The Pre-Raphaelites in Oxford

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“'A complex and varied movement in art, but at every point closely connected with Oxford’." These were curious words to be reading on the top floor of a major department store in Tokyo; and became curiouser and curiouser as I realised I was surrounded by almost the entire disgorged contents of Oxford’s Ashmolean Museum – when all I’d come in for in the first place was to purchase green tea, raw fish and a few dozen packets of shredded squid. An Oxford don who was about to spend a sabbatical term at a Humanities Research Centre in the Australian outback once remarked to me that it would be a blessing to be, for once, in a place where no-one either knew or cared about what was happening in Oxford – and until this summer Japan had seemed to me to be an almost equally secure refuge. As a member of a postgraduate reform group that publishes a journal called News from Nowhere and fights what we see as Morris-inspired battles against what remains probably the most entrenchedly Arnoldian English Faculty in the country, the land of sumo, sushi, sake and zen used to offer the chance of a few weeks’ break from internecine Oxford polemics and warfare. But now, I reflected dolefully, handing over my 2000 yen entrance fee, there’s no safe haven anywhere.

“The Pre-Raphaelites in Oxford”. What, I wondered, did the Japanese audience make of Holman Hunt’s Light of the World, Morris’s Kelmscott Chaucer, engravings of Exeter College Chapel and photographs of dour Gothic houses up and down the Banbury Road?
The answer suggested by the speed with which they moved from one item to the next at this splendid exhibition would seem to be— not much. But what can we—Morrisians who were fortunate enough to be in Tokyo at the time or who will peruse the lavish catalogue hereafter— make of it all? The introduction to the catalogue offers some help, charting three stages of Pre-Raphaelite relations with Oxford. The first comprises fortuitous personal connections, before the movement even existed as such: the sixteen year-old Millais visited his half-brother in the city in 1846, where he met the Oxford art-dealer, James Wyatt. Then, in a second round of friendships, the young art movement comes into direct contact with some of Oxford’s own significant nineteenth-century cultural traditions: crucial here is Millais’s relationship, from 1850 on, with Thomas Combe of the Clarendon Press— Combe who was nicknamed “the Early Christian” because of his strong links with Newman’s Oxford Movement. The third phase begins in 1857, when Dante Gabriel Rossetti becomes involved in decorating the Debating Hall of the Oxford Union — an episode which further confirms the two former Exeter College undergraduates Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris in their commitment to the life artistic. By this time Millais had degenerated into Royal Academy complacency, and the Combes were patronizing only the overtly religious and moralistic art of William Holman Hunt (who did much of his work in the paper-mill at Wolvercote).

David Blayney Brown traces these interconnections with a wealth of detailed, judicious scholarship, but he seems too much the detached objective historian to reflect very trenchantly on their significance— which is my purpose here. One needs, it seems, to be bloodied and bruised in current Oxford wrangles to look back consequentially on their counterparts of a century or so ago. In terms of general art history, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood remains a crucial early instance of that distinctively modern type of cultural formation—the avant-garde; its journal, The Germ, which ran for four issues in 1850, has been termed by one commentator “the first house-journal of a self-consciously avant-garde artistic group”3 Moreover, it was from this group that Britain’s greatest socialist cultural theorist was to emerge. And if, as Raymond Williams argued in Culture and Society, “Morris’s principal opponent, in fact, was Arnold”,4 an understanding of his Pre-Raphaelite background will sharpen our critique of Arnold’s own aesthetic positions as well as those of the Oxford English Faculty that he continues to inspire today.

I’m not arguing that Holman Hunt’s The Scapegoat is actually a portrait of an Oxford English don (though as it happens it reminds me of several), but rather that the Pre-Raphaelites rejected, and for the right reasons, the classicist cultural traditions on which Oxford English, from Arnold on, was to be based. The object of their polemic was not the Oxford English School (founded in 1894) but the Royal Academy, not Professor John Bayley but Sir Joshua (or Sloshua, as they preferred to dub him) Reynolds; but then there isn’t very much to choose between the classicizing values of these two institutions. For Joshua Reynolds, as for Samuel Johnson, art deals in generalities, not particularities, in grand permanent truths of human nature, not the fickle transient details of specific societies or epochs; the very last thing it should do, Imlac tells us in Rasselas, is to try to number the streaks of the tulip or describe the different hues in the verdure of the forest. And Matthew Arnold, in a hundred places, simply rehashes these old prescriptions: poetry must be general not particular; transcendent not time-bound, concerned with identity not difference. But it was precisely the aim of the Pre-Raphaelites to render the artistic object with minute fidelity, to celebrate not abolish its haecceity or unique
individuality, or — to put the point in Russian Formalist terms — to renew perception by “making the stone stony”. It took Allston Collins whole days to paint a single one of the water lilies in the pond of his Convent Thoughts, Holman Hunt went out at midnight to paint weeds and brambles for his Light of the World, and the unfortunate Elizabeth Siddal had to pose for hours in a tepid bath for Millais’s Ophelia. The P.R.B. journal records: “Millais said that he had thoughts of painting a hedge (as a subject) to the closest point of imitation — a thing which has never been attempted”.5

Such particularism then generates a politics of its own, both thematic and stylistic. While classicist aesthetics are violently exclusivist, erasing difference and individuality in the name of universal identity, Pre-Raphaelitism is inclusivist, tending towards a democratic all-embracingness. No object is too humble for scrupulous representation, none is inherently anti-poetic (this will become a key tenet of modernist poetics) or, alternatively, traditionally revered objects are rendered in demystifying ways. This was notably the case with early Pre-Raphaelite portraits of the holy family, which stressed Christ’s lowly, working-class origins; Millais’s “Christ in the House of his Parents” was execrated by Dickens in Household Words for exactly this reason. This refusal of classicist hierarchies is also a principle of style, as with the Pre-Raphaelite insistence on evenly working the whole surface of the canvas, so that the subordinate parts are as fully detailed and “seen” as the central subject, and on achieving evenness of light, refusing to move in from dark edges to a highlighted central focus. Such principles, to be sure, will hardly satisfy the more sharply political post-structuralist aesthetics of our own day, in which the repressed “edges” or margins actively infiltrate and carnivalesquely invade the hegemonic centre; but then, in their democratic generosity, they are equally far removed from the grimly authoritarian poetics of a Matthew Arnold, whose demand for architectonic or total construction requires that the subordinate elements of the work be held rigidly in place, that the “Attic” centre rule unchecked over the “Asiatic” margins. This rejection of a hierarchy of structure then leads to a hedonism of texture. While classicist aesthetics sees sensuous particularity as a threat to the universally rational truths it is in search of and is therefore grimly ascetic, Pre-Raphaelite particularism celebrates the materiality of the object; while Arnold throughout his career as critic deplored Keatsian sensuality, Rossetti et al revelled in it. While early nineteenth-century painting tends to be extremely dark in colour due to its admiration for old masters, the Pre-Raphaelites adopt the technique of using a wet-white ground onto which the colour would later be painted; this creates the effects of bright, sensuous luminosity so characteristic of their work. Democracy of objects, hedonism of texture: such aesthetic canons have their moral counterpart in the relaxed bohemianism of Pre-Raphaelite lifestyles, which makes them such a blessed alternative to the dour moralism that had settled over much of the rest of Victorian culture — including even the emergent labour movement. In the case of Rossetti at least, contemporaries suggested, the mysterious initials P.R.B. stood for “Penis Rather Better”.

Naturalism is, however, only one part of the P.R.B. synthesis. The other crucial component of this aesthetic ideology is romantic medievalism, which is both a powerful weapon against the classicism of a Reynolds or an Arnold and opens swiftly, as with Morris, into general social critique. Medievalism seems at first sight to contradict the stress I’ve laid on “democratic” particularism, since its utopian dream is of a restored, “organic”, hierarchical social order. Certainly there are some aspects of Pre-Raphaelite
medievalism that tend in this socially regressive direction; Burne-Jones is a good instance, increasingly dismayed as his close friend Morris gravitated towards revolutionary socialism. Yet even such hierarchies are in a sense respectful of particularity: they acknowledge specific social identities, which they then offer to compose into an ideal order modelled on the human body, rather than quelling them into complete indifference as classicism does. Space, too, within such an order, is “qualitative” rather than “quantitative”, constituted through and through by human value rather than being reduced to the featureless “extension” of Newtonian science. As Marx writes of feudal ownership in his Paris Manuscripts, “there is still the appearance of a relationship between owner and land which is based on something more intimate than mere material wealth. The land is individualized with its lord”. Within classicism, however, such particularism of place is dismissed contemptuously as – in Arnold’s term – “provincialism”, just as within capitalism the local specificity of feudal piety, tradition and “aura” are dissolved into naked cash-nexus, into the abstract equivalences of commodity exchange.

“At every point closely connected with Oxford” as the Japanese catalogue rightly reminds us, Pre-Raphaelitism naturally tended to take over motifs from Oxford’s own genteel brand of medievalism – the Oxford Movement. Millais’s friendship with Thomas Combe was no accident, though its necessity is revealed in the pietistic contemplativism of Allston Collins’s Convent Thoughts or in the young Burne-Jones’s High-Anglican ritualistic enthusiasms (he made regular undergraduate pilgrimages to the ruins of Godstow Nunnery) rather than in Millais’s own work. If a Catholic or Anglo-Catholic “unity of being” had been ripped apart by a parvenu Protestant extremism, then one could regress or revolt, dream insipidly of the last enchantments of the Middle Ages or boldly go where no Oxford graduate had politically gone before – as Morris did in 1883. Gothic architecture was either the cultural form appropriate to a spiritually unified but hierarchical society, as for Thomas Combe, who was secretary of the Oxford Society for the Study of Gothic Architecture from 1839 on and founded St Barnabas’s Church for the poor of Oxford’s Jericho, or, as with Ruskin and Morris, a principle of revolutionary desire, a utopian image of non-alienated labour, the approximate equivalent within British cultural criticism of the “species-being” of the young Marx. A love of Malory’s Arthurian legends leads either to the deathly, airless, immobilized world of late Burne-Jones or to Morris’s Socialist League. So feeble was the medievalism that Oxford could offer to these young poets and painters that it soon managed to invert itself into its opposite. For that arch-classicist Matthew Arnold himself learnt much from the Oxford Movement, seeing Newman as an exemplar of that decidedly non-Gothic quality, urbanity.

Morris’s early Arthurian poems suggest some of the causes of this parting of the ways within Oxonian medievalism. For if they certainly have much of the ritualistic, stylised hieratic quality of a Burne-Jones canvas, they also often manifest a fidelity to the actual which is more akin to the naturalistic moment of Pre-Raphaelitism. The violence in these poems is bloody and bruising; life, for all its chivalric heightening, can also be nasty, brutish and short. Naturalism, as many commentators have pointed out, is the marker of modernity within the P.R.B.; it is what made their paintings ultimately acceptable to the ascendent commercial bourgeoisie, whose suburban villas would hardly welcome the great, stately canvases of a classicism designed for aristocratic country houses and
manorial halls. And while naturalism entailed a certain politics of the lowly which went rather beyond the tastes of such patrons, this social concern none the less remained at the level of a philanthropic—or what we might term, anachronistically, a social-democratic—anxiety about the plight of the labouring classes; its preeminent expressions are the two paintings of “The Stonebreaker” by John Brett and Henry Wallis, and Ford Madox Brown’s “Work”. Such artefacts may well be more humane than the harsh utilitarianism of a Gradgrind or a Bounderby, but they don’t go beyond compassion to a politics of the transformation of a system which necessarily creates such effects; in this sense the P.R.B. remains, in Raymond Williams’s neat formulation, “a revolt against the class but for the class”. It’s only in the conjoining of naturalism and Romantic medievalism that Morris’s break to socialism is made possible: the latter raises naturalist humanitarianism to the level of a utopian reimagining of an entire social system, while the former grounds utopian hope in the gritty actualities of the present rather than letting it run riot in the other-worldliness of a Rossetti or a Burne-Jones. For a few brief moments around its formation in that great revolutionary year 1848, the P.R.B. effected some such stylistic juncture: Millais’s “Isabella”, say, is both naturalistic and highly stylised, tenaciously faithful to the object yet also consciously archaic. But as the P.R.B. develops, such impulses tend to split apart, into what Timothy Hilton terms the “high realist phase of the movement” and its ethereal counterpart which was to play so crucial a role in the development of aestheticism, decadence, symbolism. Only in Morris himself, within the resurgent working-class movement of the 1880s, was a real fusion of the two substantially and sustainedly worked through.

“The Pre-Raphaelites in Oxford” – in Japan. One thing that strange conjunction brought home, in one of the great “post-modern” world-capitals, was that a socialism that would challenge post-modernist affluence on its own exhilarating ground would have to be – à la Morris and pace Engels – utopian rather than dessicatedly “scientific”, passionately romantic anti-capitalist rather than tepidly social-democratic. If this was a lesson the Japanese audience at this excellent exhibition didn’t on the whole seem to be drawing, it’s not—alas—one that the current Labour Party leadership seems very likely to happen upon either.

NOTES
2 See my “Nineteenth-Century Studies: As They Are and As They Might Be”, News from Nowhere no. 2 (Oct 1986), 38-55, for an account of Morris’ relevance to debates about Oxford English today.
5 Cited in Hilton, op. cit., 72.