Victorian Noon
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"The Germ" No. 1, came out on or about January 1, 1850. The number of copies printed was 700. Something like 200 were sold, in about equal proportions by the publishers, and by ourselves among acquaintances and well-wishers. This was not encouraging, so we reduced the issue of No. 2 to 500 copies. It sold less well than No. 1. . . . Had we been left to our own resources, we must now have dropped the magazine. But the printing firm—or Mr. George I. F. Tupper as representing it—came forward, and undertook to try the chance of two numbers more. The title was altered . . . to "Art and Poetry, being Thoughts towards Nature, conducted principally by Artists". . . . Some small amount of advertising was done. . . . All efforts proved useless. People would not buy "The Germ," and would scarcely consent to know of its existence. So the magazine breathed its last, and its obsequies were conducted in the strictest privacy.—William Michael Rossetti in 1899

Looking back over half a century to his association with The Germ, William Michael Rossetti could still smile at the hapless magazine and at the group of friends and acquaintances, "artists" and non-artists, who had, in the second year of their Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, followed Dante Gabriel Rossetti's suggestion and launched their artistic manifesto. By the end of the century, a continued interest in the Pre-Raphaelites warranted William Rossetti's republishing of The Germ. Low sales and short life notwithstanding, the prototype of so many "little magazines" to follow had served, first, to express the views of the Rossettis and friends, and, second, to record their views for later and more receptive generations.

In December of 1849, when the Pre-Raphaelites were debating the relative merits of such titles as "The Harbinger," "First Thoughts," "The
Sower,” “The Truth Seeker,” “The Acorn,” “The Seed,” and “The Scroll”—finally voting by six to four in favor of “The Germ”—Charles Dickens was also considering titles for a new magazine. Some of his possibilities included “The Robin,” “Mankind,” “Charles Dickens,” “The Microscope,” “The Household Guest,” “The Household Face,” and several others—among them “Everything.” At last, *Household Words* found Dickens’s approval. The contrast between the organic metaphors of seeds and germs and the qualities implied by “Household Voice” and “Mankind,” and by “Household Words” itself, points to the differences between the Pre-Raphaelites’ manifesto and Dickens’s magazine for the millions. For the one “conducted by artists,” a modest issue of five hundred proved too optimistic by far; for the other, “conducted by Charles Dickens,” forty thousand sales per week was soon a reality. As he wrote in his “A Preliminary Word” to the first issue of *Household Words*, Dickens wanted his magazine “to live in the Household affections, and to be numbered among the Household thoughts of our readers.” He confidently expected *Household Words* to enter the hearts of untold readers, readers who would otherwise not constitute a predictable audience, but who might share certain hopes and sentiments. “In this summer-dawn of time,” he writes, his magazine will introduce “the stirring world around us, the knowledge of many social wonders, good and evil,” but with the editor’s promise that the spirit of the magazine will be “no utilitarian spirit.” Society must, after all, “tenderly cherish that light of Fancy which is inherent in the human breast.”

Unlike the Rossettis and their friends, Dickens had earlier experience with magazines, and if, in his usual way, he debated long about a proper title, he knew exactly what he wanted to publish, and for whom. He had behind him the editorship of *Bentley’s Miscellany* (in the late thirties) and the editorship of the *Daily News* (in 1846). In addition to assessing his public, he carefully picked his writers, all of whom were to publish anonymously in the magazine “Conducted by Charles Dickens,” but who included in their numbers Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Gaskell, Wilkie Collins, Mrs. Lynn Linton, Henry Morley, R. H. Horne, William Blanchard Jerrold, and George Augustus Sala. Occasional contributors were George Meredith, Geraldine Jewsbury, Walter Savage Landor, Albert Smith, and Edmund Yates. Even Elizabeth Barrett Browning contributed—and so did Coventry Patmore, who wrote several poems and an essay for *The Germ*. The combination of skillful editing (Dickens was assisted by William Henry Wills, his subeditor) and well-written material insured for *Household Words* its almost incredible popularity. And Dickens was able to maintain its popularity until 1859, when, by a brilliant sleight-of-
hand, he assumed total financial command of the magazine and guided it into another phase of success as *All the Year Round*.

The reasons for the commercial success of *Household Words*, if not for the commercial failure of *The Germ*, probably lie in Dickens's uncanny assessment of his potential audience. He wanted to please a large audience and was ready to cater to its tastes—which, no doubt, he largely shared. His inexpensive, weekly magazine epitomized a broad popularizing of periodical literature that developed through the century and that reflected a growing reading public. Walter Graham speaks of *Household Words* in terms of the various penny and half-penny magazines, appearing for the first time between 1800 and 1850, which appealed to new readers among the working classes. But Graham implies that Dickens aimed primarily at a lower-class audience. What he wanted was a weekly package for anyone's pleasant opening.

The contents of the first number of *Household Words* (30 March 1850) show how Dickens managed his material and how much he could pack into a magazine of less than twenty-five pages. In addition to his own "A Preliminary Word," he included an installment of Mrs. Gaskell's *Lizzie Leigh*, an article coauthored by himself and Wills on the Post Office, a poem by Leigh Hunt, an article (by himself) on theaters for the poor, a historical anecdote by George Hogarth, a poem by William Allingham (who was a friend of the Pre-Raphaelites, but who no doubt preferred to be paid for his writing), a selection of emigrant letters (selected by Dickens and Mrs. Chisholm), an article "Milking in Australia" by Samuel and John Sidney, and a final unidentified piece entitled "Metal in Sea-Water." Except for the poetry and the story by Mrs. Gaskell, here clearly was no literary or artistic publication.

Dickens knew that a popular magazine needed fiction (like Mrs. Gaskell's) and topical essays (like his own) that would be both timely and readable. Implicitly, he rejected the format of the old quarterlies without offering a weekly newspaper, like Lewes's and Thornton Hunt's *Leader*, or like the *Athenaeum* and *Spectator*. (Dickens did introduce the *Household Narrative* later in the spring; it was a news supplement to *Household Words*.) He was also careful to avoid a conspicuously political bias—like that of George Hayley in *The Red Republican* (1850) or that of Kingsley and his friends in *The Christian Socialist*. It is true that he admitted social purpose behind *Household Words*. In a letter to Mrs. Gaskell, herself a reformative novelist, he described his "new cheap weekly journal of general literature," the purpose of which "is the raising up of those that are down, and the general improvement of our social condition." But if
social commentary was to play an important part in *Household Words*, it was not to dominate. Dickens sought, and achieved, a genuine *magazine*, a mixed publication that avoided the political bias of *Blackwood's*, the diffuseness of *Ainsworth's*, the satire of *Fraser's*, or the frivolity of *Punch*.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti was as important to the founding of *The Germ* as Dickens was to the founding of *Household Words*. Rossetti had persuaded his friends, in 1848, to form a Brotherhood. Now he persuaded them to publish a magazine. His enthusiasm for *The Germ* seems to have been as casual as his sense of the Brotherhood itself, which he increased (to the amazement of Hunt and Millais) at a whim. His extending the Brotherhood and his compulsion to confess the meaning of its initials, which the group had decided to keep secret, were gestures of a showman who wanted publicity. Yet just as Rossetti was to teach drawing and painting to working-class men, apparently with great skill and generosity, so he wanted to share the enthusiasms of the Brotherhood with a wider, public audience. *The Germ* would explain his views while showing his wares. The only Pre-Raphaelite who began as poet as well as artist, Rossetti prodded Thomas Woolner and William Rossetti to write poetry, George Stephens and Ford Madox Brown (not officially a PRB) to write prose, and he appointed his brother to do the editing, soliciting, and general managing of the magazine. He was happy to contribute to *The Germ*, but, unlike the editor of *Household Words*, he had little interest in the daily routines.

So the editing of *The Germ* devolved on William Michael Rossetti, who was twenty-one years old, and whose notions of editing can only have been minimal. No "artist" himself, he was drafted to do reviews as well as editorial work. To use his own words again, he was "more or less expected to do the sort of work for which other 'proprietors' had little inclination—such especially as the regular reviewing of new poems." Although Rossetti later dismissed his four reviews as unimportant or immature (having in the meantime done half a century of reviewing), they showed a sense of new directions. In a time of much "triviality and commonplace," Rossetti picked out poems by Arnold, Clough, and Browning. He shared the Pre-Raphaelite respect for Browning, whom, with Tennyson, he saw as the great poetic spirit of his time. His discussion of Arnold's self-conscious, elegiac style identifies Arnold's poetry as the characteristic poetry of the age (see chapter IV). Holding "the inventor" above "the commentator" in a spirit of diffidence (a principle he may have taken from Coleridge), Rossetti applied what he believed, seeking
out the best in the works he reviewed and relating their characteristics to what he saw as the main creative forces of the times.

As for the magazine itself, that, too, reflected thoughtful editing. It was almost uniformly serious, and sometimes ponderous, but Rossetti had to work with what was available, and he evidently did not have a large choice of contributions. Nonetheless, his offerings were impressive. Contents for the second number of *The Germ* (actually the final number of *The Germ* as such) looked like this:

- The Child Jesus [a poem] : By James Collinson
- A Pause of Thought [poem] : by Ellen Alleyn [Christina Rossetti]
- The Purpose and Tendency of Early Italian Art: by John Seward [F. G. Stephens]
- Song: by Ellen Alleyn
- Morning Sleep [poem] : by Wm. B. Scott
- Sonnet: by Calder Caldwell
- Stars and Moon [poem] : by Coventry Patmore
- On the Mechanism of a Historical Picture: by F. Madox Brown
- A Testimony [poem] : by Ellen Alleyn
- O When and Where [poem] : by Thomas Woolner
- Fancies at Leisure [poems] : by Wm. M. Rossetti
- The Sight Beyond [poems] : by Walter H. Deverell
- The Blessed Damozel: by Dante G. Rossetti
- Reviews: “The Strayed Reveller, and other Poems”: by Wm. M. Rossetti

In its length (a little less than fifty pages) and its range of contents, the second number was typical of *The Germ*’s offerings.

In contrast to *Household Words*, *The Germ* was manifestly literary and aesthetic in emphasis, publishing poetry rather than fiction, essays on art rather than “domestic” discussions. Other numbers included Coventry Patmore’s analysis of the witches’ role in *Macbeth* (a shrewd essay largely ignored by Shakespeare critics), John Orchard’s “Dialogue on Art,” Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s “My Sister’s Sleep” and “Sonnets for Pictures,” along with “Hand and Soul,” and it was for *The Germ* that Rossetti wrote “St. Agnes of Intercession,” with the original and fitting mid-century title “An Autopsychology.” Holman Hunt and Ford Madox Brown provided etchings.

The contents of the magazine suggest that, in spite of its polemical inception, *The Germ* was not entirely polemical in character. Rossetti’s principle of “diffidence” may have reflected the tacit principles of the group, or the magazine may itself have followed the example of its young editor, presenting viewpoints without laboring them, or—to put this another way—addressing aesthetic instead of political or religious issues,
but addressing these with moderation. William Rossetti’s later paraphrase of his brother’s *Hand and Soul* expresses what seem to have been his editorial aims:

The design [of Rossetti’s intended etching for the imaginary biography] showed Chiaro dell’ Erma in the act of painting his embodied Soul. Though the form of this tale is that of romantic metaphor, its substance is a very serious manifesto of art-dogma. It amounts to saying, The only satisfactory works of art are those which exhibit the very soul of the artist. To work for fame or self-display is a failure, and to work for direct moral proselytizing is a failure; but to paint that which your own perceptions and emotions urge you to paint promises to be a success for yourself, and hence a benefit to the mass of beholders. This was the core of the “Praeraphaelite” creed; with the adjunct . . . that the artist cannot attain to adequate self-expression save through a stern study and realization of natural appearances.10

However cavalier the members of the Brotherhood may have been toward a medium that was not their own, or not their main interest, they created a magazine that reflected their views and was at the same time diverse and exploratory. The hope of reaching a “mass of beholders” may only have proven possible, and that to a limited extent, for Millais, Hunt, and Rossetti as painters, but the little magazine provided the Brotherhood with a timely, if short-lived outlet.

While the public response to *The Germ* was meager, it received some favorable and sympathetic attention. If nothing else, it secured William Rossetti’s career, since he was soon hired as an art critic for the Spectator. Several magazines praised *The Germ*. One reviewer invoked the common complaint about the *material* tendencies of the age, protesting that *The Germ* was “too good for the time.” In a later review the same critic spoke of Orchard’s “Dialogue on Art” as “a paper which the Edinburgh Review in its best days might have been proud to possess.”11 Similarly complimentary was a writer for the Guardian:

Here, at last, we have a *school*, ignorant it may be, conceited possibly, as yet with but vague and unrealised objects, but working together with a common purpose, according to certain admitted principles, and looking to one another for help and sympathy. This is new in England, and we are very anxious it should have a fair trial. Its aim, moreover, however imperfectly attained as yet, is high and pure. . . . A school of artists who attempt to bring back the popular taste to the severe draperies and pure form of early art are at least deserving of encouragement. Success in their attempt would be a national blessing.12

Praise of this sort, though of no help to *The Germ*, must have been gratifying to the Brotherhood, and a welcome change from the more
common hostility issuing from the press. The Times deplored a “morbid infatuation which sacrifices truth, beauty and genuine feeling to mere eccentricity.” And the Athenæum, which was soon to hire George Stephens as an art critic, scoffed at the work of “artists who” are “intellectual without belonging to the better order of intellect,” and who have set up a clearly deformed “Art Idol.” Among the most vocal of detractors was Charles Dickens.

In an article for Household Words, “Old Lamps for New Ones” (15 June 1850), Dickens offered a satirical sketch of Pre-Raphaelite aims. “You will have the goodness to discharge from your minds all post-Raphael ideas, all religious aspirations, etc. . . . for the lowest depths of what is mean, odious, repulsive, and revolting.” He proposes analogous brotherhoods to the PRB, such as “The Pre-Newtonian Brotherhood,” the Pre-Gower and Chaucer Brotherhood,” and he speculates about “promising students connected with the Royal College of Surgeons” holding “a meeting, to protest against the circulation of the blood.” The article includes among its heavy jokes a nasty attack on John Millais’s Christ in the House of His Parents (known as The Carpenter’s Shop and exhibited by the Academy in 1850) that is a pure piece of Philistinism. The painting presents, Dickens says, “a kneeling woman so horrible in her ugliness that (supposing it were possible for any human creature to exist for a moment with that dislocated throat) she would stand out from the rest of her company as a monster in the vilest cabaret in France or the lowest gin shop in England.” In sum, “Whenever it is possible to express ugliness of feature, limb, or attitude, you have it expressed.”

Dickens’s appeal in this article is to an easy, know-nothing smugness. With no attempt either to look at Millais’s painting or to understand the aims of the Pre-Raphaelites generally, he dismisses all as “mean, odious, repulsive, and revolting,” terms clearly aimed at the artists as much as at their work. Millais, if he read the article, must have wondered why people looking at his paintings were seized with a desire to attack him; why, instead of taking pleasure, they took offense. He may have been irritated, too, at the catch-all denunciation, since he alone of the Brotherhood had affiliations with the Royal Academy—was soon, indeed, to become a member—while he had strong doubts about the judgments and eccentricities of several of his Pre-Raphaelite brethren. Millais had known that the name “Pre-Raphaelite” might cause laughter; he was disappointed when Dante Gabriel Rossetti confessed the meaning of PRB to a friend and hence made it public. For all his impatience with academicians, Millais was no Bohemian. (His later elopement with Effie Ruskin was to be
handled with all possible proprieties, and Millais, after associating with the Pre-Raphaelites, was soon to seek his friends in different circles. His new friends were to include Anthony Trollope, John Leech, and, ironically, Charles Dickens himself, who grew to admire both Millais and Hunt in years to come.)16 “Art wants you home,” wrote Millais to Holman Hunt in 1855. “It is impossible to fight single-handed, and the R. A. is too great a consideration to lose sight of, with all its position, with the public wealth and ability to help good art.”17 Here speaks, for good or ill, a member of the establishment. He can hardly have relished Dickens’s attack.

Apart from its inappropriateness for Millais, Dickens’s indictment of The Carpenter’s Shop reveals some odd misconceptions. Why, for example, would he think of Millais “discharging” “all religious aspirations” in the portrait (a kind of conversation piece, set in Joseph’s workshop) of Christ, Mary, and Joseph? Did he, in spite of his own occasional impatience with the Royal Academy, subscribe to conventional opinion as to the proprieties for representing religious subjects? Apparently so. Yet Millais, while untraditional, and perhaps radically mimetic, was if nothing else devout. Was Dickens’s attack based, perhaps, on the mistaken understanding that the Pre-Raphaelites were not only “art-Catholics” but Roman Catholics as well? He may have resented what he took to be an alien iconography in the painting, just as later critics resented the inexplicable literalism of Hunt’s Scapegoat, simply because he lacked the sympathy to look. Had he known Millais’s aspirations, he would have recognized an intensely religious and moral intent and a conception of art that was anything but “mean.”

With the sympathy that he later found, Dickens might have seen in the oddly vivid and evidently disturbing pictures of the Pre-Raphaelites a medium comparable to his own. Contemporary reviewers sometimes accused Dickens of excessively detailed narrative, while they wondered about his odd gift for what they called “idealization.” I have mentioned David Masson’s review of Pendennis and David Copperfield in which Masson praised Dickens for his ability to “daguerreotype the interior of a hut,” but in which he also contrasted Dickens with the more “real” Thackeray. Dickens’s “fictions are hyberbolic.” His characters “are real only thus far, that they are transcendental renderings of certain hints furnished by nature.”18 By a simple extension of such arguments, a reviewer of Bleak House actually called Dickens a Pre-Raphaelite, attacking his ugly vision as Dickens had attacked the vision of Millais.19

Dickens may not have recognized the idealization in Millais’s work (though Ruskin and others did), but it was obviously there. Along with it went the commitment to mimetic accuracy. William Bell Scott later wrote
about the Pre-Raphaelites that the impetus behind them was photog-
ography—the challenge of the new medium, which demanded new skills,
and which made the work of the Academy seem dreary and uninventive.
I shall return to this question. My point here is that, if the sort of loose
analogies I have suggested were likely to escape the unsympathetic viewer
of the Academy exhibit in 1850, still Dickens’s attack on the Pre-Raphael-
ites disregarded much that he implicitly shared with that odd assortment
of artists and friends of artists who called themselves the PRB.

Perhaps Dickens never read The Germ. If he had, he would have en-
countered ideas and a vocabulary not far from his own. The Pre-Raphaelites’
urgent advocacy of “Nature” often seems vague in intent and ambiguous
in application. What does the phrase “Thoughts towards Nature” really
mean? The writers for The Germ are, however, no vaguer than many of
their contemporaries, including Dickens, who pay tribute to nature as a
self-evident value and aesthetic standard. “Great Nature” is a phrase from
Copperfield that the Pre-Raphaelites would have admired and understood.
True, they themselves often invoked nature in relation to fourteenth-
century artists, and they may have seemed, to outsiders, to have been at
best quaint and at worst foolishly regressive. But the writers for The
Germ always qualified their medievalism, emphasizing its application for
their own times and referring to early masters to clarify modern aims. “If
we have entered upon a new age,” George Stephens writes in “The Pur-
pose and Tendency of Early Italian Art,” “a new cycle of man, of which
there are many signs, let us have it unstained by this vice of sensuality of
mind.” To argue the shared Pre-Raphaelite ideal of spiritual and aesthetic
health (an ideal they shared with Kingsley, who despised them), Stephens
relies on another of Dickens’s favorite words. He speaks of the necessity
of a “pure heart”; and his context makes clear that “pure heart” might
just as well carry Dickens’s tag of “disciplined heart.” No less than Dickens
in Copperfield the Pre-Raphaelites associate emotional readiness with
mature expression—and they share a high regard for the “new cycle of
man” in this “new age.”

Here again is William Rossetti in his review of Clough:

We believe it may safely be assumed that at no previous period has the public
been more buzzed around by triviality and common-place; but we hold firm, at
the same time, that at none other has there been a greater or grander body of
genius, or so honorable a display of well-cultivated taste and talent.22

And Stephens, in “Modern Giants,” says: “Yes! there are giants on the
earth in these days; but it is their great bulk, and the nearness of our view
which prevents us from perceiving their grandeur. . . . we lose the brightness of things of our own time in consequence of their proximity."

The argument here seems to echo that of Ruskin on Turner, for Ruskin also wanted his countrymen to learn how to see and to appreciate modern greatness. Stephens is defending Browning rather than Turner, but he addresses similarly the critical blindness of his contemporaries. He is not saying that poetry is dead or genius flown, nor is he bemoaning the death of Pan. Like Dickens he insists on something like “this summer-dawn of time”; he simply sees the sun rising from a different angle.

I have dwelled on Pre-Raphaelite parallels with Dickens because of the Dickens attack and because of the historical overlaps of Household Words and The Germ. Dickens’s splenetic response and his later change of heart also serve to introduce the underlying qualities of the Pre-Raphaelites and the nature of their aesthetics as expressed in The Germ.

The movement to which they gave their name was one of the most important and interesting in the whole history of 19th century art, but it was not, as often claimed for it, a revolution.—John Steegman, Victorian Taste

Perhaps to a man like Dickens the irritating quality in the Pre-Raphaelites was their apparent single-mindedness, their devotion to a self-asserted “high art,” which came with all the effrontery of youth. Coventry Patmore’s comment on Thomas Woolner’s poems, that they seemed “a trifle too much in earnest,” fits the public proclamations of the Brotherhood generally. When George Stephens quotes Lessing to the effect that “the destinies of a nation depend on its young men between nineteen and twenty-five years of age,” he leaves no doubt that he has in mind a particular group of young men. At the same time he boasts about the difficulty of their chosen “path” by raising an analogy with religious martyrdom. “No Cross, No Crown” qualifies the nature of the path while implying the fundamental struggle faced by “artists” of all times. However sincere the invitation to share its ideals, the Brotherhood made clear that it was exclusive by necessity and that the necessity resulted from its awareness of the historical separation of creative youth from a smothering and conventional society.

When John Steegman speaks of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood as “one of the most important and interesting” movements of the century, but
"not, as often claimed for it, a revolution," he touches on the urgency behind the PRB and the implications of its protest. If, however, "the Pre-Raphaelite movement . . . was in deliberate revolt . . . ," it was in its intent a revolutionary movement, although it clearly engendered no revolution. *The Germ* is an apt emblem of the Brotherhood's lack of popular success. Yet Steegman's main reason for thinking of the movement as important rather than revolutionary lies not so much in its limited impact as in its second-hand thinking. Its ideals, far from being new, were rooted in nineteenth-century taste. Here we have a more interesting question.

In painting techniques the Pre-Raphaelites had been anticipated by the German Nazarenes, among them Cornelius, who prided themselves on accuracy of detail, on adhering to Pre-Raphael techniques, and on living morally upright lives. They had been anticipated in England by Fuseli and Stothard (specifically in Stothard's painting of the Canterbury pilgrims), by Turner (as interpreted by Ruskin), and by other painters, including William Dyce, who was in turn to be influenced by the Pre-Raphaelites (in a painting like *Pegwell Bay*), and by Ford Madox Brown. Dyce and Brown had known the work of the Nazarenes and learned something from their techniques. Brown himself wrote an article "On the Mechanism of a Historical Picture" for *The Germ* and he associated with the Brotherhood, though he was not technically a member.

Apart from painting techniques, the Pre-Raphaelites shared a great deal with their mid-century contemporaries—painters, poets, even the general public. Young men of "nineteen to twenty-five" often enough absorb what others have said and done before, making the hackneyed peculiarly their own. A sense of the times as hypocritical, uninspired, and morally bankrupt was, as Carlyle, Kingsley, Mayhew, and Ruskin show, a commonplace. *Fraser's* in 1850 carried a series of articles called "The Age of Veneering" (a name Dickens later picks up in *Our Mutual Friend*). Such criticism might, as with the Pre-Raphaelites themselves, complement a hope for progress, but it was widespread. So, too, the insistence on the importance of nature, which was so common and so broadly applied as to be a cliché. Yet the Pre-Raphaelites pledged themselves to honor nature as though they had themselves invented the word.

We can address the question of the Pre-Raphaelites' representative qualities by glancing at their appeal to nature and at their "medievalism," ideals which they contrived to pull together. In an obvious sense, the Brotherhood's reverence for the early Italian masters was wholly arbitrary—no more than the result of perusing a group of prints and deciding that they would serve nicely as models. Ruskin called the prints "execrable," and whatever their quality, they can hardly have provided the
Brotherhood with much information. To read The Germ or the Pre-Raphaelite Journal is to see, moreover, how limited the medieval interest was among the group. William Rossetti tells in the Journal how the group joked about having a door-knocker inscribed with PRB, which would signify “Please Ring the Bell” to the uninitiated. He has, otherwise, little to say about medieval art. He tells a great deal about conversations with Coventry Patmore, reports about Patmore’s views on Tennyson and Browning, and Tennyson’s on Clough, and he refers often enough to his brother’s interest in Dante. His concern with literary figures—particularly those in his own time—might reflect his personal involvements rather than report the conversations of the entire group. Yet the famous “List of Immortals,” drawn up by D. G. Rossetti and Holman Hunt (in 1848) presents a surprisingly broad—not to say strange—assortment of people. According to Hunt’s account, the list included (with asterisks for emphasis):

- Jesus Christ****
- The Author of Job***
- Isaiah
- Homer**
- Pheidias
- Early Gothic Architects
- Cavalier Pugliesi
- Dante**
- Boccaccio*
- Rienzi
- Ghiberti
- Chaucer**
- Fra Angelico*
- Leonardo da Vinci**
- Spenser
- Hogarth
- Flaxman
- Hilton
- Goethe**
- Kosciusko
- Byron
- Wordsworth
- Keats**
- Shelley**
- Haydon
- Cervantes
- Joan of Arc
- Mrs. Browning*
- Patmore*
- Raphael*
- Michael Angelo
- Early English Balladists
- Giovanni Bellini
- Giorgioni
- Titian
- Tintoretto
- Poussin
- Alfred**
- Shakespeare***
- Milton
- Cromwell
- Hampden
- Bacon
- Newton
- Landor**
- Thackeray**
- Poe
- Hood
- Longfellow*
- Emerson
- Washington**
- Leigh Hunt
- Author of Stories after Nature*
- Wilkie
- Columbus
- Browning**
- Tennyson*28
One reason why the early masters fared poorly in this seriocomic list is perhaps simple. In spite of the public interest in Gothic architecture, the ignorance about medieval painting was widespread. Ruskin, in his 1851 pamphlet *Pre-Raphaelitism*—an odd and tangential apology for Hunt and Millais—summed up the situation perfectly. “Few English people,” he wrote, have “ever seen a picture of early Italian Masters.” Not many such paintings existed in public repositories (since the National Gallery’s holdings remained slight: Charles Eastlake was to remedy this in time) and not many galleries were open to the public. If English people had seen pictures by the Italian painters, says Ruskin,

they would have known that the Pre-Raphaelite pictures are just as superior to the early Italian in skill of manipulation, power of drawing, and knowledge of effect, as inferior in grace of design; and that in a word, there is not a shadow of resemblance between the two styles. The Pre-Raphaelites imitate no pictures: they paint from nature only. 29

Whether or not we accept Ruskin’s judgments, his point about the ignorance of English connoisseurs and his implication about the Pre-Raphaelites’ own ignorance are well taken. Ruskin might have mentioned that the Pre-Raphaelites’ medieval indebtedness seems to have been limited to the Rossettis, whose interest centered on Dante. D. G. Rossetti’s “Dante in Exile” and his translation of the *Vita Nuova* belong to these years, and Rossetti’s preoccupation with Dante (seen in his treatment of Lizzie Siddal, in the setting and tone of “The Blessed Damozel,” and elsewhere) may have determined the choice of medieval models in painting. One might even expect in *The Germ* a literary manifesto equivalent to the “medievalism” in painting. But there is no such thing. Two of *The Germ*’s four etchings and one of its major articles (though by Patmore, rather than by a Pre-Raphaelite as such) were drawn from or about Shakespeare. The literary tastes expressed in the *Journal* as in *The Germ* (as the “List of Immortals” suggests) were inclusive rather than exclusive—and no more medieval than Ruskin allows Hunt’s and Millais’s paintings to be.

The hostility to the Pre-Raphaelites among men like Dickens probably reflected a wide dislike, if not a profound distrust, of things medieval. Within a month, however, of Dickens’s attack in *Household Words*, James Collinson resigned from the PRB because it was not, presumably, medieval enough. To Dante Rossetti, Collinson wrote:

Whit Monday.—Dear Gabriel, I feel that as a sincere Catholic, I can no longer allow myself to be called a P. R. B. in the brotherhood sense of the term, or to
be connected in any way with the magazine. Perhaps this determination to withdraw myself from the Brotherhood is altogether a matter of feeling. I am uneasy about it. I love and reverence God's faith, and I love His holy Saints; and I cannot bear any longer the self-accusation that, to gratify a little vanity, I am helping to dishonor them, and lower their merits, if not absolutely to bring their sanctity into ridicule. —I cannot blame anyone but myself. Whatever may be my thoughts with regard to their works, I am sure that all the PR Bs have both written and painted conscientiously;—it was for me to have judged beforehand whether I could conscientiously, as a Catholic, assist in spreading the artistic opinions of those who are not. I reverence—indeed almost idolize—what I have seen of the works of the Pre-Raffaelle painters; [and this] chiefly because [they fill] my heart and mind with that divine faith which could alone animate them to give up their intellect and time and labor so as they did, and all for his glory.  

Collingson gently tells his PRB colleagues that their medievalism is a kind of game, that it lacks “reverence,” and that it is invoked lightly. Collinson does not say that the medievalism of Pre-Raphael painters reflects a fashion, though he might have added that too.

The contemporary craze for restitution of old buildings—deplored by Ruskin as barbaric—and the desire for new medieval edifices have been discussed by Sir Kenneth Clark and other historians. In one phase the mid-nineteenth-century medievalism lent itself to Barry's Houses of Parliament. In another it informed works like Carlyle's *Past and Present* (1843) as a way of commenting on and criticizing modern life. Carlyle points to the lack of spiritual force in his contemporaries, to their false idols, and to their inhibiting and dehumanizing institutions, complete with “red-tape” (the nonce word he uses again in *Latter-Day Pamphlets*). Even Marx and Engels refer to medieval economic and social relations to clarify the alienation of workers in their own century, and Ruskin introduces a similar argument in *Pre-Raphaelitism* as well as in later works. The nostalgia for medieval culture led to a plethora of scholarly and polemical works. In 1850, for example, Anna Jameson published her *Legends of Monastic Orders* and A. W. Pugin published yet another of his apologies for neo-Gothic. Ruskin's defense of medieval art was and remains the best known.

Again, Ruskin himself categorically thinks of the Pre-Raphaelites as doing something different from the early masters. He ascribes the entire movement indeed to his own instructions given in the first volume of *Modern Painters* (1843).

Eight years ago, in the close of the first volume of *Modern Painters*, I ventured to give the following advice to the young artists of England:—

"They should go to nature in all singleness of heart, and walk with her labori-
ously and trustingly, having no other thought but how best to penetrate her meaning; rejecting nothing, selecting nothing, and scorning nothing." Advice which, whether bad or good, involved infinite labour and humiliation in the following it. . . . It has, however, at last been carried out, to the very letter.31

Ruskin may be right. Certainly Patmore appreciated Ruskin, and the Pre-Raphaelites often discussed art with Patmore. Moreover, Ruskin himself came to befriend the Pre-Raphaelites and tried to influence them directly. But whereas Patmore wrote a laudatory review of Seven Lamps for the North British Review (February 1850), praising him, as Lewes and others praised him, for offering genuine standards in art criticism, Ruskin's name is conspicuously absent in The Germ and even in the private Journal. If the Pre-Raphaelites followed Ruskin, it was without fanfare. Interestingly, they also have little to say about Turner, whom Ruskin primarily discusses in Pre-Raphaelitism as well as in Modern Painters, and while for Ruskin "Pre-Raphaelitism and . . . Turnerism are one," the Pre-Raphaelites themselves seem unaware of the relationship.

Ruskin's admonition in Modern Painters nevertheless does coincide with the Pre-Raphaelites' aims. When Stephens, in "The Purpose and Tendency of Early Italian Art," thinks about medieval painting, he emphasizes vivid color, precise detail, and symbolic meaning. He acknowledges in the old masters a preeminence in "energy and dignity." The lesson to be learned from them is not idle copying, but the need for "originality of conception"; not "a dreary course of preparatory study," but a "bold" imaginative striving. Where then lies the medievalism, so important that it gave its name to the movement? For Stephens, it lies in the unconventionality and the lack of "coarseness" in medieval artists. They were humble, simple, earnest, and could thus be full of "passion and feeling." Modern artists need to find an equivalent for the discipline and the retirement of a monastery if they hope to find again "a more humble manner than has been practiced since the decline of Italian Art in the Middle Ages." According to Stephens, modern artists must provide "pure transcripts and faithful studies from nature, instead of feeble reminiscences from the Old Masters." The lesson from nature is a broad injunction to emphasize "the soul" more than "the hand" and to seek what amounts to "communion with nature."32

For the Pre-Raphaelites the communion can take a variety of forms. But Collinson notwithstanding, they are religious, in the sense of humble and reverent, in their approaches to the physical world. Hence they work as Ruskin urged artists to work—with accurate memories and as devoted scribes. One of the differences between them and the later Impressionists
is that, while both groups effect a kind of "sun-painting," a brilliant recording of light and color, the Pre-Raphaelites want to catch the unchanging and permanent in their works rather than the transitory and therefore personal. Holman Hunt's famous *Scapegoat*, painted at the Dead Sea, while Hunt carried a gun under one arm to protect himself from hostile Arabs, is a case in point. Hunt was intent on absolute fidelity; he was ruthless with himself—and had, in fact, made a pilgrimage to do the painting—and ruthless with the goat, which died from exposure. And though art may be both accurate and symbolic, as several writers for *The Germ* assert, we can still appreciate the difficulty contemporary viewers had in understanding Hunt's pathetic animal obviously near to collapse, in a setting as carefully depicted as though it were a single furnished room. Part of the literalism in Hunt's painting results from the attempt to render the animal as if it had emerged from its biblical story. And what Hunt does to the poor goat, Millais almost does to Lizzie Siddal, who lies for hours in a cooling tub of water in imitation of the drowning Ophelia. Despite the claim to revere nature, Hunt's and Millais's and Rossetti's paintings are obviously literary in conception, no less anecdotal than so much of the academy work that the Brotherhood rejected.

The problem for the PRB was to define the new, which they saw as adherence to nature, as separate from the art of the recent past and at the same time to give it authority, to place it in a tradition. T. S. Eliot's arbitrary rejection of poetry since the Metaphysicals is a twentieth-century parallel, and Eliot, like the Pre-Raphaelites, had no trouble at all praising intervening artists.

An emphasis on tradition may take the direction of what Stephens calls "feeble reminiscences" from the Old Masters, or it may involve independence and "originality," using the Old Masters as spiritual more than purely technical guides. In discussing Dickens's attack on Millais, I mentioned the Pre-Raphaelite notion of a summer-dawn of time. To read *The Germ* is to see that they think of their own times whenever they invoke Raphael's predecessors, and also that they think of their times with a great deal of optimism. John Orchard, who was not technically a PRB member, but whose "Dialogue on Art" William Rossetti considered "really wonderful," had told Dante Rossetti that it was silly to adopt "the mode of thought and the practice of any preceding age."33 Rossetti mentions no argument from his brother and offers none himself. The "Dialogue" takes place on the first day of spring, and the opening speaker, Kosmon, says:

Great impulses are moving through man; swift as the steam-shot shuttle, weaving some mighty pattern, goes the new birth of mind. As yet hidden from eyes is the
design: whether it be poetry, or painting, or music, or architecture, or whether it be a divine harmony of all, no manner of mind can tell.\(^{34}\)

When Dickens introduced his “Preliminary Word” to *Household Words*, he carefully stressed the entertainment offered by his magazine. It came to its readers, he said, in “no utilitarian spirit.” Now, Orchard’s dialogue is not summed up in Kosmon’s steam-shot shuttle speech, and Orchard’s emphasis may not reflect utilitarian theories of progress, but the metaphors are exactly what people associated with the Utilitarians. And Orchard’s view was not a single instance. In “Modern Giants” Stephens says:

> There is something else we miss; 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.\(^{35}\)

Whether or not the other Pre-Raphaelites would have concurred with Stephens on the “poetry of things around us” (certainly they never painted railways and factories), Stephens expresses a common point of view of the time. His paean to the mechanical beauties of his age could have come from almost any poetry review from the early days of the *Westminster*, and it reads like an advertisement for the arts of the Great Exhibition for which Prince Albert, Sir Robert Peel, and Henry Cole were already preparing.

Within its Gothic court and its elaborate, ornately curved art-work, the Crystal Palace paid a common debt to the Middle Ages, exhibiting “gutta-percha” sideboards, foliated dinner ware, along with chairs, tapestries, and sundry other “useful” products that fairly writhed with decorative activity. Ruskin recognized in the Exhibition a universal love of pointless detail combined with a delight in efficient methods of production. He found no beauty in the “work of nations.” Yet for Ruskin’s readers the ornateness might seem to have met his own criteria for functional decoration; and Ruskin’s admiration for the detail of medieval windows and sculpture was to invite an eclecticism perhaps not too far from the aesthetic-industrial muddle housed by Paxton’s glass palace.

The Pre-Raphaelites also came close to advocating a doctrine of work. Stephens speaks of artists having to avoid authority and conventionality, and making sure that they have not “fritted away” “earnest thought . . . by a long, dreary course of preparatory study.” At the same time he draws an analogy between artists and monks, advocating the discipline
and retirement, the “patient devotedness” necessary to creation. But the sense of the artist’s labor, though a matter of ambivalence for the Pre-Raphaelites as it was for Ruskin, involves a broader commitment to the stature of work which the Pre-Raphaelites shared with Lancashire factory owners and Thomas Carlyle. In his “Dialogue on Art,” John Orchard presents differing points of view, without reconciling or allowing one to predominate (this was reserved for the second article, which Orchard did not live to write). He allows Kosmon to say: “Are not [the “mechanical arts”]—especially steam-power, chemistry, and the electric telegraph—more—eminently more—useful to man, more radically civilizers, than music, poetry, painting, sculpture, or architecture?” Kosmon sees a relationship between the artist and his society and expresses the widespread notion that “the career of one artist contains in itself the whole of art-history; its every phase is presented by him in the course of his life.” If Orchard himself sympathizes more with “Sophon” than with “Kosmon,” he seems to share the assumption that the development of the arts parallels the development of society, and he admits—like Stephens in Modern Giants—the imaginative power inherent in steam, chemistry, electricity. His testimony qualifies the Pre-Raphaelite emphasis on what would seem to be escapes into the world of the past or the world of dreams. We might associate other Victorian painters—Turner, for example, in Rain, Steam, and Smoke, or Frith, in the painting of Paddington station—with the idealization of industry, but it was Ford Madox Brown who painted the famous Work, in which, ironically, the apostle of work, Carlyle, is represented as an idle onlooker.

For all their early isolation and hostile reception, the Pre-Raphaelites shared much with their contemporaries both in and out of the art world. Where, then, do we find their radicalism? The radical or revolutionary quality of the PRB lies in the group’s intensity, in the transformation of common ideals into one ideal, which allows vague principles and expansive lists of immortals. The Pre-Raphaelites saw themselves as a new force, able to reopen the book of nature as it had not been opened for centuries, and able, too, to reject the social-political conformity of the Academy. To say that even Dickens came to be bored by the Royal Academy, or that scarcely anyone at the time with or without artistic pretensions failed to invoke nature, may remind us that Marx and other revolutionaries similarly reflect the preoccupations of their contemporaries and differ from them in passion or commitment. From our perspective a comparison of Marx and the Pre-Raphaelites is hyperbolic. For mid-century Englishmen, the group of young poets and painters might have seemed the more revolutionary.
Thomas Dixon, who was to win passive recognition as Ruskin’s “Working Man” in *Time and Tide*, serves to introduce this final note about *The Germ*. For in spite of the Pre-Raphaelite commitment to work, their appreciation of the promise in their times, their sense that great spirits were upon the earth, the effect of their paintings and poetry is perhaps the “vague and dreamy sensation” that Dixon describes. Dixon’s “life that I long for, and which never seems realizable in this life,” calls attention to the imaginary and sometimes visionary quality in the work of the Pre-Raphaelites, a quality divorced from mills and smoke, from the industrial, urban conditions of mid-nineteenth-century England. Christina Rossetti’s “Dream Land” and Dante Rossetti’s “Blessed Damozel” may come immediately to mind. When Dixon speaks of the “realistic” aspect of *The Germ*, he evidently means its specificity, and he seems surprised that “realistic” need not imply (as it had largely come to imply) a broad injunction to survey the modern world. Dixon ignores Stephens’s and Orchard’s protests about the poetry in machines or the energy of industrialization—for good reason. He senses behind the pronouncements of *The Germ* the Pre-Raphaelite disgust with ugliness and the association, made explicit by Ruskin, of ugliness with industrial growth. As René Wellek says: “Ruskin was one of the first to see industrialization in terms, not only of human suffering, but also of the blight it inflicts on art and free creativity.” All their protests about the poetry of mechanical things notwithstanding, the Pre-Raphaelites shared Ruskin’s horror and acted on his assumptions.

The Pre-Raphaelite decision to omit politics from their magazine may have been a gesture toward commercial success or a tacit rejection of the political bias of other periodicals; but it was also a true reflection of the group’s interests. The PRB was a revolutionary group with aesthetic rather than political principles. We can appreciate the energy behind *The Germ* by glancing at another short-lived periodical of 1850, which was, in intent, directed at men like Thomas Dixon, and which proclaimed itself as *The Red Republican*.

George Julian Harney was to *The Red Republican* what Dickens was to
Before launching *The Red Republican* he had edited the Chartist *Northern Star* and later the *Democratic Review*, which had published commentaries by a variety of European intellectuals from Marx to Mazzini. Harney had been associated with the “Fraternal Democrats,” a group of English radicals who joined French, Polish, Italian, and German exiles. As John Saville points out, Harney’s relationships typify the international quality of early British radicalism, and Harney sought to bring to his readers the intellectual, revolutionary ferment of the continent. He befriended Engels, who wrote for the *Democratic Review*, and Marx, whom he met on Marx’s first visit to England in 1847. In their usual way, Marx and Engels were soon to spurn Harney for tolerating rival theories, but *The Red Republican* did publish, in Helen Macfarlane’s translation, the first English version of the *Communist Manifesto*.

Harney’s paper turned out to be little more commercially successful than *The Germ*, possibly because it shared certain attitudes with *The Germ*. Though committed to helping the working classes, it was almost as divorced from “the day to day struggles of the working people” as the magazine of the Pre-Raphaelites. Like *The Germ* it was largely theoretical, affirming certain “principles” in the face of the establishment, although its establishment was the “organizing hypocrisy” of the propertied classes rather than the aesthetic domination of the Royal Academy. Harney’s commitment to political societies (like the Fraternal Democrats), his hope in an emancipating elite, his impatience with English provincialism and smugness, his flaunting of a name he knew would be, at the least, unpopular and misunderstood—all these might suggest the impetus behind *The Germ*. This is not to say that the small group of Pre-Raphaelites equaled a large working-class movement; rather that Harney himself scarcely reflected the movement, which, in its Chartist phase, was in disarray. Harney, like the Christian Socialist Kingsley, was, indeed, soon to give up active politics, and his rhetoric may reveal his isolation and ineffectuality. His proclamation in the first number of *The Red Republican* (June 22) is called “Our Name and Our Principles.” The name, he says, is admittedly “imprudent,” but the principles are time-honored. He reaches back to an address by Robespierre from the early days of the French Revolution, calling for a new order based on a new understanding, while quoting Robespierre’s admonition to “fulfill the vows of Nature.” Nature for *The Red Republican* as for *The Germ* is a call to arms as well as a self-evident principle of good. “The Golden Age, placed by blind tradition in the Past, is before us.”

It may of course be historical coincidence that *The Germ* and *The Red
Republican would share vocabulary or would assess their age in analogous ways or look with the same sort of optimism to the future. But if they expressed, in Sir Nikolaus Pevsner’s words, “that unquestioning optimism, that yet unarrested drive, that naivety in overlooking bleak problems,” in common with Crystal Palace England, they also spoke to the unattainable “life that I long for, and which never seems realizable” of Thomas Dixon. Although worlds apart in their ideals, the one exclusively aesthetic in content, the other stridently political, both The Germ and The Red Republican represent the views of self-appointed outsiders who saw themselves as, at once, underprivileged, prophetic, and indisputably right.