exhibition of 1856, he pointed out that a significant change had taken place and his tone is almost ecstatic. His narrative seems to peak here, as his imagery is that of a Holy War between Raphael and the Pre-Raphaelites; "the battle is completely and confessedly

won” (p. 207) as painters have abandoned Raphael, “struggling forward out of their conventionalism to the pre-Raphaelite standard” (p. 207). The desired goal has been attained, as the majority of the exhibited works now show a clear Pre-Raphaelite influence and the Grand Style is no longer the accepted norm. The following year’s Academy notes would begin to register some disillusionment, but for now Ruskin was triumphant as the vindicated standard-bearer of the Pre-Raphaelite movement.

Ruskin published the third volume of *Modern Painters* in 1856, praising early Renaissance figures such as Giotto and Fra Angelico and linking them to the “modern Pre-Raphaelite school” (p. 46). Interestingly, Ruskin’s claims on behalf of the Pre-Raphaelites had become less vague, moving from the imprecisely defined medieval tradition to named artists from the beginning of the Renaissance. Ruskin continues to associate Raphael with the imagery of Lucifer in this work, maintaining that Raphael’s artistic innovations “were not sought for truth’s sake but for pride’s” (p. 62) as the “infinitely varied veracities of Christ’s life [were]

blotted out by the vapid fineries of Raphael” (p. 72). Diverging from his claims of 1853, Ruskin is now prepared to work the Reformation into his argument, claiming that “Raphael ministered [...] to the impious luxury of the Vatican” (p.73). Despite the admirable efforts of Calvin, Knox and Luther, “to this day, the clear and tasteless poison of Raphael infects [...] millions of Christians” (p. 73). Those painting in the tradition of Raphael / Joshua Reynolds are labelled as Pharisees and since the young Pre-Raphaelites had been claimed by Ruskin as his followers or disciples five years earlier, it seems difficult to avoid the implication that Ruskin has an unconscious sense of himself as a Christ figure. Perhaps it would be fairer to suggest that Ruskin reinvented himself as John the Baptist, the prophet whose writings prefigured the Pre-Raphaelite school. The religious imagery is sometimes confused, particularly since Ruskin modified his opinions and arguments over time, yet it lends dramatic effect to his narrative of good versus “Artistical Pharisaism” (p. 78).

By 1857, however, Ruskin seems quite disappointed that the Pre-Raphaelite school had achieved a considerable level of popularity. In his notes on the Royal Academy Exhibition of that year, he grumbled that artists who had once copied Raphael now simply copied the Pre-Raphaelites instead: “what was done in the first instance by men of singular genius [...] is now done [...] by men of ordinary powers” (*Pre-Raphaelite Lectures*, p. 275). Ruskin missed the pioneering years of the Brotherhood and perhaps he also resented the erosion of his importance to artists who were no longer marginalised. Ironically, newspapers like *The Times* now imitated Ruskin’s former praises of the Pre-Raphaelites, down to adopting his habit of examining tiny details in their paintings. His snub to the movement at the Manchester Art Exhibition may seem surprising, but it pales in comparison to his notes for the Academy Exhibition of 1858. Ruskin accuses the movement of “tearing down in its victory a few useful old landmarks, that we will have to build up again by and by” (p. 275). Since writers for *The Times* were imitating

Ruskin's former stance, Ruskin apparently returns the compliment in adopting criticisms of the Pre-Raphaelites once beloved by that newspaper. He identifies the "fatal influence" of the school as "the fate of loving ugly things better than beautiful ones" (p. 298).

In a sense, Ruskin's identity and critical voice were being stolen, as his defences of the Pre-Raphaelites were popularised. The anonymous writers for *The Times* did their best to write like Ruskin, and in some instances, they were uncannily successful. Ruskin's response was extreme: he switched to the other side of the debate. Perhaps most surprisingly, Ruskin now finds something good to say about Joshua Reynolds, the first President of the Royal Academy and the artist who had popularised Raphael's style. He decides that Reynolds was "grace consummate [...] in the rendering of the momentary loveliness and trembling life of childhood" (p. 290). Ruskin admits that his readers may be surprised to find him writing "somewhat in the tone of one of the men of the old generalisation school" (p. 291), but perhaps he is simply nostalgic for the lost youth of the ten-year-old Pre-Raphaelite movement. England's noblest children had grown older and more distant from him: Millais had not only married Ruskin's former wife but, far worse in Ruskin's view, had commercialised his artwork, while Holman Hunt was frequently out of the country.

Given Ruskin's unhappiness that the Pre-Raphaelites had achieved too much popular success, however, there is a certain pointed irony to his defence of Joshua Reynolds. The P.R.B. had always disliked Reynolds more than Raphael himself, blaming the former for the endless and inferior copies of Raphael's work. Ruskin always adjusted his Pre-Raphaelite theories to suit the moment and perhaps he now identified with Reynolds as never before. To a certain extent, Ruskin is responsible for the popularisation of Pre-Raphaelite art and thus he may blame himself for the inferior works from "the men of ordinary genius" who had once copied Raphael and now copied the Pre-Raphaelites. Like Reynolds, he is guilty of tainting the art that he once loved, undermining his own purpose as a critic.

The progress of Ruskin's thoughts and theories can be traced from 1851 to 1858 without much difficulty, if his works are read in the correct order. Since Ruskin rarely admits that such a progression exists, however, his Pre-Raphaelite writings will present a considerable challenge to the casual reader who does not follow a strict chronology, ranging from detachment to passion, from advocacy to hostility without much explanatory comment.

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