Conclusion

After an extensive and thorough discussion of Lessing’s Laocoön, a work which he deemed indispensable to an understanding of the distinctions between temporal and spatial arts, Walter Pater declares in his Renaissance that each art has “an untranslatable charm.” Carrying the debate over the distinctions of the arts even further than Lessing, Pater states that at times an art may “pass into the condition of some other art, by what German critics term an Andersstreben—a partial alienation from its own limitations, through which the arts are able, not to supply the place of each other, but reciprocally to lend each other forces.” Pater’s definition of Andersstreben may also be applicable to the convergence of the spatial and temporal arts in the Victorian novel—the narrative redrawings of Pre-Raphaelite paintings. Through their intersection, the novels and Pre-Raphaelite paintings extended their own boundaries, added dimensions to each other, and created possibilities that each art lacked. Thus within the temporal dimension of the novel, by means of their narrative redrawings, the subjects of Pre-Raphaelite art acquired a voice and quite often a subjectivity that the spatial essence of painting had denied them.

The verbal portraits or scenes of the novels, on the other hand, were endowed with color and depth. Defying the novel’s fictional or temporal constraints, fictional characters seemed to have once inhabited the real world of the galleries, where readers visiting exhibits had first become acquainted with them. Yet the expansion of verbal and visual boundaries, achieved through the coalescence of the two arts, was not merely confined to the aesthetic realm but extended to the social sphere as well. Through their pictorial reconfigurations, narratives obtained a realistic foundation and thus more readily engaged their readers in their construction, in the process involving them in actual, not fictional, sociopolitical concerns. Narrative redrawings of Pre-Raphaelite representations of gender, perhaps more so than their visual counterparts, raised questions over circumscribed conventional gender roles (no longer relevant to contemporary
needs), offered alternatives and possibilities (at the time unavailable in the readers’ actual lives), and created the desire for change.

Victorian novelists and Pre-Raphaelite artists, as we have seen, were concerned with the constraining sociopolitical limitations imposed on gender roles and often attempted to extend conventional gender boundaries. Contemporary denunciation of unconventional, Pre-Raphaelite representations of gender revealed intense anxieties over transgressions of traditional gender boundaries, slowly eroding by social protests and legislative measures. Whereas most Victorian novelists approved of the Pre-Raphaelite extension of these boundaries, they also saw and criticized the limitations of their representations.

At times male and women novelists perceived and interpreted these limitations in completely different ways. Women novelists, as their letters and notebook entries reveal, had directly and painfully experienced the crushing effect of conventional gender boundaries. The narrative reconfiguration of Millais’s *Mariana* may serve as a case in point. In Collins’s *Woman in White* Mariana is redrawn as Marian when Walter first sees her standing by the window gazing outside; from a distance, after erotically appraising her figure, he eagerly anticipates seeing her beautiful face. Like contemporary reviewers responding to Millais’s painting, Walter is initially repulsed by her unattractive appearance. In his representation of Marian as Mariana, Collins transforms the Pre-Raphaelite pictorial technique of light and shade into his successful narrative strategy. Though he develops Marian into a more complex individual than the subject of his Pre-Raphaelite friend, Collins in this case does not fundamentally change Millais’s *Mariana*. Marian’s valiant resistance to conventional femininity throughout the novel ends in a regrettable acquiescence to a conventionally subsidiary role, “the angel” in Laura’s and Walter’s house. Our last encounter with Marian is beset with regrets over her confinement within the domestic sphere, which deprives her of the affirmation of subjectivity and the opportunity to become an agent of social change.

For Elizabeth Gaskell, however, Millais’s *Mariana* becomes the locus of contemporary questions about women’s oppression and the role of literary history in contributing to their victimization by entrenching gender stereotypes, thus stifling their individuality and depriving them of possibilities for meaningful social roles and actions. Her choice of Pre-Raphaelite paintings is a deliberate attempt to give voice to figures whose painted silence has promoted stereotypically passive femininity. Unlike Collins, Gaskell does not contain the redrawing of Millais’s *Mariana* within a single narrative scene, but brushstroke by brushstroke, as it were, she reconfigures this painting on numerous occasions in the novel, each time for a different purpose. At the very beginning, for instance, Ruth is
Mariana’s reflection when we first see her illuminated by the light filtered through the stained-glass window. Shortly after this scene, Ruth, like Mariana, stretches wearily, exhausted by the cruel working conditions imposed on her and her fellow workers. In this case, however, Ruth is not Millais’s middle-class Mariana luxuriating in a solipsistic cocoon; rather, she becomes representative of thousands of women, seamstresses struggling for a meager living in unbearable conditions, exploited by their employers.2

Later, in her transposition of Millais’s Mariana, Gaskell also alludes to Tennyson’s “Mariana,” a poem that casts her in the stereotypical role of the abandoned lover who sees death as the only alternative. Unlike either Millais’s or Tennyson’s Mariana, who would have welcomed the return of their love, Ruth rejects Bellingham’s offer of marriage when she meets him years later, overcomes the boundaries of the domestic sphere, even the more pernicious constraints of ostracism, and becomes an agent of social change, “the light of the world.” Gaskell does not reconfigure either Mariana or Ophelia merely to establish a rapport with her readers but does so in an attempt to bring to the foreground conditions that both the paintings and the poem conceal. In the process, she underscores obstacles and limitations that, if they were understood as detrimental to social progress, she suggests, they could and should be rectified, for they would benefit not only the victimized but the privileged as well. The typhoid fever that spreads through Eccleston, for instance, eliminates class distinctions and barriers; Ruth, hitherto an outcast, becomes Bellingham’s rescuer and is reinstated in the community. Certainly one could argue that Ruth’s death at the end of the novel eradicates the possibilities Gaskell has explored; simultaneously, however, we cannot deny that the emotional turmoil at the end implicates the sacrosanct or the complacent readers who, unlike Benson, refuse to make a difference in the lives of the underprivileged and the victimized. Undoubtedly the intense pain the reader experiences at the end of the novel is an unforgettable call for action.

In her reconfigurations of Rossetti’s and Burne-Jones’s mythological and legendary figures, Eliot, like Gaskell, traces the limitations that art and literature place upon women. Her choice of Rossetti’s paintings of women like Proserpine, Pia dé Tolomei, and Astarte Syriaca, at once attractive and lurid, feminine and masculine, as representations of Gwendolen, captures her culture’s incongruous perspectives on women, which deny them any possible empowerment. Thus Gwendolen, deprived of education, in a culture that worships beauty, relies on her striking appearance to rescue her family from poverty by marrying Grandcourt, a man she finds repulsive. By juxtaposing Deronda’s development with that...
of Gwendolen’s, Eliot highlights the lack of opportunities available to women of her time and the limitations that propelled them to acts of desperation that often turned victims into victimizers. Surprisingly, Gwendolen, unlike Ruth, or Maggie in *The Mill on the Floss*, survives in spite of the transgressions she has incurred. Indeed Eliot’s response to the hostile critics of the Jewish element in *Daniel Deronda* could very well also serve as her justification for Gwendolen’s triumphant survival: “But I was happily independent in material things and felt no temptation to accommodate my writing to any standard except that of trying to do my best” (*Letters* 6: 301–302).

Though somewhat subdued and dispirited, Gwendolen is still a powerful figure by the end of the novel; the irresolution with which the novel ends, regarding Gwendolen’s life, leaves room for speculation. Sue, however, is completely broken when we meet her for the last time. After an intrepid struggle against conventional boundaries of femininity, she collapses into the conventional and the stereotypical—the hysterical, nonsensical woman. Knowledge in the hands of Burne-Jones’s Nimue becomes a weapon for Merlin’s demise. Similarly, Sue’s self-education and by extension education for women, intensely advocated and debated at the time, Hardy intimates, leads to the transgression of gender boundaries, and woman’s femininity turns into terrifying androgyny, a psychological aberration, the cause of men’s and women’s physical and psychological disintegration.

Women and male writers then reconfigured Pre-Raphaelite paintings for various and complex reasons as this study has demonstrated. However, whereas male writers like Collins and Hardy, through their narrative reconfigurations of Pre-Raphaelite paintings, quite often emphasized limitations for women, Eliot and Gaskell frequently explored possibilities. Representations of (stereotypical) literary women by Pre-Raphaelite women artists also depict possibilities rather than limitations for women. I have already intimated the difference between Millais’s illustration of *Mariana* and that of Marie Spartali Stillman, whose wistful gaze, by her open window, signals the possibility for self-renewal and liberation, denied to either Millais’s or Rossetti’s *Mariana*, both claustrophobically enclosed within the domestic sphere. Likewise, Julia Margaret Cameron’s *Mariana* is self-possessed and rather irritated by the lengthy wait, somewhat determined to disengage herself from the long ordeal. Unlike Millais’s *Ophelia*, who is helplessly drowning, Cameron’s looks neither insane nor desperate but rather self-assured. Like women writers of the time, women Pre-Raphaelite artists undermined literary stereotypes and through their works expressed possibilities for women rather than the restrictions their male counterparts often preferred to depict—a subject worth further exploration.
In *The Pre-Raphaelite Body* J. B. Bullen demonstrates the tremendous impact of the Pre-Raphaelites in British art between 1850 and 1880, emphasizing their liberal perspectives on gender issues: “Though from this distance they appear to be quintessentially nineteenth-century in their ideas and attitudes, at the time each phase, in its different way, seemed strangely defiant, and to be perversely working against the grain of contemporary forward-looking, progressive ideology. This sense of shock was enhanced by the fact that their impact extended beyond the canvas and onto the page. The changes they represented had analogues in literature and criticism” (216).

Taking the Pre-Raphaelites’ often unconventional representations of gender as their point of departure, Victorian novelists further pursued alternative constructions of gender. Thus Pre-Raphaelite art became an integral part of the Victorian novel, but its presence did not cease at the end of the Victorian era. Modern novelists such as D. H. Lawrence and postmodern ones such as John Fowles and, most recently, Tracy Chevalier in *Falling Angels* have relied on Pre-Raphaelite representations of women to enrich and vivify their literary portraits, leaving indelible memories in the recesses of their readers’ imagination. Like Victorian readers, we may still go beyond the temporal boundaries of the Victorian novel and see in galleries today pictorial versions of characters or scenes. Certainly the Victorian novel enjoys a vibrant, dazzling afterlife.

The ever-shifting perspectives Pre-Raphaelite paintings offer within various contexts partly explain their enduring appeal. Such striking renewals take place not only within the walls of galleries but also on the pages of novels as Pre-Raphaelite paintings slowly emerge through the novelists’ narrative redrawings. In the process, the Victorian novel, the reading of which is today often seen as a formidable task for postmodern students, acquires the lush colors, the enchanting hues and the mysterious, fascinating expressions of Pre-Raphaelite subjects. Recent film adaptations of Victorian novels continue to establish our connection to the Victorian era, highlighting our preoccupation with similar concerns—identity formation, gender issues, and postcolonialist aggression, to name but a few. We often tend to overlook the fact that the Victorian era, like our own, was a highly visual culture. This book suggests ways of channeling the twenty-first-century desire for the visual into explorations of Pre-Raphaelite paintings in the Victorian novel.