

CHAPTER IV

ROSSETTI AND THE PRE-RAPHAELITES

I "My work is the embodiment of dreams "

WE must not anticipate This leap to a new understanding was still thirty years ahead, and in the four or five years before 1883 Morris had himself in his lectures on art done much to develop Ruskin's thought to the point of transformation. In their influence upon Morris in the fifties, Ruskin's writings were perhaps of greatest importance in helping towards his choice of art as the central battleground in the "Holy Warfare against the age".

At the time when he was reading Carlyle and Ruskin, Morris had very little first-hand experience of the working class, of their conditions of life and labour. Several members of his circle at Oxford, including Cornell Price who came from the Black Country, had far more first-hand knowledge than he and vigorous articles on the "social question" from their pens were included in the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*. From Kingsley's *Alton Locke*, Mrs. Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, and from *Hard Times* he would have learnt more Of the life of the workers he had a vague but continual guilty apprehension. But his knowledge (and hatred) of capitalism in the 1850s was derived not from contact with the sources of exploitation, but from the squalor and anarchy which he passed through in London and the great towns from the degradation of its architecture and from the sham and hypocrisy pervading its manners and thought.

For "politics"—the intrigues and shadow-boxing of the two great political parties—he was already forming a contemptuous indifference, which was nourished by Carlyle's scorn of democratic fetishes, and Dickens' ridicule of Parliament. It is true that he was attracted by (and learnt something from) the "Christian Socialism" of Charles Kingsley and F. D. Maurice. But when, early in 1856, he came under the influence of the engaging and arresting personality of Dante Gabriel Rossetti,

these ideas were left to mature in the back of his mind. In July, 1856, he was writing to his friend, Cornell Price:

"I can't enter into politico-social subjects with any interest, for on the whole I see that things are in a muddle, and I have no power or vocation to set them right in ever so little a degree. My work is the embodiment of dreams in one form or another."

In one sense, this letter reveals that Morris was aware of the severity of the disease from which society was suffering: he put forward no petty quack remedies—the immensity of the problem left him helpless. In another it reveals the weak point in his vision at this time—"Things are in a muddle"—can it be an accident that almost the identical phrase—"It's aw a muddle", "Fro' first to last, a muddle!"—is the refrain of the sentimentalized workingman, Stephen Blackpool, whose central position in the structure of Dickens' *Hard Times* destroys the artistic integrity of the novel, and blunts the fine edge of its attack—deflecting the attack from a total indictment of capitalist society into an assault upon utilitarianism alone? *Hard Times* appeared in 1854, and Morris—already an admirer of Dickens—was certain not to have passed it by. And Blackpool—and, above all, this very phrase, "a muddle"—serves in the novel to obscure the one fact which Dickens could never bring himself to look in the face—the fact of the class struggle, the irreconcilable interests of the employers and the employed. It was this fact which Morris had—through stern experience—still to learn and until he had learned it, all his "Warfare" was likely to be misdirected and wild.

In the 1850s, however, Morris abandoned the effort to analyse the causes for his "hatred of civilization", and surrendered to the over-mastering attractions of "romance". For it was just at this time that he came under the influence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and—through him—met the members and associates of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. As we shall see (p. 88) this "Brotherhood" was a high-sounding name adopted by a small circle of young artists (and would-be artists) determined to raise the banner of revolt against the academic art of their time, but incoherent in their ideas, and ill-assorted in their talents. The name itself was derived from the banter of fellow art-students, who thought that the reverence paid by John Everett Millais and William Holman Hunt to the religious art of the early Italian

Renaissance was exaggerated and ludicrous. The "Brotherhood" had been founded in 1848, to give a sense of mystery, dedication, formality, to the group, when they met in each others' rooms and studios for earnest discussion. Of its seven original members, three were of especial prominence—the two very young professional painters, with marked abilities, Hunt and Millais and Rossetti himself, the brilliant London-born son of an Italian refugee. Rossetti's younger brother, William Michael, was another member (critic and recorder of the Brotherhood, since he had no talent as a painter), and his sister, Christina Rossetti the poet, was a close associate. Ford Madox Brown, the painter—a few years older than the others—was welcomed as an unofficial associate, while John Ruskin came to the aid of the Brotherhood when they were hard-pressed by outraged critics, and adopted a position of qualified patronage. In 1849 and 1850 Millais, Hunt and Rossetti exhibited paintings adorned with the mystic initials, "P.R.B.", which aroused both attention and rage in academic circles, and in 1850 a paper named *The Germ* was published, which lasted for only four numbers, and whose contents were written almost entirely by members of the Brotherhood or their associates.

The fame of the Brotherhood had reached Morris and Burne-Jones at Oxford, through the storm of critical controversy, and through Ruskin's defence of their work. The rumour of revolt within the visual arts excited their interest. when they found a copy of *The Germ* they read it with enthusiasm, and they made it their business to view any paintings by the group which they could find. In January, 1856 (when the original Brotherhood was already breaking up), Burne-Jones contacted Rossetti at the Great Ormond Street Working Men's College which the Christian Socialist, F. D. Maurice, had helped to found, and at which both Rossetti and Ruskin gave lectures and tuition. He fell completely under Rossetti's spell. and was flattered to find at a subsequent meeting that Rossetti was taking a close interest in the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*. Burne-Jones recalled:

"He received me very courteously, and asked much about Morris, one or two of whose poems he knew already, and I think that was our principal subject of talk, for he seemed much interested about him. He showed me many designs for pictures; they tossed about everywhere

in the room. the floor at one end was covered with them and with books . I stayed long and watched him at work, not knowing till many a day afterwards that this was a thing he greatly hated, and when, for shame, I could stay no longer, I went away, having carefully concealed from him the desire I had to be a painter"¹

Even after the passage of years, it is clear that Burne-Jones could still recall with excitement the spell which Rossetti's studio cast upon him. Here—after all the youthful conversations at Oxford, the awed discussions with Morris of this new, revolutionary, movement in art of which they had read in the pages of their master, Ruskin, and the visits they had made to see the pictures of members of the Brotherhood—here at last he seemed to have stepped directly into the presence of Art itself, and—what is more—Art treated him familiarly and courteously, and had even noticed the work of his best friend!

Rossetti, on his side, was flattered by the attention he received, for the "great" man was himself still in his late twenties. and, no doubt, he was not so disturbed to be watched at his work as Burne-Jones later came to fear. Indeed, only a few days later he was writing to his friend, Allingham.

"That notice in the Oxford and Cambridge Magazine was the most gratifying thing by far that ever happened to me—being unmistakeably genuine . It turns out to be by a certain youthful Jones, who was in London the other day, and whom I have now met. One of the nicest young fellows in—Dreamland. For there most of the writers in that miraculous piece of literature seem to be. Surely this cometh in some wise of the *Germ* . . ."²

Morris, by now articled to G. E. Street, the architect (where he met his life-long friend, Philip Webb), but still with one foot in the University, was the next to be introduced to the shrine of Art. Burne-Jones, indeed, was now worshipping at it almost daily, having thrown over his Oxford degree and moved to London to dedicate his life to painting. Here Morris joined him on many weekends in the early summer, and they basked together in Rossetti's patronage:

"Our Sundays were very peaceful days . . . often spent by Morris reading aloud the *Morte d'Arthur* while I worked, and often Rossetti

¹ *Memorials*, I, pp 129-30

² *Ibid*, I, p 130 "That notice" was a reference to Rossetti's work in an article by Burne-Jones on Thackeray, published in *The Germ*

would join us in the afternoon, and it became clear that he cared to be with us ”¹

“We fell under the influence of Rossetti”, Morris recalled in 1892,² “perhaps I even more than Burne-Jones,³ and he did us a great deal of good.” It was the only time in his life that Morris was completely—and almost uncritically—swept off his feet by another personality. Rossetti was most decisive. Keats was the climax of romantic poetry; the course of poetry was now nearly run, and the next Keats must be a painter. In fact, *every* man ought to be a painter. Within a matter of weeks, architecture was abandoned. In July, 1856, Morris was writing to a friend (in the same letter in which he declared that “My work is the embodiment of dreams”).

“I have seen Rossetti twice since I saw the last of you; spent almost a whole day with him the last time, last Monday. Rossetti says I ought to paint, he says I shall be able, now as he is a very great man, and speaks with authority and not as the scribes, I *must* try.

“I shall have enough to do, if I actually master this art of painting. I dare scarcely think failure possible at times, and yet I know in my mind that my chances are slender, I am glad that I am compelled to try anyhow, I was slipping off into a kind of small (very small) Palace of Art ”⁴

By August he was sharing a studio in London with Burne-Jones, who wrote:

“Topsy and I live together in the quaintest room in all London, hung with brasses of old knights and drawings of Albert Durer. We know Rossetti now as a daily friend, and we know Browning too, who is

¹ *Memorials*, I, p. 133

² *Works*, Vol. XXII, p. xxxi

³ It is difficult to believe this, in view of the tone of adulation in some of Burne-Jones's private letters and recollections, e.g. “One autumn evening Gabriel and I were alone, and we were chatting together—and he to me was as Pope or Emperor—it was so nice, for when he loved man or woman they knew it and it was happy, and it was just then that a note came from — to say that he would come in a few minutes to fetch us to dine to meet this and that. Gabriel rang the bell and asked the man when the next train for Euston started for London, and a cab was got and we were in the train for Euston when — came. It was ten o'clock when we got to Euston Hotel, and we were back in Oxford by nine [the next morning]. I thought, ‘this man could lead armies and destroy empires if he liked, how good it is to be with him’ ” (*Memorials*, I, p. 167)

⁴ *Letters*, pp. 17–18

the greatest poet alive, and we known Arthur Hughes, and Woolner, and Madox Brown Topsy will be a painter, he works hard, is prepared to wait twenty years, loves art more and more every day He has written several poems, exceedingly dramatic—the Brownings, I hear, have spoken very highly of one that was read to them, Rossetti thinks one called 'Rapunzel' is equal to Tennyson The 'Mag' is going to smash—let it go! the world is not converted and never will be."¹

Rossetti continued to drum into the two lads his gospel:

"If any man has any poetry in him, he should paint, for it has all been said and written, and they have scarcely begun to paint it!"²

And—while Morris was learning to do it—he could be useful in other ways: for Rossetti had not overlooked the fact that his protégé had money, and this enabled him to extend the range of his good-natured patronage "Yesterday", Ford Madox Brown noted in his diary for August 24th, 1856, "Rossetti brought his ardent admirer Morris of Oxford, who bought my little Hayfield for £40."³

In the next two years, if the Palace of Art was evacuated, Morris set up in real style in a Gothic castle in Bohemia The studio at Red Lion Square was furnished with enormous "intensely medieval furniture", including a huge settle surmounted with three great cupboards, on the panels of which Rossetti painted scenes from Dante and Malory Morris, working to master the art of painting, became noticeably more variable in mood—at some times hilarious, at others, taciturn and morose, at others flying into uncontrollable rages In 1857 the famous descent of the artists and amateurs on Oxford was made, in order to paint murals on the walls of the Oxford Union Rossetti took with him a mixed bag of friends and protégés, and they set to work to paint with distemper on a ground of whitewash on

¹ Mackail, I, pp 107–8

² *Ibid*, I, p 110 Rossetti's opinion of the two was very high In February, 1857, he wrote to William Bell Scott "Two young men, projectors of the Oxford and Cambridge Magazine, have recently come to town from Oxford and are now very intimate friends of mine Their names are Morris and Jones They have turned artists instead of taking up any other career to which the University generally leads, and both are men of real genius Jones's designs are models of finish and imaginative detail, unequalled by anything unless, perhaps, Albert Durer's finest works, and Morris, though without practice as yet, has no less power, I fancy He has written some really wonderful poetry, too"

³ *Ibid*, I, p 112

damp mortar scenes out of Malory Morris's picture was entitled "How Sir Palomydes loved La Belle Iseult, with exceeding great love out of measure, and how she loved not him again but rather Sir Tristram". The remaining members of the Oxford "Brotherhood" were enlisted to help in the execution of the work. Dixon, the fledgling Canon, took a hand, while C. J. Faulkner—now an Oxford Fellow and Mathematics Tutor—"comes out tremendously strong on the roof with all kinds of quaint beasts and birds".¹ They sat for each other as models, and Cormell Price noted in his diary for October 18th, 1857, "Stood for Top for two hours in a dalmatic".² Morris's head was "always fit for Lancelot or Tristram",³ while his (now portly) figure, with legs straddled like Henry VIII, served to decorate angles in the roof. "For the purposes of our drawing we often needed armour", recalled Burne-Jones.

"Therefore Morris, whose knowledge of all these things seemed to have been born in him set to work to make designs for an ancient kind of helmet called a basinet, and for a great surcoat of ringed mail with a hood of mail and the skirt coming below the knees. These were made for him by a stout little smith who had a forge near the Castle. Morris's visits to the forge were daily, but what scenes happened there we shall never know, the encounters between these two workmen were always stubborn and angry as far as I could see. One afternoon when I was working high up at my picture, I heard a strange bellowing in the building, and turning round saw an unwonted sight. The basinet was being tried on, but the visor, for some reason would not lift, and I saw Morris embedded in iron, dancing with rage and roaring inside. The mail coat came in due time, and was so satisfactory to its designer that the first day it came he chose to dine in it. It became him well, he looked very splendid."⁴

The story of the armour is one among many humorous anecdotes of Morris at Oxford. He was now known by his friends as "Topsy", partly in honour of his mop of matted hair, partly after the character in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. One of his associates recalled him as being, at this time,

"a short, very square-built, spectacled man with a head that appeared too big from the length and thickness of his dark, matted locks. His movements were jerky and full of humour, for Morris was an excellent

¹ Mackail, I, p. 120

² *Ibid*, I, p. 126 "Dalmatic"—a long-sleeved clerical vestment.

³ *Ibid*, I, p. 120

⁴ *Ibid*, I, pp. 120-1

mimic. He was very shy, and had a way of shifting his legs and twiddling with his watch-chain which gave him somewhat of a grotesque appearance. He was the essence of good-nature, and stood chaff with extra-ordinary tolerance."

In the circle of enthusiasts, he was the butt of their laughter. His painting was amateurish—the figures fourteen feet high, their legs hidden by sun-flowers, above which great heads and shoulders appeared. Rossetti told him his Iseult was ugly, and sent him back to "Nature" to make sketches of a local *belle*. The wary mother refused to allow Morris to draw her daughter, and on his return, disconsolate, he was confronted by some rhymes

"Poor Topsy has gone to make a sketch of Miss Lipscombe
But he can't draw the head, and don't know where the hips come "

When painting the roof, he was covered from head to foot—hair, beard, and clothes—in paint. "My good man, can you tell me the subject of these pictures?" enquired one officious don, examining the work in progress

"Morris turned suddenly on the Don, glaring at him through his tempera-splashed spectacles. *Morte d'Arthur* he shouted, and mounting a ladder, he vanished into the chaos of the roof scaffolding"¹

The next day Rossetti received from the don a complaint of the rudeness of his workmen. The stories of Morris's hatred of any formal or fashionable social intercourse are many. Day and night, he lived with the stain of paint on his hands, the dreams of Malory in his head. "Morris went to Jones's on Sunday night", noted the sister of Cornell Price in her diary, "and his hair was so long and he looked so wild that the servant who opened the door would not let him in, thinking he was a burglar."

This Oxford adventure was the culminating period of Morris's youthful revolt. In these dizzy weeks, surrounded by other young enthusiasts, he came nearest to bringing to life his dream-world in the heart of Victorian England. During these weeks several of his best early poems were written, in a medieval volume with a large clasp. A hilarious and eccentric undergraduate, with scarlet hair, who flaunted revolutionary, atheist and republican convictions, became one of the circle: his name was Swinburne. Rossetti discovered the beautiful Jane Burden, with her deep

¹ Val. C. Prinsep in *The Magazine of Art*, 1904.

mystic eyes, shapely neck, and plenitude of dark hair, who was to become William Morris's wife. The co-operative work at the Union, under the inspiration of the master-artist, Rossetti, seemed to give a new reality to the idea of "Brotherhood" in such a manner (it seemed) the frescoes on some stately church might have been painted in Italy during the early Renaissance. Nineteen-year-old Val Prinsep, aspiring to become a painter, who was one of the circle, could still recall fifty years later the "singular charm" of the adventure. The mediæval dream was built into their everyday life. The first meal he took with Rossetti, Burne-Jones and Morris in their lodgings was atrocious—but "to be at that feast was like entering a new world!"

"The past was mixed so frequently and with such sincerity with the present that I found some saying of the man who prepared the paints at the 'Union' mentioned at the same time and nearly in the same sentence as a joke of Sir Dinadan the maddest wag among the Knights of King Arthur ."

Like other such cliques—proud of their own identity, their sense of difference with the humdrum world—a special slang, private jokes and allusions, were cultivated. Every lodging was a "crib", all beautiful women were "stunners" "For a man not to know the difference between a basinet and a salade was shameful." They asserted the same artistic doctrines "in all art there was to be an abundance of pattern". Above all, underlying their high spirits and affectations, there was a tremendous sense of dedication to art, an earnest passion to achieve something worthy of the beauty of past times, despite the commercialism and philistinism of their age. "I can still picture to myself the little dining-room at that 'delightful crib'", recalled Val Prinsep:

"I can recall the animated discussion on Art subjects that we held there. I can hear Rossetti from his sofa interrupting us, and saying

"'It's all very well talking, but if I could paint like —', mentioning a painter, who was then the most popular artist of the day, 'why, by Jove, I should do it'."

"I can see Morris stop aghast in his stumping backwards and forwards, as was his wont, and Ned look up from his drawing, and crying a pained, 'Oh, Gabriel,' and then bursting forth in a roar of laughter at the idea of 'our Gabriel' being anything but what he was. Then Morris recovers himself and chuckles, 'What a lark!'"¹

¹ Val C Prinsep in *The Magazine of Art*, 1904.

So, for over three years, Rossetti's commanding influence, the dedication to painting, and to a "Brotherhood" of artists defying the world, prevailed.

II The Pre-Raphaelites—and the "Soonset Floosh"

That these years of discipleship to Rossetti were ones of high-spirited revolt—Bohemian, enthusiastic, iconoclastic—is clear enough. Analysis of the nature of this revolt is more difficult. If we consider the aims of the original Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (which was already dissolving when Morris and Burne-Jones met Rossetti) we meet with a good deal of confusion. Hunt and William Michael Rossetti attempted to write the history of the movement in later life, and they by no means agreed on the original objectives of the Brotherhood, nor even on the course of events. Certainly, all who took part in its early stages believed that they were in revolt against the academic art of the time. Several of the group came from impoverished professional or lower middle-class backgrounds like Keats, they found the need to fight to gain entry and recognition in artistic circles, and, like Keats, they resented the tradition of deference to aristocratic taste which had by no means been ousted by the mid-century. The Royal Academy (to their minds) represented the bastion of reaction in the visual arts, and William Morris, in 1891, still regarded the Pre-Raphaelite movement as "a really audacious attempt, a definite revolt against the Academical Art which brooded over all the Schools of civilized Europe at the time. . ."

"One must look upon it as a portion of the general revolt against Academicism in Literature as well as in Art", continued Morris. "In Literature the revolt had taken place much earlier . . ."¹ And, in truth, the movement started with a strong literary influence. The painters, influenced by the great romantic poets, sought to discard the cold conventions of a mechanical "grand manner", and to return to the direct observation of nature. F. G. Stephens, one of the original Brotherhood, wrote in *The Germ*:

"The Public are taught to look with delight upon murky old masters, with dismally demoniac trees, and dull waters of lead, colourless and

¹ Lecture on "The English Pre-Raphaelites", May Morris, I, p. 297

like ice, upon rocks that make geologists wonder, their angles are so impossible, their fractures are so new . . . so it is that the world is taught to think of nature, as seen through other men's eyes, without any reference to its original powers of perception . . ."¹

Holman Hunt, more than fifty years later, reconstructed a conversation with Millais in the early days, when the two young painters decided to challenge the stylized manners of the Schools:

"Let us go on a bold track . . . It is simply fuller Nature that we want . . . Why should the several parts of the composition be always opposed in pyramids? Why should the highest light be always on the principal figure? Why make one corner of the picture always in shade? For what reason is the sky in a daylight picture made as black as night?"²

So far, so good—but overshadowing the "return to Nature" of the romantic literary tradition there was the particular influence of the poems of John Keats. The discovery of Keats's poems had nourished the adolescent revolt of both Hunt and Rossetti. Hunt's first picture exhibited at the Academy was *The Eve of St Agnes* the first avowedly Pre-Raphaelite painting of Millais was taken from *Isabella*, and Rossetti's first important poem, *The Blessed Damozel*, was written as a heavenly complement to the same poem. The desire to make their painting the medium for the expression of more intimate and personal feelings than were capable of expression in the conventional "grand manner" was thus, in its early stages, coloured by the attractions of Keats's imaginative "realms of gold". Many years later William Michael Rossetti sought to find a formula which reconciled both the "return to Nature" and the lure of "romance"—

"the predominant conception of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood," he wrote, was "that an artist, whether painter or writer, ought to be bent upon defining and expressing his own personal thoughts, and that these ought to be based upon a direct study of Nature"³

But John Ruskin, in the letter to *The Times* in 1851 in which he came to the defence of the Brotherhood (placing, admittedly, his own interpretation on their aims, rather than that of Hunt or Rossetti) emphasized quite different points:

¹ *The Germ*, No. 4

² W. Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the P.R.B.*, Vol. I, p. 59

³ W. M. Rossetti's Preface to a facsimile edition of *The Germ* (1905)

"They intend to return to early days in one point only—that . . . they will draw either what they see, or what they suppose might have been the actual facts of the scene they desire to represent, irrespective of any conventional rules of picture-making and they have chosen their unfortunate though not inaccurate name because all artists did this before Raphael's time, and after Raphael's time did *not* do this, but sought to paint fair pictures rather than represent stern facts . . ."

The representation of "stern facts" and the expression of the artist's "own personal thoughts" need not necessarily be opposed. But the two phrases indicate the contradictory nature of Pre-Raphaelite aims. "Truth to Nature" proved to be one of the most deceptive slogans of any artistic movement in history. The Pre-Raphaelite painters devoted exceptional pains to copying the external appearances of reality. They took each other (and each other's friends) for models, and posed in strange costumes and in stranger attitudes. William Morris, raging inside a basinet, is only one piece of vociferous testimony among many to the literal enthusiasm with which the group of painters adopted their fallacy—painting each vein and mottle on a leaf, painting the coat of a sheep hair by hair, or tethering a calf in the studio—in the belief that by so doing they were approaching closer to the portrayal of reality.

But the very last impression that is given by the majority of Pre-Raphaelite paintings is that they are engaged in any serious way with the exploration of contemporary experience. The painters understood perfectly well that "Truth to Nature" pushed to its extreme would become mere copywork naturalism. In fact, they took themes for their painting which varied like the two extremes of Victorian poetry. At both extremes they were subject to a strong literary inspiration. In the first stage of the movement, Keats, Dante and the Bible, provided most of the texts. In the second stage—of Morris, Burne-Jones and Rossetti—Malory supplanted these, and Morris's first full-scale picture (commissioned for Thomas Plint, a Leeds stock-broker) was entitled "Sir Tristram after his illness, in the garden of King Mark's Palace, recognized by the dog he had given to Iseult". One of Burne-Jones's earliest paintings (also commissioned for Plint) was taken from Rossetti's poem, *The Blessed Damozel*:

"I have chosen *The Blessed Damozel* for my year's work. In the first

picture I shall make a man walking in the street of a great city, full of all kinds of happy life, children, such as he will never have, and lovers walking, and ladies leaning from windows all down great lengths of street leading to the city walls, and there the gates are wide open, letting in a space of green field and cornfield in harvest, and all round his head a great rain of swirling Autumn leaves blowing from a little walled graveyard

"And in the other picture I shall make lovely Heaven, where the lady stands at the edge of the garden and leans over, trying to count a thick flight of little souls in bright flames, and the garden of Heaven full of flowers on every side of her and of lovers who have met again. Oh dear, I dare say it will turn out something awful."¹

And at the other extreme, something equally "awful", if not even more grisly, was perpetrated by members of the movement—their attempt to fit into their laborious backgrounds dramatic scenes from contemporary life. Just as remote idealized beauty—La Belle Iseult and Guenevere and the Blessed Damozel—provided the first source, so Vice provided the second. Hunt hit rock-bottom with *The Awakened Conscience*, whose scene is "one of those *maisons damnées* which the wealth of a seducer has furnished for the luxury of a woman who has sold herself and her soul to him". The Seducer is portrayed with one hand striking the keys of the piano, and with the other arm embracing the Victim of his Passions, who stands "her wide eyes straining on vacancy as if seeing Hell open, the trinkets on her hands driven into the flesh and the fingers intertwined with a spasmodic power".² But, while Rossetti also tried his hand at Vice, the original intention of the Brotherhood had been to treat contemporary reality in other aspects as well. An Article in *The Germ* entitled "Modern Giants" declared that we miss "the poetry of the things about us".

"our railways, factories, mines, roaring cities, steam vessels and the endless novelties and wonders produced every day, which if they were found only in the One Thousand and One Nights, or in any poem classical or romantic, would be gloried over without end, for as the majority of us know not a bit more about them, but merely their names, we keep up the same mystery, the main thing required for the surprise of the imagination."³

¹ *Memorials*, I, p. 153

² See William Gaunt, *The Pre-Raphaelite Tragedy* (1942), p. 54

³ F. G. Stephens in *The Germ*, No. 4

"Truth to Nature." "Stern facts" "Flight of little souls in bright flames" "*Maisons damnées*" "Personal thoughts." "Mystery—the main thing required for the surprise of the imagination." Perhaps the last phrase provides the best clue in this Babel. Once again, we are forced to return to the conflict voiced in the poems and letters of John Keats. But, in the minds of these young artists, the sense of opposition between the world of "romance" and that of everyday experience has reached a further stage. Reality, the world where "men sit and hear each other groan", is presented as Vice. an attempt to represent the truth of suffering which is tarnished by the sentimental moralizing from which even Dickens did not always escape. This impoverished sentimentalizing was based, in the last analysis, upon a refusal (or inability) really to look the facts of capitalist exploitation and class conflict in the face. Ruskin himself admitted, he had "naturally a great dread of subjects altogether painful". As for railways, factories, mines—these remained subjects for Art only so long as they remained to the artist a "mystery", miraculous magic powers summoned into being by genius. Once the "mystery" was penetrated, they revealed themselves to the artists only as squalid scenes of suffering, exploitation and money-making, drained of all the aspirations transfigured in the world of "romance".

Rossetti, indeed, tried his hand at Vice (in his long uncompleted painting, *Found*) but, finding it uncongenial, he had dedicated himself to the other extreme of "romance" when Morris and Burne-Jones came under his influence. The Pre-Raphaelite doctrine of "Truth to Nature" finds a marked parallel in the concrete, richly ornamental language of Keats's *Eve of St Agnes* (a poem bound to exert a special attraction on a painter, with its splendid colour-imagery), and in the matter-of-fact realistic details which Tennyson embroidered into *Mariana*:

"The rusted nails fell from the knots
That held the pear to the gable-wall . . ."

or the colourful visual detail of the *Lady of Shallott*:

"All in the blue unclouded weather
Thick-jewell'd shone the saddle-leather,
The helmet and the helmet feather
Burn'd like one burning flame together,
As he rode down to Camelot "

Browning, and, later, Morris, employed similar realistic devices in their poems on medieval themes in order to evoke their romantic dream in concrete terms and with the semblance of life. In Burne-Jones's paintings from Malory, in Rossetti's early paintings from Dante, and in Morris's own painting of Guenevere, minutely naturalistic detail—of costume, rich ornament, and hangings—was used to like effect. But the impression left by the pictures is not one of realism. Rather, Keats's world of "poesy" and "romance" appears to have lost its last root-holds in the soil of contemporary experience, and to be becoming emaciated, sapless, and drooping. We are no longer conscious (as we are in Keats's greatest work) of the real sense of conflict between rich aspiration and drab reality, and of the struggle to reconcile the two. Rather, the extreme of "romance" (like that of *Vice*) seems always tainted by the evasion of life. At their worst, Pre-Raphaelite versions of Keats or the Bible or Malory were (like the worst of Tennyson's *Idylls*) little more than the projection of the impoverished sensibility of the Victorians into a medieval setting, with conventional Victorian gentlemen and ladies dressed up in fancy costume. At their best, they were remote and ethereal, saturated with a yearning for values lost to the world, and whose impossibility of realization was accentuated rather than relieved by the naturalistic detail of the painting.

This evasion of contemporary experience was directly related to the concept of "Beauty" which Rossetti and his friends had taken over, perhaps unconsciously, from Keats. or which, it may be, they had reached independently from the pressure of a similar hatred of their times. Victorian society (they held) was inimical to all "Beauty", and to the end of his life Morris maintained that the true artist at work within capitalist society must always be forced to "Look back!" (see p. 764). In 1891 he delivered a lecture on "The English Pre-Raphaelites" in which he came to the defence of Burne-Jones and Rossetti on this very point, and which throws some light back upon his views as a young man.

"I must just say one word about the fact that both Rossetti and Burne-Jones have very little to do with representing the scenes of ordinary modern life as they go on before your eyes. One has often heard that brought against the 'Romantic' artists, as a shortcoming.

Now, quite plainly, I must say that I think it *is* a shortcoming. But is the shortcoming due to the individual artist, or is it due to the public at large? for my part I think the latter. When an artist has really a very keen sense of beauty, I venture to think that he can not literally represent an event that takes place in modern life. He must add something or other to qualify or soften the ugliness and sordidness of the surroundings of life in our generation. That is not only the case with pictures . . . it is the case also in literature. The difficulty is even greater, perhaps, for the painter. In painting, you cannot get so far away from the facts as you can in literature . . . By all means, if anyone is really moved by the spirit to treat modern subjects, let him do so . . . but . . . I don't think he has a right, under the circumstances and considering the evasions he is absolutely bound to make, to lay any blame on his brother artist who turns back again to the life of past times, or, who, shall we rather say, since his imagination must have some garb or another, naturally takes the raiment of some period in which the surroundings of life were not ugly but beautiful."¹

If Morris's adhesion to this part of Pre-Raphaelite theory may be seen as a weak point in the splendid fabric of his artistic theories in his last years (see pp. 761 f.), nevertheless it was understandable enough in the decade of the defeat of Chartism and the success of the Great Exhibition.

"My work is the embodiment of dreams . . ." The tone of the remark is almost aggressive—damn Gradgrind's age, with all its "practical" men, its cant of progress, its hypocrisies and its ugliness! Morris, in the years of Rossetti's greatest influence upon him, placed himself firmly in the etherialized extreme of Pre-Raphaelite "romance." It was, perhaps, here that the most positive aspect of the movement was to be found. "Why is it", asked Thomas Dixon, a working-man from Sunderland, writing to William Michael Rossetti about *The Germ*,

"these pictures and essays being so realistic, yet produce on the mind such a vague and dreamy sensation, approaching as it were the Mystic Land of a Bygone Age? . . . There is in them the life which I long for, and which to me never seems realizable in this life."

So it seemed to many other men and women, dissatisfied with the poverty of their lives, and finding their sense of loss reflected in these canvasses, their yearning for something finer, more "ideal". It was as if the human spirit was being driven to more and more

¹ May Morris, I, pp. 304-5

remote regions, but was still struggling to keep alive. As Burne-Jones once declared. "The more materialistic Science becomes, the more angels shall I paint."

But angels frightened no one—least of all Mr. Gradgrind. Of all the contradictory vicissitudes of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, none was more curious or unexpected to the artists than the assortment of patrons which they collected around them. In their early days, none of the dwindling stream of aristocratic patronage was diverted towards them. indeed, when Millais (before he turned renegade, and entered the portals of the Academy) had dared to intrude democratic sentiments and realistic detail into his *Christ in the House of His Parents*, the critics met him with an outburst of fury *The Times*, calling the picture "plainly revolting", continued. "To attempt to associate the Holy Family with the meanest details of a carpenter's shop, with no conceivable omission of misery, of dirt and even disease, all finished with the same loathesome minuteness, is disgusting." But the dissenting middle class had less fastidious sensibilities, and in the later years of Victoria's reign, Millais's picture was to become a favourite in the Sunday school and the Bible class. Something similar can be found in the adoption of Rossetti and his friends by such patrons as Marshall, a Leeds millionaire. MacCracken, a Liverpool shipping-magnate and Thomas Plint, the Leeds stock-broker. Although several patrons of this kind were said to have a weather-eye open towards successful financial speculation, this certainly was not the main motivation of Plint.

We are indebted (once again) to Val Prinsep for a glimpse of Plint, visiting Rossetti in his studio.

"On the easel was a charming water colour of an 'Annunciation', the angel appearing to the Virgin in the grey dawn as she wanders by the side of a stream. The charm of the picture was the pearly grey tones of the figures and landscape Plint sat down before the picture. He was a Yorkshire man, and talked with a strong accent.

" 'Nobbut, Mr Rossetti,' he said, 'that's a fine thing' Then, after a pause, he added. 'Couldn't you put a soonset floosh over the whole thing?' "¹

Rossetti was stung to fury, and despite the abject penitence of the dissenting stock-broker, refused to sell him the painting Plint

¹ *The Magazine of Art*, 1904

was able to impose more easily on the impoverished Ford Madox Brown, buying his *Work* on the condition that he introduced into it both Carlyle and Kingsley, and changed "one of the, four *fashionable* young ladies into a *quiet, earnest, holy-looking* one, with a book or two and tracts".¹ Plint, dying at thirty-nine, left pictures which fetched the sum of £18,000 at a Leeds sale in 1862. His obituaries commended his high reputation on the stock exchange, his life spent in the service of religion and benevolence, and his selection of *Hymns and Sacred Poetry*.² Whatever qualities Thomas Plint may have had (and no doubt he was both well-intentioned and enlightened) he can hardly have seemed to the young Morris and Burne-Jones—when he came forward as their first patron—to have been fitted to take a seat at the Round Table or to shake a lance in the jousts at Camelot.

But Plint (and his like) were important and neglected characters in what one critic has termed "The Pre-Raphaelite Tragedy". First, he helps us to understand the gathering cynicism of Rossetti, who despised his patrons while at the same time he was forced to meet their tastes. Later, Plint's successors were to lead Morris, also, to an understanding of the inadequacy of the Firm in the "Holy Warfare" with the age—although with altogether different results. Second, Plint points to the nature of the "tragedy" itself. Romanticism, when "hope" had perished, when revolt no longer grappled with the enemy but evaded it in a world of "romance", when aspiration no longer summoned forward the future but yearned towards the past, was no longer a source of fear to the enemy. It might be ignored, or jeered at as "effeminate". More dangerous, it could be courted as an ally. It could provide a "soonset floosh".

This was the tragedy of Pre-Raphaelitism, beside which the differences and defections of the Brotherhood sink into unimportance. At the end of his life, Rossetti dismissed the early mysteries of the Brotherhood as "the mere affectations of a parcel of boys", and so showed himself wiser than both Holman Hunt and his own brother who were to treat the origins of the affair with such solemnity. But Rossetti did not deny the

¹ See Oswald Doughty, *A Victorian Romantic, Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (1949), p. 213.

² Rev. R. V. Taylor, *Biographia Leodensis*, pp. 497-8.

earnestness of the revolt itself. "What you call the movement was serious enough", he told Hall Caine,

"but the banding together under the title was all a joke. We had at that time a phenomenal antipathy to the Academy, and in sheer love of being outlawed signed our pictures with the well-known initials"¹

The element of tragedy in the movement comes from the very devotion and ambition of this original revolt, which yet never succeeded in coming into serious engagement with the enemy. In their lives and, often, in their occasional sketches, Rossetti, Madox Brown, and Burne-Jones showed abilities, humour, and a quality of self-criticism which was rarely present in their more studied canvasses. The reason (in the case of Burne-Jones in particular) must partly be found in the conditions of work which they imposed upon themselves. The fire of their original conceptions became lost in the desert of interminable copywork from which their paintings were assembled. But the greater reason lies in the extravagance of their ambition. In their youth, they looked upon success in the esteem of fashionable circles with contempt. They refused all compromise with the Academy, and Millais was damned when he capitulated. Rossetti, indeed, showed a dislike of exhibiting before the public which recalls the letters of Keats. They thought of themselves as revolutionaries, who intended to bring back a world of feeling and meaning to the visual arts—irony or critical restraint were targets set far too low. They sought to create great Art with their backs turned on the world. "Dream" is not an affectation: it is a precise description of the character of the movement. They desired to paint Visions but the result was "dream", a world of compensation, in which the frustrations and repressions, both individual and social, of their lives found release. Great art is not made of such stuff, and, while many minor works of permanent value were painted in the process, the major "masterpieces" of the Pre-Raphaelites remain as testimony to this truth.

¹ See Hall Caine, *Recollections of Rossetti* (1928)