

THE ENGLISH PRE-RAPHAELITES.

SECOND (AND LAST) ARTICLE.

By Edouard Rod.

The groups of writers and artists known as schools are, as a rule, most artificial in character, and serve only the purpose of hampering their followers with irksome restrictions: the Pre-Raphaelite school, owing to its high degree of culture and the analytical minds of its chief members, has in great measure avoided this harmful tendency; although it represents a harmony of common ideas and impulses, it has never arrested the free development of marked individuality, such as that possessed by Rossetti, Holman Hunt; and Burne-Jones. Its influence has been rather beneficial upon some of more limited talent and narrower endowment; on the other hand, it has, perhaps, developed eccentricity in some fair artists who would otherwise have followed conventional methods; and it is always a misfortune when those undistinguished by superior talent depart from beaten paths. It must be alleged in compensation that this school taught poetry to Millais, who, without the Brotherhood, would have remained simply a painter; also to the portrait-painter Richmond, who is as insignificant in his original

compositions as he is intuitive in his portraits. A closer study of the principles and tendency of this school will disclose the nature of its success.

Primarily, it must be remembered that the Pre-Raphaelite movement was not an isolated event: springing into life after the transition period which followed the death of Shelley, Byron, Keats, and Coleridge, it took root in the then prevailing prejudices and sentiments of England, and was closely related to the Oxford religious revival and the Gothic renaissance.

The essentially religious and mystical cast of the works of this school is its most striking characteristic, – the one which detaches itself most clearly from the works of Holman Hunt and Rossetti, whose points of difference arise as much from the complex nature of their inspiration as from the disposition and temperament of each artist.

Holman Hunt, an English Protestant, shows himself in his works that which he probably is in his faith, that which the majority of men of his race, education, and age are in their convictions, a strong and simple believer, who finds the spirit of Christianity, as he comprehends it, and he comprehends it morally as well as metaphysically, in all the affairs of life. How religion, so

conceived, can manifest itself in art and become the chief inspirational source of a painter is a puzzling problem to critics accustomed to Flemish, Italian, and French art; before seeing a single canvas by Holman Hunt, they are seized with distrust upon being confronted with such titles as. "The Awakening World," "The Shadow of Death," and "The Expiatory Ram;" after having seen them, they are still doubtful, and ask how far the artist has succeeded in his aim. According to the explanatory catalogue, "The Awakening of Conscience" represents a young woman led into evil by a shallow and frivolous man, and installed by him in a little English cottage; her conscience is awakened by the refrain of an old song, "Oft in the Stilly Night," played by her lover upon the piano, and which recalls to her the time before her fall. If you look at the picture without reference to the catalogue, and endeavor to seize the moral, you will notice that painful thought is indicated by the tension of the features; the young woman is depicted as leaning back in a hopeless attitude against the easy-chair in which she is seated; you will also infer from the indifferent and smiling air of the man, whose fingers are wandering over the keys, that her disturbed feeling is not produced by the simple music; you will still further see that the man is thoroughly commonplace, while the

woman is of finer fibre, but nothing more. The artist is of the opinion that no possible doubt can arise concerning the relation of the two people, that the grief depicted on the young woman's face can result only from remorse, and that you have only to look to divine the story of the little cottage, – the words and air of the song "Oft in the Stilly Night." The same remarks apply to the "Light of the World:" in this Christ is represented as covered with a mantle embroidered in precious stones, and walking at night with a lantern in his hand, while from behind the moon envelops him in a halo. M. Taine, who saw the canvas without explanatory notes, calls it simply "Christ at Night with a Lantern." To the casual spectator it is nothing more, to the artist it is Christianity enlightening the universe, the mystic -light of faith piercing the shadows of ignorance. It is in this sense, because of this sense, perhaps, that this picture was so immensely popular in England, where it was taken from city to city, and a large number of engravings were made from it. However strange this may seem to us, we are forced to recognize that the aim of the painter, although not picturesquely conceived, has been fully realized. I will add that, by a little mental effort, one may even arrive at the same point of view as the artist. Another case in point is "The

Expiatory Ram," weirdly decked out with fantastic bows, and carrying the sins of the world into an uninhabited region. He advances laboriously along a coast bordered by mountains, bathed in the deep-red tones of an Eastern sun, among strange objects protruding from the sand, and succeeds in giving quite a different impression from that of a simple animal. Does this effect spring from the power of the artist, the strength of his faith, or the willingness of the imagination to be led? I do not know, but it is real, and nearly the whole English public have felt it: Holman Hunt is thus rather more strictly national in his tendencies than any other painter of his time.

In addition to these three works and "The Shadow of Death," I could mention several others by the same artist denoting a similar tendency, which in the highest degree exemplifies the moral style of painting admired and

BY BURNE-JONES.

(From the artist's drawing)

advocated by the aesthete, John Ruskin, to whom the Pre-Raphaelites owe their first success. The programme of the celebrated "Oxford graduate" is almost completely carried out by them. Contrary to the demands of the Italian Renaissance, we are no longer called

upon to consider Madonnas who are "simple Italian mothers," "subjects suitable for illustrating transparent shadows, well-chosen tints, and scientific foreshortening," and which are scarcely more than "pleasing bits of furniture for the corners of a room;" we are no longer in the presence of rationalistic art, "marked by the determination with which it returns to Pagan systems, not to adopt and Christianize them, but to follow them as imitator and disciple" we have before us a man who profoundly despises the "light sensuality of "miscomprehended mythology," who does not think that the sole aim of the painter is to portray harmonious forms, who is always ready to sacrifice beauty to truth, who thinks it sacrilege to " use religion to illustrate art," and who, in meditating upon Christ, pictures to himself not a human being but the Saviour of the world. With Rossetti, although his inspiration is even more religious, we find ourselves far removed from this ascetic and Puritanic ideal.

Rossetti was a Catholic, and more than half Italian; for his father, the Neapolitan patriot, married the daughter of Alfieri's secretary, Miss Frances Dante, who was English only on her mother's side. His religion manifested itself in quite a different manner from the outset ; he was not a preacher, as

the English so often are by temperament and national habit ; he never had a practical aim, and was more interested in the emotional than in the moral side of a subject. He was instinctively distrustful of abstractions, so strongly seductive to his friend Holman Hunt, and, although quite as spiritual as he in his manner of treating art, was less prone to symbolism. Rossetti had one trait in common with the great artists of the Italian Renaissance, – he was more fond of portraying man than nature. But – and here is where his Northern origin declares itself – his attraction was not for the physical man, "the human animal," in the words of M. Taine, but for the inner man. Thus, disdainful of beautiful bodily forms, he sought only expression and the style best calculated to illustrate it. His religion did not take the form of faith in the supernatural, of transcendental idealization, of a necessity to establish his life on a solid foundation: it showed itself in an altogether subjective tendency, in a new faculty, – ecstasy. It is impossible to determine whether this was natural to him or whether he acquired it by an effort of mind and heart in communing with Dante and the writers of that period. The only really certain thing is that he had a mind characterized by absolute and excessive feeling, which remained the same whether considering celestial or terrestrial objects, which

absorbed the whole being in a sort of hypnotism that blotted out all difference between the real and the imaginary. This peculiar intensity of feeling disappeared during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, being known only in exceptional cases among diseased minds; it burst forth anew in the "House of Life." In this, as in some of Dante's sonnets and in certain

STUDY OF DRAPERY, BY BURNEJONES

(From the artist's drawing)

passages of the "Paradise," words vainly strive to embody inexpressible shades, meaning escapes momentarily only to reappear suddenly and reveal to the imagination boundless perspectives, thought is no longer imprisoned by reality but floats unhindered into a land of dreams, where images lose and diffuse themselves like fleeting clouds, where one has the painful impression of being a lost soul separated from the body and having no longer mastery over feeling:

" O Thou who at Love's hour ecstatically
Unto my lips dost evermore present
The body and blood of love in sacrament ;
Whom I have neared and felt thy breath to be
The inmost incense of his sanctuary ;
Who without speech hast owned him, and intent upon his will, thy life with mine has blent,
And murmured o'er the cup, Remember me!"

This directly recalls the "Vita Nuova," from which Rossetti borrowed the title of his collection. We find ourselves, in the magnificent words of the poet, in "the sphere of infinite images of the soul," and we do not emerge from this atmosphere from the beginning to the end of the work, in which Rossetti celebrated the joy of love and the despair of regret. He himself never left this sphere, and when he laid aside the pen to take up the brush, when he abandoned the free and subtle instrument of poetry for the kingdom of lines and colors, the character of his inspiration remained unchanged. Like his sonnets and ballads, his pictures are visions : in his "Dream of Dante," his greatest composition, in "Beata Beatrice," in "The Death of Beatrice" (reproduced in the March number), in his "Blessed Damozel," in the "Pia," in many more of his works, his figures have an immobility, a silence, an almost suspended attitude, a slow hesitation in their rare movements, which give the impression of figures seen in a dream, which remain so long before the mind before they assume definite form and shape. Sometimes he surrounded them with brilliant accessories, with beautiful flowers, – roses, especially, which he painted with rare perfection, – draped them in Venetian style ; the rich vestments in which he

arrayed them recall Giorgione by their coloring, and this without detracting in the least from their unearthly appearance, from that indefinable something which reveals that they have no real existence, that, although transferred to canvas, they are still profoundly and intimately linked with the artist's soul. Religious, profane, and mythological subjects are but pretexts to Rossetti; under different forms he expresses only his dream ; attitudes, traits, colours change, – he always remains.

Burne-Jones, who represents the second period of Pre-Raphaelitism, has the same religious tendency as his predecessors, but in a milder form. He is more imaginative than they, attaches more importance to the figured representation than to the thought itself. He is doubtless occasionally inspired by Christian tradition : he is especially fond of borrowing from this source angels, whose drapery is of the ancient style, and whose faces have a perfect, hieratic, and monotonous beauty ; but he rather prefers other epochs, antiquity, for example, which he interprets freely, as witnessed by his "Sibylla Delphica." The Moyen Age, with its boundless chivalry, vague symbolism, and arch conceits, is wonderfully attractive to him. His "Love-Song" is almost a page from the " Romance of

grave mien, a " Spirit," descended from heaven, holding hearts under his gentle sway and inspiring them with the subtle reason which softens and tempers the Rose." A cavalier is seated at the feet of his lady, who is playing upon an organ, while behind them is the figure of inspiring Love ; not a gay and mocking child, the son of Aphrodite, whose winning pranks are the theme of Anacreon's song, but an adolescent of passion. This is very far removed from the sermonizing art of Holman Hunt, – it is not even akin to the art which manifests religion in the manner advocated by Ruskin, – but it is religious art in the sense that it is more transcendental than picturesque.

It was probably because of this religious and mystical cast, and because of the almost apostolic importance which art assumed in their minds, that the Pre-Raphaelites, at the very beginning of their career, addressed themselves to work with such extraordinary seriousness. No school has ever had a higher conception of art, no youths ever entered upon their career with more profound faith. They are always in thorough accord with Ruskin's theories and with his taste for exact detail, which he expresses ceaselessly and concerning everything :

" Each herb, each flower of the field,

has its distinct and perfect beauty ; it has its home, expression, particular office, and the highest art is that which seizes this specific character, develops and illustrates it, and gives to it its appropriate place in the landscape, thus enhancing and intensifying the grand impression which it is intended to produce. Each class of rocks, each variety of soil, each kind of cloud, should be studied and portrayed with geographical and meteorological exactness ; it is not only important to adhere to truth in detail, but it is still more important to obtain the simple, serious, and harmonious character which distinguishes natural sites when viewed as a whole. Each geological formation has its distinct peculiarities, belonging only to itself, its lines determined by fissures which give birth to unchanging forms in earth and rocks, its peculiar vegetation still farther distinguished by different varieties, according to elevation and temperature. From these modifying circumstances result the infinite varieties of landscape, each one presenting perfect harmony in its different parts."

One need not reflect long on these conditions imposed upon painting in order to see in what degree, notwithstanding a certain superficial analogy, they differ from the various realistic tenets. To the realist, exact reproduction of nature is an aim in itself, models

are neither beautiful nor homely and have no meaning beyond their form, the artist achieves his aim in reproducing this form as his eye sees it. To Ruskin, truth does not lie in exactness, in the bare reproduction of tangible forms, it rests in the meaning which the artist discovers in these forms and illustrates by his art: "To surprise in herb and brier those mysteries of creation and combination by which nature speaks to the soul ; retrace the fine fissure, the descending curve and undulating shadow of the earth, which vibrates with a lightness and delicacy equal to that of falling rain; to discover in apparently the most insignificant and despicable trifles the incessant working of a Divine Power, which beautifies and glorifies ; to proclaim, in fine, all things for the instruction of those who neither look nor think : that is truly the privilege and special vocation of the superior mind ; that is consequently the peculiar duty assigned to it by Providence."

Holman Hunt expresses himself in like manner. He protests strenuously against the designation of realist. Art, according to him, would cease to have the least interest if it were only a more or less careful representation of a simple fact in nature. Thus comprehended, it would lower the artist to the level of a simple imitator, and imi-

tation affects the vision very much "as illness does, when it spreads a thick veil before the eyes." Purely imitative works, then, instead of making the spectator feel "how much more beautiful the world is than he imagined," end by representing it to him as an absolute nightmare. Merimee, one of the first French critics to interest himself in the Pre-Raphaelites, has neatly characterized their relation to realism : "Exact imitation of nature," said he, "is the watchword of these innovators. If you paint a portrait, it is not sufficient, they tell you, to copy the face and expression of your model; you must faithfully copy her boots as well, and if they have been re-soled you must carefully note the work of the cobbler. In this relation the new English school and our own realists are united upon but one point, – that of abjuring all predecessors. The realists protest against academical mannerisms, theatrical postures, mythological subjects, and imitation of antique statues. Desiring to seize nature unawares, they surprise it at street corners. In England there was neither academy nor mythology to combat. Classical painting had never been known there. The only convention to be overthrown was the studio-coloring, a species of daubing. // must he remembered that the Pre-Raphaelites raised their standard at the instigation of writers, while our real-

ists are artists who protest against the judgment of men of letters."

The italicized sentence marks the most general and striking tendency of the Pre-Raphaelites ; but it is not sufficient to say that they raised their standard at the instigation of writers : they themselves were writers, and their painting is literature. This is true of all, even of Millais, the most decided "painter" of the school. From the beginning, they are seen drawing their subjects from poetry and permeating themselves with it, each one instinctively choosing the poets most in consonance with his genius. A common love of Keats first united Hunt and Rossetti. The inspiration of Holman Hunt is drawn chiefly from the Bible and English poets, that of Rossetti from Dante and the fourteenth-century writers, and that of Burne-Jones from chivalrous poems. Sometimes the theme is of a nature exclusively literary, as in Burne-Jones's "Seven Days of Creation," – a symbolical angel seven times reproduced, with scarcely a change of attitude, and always carrying a globe, in which successively appear, in vague forms, the different changes resulting from God's words. The whole grace of the work lies in the charming affectation of naivete with which it is conceived. Another well-known work by the same artist is "Merlin and Viv-

ian," unintelligible to those unfamiliar with the legend of the magic circle in which the bard and the fairy had forever enclosed their love. Several of Holman Hunt's pictures are almost illustrations, – "Claudio and Isabella," of a passage from "Measure for Measure," and "Isabella and her Basilisk Vase," of a passage from one of Boccaccio's celebrated tales.

The same may be said of most of Rossetti's canvases, in which the figures always have a deep meaning, nearly always explained and commented upon in his sonnets and poems. In the company of these three artists and their less-noted disciples we are as far removed as possible from pure art as conceived by modern realists, who think only of portraying objects, and from art as conceived by painters of the Renaissance, who thought only of reproducing beautiful forms ; their indifference, from this point of view, allies them much more closely with early artists than their more or less successful imitation of early methods, as illustrated in distinct coloring and clean drawing. The Pre-Raphaelites were profoundly dissimilar in the quality of their painting and the nature of their literary tastes, and, although their general tendency was the same, the application was altogether individual in each case.

Rossetti, from the beginning to the end of his career, was a poet pure and simple. Of the painter, if by this word we mean the artist pre-eminently interested in things sensible to the sight, he had only the artist's taste for beautiful colors and rich accessories. His drawing was often mediocre and obviously faulty : nearly all his women have too large hands, and this fault is all the more glaring, as he loved to represent them as playing upon stringed instruments ; often the drapery appears to reveal strange physical imperfections, —a too short arm or a receding shoulder. But the colorist who understands how to use and harmonize magnificent shades, who surrounds his figures with the most gorgeous flowers, as in the " Ghirlandata," may easily be pardoned faults in drawing. It may also be said that the end for which he strove authorized neglect of the details of technical perfection ! The simple movement of the "Pia," softly turning the ring on his left hand with his too long fingers, emaciated by the fever which devours him, relates the anguish and slow drama of his death in the miasmatic marshes with as powerful force as the two stanzas of the "Purgatory" in which Dante consecrates his memory ; and, notwithstanding a somewhat faulty shoulder, Proserpine, tightly clasping the pome-

granate which she has imprudently tasted, presents to our view a tragic image of mortal unrest and hopeless melancholy. Setting aside technical skill, the art of this painter is unrivalled in supreme intensity of expression, which he succeeds in giving to his figures without the aid of grand gestures or violent action.. This quality constitutes the artistic value of Rossetti's paintings ; their poetic value admits of no doubt : he understood that the plastic epoch in painting had passed away ; that, since the vigor and the beauty of the human form were no longer held in the same esteem as of old, the simple portrayal of the body could no longer be the highest object in art; that, in an altogether intellectual epoch, painting itself must obey the general tendency and follow another ideal than that of pure form, and that that ideal could be only expression. Doubtless, many before him, in France as well as in England, comprehended this ; but they, like Delacroix, for example, fell into the error of seeking expression in movement, a thing too fugitive to be transferred to canvas. Going back to the source of painting, to the epoch when Botticelli, Beato Angelico, Pollajuolo, and Ghirlandajo, indifferent also to bodily beauty, and mindful only of religious thought as revealed by the body, succeeded in translating their broadest conceptions by almost

motionless figures, Rossetti recognized that the calmest attitude and slowest gesture are often compatible with the greatest intensity of feeling; and he restored to art those supreme qualities which it had lost since the Renaissance.

Holman Hunt seems to have had the same aim, but he has been less successful. He has sacrificed too much on one side to the complexity of his subjects, and on the other to imitation of processes which cannot be revived. His pictures are often riddles, demanding an explanation, and err in portraying, not feeling, but situation ; this is the case with his "Rienzi," "Two Gentlemen of Verona," and some other works. Far superior to Rossetti in the matter of drawing, he works in the detail of his pictures with infinite care : thus, for the background of "The Shadow of Death," which represents the hills of Nazareth and the plain of Jezreel, he studied the landscape day after day, at the same hour, in the hope of attaining the greatest possible exactness ; several years were spent in this work. He attained his object without doubt, but the evidence of this extreme care has a tiring effect upon the spectator, and the too great precision of the drawing serves only to destroy the illusion ; this is still further affected by Holman Hunt's taste for

crude colors, – sharp greens, vivid yellows, uncompromising blues, and flaming reds, – which may recall the favorite shades of Filippino Lippi and of Botticelli, but are absolutely painful to eyes accustomed to softer gradations of color.

As a painter, Burne-Jones is the most complete of the three, he is both draughtsman and colorist. He has profited by the experience of his predecessors in the new field opened by them, and, while he has acquired a wonderful accuracy of touch, and is as conscientious as Hunt in his studies, he has the advantage of having learned to conceal the effort by which he compasses his end. He has, moreover, created a palette which is his own: contrary to Hunt with his crude colors, and Rossetti with his warm effects, Burne-Jones – excepting, of course, in his water-colors – employs scarcely any but extremely soft tones, which blend in an exquisite symphony of infinitely delicate gray. His figures appear in a light proceeding, apparently, from a veiled but not overcast sky, and often in the midst of landscapes purely imaginary, perhaps, but suggestive of the downs of the English coast. All are marked by a somewhat monotonous uniformity of feeling, but they are, nevertheless, charming. Burne-Jones does not, like Rossetti in his "Blessed

Damozel," "Venus Verticordia," "Pia," and "Proserpine," sweep us over the whole gamut of extreme feeling ; he introduces us to an atmosphere of innocent, tender peacefulness, so well illustrated in his "King Cophetua:" a handsome young king in black armor and bared head half kneels at the feet of a beggar-girl, whom he has seated on his throne, and who looks into space with serene, untroubled gaze.

These three artists, with all their differences and inequalities, form a marvellous complement, the one of the other ; their ideal is not the same, but it is equally high ; Rossetti is more genial, Holman Hunt and Burne-Jones more learned, but the conception which each artist has of his art is equally noble, exalted, and disinterested. Their work is the finest protest of artists and thinkers against the "vulgar mercantile spirit, contented insipidity, and paltry cleverness by which contemporary art is animated in a great measure. Their united effort was so strongly opposed to the general tendency that, in the beginning, they were looked upon as ridiculous ; then, like all who have the courage to conceive beauty, they succeeded in drawing to their work a certain amount of praise, whose distinction was sufficient compensation for its moderate quantity; then came the great public, bringing,

as usual in such matters, more goodwill than discrimination, and the result was the birth of those aesthetic exaggerations for which it would be unjust to regard the Pre-Raphaelites as responsible. Equilibrium has at last been established, and we are now able to judge of the place that the movement of which Holman Hunt, Burne-Jones, and Rossetti are the most complete exponents will hereafter occupy in the history of art. Decidedly, it will never become general, as the romantic school has been, and as realism under different forms will continue to be, from time to time : it is too aristocratic for that, and also too special. Every one cannot have a fourteenth-century spirit; few people find pleasure in reasoning concerning their feelings; very few succeed, if I may express myself thus, in detaching their passions and ideas from material bonds and carrying them into an atmosphere transformed and ennobled by intelligence. It is to this select few that Pre-Raphaelite painting is addressed, as it is to them that are addressed such works as the "Vita Nuova," the "Convito," the "Trionfi," the "Cortigiano," the "Ragionamenti Amarosi," all that strange and enchanting literature which lived more than two centuries through the impulse of Dante, and to which Rossetti and his disciples have returned across the ages.

