

It was in *The Germ* (1850), the first British magazine with an aesthetic manifesto, that the interart theories of the Pre-Raphaelites took shape. The thirteen young contributors advocated an ethical approach to art while at the same time acknowledging self-referentiality and meta-discursivity. They defined the specificity of each mode of artistic expression while exploring the dynamic between word and image, moving from realism towards Symbolism and even anticipating Surrealism. The Aesthetes and Decadents were fascinated; the Modernists felt challenged.

Later in the twentieth century a succession of reappraisals transformed the Pre-Raphaelites into a well-marketed group of eccentrics, but neglected the complexity of their cross-cultural, verbal/visual art. This study aims to explain why claims about the autonomy and interrelatedness of the arts, expressed in the form of a provocative monthly journal, proved so influential as to be a source of inspiration for the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, *The Century Guild Hobby Horse*, *The Yellow Book*, *The Savoy*, and even for Modernist periodicals. Often regarded as a juvenile venture, *The Germ* was in fact a laboratory for expressive forms, themes, and ideas that had an enormous impact on the history of British culture.

Paola Spinozzi is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Ferrara. Her research includes an investigation of ekphrasis, illustration, and calligraphy in the work of William Morris, D. G. Rossetti, Walter Crane, and A. S. Byatt as well as a comparative study of scientific and creative writing. She is the author of *Sopra il reale. Osmosi interartistiche nel Preraffaellitismo e nel Simbolismo inglese* (2005) and the co-editor of *Origins as a Paradigm in the Sciences and in the Humanities* (2010) and *Discourses and Narrations in the Biosciences* (2011).

Elisa Bizzotto is Lecturer in English Literature at IUAV University of Venice. Her main research focuses on Victorian and late Victorian literature and culture, and she has written extensively on Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, Vernon Lee, Aubrey Beardsley, and *fin-de-siècle* culture. She is the author of *La mano e l'anima. Il ritratto immaginario fin de siècle* (2001) and co-edited, with Paola Spinozzi, the first Italian edition of *The Germ* (2008).



Spinozzi and Bizzotto

*The Germ: Origins and Progenies of
Pre-Raphaelite Interart Aesthetics*



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Paola Spinozzi and Elisa Bizzotto

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Aesthetic Prose in *The Germ*: Moulding a Literary Mode

Defining Aesthetic Prose

While addressing intricate aesthetic issues with youthful overconfidence, four contributors to *The Germ* initiated a prose style which produced significant innovations in Victorian discourses on art. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Tupper, Frederic George Stephens, and John Orchard crafted a mode of writing which can be defined 'aesthetic' because it delves into the origin and reverberations of artistic creativity, explores the endeavours of the artist, and enunciates the criteria for evaluating artworks. They moulded a language characterized by sophisticated aesthetic concepts and an extensive use of allegories, symbols, and tropes.

Aesthetic prose is predominantly creative, when it takes the shape of fiction, or critical, when it is written in essay form. The fictional biography recounted in 'Hand and Soul' by Rossetti exemplifies creative aesthetic prose and the laborious enquiries performed by Tupper in 'The Subject in Art No. I' and 'No. II', by Stephens in 'The Purpose and Tendency of Early Italian Art' and 'Modern Giants', and by Orchard in 'A Dialogue on Art' illustrate critical aesthetic prose.

The imaginary portrait in 'Hand and Soul' became the paradigm of the *fin-de-siècle* short story; the vocabulary, syntactic structures, and musical cadences Rossetti experimented with were assimilated and developed by Aestheticism and Decadence. Tupper, Orchard, and Stephens set upon themselves an ambitious and arduous task. Though exhibiting a juvenile grandeur, they attempted to shun didactic tones, moralistic warnings, and prophetic statements, but their topics – authenticity of inspiration and

originality of expression – were intrinsically steeped in ethics. ‘Aesthetic-ethical’, their prose could be defined, because it exhibits a preference for spontaneity, freshness, earnestness, and a decided aversion to conventionality, artificiality, and vacuity. Unexpectedly, while eulogizing the thaumaturgic powers of good art, critical prose writers in *The Germ* discover the self-relatedness of beauty.

Emphasis was laid on the belief that an artist possesses creativity and the ability to talk about it. The meta-artistic attitude acquired, and deeply assimilated, by the Pre-Raphaelites reached even more elaborate expressions with the Aesthetes. Being a peculiar form of discourse on art pronounced by artists, aesthetic prose displays a self-referential structure: the arguments are empowered through a rhetorical ‘encasement’ perfectly suited to contain the conceptual core. Meaning is supported and reinforced by form; statements acquire full significance only through a specific formal structure.

Owing to its highly wrought features, Pre-Raphaelite prose was accessible to a restricted audience and particularly appealing to *fin-de-siècle* writers. Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, Vernon Lee, Ernest Dowson, Arthur Symons, Aubrey Beardsley, John Millington Synge, and William Butler Yeats took up the legacy of *The Germ* by experimenting with artistic modes of writing about art.

‘Hand and Soul’ by D. G. Rossetti as the Prototype of Creative Aesthetic Prose

‘Hand and Soul’ is the prototype of creative aesthetic prose, which entails the articulation of programmatic ideas on art in a particular fictional form. The search for and expression of authentic creativity are the underpinnings of early Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics. The tale, written on 21 December 1849 and published in the first issue of *The Germ*, recounts the existential turmoil of Chiaro dell’Erma, an imaginary painter in late medieval Arezzo and Pisa. Although the vicissitudes of the fervent young artist may appear

to be the fulcrum of the story, its *raison d'être* is to be found in the artistic manifesto. In his 1899 'Introduction' William Michael Rossetti suggests that through a Romantic metaphor the author brings forward his theory of beauty, truth, and creativity: artworks are worthy of praise only if they reveal the innermost part of the artist. Self-celebration and moral preaching are misleading, while the expression of the interior world fosters an empathic response from the audience.¹

'Hand and Soul' conveys the complexity of the dialogue between diverse creative faculties, which was at the core of Rossetti's approach to art. The aesthetic issues foregrounded in the story became personal dilemmas when he found himself challenged by the inability to produce an image more vivid than its literary description. William Michael explains that when Dante Gabriel started to work on an etching for 'Hand and Soul', he thought it would appear after the second issue. In March 1850 he drew *Chiaro dell'Erma* in the act of painting the embodiment of his soul, but was very disappointed with the result. The destruction of the plate and the prints² shows that he did not want to leave any trace of his failure. Ironically, his inadequacy to depict the fair woman as the visual expression of the artist's interiority showed the mismatch between verbal and visual representation. The realization that the multi-layered meanings attached to the tale could not be visually rendered prompted his decision to preserve the exclusively verbal nature of the portrait.

Attention to natural appearances is mentioned by William Michael as a principle endorsed by Dante Gabriel.³ After having reaffirmed his brother's coherence with the Pre-Raphaelite manifesto enunciated in 'Hand and Soul', William Michael qualifies his declaration by adding that faithfulness to original tenets was maintained in spite of remarkable exterior changes in later works.

His conclusive remarks are aimed at elucidating the conceptual map of the tale:

1 William Michael Rossetti, 'Introduction' to *The Germ*, p. 18.

2 *Ibid.*, ivi.

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.

Three currents of thought may be traced in this story: (1) A certain amount of knowledge regarding the beginnings of Italian art, mingled with some ignorance, voluntary or involuntary, of what was possible to be done in the middle of the thirteenth century; (2) a highly ideal, yet individual, general treatment of the narrative; and (3) a curious aptitude at detailing figments as if they were facts.⁴

William Michael is right in observing that the use of antithetical elements evidences the boldness and naiveté of the author. The interaction between the fictional protagonist and Giunta Pisano in medieval Pisa, the detailed descriptions of the disputes between imaginary local families produce an intricate mesh of plausible fiction presented as history.

'Manus Animam pinxit': Ekphrasis as Mise en Abyme of the Creative Act

Without appreciating the centrality of medieval poetry and painting as sources of inspiration, the origins of *The Germ* would remain unclear. Rossetti's translations, re-writings, and visual transpositions of the Duecento and Trecento are extraordinary trans-cultural and inter-medial endeavours. The twenty-year-old artist produced the first English translation of early Italian poetry and the *Vita Nuova* in rhymed verse and original metres.⁵ His project spanned many years, during which he gained an insight into the diverse artistic personalities of the *Scuola Siciliana* and the *Dolce Stil Novo*. *The Early Italian Poets from Ciullo D'Alcamo to Dante Alighieri (1100–1200–1300) in the Original Metres together with Dante's Vita Nuova Translated by D. G. Rossetti* (1847–1848, published 1861)⁶ is a vast work of

4 Ibid., p. 19.

5 Various critical editions had appeared before the first translation was drafted in 1830 and published in 1835 by Charles Lyell. *The Canzoniere of Dante Alighieri, Including the Poems of the Vita Nuova and Convito; Italian and English*, trans. by Charles Lyell, Esq., of Kinnord, North Britain (London: John Murray, 1835) is organized according to arbitrary editing criteria and does not include prose.

6 *The Early Italian Poets from Ciullo D'Alcamo to Dante Alighieri (1100–1200–1300) in the Original Metres together with Dante's Vita Nuova Translated by D. G. Rossetti*, 'Part I. Poets chiefly before Dante'; 'Part II. Dante and his Circle' (London: Smith, Elder

translation as well as a novel poetic creation.⁷ Not only did he make early Italian literature and painting accessible to an English-speaking audience, but he also began to develop his own poetics and views on verbal/visual interrelations. While he translated into nineteenth-century English the regional languages used in Italian literature between the twelfth and the fourteenth century, he rewrote the poems and visually presented them in sketches, drawings, watercolours, and oil paintings. The figurative works he produced and re-produced to illustrate the texts are visual transpositions as well as original artworks. His translations and illustrations made early Italian culture available to the Victorians, but were also the first expressions of a young artist affirming his personality.

Rossetti was a cultural mediator as well as creator of original verbal/visual poetics. In the *Vita Nuova* Dante Alighieri had transformed the noble lady chanted by the troubadours into a spiritual creature acting as God's visible manifestation. Rossetti transposed Dante's praise of female spirituality into an aesthetic tribute suffused with sensual yearning. For the early Italian poets, and above all Dante, Love is a divine emanation; for Rossetti, instead, God as Love metamorphoses into Love as God, dominating man's action.⁸

and Co., 1861), republished in 1874 as *Dante and His Circle. With the Italian Poets Preceding Him (1100–1200–1300). A Collection of Lyrics Translated in the Original Metres*, 'Part I. Dante's *Vita Nuova*, &c. Poets of Dante's Circle'; 'Part II. Poets Chiefly Before Dante'.

- 7 See *Dante's Vita Nuova together with the Version of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. by Hermann Oelsner (London: Chatto and Windus, 1908), pp. xlv–lii; Cecil Grayson, 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Translation of the *Vita Nuova*', in *Dante Alighieri. Vita Nuova con traduzione inglese e illustrazioni di Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. by Corrado Gizzi (Milano: Mazzotta, 1985), pp. 17–23; John Woodhouse, 'D. G. Rossetti Translator of the *Vita Nuova*', in *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. by Corrado Gizzi (Milano: Mazzotta, 1984), pp. 69–74; Paola Spinozzi, 'Journeying through Translation: Dante among the Victorians, Dante Gabriel Rossetti in Medieval Italy', in *Strange Sisters: Literature and Aesthetics in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Francesca Orestano and Francesca Frigerio (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 77–96; Fabio Camilletti, 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti fra "religione della mente" e decostruzione dell'io', in *I Rossetti e l'Italia*, ed. by Gianni Oliva and Mirko Menna, pp. 333–57.
- 8 Nicolette Gray, *Rossetti, Dante and Ourselves* (New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1974), pp. 32–55.

In 'Hand and Soul' the sudden apparition of a mystical female figure is described as a vision revealing the essence of beauty, love, and art. The lady is presented in two ekphrases which mark the climactic moments of the narration. The first ekphrastic portrait introduces Rossetti's aesthetic views; the second one, in the very last pages, raises meta-artistic issues:

A woman was present in his room, clad to the hands and feet with a green and grey raiment, fashioned to that time. It seemed that the first thoughts he had ever known were given him as at first from her eyes, and he knew her hair to be the golden veil through which he beheld his dreams. Though her hands were joined, her face was not lifted, but set forward; and though the gaze was austere, yet her mouth was supreme in gentleness. And as he looked, Chiaro's spirit appeared abashed of its own intimate presence, and his lips shook with the thrill of tears [...]. She did not move closer towards him, but he felt her to be as much with him as his breath. [...] As the woman stood, her speech was with Chiaro: not, as it were, from her mouth or in his ears; but distinctly between them. [...] 'I am an image, Chiaro, of thine own soul within thee. See me, and know me as I am. [...] seek thine own conscience [...].'

[...] And Chiaro held silence, and wept into her hair which covered his face; and the salt tears that he shed ran through her hair upon his lips; and he tasted the bitterness of shame. Then the fair woman, that was his soul, spoke again to him, saying: '[...] In all that thou doest, work from thine own heart, simply.' [...]

'Chiaro, servant of God, take now thine Art unto thee, and paint me thus, as I am, to know me: weak, as I am, and in the weeds of this time; only with eyes which seek out labour, and with a faith, not learned, yet jealous of prayer. Do this; so shall thy soul stand before thee always, and perplex thee no more.'

And Chiaro did as she bade him. While he worked, his face grew solemn with knowledge: and before the shadows had turned, his work was done.⁹

While 'writing' a female body, Rossetti 'writes on' it and transforms the fair lady of the *Dolce Stil Novo* into a spectacle for the reader's eye. Metamorphosed into an ideal vision of the artist's interiority, the woman can be gazed at, praised, and desired. As John Dixon Hunt has observed, 'first, [...] a beautiful woman appears as a visible embodiment of his soul; second, [...] the artist should honour his soul, which means painting the images of his

9 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'Hand and Soul', 29–32.

soul, the various moods of a beautiful woman.’¹⁰ Rossetti develops a neo-Platonic, neo-Dolce-Stil-Novo aesthetic discourse in which the incorporeal soul acquires feminine corporeality and symbolizes artistic creativity. After having declared that the lady is Chiaro’s anima and encouraged readers to think that her nature is immaterial, the third-person narrator describes a moment of closeness, when Chiaro’s tears wet her hair and then reach his own lips. In ‘Hand and Soul’ the *donna angelicata*, celebrated as the custodian of man’s spiritual integrity and originator of his poetic power, soon becomes an enthralling woman whose sensual appeal generates intense emotions.

The second ekphrasis reinforces the value of the aesthetic and existential quest shared by the medieval artist and the Victorian narrator. The lady is described again, this time no longer to render the intense pathos felt by the artist, but to disclose the truth about her nature: Chiaro painted his inner self in the shape of a woman who was visible only to him. Such revelation displays the mirroring processes between life and art and illuminates the *mise en abyme* of words and images. A beguiling parallelism exists between the vision of the Italian and the Englishman. The narrator describes a painting which represents the soul of an artist who saw it in a moment of epiphany. The soul seen by Chiaro is the soul on the canvas admired by the Victorian narrator and neglected by the other observers. Readers find themselves more and more immersed in descriptions rich in hyper-realistic and surreal elements:

In the Spring of 1847 I was at Florence. [...] many rooms of the Pitti Gallery were closed through that season [...].

One picture [...] had been hung, obviously out of all chronology, immediately beneath that head by Raphael so long known as the ‘Berrettino,’ and now said to be the portrait of Cecco Ciulli.

The picture I speak of is a small one, and represents merely the figure of a woman, clad to the hands and feet with a green and grey raiment, chaste and early in its fashion, but exceedingly simple. She is standing; her hands are held together lightly, and her eyes set earnestly open.

10 John Dixon Hunt, ‘The Soul’s Beauty. The Pre-Raphaelite Image of Woman’, in Id., *The Pre-Raphaelite Imagination 1848–1900* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), pp. 177–210 (p. 178).

The face and hands in this picture, though wrought with great delicacy, have the appearance of being painted at once, in a single sitting: the drapery is unfinished. As soon as I saw the figure, it drew an awe upon me [...]. I shall not attempt to describe it more than I have already done; for the most absorbing wonder of it was its literal-ity. You knew that figure, when painted, had been seen; yet it was not a thing to be seen of men. [...] On examining it closely, I perceived in one corner of the canvass the words *Manus Animam pinxit*, and the date 1239.

I turned to my Catalogue, but that was useless [...]. I then stepped up to the Cavaliere Ercoli [...] and asked him regarding the subject of authorship of the painting, [...] the reference in the Catalogue [...] merely said, 'Schizzo d'autore incerto' [...]. The next day I was there again; but this time a circle of students was round the spot, all copying the 'Berrettino.' I contrived, however, to find a place whence I could see *my* picture [...]. For some minutes I remained undisturbed; and then I heard, in an English voice: 'Might I beg of you, sir, to stand a little more to this side, as you interrupt my view.'

I felt vexed, for, standing where he asked me, a glare struck on the picture from the windows, and I could not see it. [...] I complied, and turning away, stood by his easel. I knew it was not worth while; yet I referred in some way to the work underneath the one he was copying. He did not laugh, but he smiled as we do in England: 'Very odd, is it not?' said he.

The other students near us were all continental; and seeing an Englishman select an Englishman to speak with, conceived, I suppose, that he could understand no language but his own. [...]

One of them, an Italian, said something to another who stood next to him. He spoke with a Genoese accent, and I lost the sense in the villainous dialect. 'Che so?' replied the other, lifting his eyebrows toward the figure; 'roba mistica': 'st' Inglesi son matti sul misticismo: somiglia alle nebbie di là. Li fa pensare alla patria,

'E intenerisce il core

Lo dì ch' han detto ai dolci amici adio.'

'La notte, vuoi dire,' said a third.

There was a general laugh. [...] I remained silent, being amused.

'Et toi donc?' said he who had quoted Dante, turning to a student, whose birth-place was unmistakable even had he been addressed in any other language: 'que dis-tu de ce genre-là?'

'Moi?' returned the Frenchman [...]: 'Je dis, mon cher, que c'est une spécialité dont je me fiche pas mal. Je tiens que quand on ne comprend pas une chose, c'est qu'elle ne signifie rien.'

My reader thinks possibly that the French student was right.¹¹

11 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'Hand and Soul', 32–33.

The ekphrases conjure up a painting which is said to portray an invisible entity but is also itself invisible, because it does not exist outside the author's imagination.¹² Only by unfolding the conceptual layers of the ekphrastic descriptions can their meta-artistic and self-reflexive core be discovered. The painting is 'roba mistica,' mystical stuff which appeals to the sensitivity of the narrator accustomed to the misty atmospheres of his native country. It is the visualization of the young Rossetti's dual cultural identity: after having ideally retraced his Italian origins by envisioning the life of an early Tuscan painter, he reveals his Englishness by delving into the thoughts and mannerisms of the narrator and finally exhibits a detached attitude through irony and parody. Dante Gabriel identifies himself with Chiaro, agitated by the turmoil of creativity, but also with the melancholic Victorian Englishman, beguiled by the small, enigmatic painting. The medieval *alter ego* and the Victorian *Doppelgänger* allow Rossetti to imagine a painting and make it visible through description. The portrayal of two *personae* and the detailed analysis of their responses to a virtual artwork are necessary to the definition of his own identity as an artist and an art critic. By declaring that the medieval painter has given visual shape to the projection of his inner self, Rossetti clarifies that his purpose is not the verbal rendition of a real portrait. His ekphrasis is essential to the construction of an aesthetic site, founded on Platonic and medieval reminiscences, adorned by aesthetic speculations, and finally observed from the outside, critically.

- 12 How beguilingly evocative and credible Rossetti's style of writing could be becomes evident from the anecdotes recounted by his brother in *Dante Gabriel Rossetti. His Family-Letters with a Memoir by William Michael Rossetti*, ed. by William Michael Rossetti, I, 'XV. The Germ', pp. 154–55: 'There was a young lady of some fortune in Worcestershire [...] who became the first wife of the landscape-painter Mr. Andrew McCallum [...]. She read "Hand and Soul" in *The Germ*, admired it, and believed it to be substantially true. Either before or after her marriage she was in Florence, and enquired at the Pitti for this picture, and was grievously disconcerted to find that nobody knew anything about it.'

Fin-de-Siècle Imaginary Portraits

The biography fabricated in 'Hand and Soul' became a prominent model for prose writers in the second half of the nineteenth century. The romances published by William Morris in the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* (1856) bear the mark of his fascination for *The Germ*, a favourite reading while he was an undergraduate student at Exeter College. Both 'The Story of the Unknown Church' and 'Frank's Sealed Letter' are fictional autobiographies which conjure up archaic, estranged atmospheres and enhance the dream-like quality of Rossetti's iconic descriptions. Morris's early fiction was a source of inspiration for *A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep* (1871), the only literary work by the painter Simeon Solomon, who was associated with the second season of Pre-Raphaelitism. Again, verbal language magnifies the visual imagery. John Addington Symonds acutely noticed that Solomon's prose poem helped understand the convoluted meaning of his drawings and connected his single pictures into a lucid series of works.¹³

The outcome of the quest pursued by the medieval painter who portrayed his own soul and by the Victorian art connoisseur who found the canvas in Florence is the discovery that artistic creation and fruition presuppose absolute devotion and are projected towards transcendence. The acknowledgement that art shapes life, thrives on metaphysical speculations, and demands unconditioned consecration, like religion, epitomizes Rossetti's poetics and prefigures fundamental *fin-de-siècle* motifs. A few decades after the publication of 'Hand and Soul' the quest for an Art which replaces religion and, ultimately, life itself will be celebrated by Aestheticism. The most notable consequence of these beliefs is the redefinition of the artist's role in society. The desire of a life nourished by beauty engenders self-centredness and *ennui*. Only art provides the aesthetic paradigms through which reality can be experienced and encompasses all that is worth knowing.

'Hand and Soul' is rich in archaisms and elaborate phrasing which evoke remote and uncanny atmospheres. Rossetti's preference for verbal sophistication, enhanced by the study of his father's native language and assimilation of Italian syntax and Latinate words, are the distinctive features

13 John Addington Symonds, 'Solomon's *A Vision of Love and Other Studies*', *Academy*, 21, 2 (1 April 1871), 189–90.

of an artist whose style resulted from complex stratifications. The Italian and English cultural matrices merged in an idiolect which did not reach wide audiences, but was appreciated by an Aestheticist elite.

The medieval tale presents the germinal form of the 'imaginary portrait', the most representative prose genre of British Aestheticism and Decadence, which mingled fiction, historical facts, (auto)biography and criticism.¹⁴ Pater, who codified the typology in the 1887 collection *Imaginary Portraits*, but also Wilde, Vernon Lee, Dowson, Symons, Synge, Yeats, and John Meade Falkner are all indebted to Rossetti's creative aesthetic prose.¹⁵ Originating at the intersection between literature and painting, the imaginary portrait shares the intergenre and interart aims characteristic of *fin-de-siècle* poetics, while also displaying experimental features. Its focus on art is magnified by the ultimate (auto)biographical inspiration: all Pater's portraits have male protagonists who show either artistic talent or aesthetic interests. Art as life is the manifest thematic kernel of the genre.

Interart aspirations affect both the subjects and the form of the imaginary portrait. As the genre approaches the end of the century, a more fastidious preoccupation with language and style emerges in the attempt to achieve the visual quality of painting through the trope of ekphrasis. Besides, the painstaking pursuit of cadenced rhythms, harmonic modulations, and verbal virtuosity evidences the recognition gained by Pater's aesthetic tribute to music as the superior art to which all creative expressions should aspire.¹⁶

14 For a thematic approach to the imaginary portrait genre see Benedetta Bini, *L'incanto della distanza. Ritratti immaginari nella cultura del decadentismo* (Bari: Adriatica, 1992). For a study of the genre from early Pre-Raphaelitism to Modernism see Elisa Bizzotto, *La mano e l'anima: il ritratto immaginario fin de siècle* (Milano: Cisalpino, 2001), and Ead., 'Imaginary Portraits', in *The Literary Encyclopedia*, first published 6 October 2007, <<http://www.litencyc.com/php/sworks.php?rec=true&UID=9864>> [accessed 7 October 2011]. For a view of the imaginary portrait as a hermeneutic category to be applied to all Pater's work see Martine Lambert-Charbonnier, *Walter Pater et les 'Portraits Imaginaires'. Miroirs de la Culture et Images de Soi* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004).

15 An evaluation of the metamorphoses of the imaginary portrait genre is presented in Elisa Bizzotto, *La mano e l'anima: il ritratto immaginario fin de siècle*, pp. 97–162.

16 Walter Pater, 'The School of Giorgione', in Id., *The Renaissance. Studies in Art and Poetry, The 1893 Text*, Edited, with Textual and Explanatory Notes, by Donald L. Hill (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 102–22 (pp. 106, 109).

The imaginary portrait stemming from ‘Hand and Soul’ permeated British Aesthetic and Decadent fiction. *Fin-de-siècle* artistic magazines such as *The Yellow Book* or *The Savoy* included narratives indirectly influenced by the genre, one fine example being Beardsley’s unfinished *Under the Hill. A Romantic Novel*, commenced in 1894 and published in instalments in *The Savoy*.¹⁷ The Decadent short fictions collected in Dowson’s *Dilemmas: Stories and Studies in Sentiment* (1895) and Symons’s *Spiritual Adventures* (1905) are overtly based on the imaginary portrait, and so are Falkner’s *The Lost Stradivarius* (1895), an interart novella, Yeats’s ‘Rosa Alchemica’ (1897), a confessional piece redundant with Decadent topoi, and Synge’s ‘Étude Morbide’ (1899), the story of a tormented musician.

The fortune of the imaginary portrait shows how suitable a literary form it was for conveying central issues of the period. One of its subtypes in particular, the ‘history of a conscience’, which focuses on the troubled selves of unheroic contemporary subjects presented in morbidly autobiographical tones, proved the most successful and determined a proliferation of short stories centred on Decadent everymen. A second group of portraits termed ‘historical-mythological’ did not achieve the same popularity, as the ancient setting and the motif of the ‘gods in exile’ derived from Heinrich Heine diminished the immediacy with which the confessional mood could be conveyed.¹⁸ Only a couple of *fin-de-siècle* stories – Wilde’s ‘The Portrait of Mr W. H.’ (1889; revised version 1921) and Vernon Lee’s ‘Dionea’ (1890) – display characteristics of the historical-mythological typology and so does Edward Morgan Forster’s first piece of creative writing, ‘The Story of a Panic’ (1902).¹⁹

17 See Chapter 5, *The Savoy* (1896), pp. 206–12.

18 The two subtypes of imaginary portrait are examined in Elisa Bizzotto, *La mano e l'anima: il ritratto immaginario fin de siècle*, pp. 39–40.

19 For an analysis of Lee’s and Forster’s stories as historical-mythological imaginary portraits, see Elisa Bizzotto, ‘L’Olimpo mediterraneo di Vernon Lee tra Pater e Forster’, in *Dalla stanza accanto. Vernon Lee e Firenze settant’anni dopo*, ed. by Serena Cenni and Elisa Bizzotto (Firenze: Consiglio Regionale della Toscana, 2006), pp. 362–75.

The interrelation between word and image and the blending of diverse literary genres, more evidently the short story and the critical essay, are recurrent, prominent features shared by 'Hand and Soul' and later imaginary portraits. Rossetti often interrupts the spinning out of the plot with digressions on the essence and outcome of art, the relation between creative talent and life, and the artist's response to both. While not rejecting the ethical component of aesthetics, as would happen in 'art for art's sake', Rossetti began to question it. In so doing, he started a debate that would fuel discourses of and on art in the decades to come.

The aesthetic prose inaugurated by Rossetti and developed in the second half of the nineteenth century was so vital as to produce prominent twentieth-century progenies in the Modernist *Künstlerroman*. James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914–1915) and Virginia Woolf's imaginary (auto)biography *Orlando* (1928) are both clearly based on Pater's model,²⁰ but also show an emphasis on self-consciousness and parody characteristic of the Modernist reception of Pre-Raphaelitism and Aestheticism.

Paradoxically, after Rossetti's modes and mannerisms acquired currency through *fin-de-siècle* appropriations, the aura of the Pre-Raphaelites began to wane. Nostalgic recollections proliferated along with teasing caricatures in the first decades of the twentieth century, as shown by Ford Madox Ford in *Ancient Lights and Certain New Reflections* (1911)²¹ and, more explicitly, by Max Beerbohm in *Rossetti and His Circle* (1922).²²

20 Elisa Bizzotto, *La mano e l'anima: il ritratto immaginario fin de siècle*, pp. 163–70.

21 Ford Madox Ford, *Ancient Lights and Certain New Reflections. Being the Memories of a Young Man* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1911), in particular 'XII. Heroes and Some Heroines', pp. 229–30.

22 Max Beerbohm, *Rossetti and His Circle* (London: William Heinemann, 1922).

Critical Aesthetic Prose

Not only does *The Germ* contain the first expressions of a new fictional genre, it also hosts non-fictional writings similarly centred on art. In his 1899 'Introduction' William Michael Rossetti devotes much attention to 'The Subject in Art' by John Lucas Tupper, who articulated a plea for Pre-Raphaelite tenets by arguing that an artist should paint whatever in Nature is found to excite mental and moral emotions.²³ Natural phenomena are unfailing sources of inspiration, because they reach both the mind and the spirit. Rossetti then praises 'The Purpose and Tendency of Early Italian Art' by Frederic George Stephens for exploring the profound bond the Italian painters of the Duecento and Trecento had with Nature.²⁴ Both Tupper and Stephens believed that spirituality in the pre-modern age should be valued as the essence of authentic art, but also that human interactions in the contemporary industrial world deserved to be represented. In 'Modern Giants' Stephens examined the impact of the socio-historical context on artistic representation. The aesthetic orientations expressed in 'A Dialogue on Art' require careful inspection. Rossetti maintains that the concept of beauty developed by Orchard in his essay was marked by strong religious overtones: the two protagonists of his dialogue extol a purist style imbued with Christian faith which was not strongly advocated in any other contribution to *The Germ*.²⁵ Although observation of nature was a shared focus of interest, the aesthetic views supported by the three essay writers presuppose different perspectives. It is precisely the autonomy of thought they showed while proving their commitment to the P. R. B. that confers originality on their prose.

The critical essays are pervaded by the oratorical power, conceitfulness, and magniloquence of moral admonition – the *paraenesis* of scriptural tradition. The rhetoric of religious and scriptural derivation has had

23 William Michael Rossetti, 'Introduction' to *The Germ*, p. 16.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

25 *Ibid.*, pp. 25–26.

considerable continuity in English culture ever since the Puritan period and was reinforced and readapted in the Victorian age. In his essay 'The Elegant Jeremiahs' (1989) George P. Landow found striking similarities between biblical prophecies and the critical writings of the Victorian sages Matthew Arnold, Thomas Carlyle, and Ruskin. Common features include an alternation of satire and visionary power, stern reproach, and reassurance of the audience. Ordinary events are usually charged with complex symbolic values:

[...] the writings of the sage are unique in that their central or basic rhetorical effect is the implicit statement to the audience: 'I deserve your attention and credence, for I can be trusted, and no matter how bizarre my ideas or my interpretations may at first seem, they deserve your respect, your attention and ultimately your allegiance, because they are correct and they are necessary to your well-being.'²⁶

While the elaborate rhetoric of persuasion characteristic of seventeenth-century homiletics resounds in the preaching tone of Tupper, Orchard, and Stephens, the finest quality of their critical prose is the argumentative strength with which meta-artistic questions about the representability of the world are voiced. By attempting to define the nature of verbal and visual art, they explore the heuristic value of representation. Assessing whether art should be mimetic or speculative, expository or elusive is a task that becomes a predicament: their demand for clarity constantly seems on the verge of yielding to the lure of verbal sophistication. While they attempt to answer the question 'What does art do?' by scrutinizing the objects of representation, their faith in the artist's ability to explore and illuminate reality conceals the preoccupation that knowledge and representation may be deceitful constructions.

The three prose writers explored modes of discussing the nature and aims of artistic creation in relation to the social context. Their belief that beauty and morality should intertwine was challenged by the advancement

26 George P. Landow, 'The Elegant Jeremiahs: The Genre of the Victorian Sage,' in *Victorian Perspectives*, ed. by John Clubbe and Jerome Meckier (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 21–41 (pp. 24–25). For an insightful analysis of Landow's essay, see Franco Marucci, *Il vittorianesimo* (Napoli: Liguori, 2009, 1st edn 1991), pp. 219–36.

of industrialization: the more they perceived that creativity could not elude a confrontation with technology and that the pursuit of truth in art would involve facing reproducibility and commodification, the more they intensified their search for rarefied, self-enclosed forms of expression. The claim that artists should pursue originality and authenticity was the vital impulse of *The Germ* from which bipolar aesthetics arose: the emphasis on art as the vehicle of ethical values fuelled their sense of commitment, the quest for autotelic forms of beauty made them feel exceptional.

'The Subject in Art No. I' and 'No. II' by J. L. Tupper

What art represents, how images can be rendered through words and words through images, and whether re-codifications engender disseminations of meaning are the topics discussed by Tupper in 'The Subject in Art No. I' and 'No. II'. The two essays develop an intricate, fastidious distinction between 'High Art' and 'Low Art'. In Tupper's view, the difference depends on the nature of artistic subjects and on the type of artistic representation, which should conform to the principle of mimesis. Adherence to reality is fundamental, because there is a close connection between our response to objects in nature and our appreciation of the same objects transposed into works of art.²⁷ Equally straightforward is the hierarchical distinction between different standards of aesthetic quality and experience:

'High Art', *i.e.* Art, par excellence, Art, in its most exalted character, addresses pre-eminently the highest attributes of man, viz.: his mental and his moral faculties. 'Low Art', or art in its less exalted character, is that which addresses the less exalted attributes of men, viz.: his mere sensory faculties, without affecting the mind or heart, excepting through the volitional agency of the observer.²⁸

Tupper laments that the standard of contemporary art is far from high and artists are totally neglected.²⁹ In order to heal society from general

27 John Tupper, 'The Subject in Art. No. I', *The Germ*, 1 (January 1850), 11–18 (p. 11).

28 *Ibid.*, ivi.

29 John Tupper, 'The Subject in Art. No. II', *Art and Poetry*, 3 (March 1850), 118–25 (p. 122).

indifference, criticism must be invested with a function of mediation. Artist and critic complement each other, establishing a dialectical relationship based on an exchange of creative energies and hermeneutic skills. Artists, guided by their extraordinariness, and critics, supported by the earnestness of their parameters, can be powerful allies in the fight against philistinism and mediocrity. The emphasis on the role of the critic is the most innovative aspect of Tupper's essay. Critics must direct their efforts towards all ramifications of art: the formation of taste, the enjoyment of aesthetic experience and, most ambitiously, the expression of creativity. Since they possess the superior knowledge to guide the talented towards the creation of High Art in which aesthetics and morals are finally unified, Beauty as Truth will be recognized and appreciated. Tupper, who bestows on critics the gifts of insight attributed to the artists of Romanticism, fosters *fin-de-siècle* ideas about the superiority of criticism over art.

Tupper witnessed the rise of the Aesthetic Movement. Even if his conviction that beauty must intersect with morals prevented him from endorsing the claim for artistic autonomy and self-relatedness voiced by the Aesthetes, his defence of man's integrity and creativity against the degrading effects of technology set him close to Ruskin and Morris. Sharing their aversion to mechanized manufacturing systems, he envisioned the debasement of humankind caused by industrial labour in a letter written to Hunt in 1870:

[...] I asked, if man's future destinies are to be wrought out by an age or so of mechanical, brain-busy, soul-sleepy, heart-freezing, money-multiplying, honour-ignoring, self-interest-substituting, organization-exalting, emotion-suppressing humanity; of whom are to be born (when Millenium arrives) men and women with faculties to enjoy and thank heaven for the possession of such a millenium? Impiously I deemed that man may forfeit life, if need, for men's good, but nor forego his birthright of freeplaying faculties while he lives.³⁰

On the one hand, Tupper's emphasis on the interaction between artist and critic paved the way for Pater's innovative prose on the verge between fiction and criticism. The value Tupper attributed to aesthetic judgement also

30 John Lucas Tupper to William Holman Hunt, 3 February 1870, in *A Pre-Raphaelite Friendship*, ed. by James H. Coombs et al., p. 102.

anticipates Wilde's praise of the critic, who in *Intentions* (1891) is viewed as someone endowed with creative faculties superior to the creator's. In *Studies in Seven Arts* (1906) Symons fixed his canon of the ideal critic, who must possess universal knowledge of beauty and study all arts from their specific points of view and contemporary manifestations so as to be able to reflect 'on each art as of absolutely equal value.'³¹ On the other hand, in *Hiatus: The Void in Modern Education, its Cause, and Antidote* (1869) Tupper advocated the importance of aesthetic education for the advancement of society, thus evidencing an edifying role of art reminiscent of Ruskin.

'A Dialogue on Art' by John Orchard

The questions raised by Tupper in 'The Subject in Art' resonate in 'A Dialogue on Art' by John Orchard. As appears from the title, Orchard's aesthetic views are presented through a peculiar mode of argumentative writing. Among the reasons for his choice, one is prominent: '[...] all my earliest and most delightful pleasures associate themselves with dialogue, – (the old dramatists, Lucian, Walter Savage Landor, &c.)'.³² The statement, reported by Dante Gabriel Rossetti in the introductory note to 'A Dialogue on Art', shows that Orchard was aware of employing a genre that belonged to a well-established literary tradition. By using it as the ideal site for meta-artistic argumentation, Orchard contributed to the nineteenth-century reworking and recodification of the Platonic dialogue.³³

The dialogic genre of antiquity was revived by Walter Savage Landor in *Imaginary Conversations* (1824–1829) and adopted for aesthetic discussion. It inspired a juvenile essay by Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'On the Origin of

31 Arthur Symons, 'To Rhoda', in Id., *Studies in Seven Arts* (London: Archibald Constable and Company, 1906), pp. v–vi (p. vi).

32 John Orchard, 'A Dialogue on Art', *Art and Poetry*, 4 (May 1850), 146–73 (p. 146).

33 The dialogic mode in nineteenth-century British culture is discussed in Elizabeth Merrill, *The Dialogue in English Literature* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1969, 1st edn 1911), pp. 111–29. For a recent assessment of the genre, see Geoffrey Rockwell, *Defining Dialogue: From Socrates to the Internet* (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2003).

Beauty: A Platonic Dialogue' (1865), in which Oxonian proto-Aesthetes vie to formulate the most precise definition of the Beautiful. The paper was possibly written for Pater, who was Hopkins's tutor when he attended Balliol College in Oxford between 1863 and 1867.³⁴

The dialogue revolving around aesthetic issues was adopted by writers of the 1880s and 1890s, for whom it became the form perfectly suited to host witty dialectic pronouncements. The chapter 'A Conversation not Imaginary' in Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) alludes to Landor in its title and includes long intertextual references to Lucian's dialogue 'Hermotimus'. In 'The Decay of Lying' (1889) and 'The Critic as Artist' (1891) Wilde staged powerful verbal exchanges between fictional *personae* to emphasize divergent aesthetic positions. Two philosophical volumes by Vernon Lee, *Baldwin: Being Dialogues on Views and Aspirations* (1886) and *Althea: A Second Book of Dialogues on Aspirations and Duties* (1894), report conversations between the author and her erudite circle of friends enjoying the Arcadian backdrop of the Florentine hills.³⁵

Stefano Evangelista attributes the popularity of the dialogic form to the nineteenth-century revival of ancient Greece in Britain. He explains that Wilde adopted and adapted the dialogue because the interaction between at least two characters produced a variety of critical perspectives and prevented the reader from identifying the narrator with the author. Incorporating the techniques used by Browning and Swinburne in their dramatic monologues and by Pater in *Imaginary Portraits*, Wilde created dialogues in which the authorial voices multiplied so as to raise ambiguity and suspense with regard to the author's real thoughts:

34 See the 'Preface' to *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. by Humphry House, completed by Graham Storey (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. xxi–xxii, and Lesley Higgins, 'Essaying "W. H. Pater Esq.": New Perspectives on the Tutor/Student Relationship Between Pater and Hopkins', in *Pater in the 90s*, ed. by Laurel Brake and Ian Small (Greensboro, N. C.: ELT Press, 1991), pp. 77–94.

35 For a recent assessment of Vernon Lee's work and connections with Pre-Raphaelitism and the Aesthetic Movement see *Dalla stanza accanto. Vernon Lee e Firenze settant'anni dopo*, ed. by Serena Cenni and Elisa Bizzotto.

Writing criticism in the form of dialogue, Wilde is free to play with ideas that might seem radical or absurd by inserting a distance between the written word and authorial intention – a technique that is quite destabilising in the genre of criticism, which traditionally depends on reliable narrators and transparent discourses of authority.³⁶

The motives lying behind Wilde's appropriation of the genre can be applied to other writers belonging to the Aesthetic Movement, but also preceding it. By resorting to the dialogue, Victorian authors could avoid the morbid autobiographism of Romantic literature. In fact, the expression of the authorial self through different fictional *personae*, which the dialogue shares with the dramatic monologue³⁷ and the imaginary portrait,³⁸ reveals that writers were exploring the elusiveness of identity and relativity of truth.

Although in 'A Dialogue on Art' Orchard addresses aesthetic issues extensively tackled in 'Hand and Soul' and in the essays by Tupper and Stephens, the all-encompassing plea is moral earnestness in art. One of the four speakers, emblematically named Christian, maintains that literature, visual arts, and music must shun impurities of form and expression in order to be 'fine art'.³⁹ Refinement of taste and morals can be achieved by entrusting to the artist the role of a Messianic guide who teaches the masses to dispel baseness and appreciate beauty:

CHRISTIAN. [...] art is degraded, made a thing of carnal desire – a commodity of the exchange. Yes, Sophon, to be instructive, to become a teaching instrument, the art-edifice must be cleansed from its abominations [...].

KALON. [...] The multitude are teachable – teachable as a child; but, like a child, they are self-willed and obstinate, and will learn in their own way, or not at all. And, if

36 Stefano Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece. Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 150.

37 For the traditional notion of the dramatic monologue as 'a reaction against the Romantic confessional style' see Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience. The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957), pp. 79–80. Reverberations of the authorial self in the dramatic monologue are examined by Alan Sinfield in *Dramatic Monologue* (London: Methuen & Co. – New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1977), pp. 57–59.

38 Elisa Bizzotto, *La mano e l'anima. Il ritratto immaginario fin de siècle*, p. 21.

39 John Orchard, 'A Dialogue on Art', 150.

the artist wishes to raise them unto a fit audience, [...] he must be to them not only cords of support staying their every weakness against sin and temptation, but also, tendrils of delight winding around them. [...]

CHRISTIAN. [...] the artist, if he desires to inform the people thoroughly, must imitate Christ, and, like him, stoop down to earth and become flesh of their flesh.⁴⁰

The quest, launched by Tupper and Orchard, for an art that expresses pureness and fosters moral integrity stood at the core of Ruskin's aesthetics. The ethical values strenuously defended in the second volume of *Modern Painters* (1846) most directly influenced early Pre-Raphaelitism. According to Timothy Hilton the P. R. B. assimilated Ruskin's thought and became the catalyst for further developments. The increasing importance attributed to art during the 1840s was the result of Ruskin's belief that the production of pictures was always highly significant, because it could generate good or evil. His enquiries into the artists' enormous potential for expressing moral power impressed the Pre-Raphaelites, who 'helped the process along by their own capacity for promoting debate. They worried about their functions as artists, and they worried even more about the expression of these functions.'⁴¹

The relevance of ethical issues, on which Ruskinian and Pre-Raphaelite theories of art were founded, was scrutinized in the late Victorian age. The necessary coexistence of Good and Beauty in an artwork which aspires to be a masterpiece featured prominently in British Aestheticism.

What distinguishes 'good art' from 'great art' is further defined in Pater's essay on 'Style' (1888): they both possess formal qualities, but are different in content. 'Great art', the highest form, generates pleasure, emancipation from ignorance, and solidarity, and is well exemplified by Dante's work, a well-acknowledged source of inspiration for the Pre-Raphaelites:

Given the conditions I have tried to explain as constituting good art [i.e. its formal quality]; – then, if it be devoted further to the increase of men's happiness, to the redemption of the oppressed, or the enlargement of our sympathies with each other, or to such presentment of new or old truth about ourselves and our relation to the

40 Ibid., 156–57.

41 Timothy Hilton, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, p. 54.

world as many ennoble and fortify us in our sojourn here, or immediately, as with Dante, to the glory of God, it will be also great art [...].⁴²

Continuing to explore the ethical values Pater attributed to great art, the Aesthetes and the Decadents transformed the terms of the relationship from ‘art as an expression of religion’ to ‘art as religion’. Their reaction against the disjunction between artistic beauty and religious faith, that had deprived painters and poets of their mission and led them to live in isolation, was the transformation of art into an aestheticized creed. Art is superior to God’s masterpieces – Man and Nature – because it represents the World of Ideas. Hence it deserves absolute consecration and worship. Accordingly, in ‘The Decay of Lying’, Wilde had his *alter ego* Vivian denounce the fallacy of mimesis and advocate the autonomy and supremacy of Art over reality:

VIVIAN.

[...] My own experience is that the more we study Art, the less we care for Nature. What Art really reveals to us is Nature’s lack of design, her curious crudities, her extraordinary monotony, her absolutely unfinished condition. Nature has good intentions, of course, but, as Aristotle once said, she cannot carry them out. When I look at a landscape I cannot help seeing all its defects. It is fortunate for us, however, that Nature is so imperfect, as otherwise we should have no art at all. Art is our spirited protest, our gallant attempt to teach Nature her proper place. As for the infinite variety of Nature, that is a pure myth. It is not to be found in Nature herself. It resides in the imagination, or fancy, or cultivated blindness of the man who looks at her.⁴³

Permeated by perfection, art is independent from external parameters of resemblance. It does not imitate anything, but rather veils everything. Against any pretence of naturalness, Vivian declares that art is artifice.

42 Walter Pater, ‘Style’, in Id., *Appreciations. With an Essay on Style*, pp. 1–36 (p. 36). See also David J. DeLaura, *Hebrew and Hellene in Victorian England: Newman, Arnold, and Pater* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969), pp. 329–38.

43 Oscar Wilde, ‘The Decay of Lying’, in *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, with an Introduction by Vyvyan Holland (Glasgow: Harper Collins, 1966, 2nd edn), pp. 1071–92 (p. 1071).

It shows half-mystical and half-pagan features, conjures up grand images from the Holy Scriptures and enticing presences from Greek mythology, generates new flora and fauna, creates and destroys worlds:

VIVIAN.

[...] Hers are [...] the great archetypes of which things that have existence are but unfinished copies. [...] She can work miracles at her will, and when she calls monsters from the deep they come. She can bid the almond-tree blossom in winter, and send the snow upon the ripe cornfield. At her word the frost lays its silver finger on the burning mouth of June, and the winged lions creep out from the hollows of the Lydian hills. The dryads peer from the thicket as she passes by, and the brown fauns smile strangely at her when she comes near them.⁴⁴

A few years later Symons expressed even more radical, if not blasphemous, views when he defined symbolical literature. Art became the quintessential manifestation of religion: mysticism. More than any spiritual practice, it was a medium to grasp the unknown and experience divine ecstasy. The artist did not merely embody the priest of Beauty, but the modern type of the ascetic and the saint:

[...] the doctrine of Mysticism, with which all this symbolical literature has so much to do, [...] presents us, [...] not with a plan for our happiness, not with an explanation of any mystery, but with a theory of life which makes us familiar with mystery, and which seems to harmonise those instincts which make for religion, passion, and art [...]. The final uncertainty remains, but we seem to knock less helplessly at closed doors [...] we realise the identity of a poem, a prayer, or a kiss, in that spiritual universe which we are weaving for ourselves [...].⁴⁵

The conflation of religious and sensual love with art is reminiscent of seveneenth-century culture, which was in fact one of Symons's main sources of inspiration. He was deeply fascinated by Saint John of the Cross and Saint Theresa,

44 Ibid., p. 1082.

45 Arthur Symons, 'Conclusion', in Id., *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (London: William Heinemann, 1899), pp. 171–75 (pp. 174–75).

to whose writings he was introduced by Coventry Patmore.⁴⁶ Moreover John Donne, the subject of one of his most insightful essays, represented for him a model of vibrant intellectuality and artistry.⁴⁷ His appreciation of Donne and appraisal of poets like Richard Crashaw and Robert Herrick⁴⁸ stimulated the late Victorian renewal of interest in Metaphysical literature, which was to gain high recognition in Modernism.⁴⁹

The tension between earth and heaven, beauty and morality, recognized by the Modernists as the most praiseworthy feature of Metaphysical poets, was a hallmark of both creative and critical prose in *The Germ*, particularly of 'Hand and Soul'. Even stronger affinities may be found between the style of the critical essays in the Pre-Raphaelite magazine and the sermon genre flourishing in the age of Donne.⁵⁰

- 46 Arthur Symons, 'Coventry Patmore' (1906), in Id., *Figures of Several Centuries* (London: Archibald Constable and Company, 1916), pp. 351–75 (p. 361).
- 47 Arthur Symons, 'John Donne' (1899), in *ibid.*, pp. 80–108.
- 48 *Arthur Symons: Selected Letters, 1880–1935*, ed. by Karl Beckson and John M. Munro (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 32, and *The Memoirs of Arthur Symons. Life and Art in the 1890s*, ed. by Karl Beckson (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977), pp. 39, 58.
- 49 Roger Lhombreaud, *Arthur Symons. A Critical Biography* (London: The Unicorn Press, 1963), p. 190, and Karl Beckson, *Arthur Symons. A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), pp. 187–88.
- 50 Among the finest studies of the homiletic genre and its progress in early modern England are Peter E. McCullough, *Sermons at Court. Politics and Religion in Elizabethan and Jacobean Preaching* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Lori Anne Ferrell, *Government by Polemic. James I, the King's Preachers, and the Rhetorics of Conformity, 1603–1625* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Mary Morrissey, 'Scripture, Style and Persuasion in Seventeenth-Century English Theories of Preaching', *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 53, 4 (2002), 686–706.

*'The Purpose and Tendency of Early Italian Art' and
'Modern Giants' by F. G. Stephens*

In 'The Purpose and Tendency of Early Italian Art', written under the pseudonym of John Seward, Stephens argues that authenticity can be found in an anonymous Florentine Madonna presented as a touching elderly woman struck by grief.⁵¹ Being primitive means focusing on the event to be depicted and valuing technical skills less than direct, perceptive observation of nature and humanity. While acknowledging the dexterous use of pictorial technique by Annibale and Agostino Carracci, Stephens prefers the empathy expressed by Masaccio. When he maintains that sensitivity, tenderness, grace, simplicity, naturalness, and earnestness inspired Masaccio, Beato Angelico, Ghirlandaio, Baccio della Porta, and argues that their spontaneity of feeling allowed them to express truth to life, he defines the art of the early Italian masters as a distinctive form of primitivism.

His preference for the art before Raphael was a counter-response to academic painters, who rejected primitive incongruities and inaccuracies. For Stephens the history of the figurative arts since the Renaissance had been marked by a growing imbalance between the refinement of skills and the progressive neglect of authenticity.⁵² Victorian artists were thus strongly encouraged to learn how to transfuse spirituality into an artwork by choosing their models among medieval Italian painters: the aim would not be imitation, but an in-depth study of the bond between beauty and pureness. By claiming that modern art should not copy, but assimilate and reinterpret the expressive modes developed in previous centuries, Stephens portrays the physiognomy of a Janus-like poet or painter, whose creativity thrives on earlier achievements as well as on individual expressive modes projected towards the future.⁵³

51 John Seward [F. G. Stephens], 'The Purpose and Tendency of Early Italian Art', *The Germ*, 2 (February 1850), 58–64 (p. 60).

52 *Ibid.*, ivi.

53 *Ibid.*, 63–64.

In the aesthetic agenda propounded in his monograph *Pre-Raphaelitism* (1851) Ruskin encouraged the Pre-Raphaelites to paint nature as it is, with the clarity originating from modern scientific knowledge and the sincerity possessed by medieval artists.⁵⁴ In 1850, when Stephens wrote his essays for *The Germ*, the Brethren were seeking to re-formulate the canons of Victorian iconography by pursuing the seriousness and genuineness conveyed by Italian late medieval painters. Primitive Pre-Raphaelitism thrives on the notion of beauty as sincerity in art proposed by Stephens and Orchard in *The Germ* and by Hunt in *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (1905) as well as on the admiration for the early Italian masters expressed by Rossetti, Hunt, and Millais in the drawings and paintings produced between 1848 and 1853.⁵⁵ As it was originally conceived by the Pre-Raphaelites, primitivism stemmed from a rejection of Victorian artificiality. Purity and originality could be appreciated only by contemplating the primitive and archaic nature of artworks created before Raphael.

The conclusion of 'The Purpose and Tendency of Early Italian Art' seems to be overturned in 'Modern Giants', written under the pseudonym of Laura Savage. Stephens explains that, if in the Middle Ages charity was associated with religion and thus visualized through sacred images of saints and angels, in his age it is better embodied by a destitute old woman desperately struggling to survive in a world radically transformed by technology. Apparently unremarkable facts are narrated with the eloquence of a prophet and personal shortcomings are revealed in order to capture the reader's benevolence:

[...] walking with a friend the other day, we met an old woman, exceedingly dirty, restlessly pattering along the kerb of a crowded thoroughfare, trying to cross: [...] but for my own part, I must needs be fastidious and prefer to allow her to take the risk of being run over, to overcoming my own disgust. Not so my friend; he marched up manfully, and putting his arm over the old woman's shoulder, led her across as carefully as though she were a princess. Of course, I was ashamed: ashamed! I was

54 John Ruskin, *Pre-Raphaelitism*, pp. 25–26, note.

55 Paola Spinuzzi, 'Primitivo, primigenio. La ricerca dell'"autenticità" nell'estetica preraffaellita', in *Il primitivismo e le sue metamorfosi. Archeologia di un discorso culturale*, ed. by Gilberta Golinelli (Bologna: Clueb, 2007), pp. 289–305.

frightened; I expected to see the old woman change into a tall angel and take him off to heaven, leaving me her original shape to repent in. [...] Why should not this thing be as poetical as any in the life of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary or any one else? for, so we look at it with a pure thought, we shall see about it the same light the Areopagite saw at Jerusalem surround the Holy Virgin [...].⁵⁶

In order to persuade the readers that the elderly lady is worthy of being portrayed as the allegorical embodiment of charity, Stephens resorts to hyperbole. Firstly he imagines that she metamorphoses into an angel ascending to heaven and then compares her vicissitudes to the tribulations of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, a widely known symbol of Christian charity, and Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, who went to Jerusalem to pay a visit to the Holy Virgin and was tempted to adore her when he saw her beauty and stateliness. It is clear that Stephens exhibits his knowledge of hagiography to affirm his authoritativeness and strengthen his power of persuasion.

After having observed that modern poets and painters constantly seek their subjects in ancient Greece or Rome, the former devotee of medieval art becomes an enthusiastic supporter of modernity who introduces a parable to demonstrate that poignant sources of inspiration can be found in everyday life:

There is 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 Thousand and One Nights, or in any poem classical or romantic, would be gloried over without end.⁵⁷

'Modern Giants' finishes with a mocking remark on the lack of taste that has caused the proliferation of bad art. Stephens stigmatizes his contemporaries, who do not possess the critical tools for noticing flaws in post-Raphaelite, and particularly eighteenth-century, paintings. The wrong use of colours, the disregard for right shapes or proportions, and the lack of

56 Laura Savage [F. G. Stephens], 'Modern Giants', *Art and Poetry*, 4 (May 1850), 169–73 (p. 170).

57 *Ibid.*, ivi.

plausibility do not seem to offend the eye of the Victorians, all too ready to pay considerable amounts of money for valueless works:

Thousands are given for uncomfortable Dutch sun-lights; but if you are shown a transcript of day itself, with the purple shadow upon the mountains, and across the still lake, you know nothing of it because your fathers never bought such: [...] let me set you in the actual place, let the water damp your feet, stand in the chill of the shadow itself, and you will never tell me the colour of the hill, or where the last of the crows caught the sinking sunlight. Letting observation sleep, what can you know of nature?⁵⁸

Stephens's praise of early Italian painting in the second issue of *The Germ* and of Victorian prodigies in the fourth confirms the Pre-Raphaelite belief that authentic and unaffected art can be produced also in an industrialized age. The two essays prove fundamental for comprehending the diverse aesthetic orientations of the Pre-Raphaelites, drawn towards an ideal past and back to a present accelerated by technological progress. Acknowledging that the metamorphoses of urban spaces produced by the machines enthuse poets and painters, Stephens reveals how the wonders of technological advancement create a counterpart to the archaic beauty of the Middle Ages.

The idea that material progress is not altogether harmful, but can produce positive social changes and enhance artistic creativity clearly contrasts with the frontispiece of *The Germ*, where it is stated that the primary aim of Art is the observation of Nature in its manifold manifestations. Stephens's essays expose the conceptual bipolarities of the Pre-Raphaelites, wavering between a present that they could not elude and an ideal past that aroused their yearning.

58 Ibid., 173.

'Macbeth' by Coventry Patmore

The essay 'Macbeth' in the third issue was Patmore's only contribution which took the form of literary criticism.⁵⁹ Although purportedly written when the poet was just seventeen, the piece testifies to originality and acumen in the perception of Shakespeare's plot structure and reveals Romantic ascendancies. It elaborates Samuel Taylor Coleridge's idea that Macbeth and his wife conspired to obtain the crown of Scotland before he met the witches.⁶⁰

Patmore's article is evidently related to the Romantic reception of Shakespeare but also presents an innovative structure. The etching *Cordelia* by Ford Madox Brown,⁶¹ the poem by William Michael Rossetti bearing the same title, and Patmore's essay form a tripartite Shakespearean sequence that exemplifies the concept of interart osmosis typical of the *fin de siècle*. Iconography, poetry, and prose produce variations on Shakespearean tragedy and are to be perceived as a unified expression. Despite its mediocre quality, Patmore's experiment with the transposition of a thematic nucleus from one artistic form to another took place while the notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* began to circulate. Theorized by Richard Wagner in *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (*The Artwork of the Future*, 1849)⁶² and appropriated throughout Europe in the following decades, the total work of art was already germinating in the Pre-Raphaelite magazine.

59 Coventry Patmore, 'Macbeth,' *Art and Poetry*, 3 (March 1850), 99–110.

60 John Cowie Reid, *The Mind and Art of Coventry Patmore* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), p. 200.

61 Brown had been interested in the story of Lear since 1844, when he sketched a set of eighteen pen-and-ink studies. Three paintings were developed in the following years: *Lear and Cordelia* (1849–1854), *The Parting of Cordelia and Her Sisters* (1854) and *Cordelia's Portion* (1866–1872).

62 The presence of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* notion in British Aesthetic culture is discussed in Elisa Bizzotto, *La mano e l'anima. Il ritratto immaginario fin de siècle*, pp. 6–7. See also Marcello Pagnini, 'Wagner e il wagnerismo nella cultura inglese fra i due secoli', in Id., *Semiosi: Teoria ed ermeneutica del testo letterario* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1988), pp. 291–311.