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February 2010 Kunstmuseum, Bern, 19 March-25 August

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'Edward Burne-Jones. The Earthly Paradise'

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William Hauptmann

While examining the private collection of the Marquis of Stafford at Cleveland House in 1823, William Hazlitt had some valuable thoughts on how European painters, wed to particular national traits by birth and training, could or could not be comprehended outside of their usual artistic milieu. Hazlitt was fully aware that some pictorial styles and doctrines could not easily become intelligible when removed from the environment in which they were nurtured. The determining factor was whether the work was entertainingly light or philosophically weighty. Lesage's picaresque and amusing *L'histoire de Gil Blas de Santillane* (1715-1735), for example, could be translated tolerably into English as a frothy, adventurous narrative – its influence in English in fact can be seen from Swift to Twain – while the more reflective ideologies of Racine or Rousseau, impregnated with deeply-rooted Gallic subtleties and traditions, could not. The reverse is true as well: Richardson's *Clarissa*, a moral tale of virtue lent itself easily translation – and indeed it had substantial influence in France – but the subtle dramatic ideology of Shakespeare was more prone to paraphrase than to translation. Benjamin Haydon's comments on seeing Talma's performance of *Hamlet* in Versailles in 1814, using Ducis' dubious translation (1769) oddly transforming the play for French theatrical conventions, are apt: the work was only 'rendered fit for the French stage', thus bastardizing it to an extent that any Englishman should shy away with fright. For Hazlitt, the painter who seemed most exemplar of comprehension on a larger visual landscape was Rubens. Hazlitt rightfully attributed this cross-border facility to the fact that Rubens had worked throughout Europe for a wide range of patrons with different artistic traditions, thus absorbing multi-cultural phenomena that, chameleon-like, he could incorporate in different artistic milieu. That is why Rubens's art could easily be appreciated not only in Flanders, but also Holland, France, Italy, Spain, and England – but not, Hazlitt added, in Scotland ('No, there alone he is *not* understood').

One is inevitably reminded of these musings in reviewing the current exhibition of the works of Edward Burne-Jones, entitled *Das irdische paradies (The Earthly Paradise)*, jointly organized by the Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart and the Kunstmuseum, Bern. While the bulk of Burne-Jones's paintings are housed in Britain and America, some of his works are indeed found in European collections – Brussels, Paris, Lisbon, and Stuttgart notably – but there have been very few exhibitions devoted to his art on the Continent, and none ever in Switzerland. If Burne-Jones is known to continental audiences, outside of reproductions and reputation, it is often in the context of general exhibitions devoted to Pre-Raphaelite painting (Baden-Baden, 1973, Rome, 1986, Ghent, 2007, Stockholm, 2009), or Symbolism and Jugendstil styles (Paris, 1976, Munich and Hamburg, 1997), but these offered only several paintings of his at most. The present exhibition brings together 166 works, some in conjunction with William Crane and mainly based on William Morris's writings and influence, that range from whole cycles to individual drawings and the decorative arts. It is, in fact, a rounded summation of Burne-Jones's art, showing his reliance on poetry, obscure legend and myth, and what may be called the spiritual side of his nature, as indistinct as that may be. Tied as it is to William Morris's long, epic poem from which the exhibition receives its title, with its reliance on Nordic folklore, pseudo-Chaucerian modes, sometime bewildering references, odd sagas, and its definite Victorian feel, one inevitably wonders how Burne-Jones's decorative cycles can be understood when removed from the boundaries of an English Victorian perspective. There is little question that Burne-Jones and Morris felt a special symbiosis in working together, and as Julia Cartwright noted in 1894 in reference to an illustrated edition of Morris's poem, "Seldom,

indeed, has so close a community of thought existed as that which is revealed in the poetry and painting of these two friends.' Therefore, the kind of real comprehension that Hazlitt described in the appreciation of Rubens's paintings must stem from grasping the full principles of Morris as an inspirational force for Burne-Jones – indeed, both of their biographies are included in the exhibition catalogue – and especially that thorny poem, *The Earthly Paradise*, which is extraordinarily opaque with its 42,000 lines of rhymed verse. In Britain, it might seem plausible; in Germany and Switzerland, where despite Wagnerian retelling of ancient myths, I am less sure. The curators seem to be aware of this as they have devoted noteworthy efforts to communicate Burne-Jones's special artistic world.

Even in the most commodious of circumstances, Burne-Jones is a difficult painter, as much a bewildering figure himself as a painter of the indescribable realms. He often appears to wander in the past, like most of the PRB, but rarely conscious of the present. His art falls within a very unusual sphere that cries out for attention and familiarity with literary sources that are not easily in the domain – or interest – of the common museum spectator. His figural compositions can appear deathly cold, a refurbished Mannerism that confounds as much as appeals. The multitude of 'damozels' in his corpus usually appear mystifyingly dazed, or other earthly, specters rather than physical volumes. His iconography can range from the evident and banal to the ghastly intricate. Viewing Burne-Jones's work *en masse*, therefore, can be challenging for the non-specialist and perhaps daunting without adequate preparation. That is not to say that such exhibitions as this, rooted in a prescribed complexity, should not be mounted outside of Britain, but one must question what they accomplish in making the artist's work known and comprehended. Exhibitions are, after all, a means of pedagogy and in this case, I suspect the lesson is problematical.

What others make of Burne-Jones' pallid, androgynous men and women in the service of various incredible quests and as inhabitants of a magical dreamland *à la* Harry Potter *avant la lettre*, I cannot gauge. A few Swiss friends were intrigued, but still largely baffled by the curious images. What is important to note is that the exhibition brings together a number of important pieces from such series as the seven part *St George and the Dragon* (1865-67), commissioned by the watercolorist Myles Birket Foster, with their powerful invocation of medieval pageantry; the four part *Pygmalion and Galatea* cycle (1875-78), which in the flesh looks even more impassive than in illustration; the *Cupid and Psyche* set for George Howard, the 9th Earl of Carlisle, commissioned to embellish his London home at Palace Green, which emits a Renaissance spirit than seems curiously out of time and place; and the *Perseus* paintings for Arthur James Balfour (author of the Balfour Declaration) to decorate his London home at Carleton Gardens, which contains some of the painter's bleakest images. The *Cupid and Psyche* pictures are the most impressive in the exhibition, arranged on the wall in order as they were in Howard's home, all exhibited without frames and all the better for it. These paintings depict dominions that can only be guessed at, works that at times are so dense, physically and psychologically, that they can suffocate. One need only contemplate his *The Prince Entering the Briar Wood* (1869) from the *Briar Rose* series, borrowed from Houghton Hall, to feel the need to gasp for air, or *The Baleful Head* (1885-7), from Stuttgart, which constricts air passages in its almost enamel-like surfaces so covered that barely an empty centimeter can be found. Few of these works really exhale breath; they illustrate intriguing oddities and fantasies that are sometimes horrendously bleak, as in *Perseus and the Graiae*, a hellish icy ballet of gestures placed in a lunar landscape, or *The Doom Fulfilled* (1885-8) in which Perseus fights a sea-monster, seemingly created for a Hollywood horror movie, where the two are so interlocked that the catalogue essay describes this portion of the painting eloquently as 'ossified calligraphy.'

The Bern exhibition has an added attraction in that a painting by Hodler, *Eurhythmy* (1895), is exhibited with the Burne-Jones corpus. The purpose was to contextualize Burne-Jones' work by seeing cer-

tain analogies between the two. In the case of *Eurhythmy*, it is meant to be compared with *Princess Sabra Drawing the Lot* (1865-6), lent by Hanover College, Indiana, but it seems to me that the analogy of the rigid lines of figures is stretched at best. There is something missing in putting this picture within the context of Burne-Jones despite some common concerns between the two painters. While Hodler's painting is as symbolically enigmatic as Burne-Jones's, it appears that the two works are in wholly different spheres. Burne-Jones' painting is tied to its poetical prototype while Hodler's composition is visionary in a different way, a sort of coming to terms in a cosmic zone where vivacious curves and his signature parallelism impart an endless march of melancholy souls toward the abyss. The juxtaposition of the two artists, both influential in their own ways – Burne-Jones more in France; Hodler more in Vienna – underscores as many differences as similarities.

The catalogue,* which is available in a German and English edition, is a glorious affair, beautifully made with reproductions that are accurate and valuable. There are twelve important essays, mostly by German scholars, although the fine essay on the St. George cycle is by Matthias Frehner, the director of the Kunstmuseum, Bern, which try to place the complexities of Burne-Jones into a Continental (Germanic) focus. All of the essays are worth reading for their clarity of what is a complex issue. The essay by William Waters and Peter Nahum on Burne-Jones's medieval sources is particularly interesting for its research into some of his sources, but not always convincing on what these were. A negative side to the exhibition is the entrance fee: SFr18, more than £11, which I suspect will inhibit many from adventure.

*[The catalogue of this exhibition is fully reviewed by Simon Poë in the Book Reviews section]

'I Preraffaelliti. Il sogno del '400 italiano da Beato Angelico a Perugino da Rossetti a Burne-Jones'

Museo dell'arte della città di Ravenna 28 February-6 June
Ashmolean Museum, Oxford 15 September-5 December

Arnika Schmidt

For centuries, Italy has fascinated the English with its groundbreaking artistic accomplishments, gentle climate and natural beauty. The Victorians in particular enjoyed a passionate and multi-fold relationship with the peninsula's cultural heritage revealed by the literary and artistic production of British artists in this period. The fervour for all things Italian, or rather for an idea of 'Italian-ness', is the driving force behind the works of the artists represented in this exhibition. This show is the first to focus exclusively on the ways in which the artists associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood were inspired by Italy and as such is of great public and scholarly interest. The accompanying catalogue deftly conveys the complexity of Anglo-Italian artistic relations in the 19th century and encourages a broader understanding of Pre-Raphaelitism.¹ Five essays take up the crucial aspects further engaging with the political and historical background, analysing the Pre-Raphaelites' interaction with literature and discussing the reciprocal dynamics between English and Italian artists. The exhibition exemplifies the addressed issues by the approximately 150 works of art presented in nine sections which are in turn grouped together under three main categories illustrating the intellectual engagement with visual and literary sources, the emotional response to the evocative southern landscape and a sensual assimilation of Italian Renaissance art.

Unfortunately the title chosen for the Italian venue, which alludes to a narrower investigation of the Pre-Raphaelites' response to Italian quattrocento art, may mislead visitors' expectations as both the display and the catalogue entries clearly show a broader approach. Had the exhibition's concept been restricted to the theme described in

the title, however, visitors might have been equally dissatisfied as the Pre-Raphaelites neither pretended nor wished to imitate the Early Italian Masters as John Ruskin specified in his famous letter published by the *Times* in 1851, a point very well argued in Colin Harrison's highly informative essay on the Pre-Raphaelites and Italian art before and after Raphael.² These artists were above all inspired by the idea of medieval Italy and the genuine creativity attributed to pre-Raphael artists as transmitted to them by literary sources and by Ruskin's accounts in particular.

A selection of early renaissance panels in the first section introduces the visitor to the kind of artworks the Pre-Raphaelites would have been inspired by. Still it is important to keep in mind that very few paintings by Italian trecento and quattrocento artists were on public display in Victorian England. As a consequence, secondary visual sources such as Carlo Lasinio's etchings of the Camposanto in Pisa, displayed in the adjacent room, became primary vehicles for the dissemination of an idea of pre-Raphael art for those who, like the majority of the members of the Brotherhood, had never actually visited the peninsula. Italian medieval history and literature also had a modern catalyst as the romantic poets Keats, Shelley and Browning had all elaborated themes drawn from Dante, Boccaccio and other contemporary sources. Translations of these poets' crucial works and their romantic interpretations constituted the major literary sources of interest for the Pre-Raphaelites. The episode of Paolo and Francesca narrated in Dante's *Divina Commedia* was one of the favourite motives of the Brotherhood, an aspect perfectly accounted for by the curators' choice of the unfortunate couple's pictorial and sculptural immortalizations by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones and Alexander Munro in the show's third section. The following three rooms were dedicated to Ruskin and his followers who represent the realistic counterpart to Rossetti's imaginative approach within the Pre-Raphaelite movement. The author of *Modern Painters* and *The Stones of Venice* understood his own watercolours (Pl 2) and drawings of Italian art and architecture as a means of documenting his observations in a manner which mirrored his archaeological interest in the country's cultural heritage, a heritage which was at that time rapidly falling into decay due to neglect. Ruskin's scientific approach also directed his disciples' mode of painting landscapes as the exhibition *Pre-Raphaelite vision – truth to nature*³ in 2004 so beautifully demonstrated. Their accurately detailed works of both English and Middle-Eastern landscapes show a geological and archaeological interest absent in the few depictions of the Italian countryside, which rather aim to evoke the atmosphere of the chosen sites, as the exhibits present in the sixth section clearly demonstrate. Curiously, most of the landscape paintings on display in the two sections dedicated to this genre were executed by artists that never belonged to the Brotherhood, another aspect at odds with the exhibition's title but a crucial element for the understanding of the variety of artistic responses evoked by the peninsula. In his pioneering book on the Pre-Raphaelite landscape first published in 1973 and re-edited in 2001, Allen Staley stated that 'in the 1860s and 1870s the most talented younger landscape painters turned away from the naturalism of Pre-Raphaelitism to return to a more pictorially disciplined and subjective art'.⁴ On these lines the so-called Etruscan School, a group of primarily English artists including William Blake Richmond, George Heming Mason and George Howard headed by the Roman painter Giovanni (Nino) Costa, was considered by some as a promising alternative.⁵ Ideological parallels of the two anti-academic tendencies and Costa's strong connections to England led some Italian critics of the time to the mistaken assumption that the Roman himself belonged to the Pre-Raphaelites regardless the fact that the atmospheric renderings of enchanting sites by Costa and the Etruscans (Pl 3) give an interpretation of 'truth to nature' very different from the scrupulously objective landscapes of painters following the Ruskinian tradition, an argument well set out in Christopher Newall's catalogue essay. The show's selection of paintings, oil studies and watercolours by artists