Chapter II

THE PRE-RAPHAELITES AND SHAW

HOUGH SHAW’S CONCEPT of “Pre-Raphaelite” was influenced most by Ruskin and Morris, it was also influenced by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Founded in 1848, the P.R.B. had seven original members—the painters William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, F. G. Stephens, and James Collinson; Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his brother, William Michael Rossetti; and a sculptor and poet, Thomas Woolner. They were united in opposition to Academy art; and they were also dedicated, Holman Hunt says, to following the “innocent spirit,” the “simplicity,” the “frank expression and unaffected grace” of Italian art before “the showy followers of Michael Angelo had grafted their Dead Sea fruit on the vital tree” of art.\(^1\) By 1856 the original P.R.B. had lost its unity: Millais was elected to the Royal Academy; Collinson, a convert to Roman Catholicism, had resigned and gone into seclusion; and Rossetti turned to new disciples—Morris, Burne-Jones, and their coterie at Oxford. However, though the brotherhood itself quickly dissolved, the Pre-Raphaelite movement continued as Hunt, Millais, and Rossetti gained fame and as Morris and Burne-Jones perpetuated it in a new and more exotic phase.

In the 1880s and early 1890s, Shaw reviewed Pre-Raphaelite art. These reviews, which appeared in The World and in Annie Besant’s journal, Our Corner, stress the serious intentions of the Pre-Raphaelites as well as their passion for color, meticulous attention to detail, and naïveté in point of view. According to Shaw, Holman
Hunt paints with a childlike vision, moral earnestness, conscientious workmanship, and glowing color. But he is too “matter of fact”—too literal and too conventional; for example, “The Light of the World” is not a symbol of anything “but a picture of a symbol taken literally,” presenting “the ideal Christ of pure superstition in his prettiest shape.” Similarly, Millais is an excellent workman who, unfortunately, sacrifices intellectual content for richness of color, so that his landscapes “tempt one to declare that no man has ever seen anything that Millais could not paint, although many men have painted things that he cannot see.” Shaw praises Burne-Jones but finds fault with him, as Ruskin had, in his tendency toward an overwrought effect. In an *Art Journal* article of 1891, Shaw speaks of the “transcendant expressiveness” of the work of Burne-Jones’s studio assistant, J. M. Strudwick, who, being unable to concentrate on technique alone—“execution for execution’s sake”—exercised his genius in inventive and carefully conceived art. Shaw also praises Rossetti, whose “wealth of color, poetic conception, and the fascination of the faces” is marred only by his “want of thoroughness as a draughtsman” and his stylized treatment of female figures.

Shaw’s fascination with the Pre-Raphaelite lady is evident in his description of his “Mystic Betrothal” to William Morris’s daughter, May Morris, and in his dramatic representation of a former Pre-Raphaelite lady, Henry Higgins’s mother in *Pygmalion*, who “was brought up on Morris and Burne Jones.” In her drawing room are Morris wallpapers and fabrics, “a few good oil-paintings from the exhibitions in the Grosvenor Gallery thirty years ago (the Burne Jones, not the Whistler side of them),” and “a portrait of Mrs. Higgins as she was when she defied fashion in her youth in one of the beautiful Rossettian costumes which, when caricatured by people who did not understand, led to the absurdities of popular estheticism in the eighteen-seventies” (*Pygmalion*, p. 244). In “How I Became a Public Speaker” Shaw refers presumably to one of the “absurdities” in his account of his first speaking success: at the Zetetical Society he answered a paper on art “by a lady in the esthetic dress momentarily fashionable in Morrisan cliques just then.” He furnishes no details about the content of this speech, but
admits that he "wiped the floor with that meeting" (Sketches, p. 57).

Though Shaw objected to the "popular estheticism in the eighteen-seventies," to Hunt’s conventional morality, to Millais’s lack of intellectual content, to Burne-Jones’s overwrought effect, and to Rossetti’s want of draftsmanship and stylized females, he nevertheless was willing to identify himself with the Pre-Raphaelite movement in the preface to Plays Pleasant. In this preface he says that Candida was written after his 1894 trip to Florence, "where I [like Ruskin and Morris before him] occupied myself with the religious art of the Middle Ages and its destruction by the Renaissance." On a previous trip to Birmingham, he attended a Pre-Raphaelite exhibit; observing the church windows of Morris and Burne-Jones, he found that "on the whole, Birmingham was more hopeful than the Italian cities; for the art it had to shew me was the work of living men." The preface continues, "When my subsequent visit to Italy found me practising the playwright’s craft, the time was ripe for a modern pre-Raphaelite play. Religion was alive again, coming back upon men, even upon clergymen, with such power that not the Church of England itself could keep it out" (p. vi). What this claim to be a Pre-Raphaelite dramatist means can best be understood by comparing Pre-Raphaelite art theory with Shaw’s, which encompasses virtually every belief of the P.R.B.

The major principle of the P.R.B. was that announced in the first issue of The Germ: "to encourage and enforce an entire adherence to the simplicity of nature." Essays in The Germ admonish the artist to make "pure transcripts and faithful studies from nature, instead of conventionalities and feeble reminiscences from the Old Masters." Ruskin likewise maintains that "the Pre-Raphaelites imitate no pictures: they paint from nature only," as did William Michael Rossetti, who in his introduction to an 1899 reprint of The Germ explained the name "Pre-Raphaelite."

It would be a mistake to suppose, because they called themselves Praeraphaelites, that they seriously disliked the works produced by Raphael; but they disliked the works produced by Raphael’s uninspired satellites, and were resolved to find out, by personal study and practice, what their own several faculties and adaptabilities might be, without
being bound by rules and big-wiggeries founded upon the performances of Raphael or of any one. They were to have no master except their own powers of mind and hand, and their own first-hand study of Nature. (P. 6)

The meaning of “adherence to nature” varies among the Pre-Raphaelites: to Hunt it means a faithful rendering of physical nature, often as background in a painting which is otherwise based on a purely imaginative image; for example, for his scriptural subjects he made trips to the Holy Land to observe “oriental proprieties” (i.e., exactness of costume, terrain, climate, etc.), so that he could paint “from Nature, not indirectly from sketches, but direct from the scene itself on to the canvas of the final picture.” To F. G. Stephens the return to nature implies looking at “the poetry of the things about us,” observing and capturing modern life instead of looking to the past.” D. G. Rossetti does not limit “painting from nature” to contemporary subjects but applies it to medieval subjects as well when he says that Morris’s painting of Sir Tristram “is being done all from nature of course,” just as Morris says that Rossetti’s “The Blessed Damosel” is “strong, unforced and full of nature.” Ruskin correctly observed that the paintings produced by adherents to the Pre-Raphaelite principle “will be as various as the kinds of truth which each artist will apprehend.”

Just as this relativism allowed Ruskin to write about Turner in his essay on “Pre-Raphaelitism,” so it allowed Shaw to call himself a Pre-Raphaelite dramatist, advocating a return to nature and expressing hatred of academicism. His first art review for Our Corner (June, 1885) significantly begins with an attack on the Academy: “During the past month Art has suffered an unusually severe blow at the hands of the Royal Academy by the opening of the annual exhibition at Burlington House.” And his statement that “‘for art’s sake’ alone I would not face the toil of writing a single sentence” is a part of an assault on academicism in art in the Epistle Dedicatory to Man and Superman. Shaw explains that his objections to “literary virtuosity” stem from a conviction that style is impossible without opinions. The old masters, he says, were master artists because they had something to say, and, though their ideas were eventually disproved, the effective form resulting
from them remained. On the other hand, academicians neglect ideas and try to paint or write or compose according to rules.

Your Royal Academician thinks he can get the style of Giotto without Giotto's beliefs, and correct his perspective into the bargain. Your man of letters thinks he can get Bunyan's or Shakespeare's style without Bunyan's conviction or Shakespeare's apprehension, especially if he takes care not to split his infinitives. And so with your Doctors of Music, who, with their collections of discords duly prepared and resolved or retarded or anticipated in the manner of the great composers, think they can learn the art of Palestrina from Cherubini's treatise.

Your academic copier of fossils offers them to you as the latest outpouring of the human spirit, and, worst of all, kidnaps young people as pupils and persuades them that his limitations are rules, his observances dexterities, his timidities good taste, and his emptinesses purities. (P. xxxv)

This passage is a paraphrase of Pre-Raphaelite doctrine.

Following the Pre-Raphaelite distinction between realism and rules in art, Shaw distinguishes between "real" and "literary" in his rejection of conventional techniques and his defense of artistic integrity. For example, he compares Shakespeare unfavorably with Bunyan because Shakespeare's heroes and heroics are often of "paper origin," bookish and classical, whereas Bunyan's originate out of sincere conviction (OTN, 3: 1-3). He accuses Swinburne of expressing "in verse what he finds in books as passionately as a poet expresses what he finds in life" (OTN, 2: 181). He condemns dramatic characters based on books rather than life, and, as if in anticipation of his own Major Barbara and Saint Joan, attacks G. Stuart Ogilvie's The Sin of St. Hulda because the heroine is based on other artistic renderings, when "the nearest Salvation Army barrack or London Mission will supply half a dozen saints of infinitely greater sanctity and heroism than the waxwork angel" (OTN, 2: 98-99). In short, his plea for dramatic characters "whose fortunes we can follow as those of a friend or enemy" (OTN, 2: 118), his praise of Ibsen for "the inevitable return to nature which ends all the merely technical fashions" (Essays, p. 139); his defense of the realism of his own characters and situations; and his attacks on formula plots, especially the "well-made" play, all stress the need for "pure
transcripts . from nature, instead of from the Old Mas-
ters.” The Pre-Raphaelite doctrine advanced by Stephens could
stand as a statement of Shaw’s own: “Nothing can be more humble
than the pretension to the observation of facts alone, and the truth-
ful rendering of them. If we are not to depart from established
principles, how are we to advance at all?” In “A Dramatic Realist
to His Critics” Shaw says that “all my audacious originalities are
simple liftings from stores of evidence which is ready to every-
body’s hand. . I simply discovered drama in real life.”

Though Holman Hunt and other members of the P.R.B. denied
any slavish or “prosaic reproduction” of realistic detail, their
methods and their finished works often show a concern for laborious
reproduction of minute detail. Ford Madox Brown complains in
a diary notation of 1854 that Rossetti is “getting on slowly with
his calf [in ‘Found’]. He paints it all like Albert Durer, hair by
hair.” Even Rossetti in an early letter (25 November 1847) admitted that “the seed of the flower of Pre-Raphaelism was
photography. The execution was to be like the binocular
representations of leaves that the stereoscope was then beginning
to show.” This concern for detail made itself apparent in “Pre-
Raphaelite” drama, according to an article of 1856 equating Pre-
Raphaelite drama with realistic staging and “the specification of
little traits and details that serve to realise the character as much
as possible.”

Though it can be argued that Shaw’s drama aims primarily at
the essence rather than at the “little traits and details” of character
and action, Shaw expresses a preference for minute detail in art,
a preference he attributes to his “normal” eyesight. In the preface
to Plays Unpleasant he explains that, when an eye test revealed
that he had normal vision, he “naturally took this to mean that it
was like everybody else’s”; but he was assured instead that he “was
an exceptional and highly fortunate person optically, normal sight
conferring the power of seeing things accurately, and being enjoyed
by only about ten per cent of the population, the remaining ninety
per cent being abnormal” (p. vi). Shaw’s “normal” vision is
illustrated by the following anecdote from The Sanity of Art.

Once I had a discussion with an artist who was shewing me a clever
picture of his in which the parted lips in a pretty woman’s face revealed what seemed to me like a mouthful of virgin snow. The painter lectured me for not consulting my eyes instead of my knowledge of facts. “You don’t see the divisions in a set of teeth when you look at a person’s mouth,” he said: “all you see is a strip of white, or yellow, or pearl, as the case may be. But because you know, as a matter of anatomic fact, that there are divisions there, you want to have them represented by strokes in a drawing. That is just like you art critics, &c., &c.” I do not think he believed me when I told him that when I looked at a row of teeth, I saw, not only the divisions between them, but their exact shape, both in contour and in modelling, just as well as I saw their general color. (Essays, p. 293)

Shaw would no doubt have disagreed with the critic of an 1857 Pre-Raphaelite exhibit who complained that Holman Hunt, with a “monomaniacal” love for nature, had violated visual, mental, and pictorial law by rendering “with utmost pains and detail, the eye, the beak, and the plumage of a swallow swiftly upon the wing!” Shaw would have said that the critic’s vision, not Hunt’s painting, was at fault. He would also have defended, as Burne-Jones did in the Whistler-Ruskin trial (1878), “completeness” and detail in art over Whistler’s impressionism, for Shaw criticized impressionist art on the grounds that the impressionists could not see well. In an art review of 1889, he says that “there must be many people who can see a pin where Mr. Walter Sickert cannot see a tenpenny nail.”

This preference for minute realistic detail does not suggest Shaw’s Pre-Raphaelitism as precisely as does his belief in the moral function of art. The critical essays in The Germ suggest that Pre-Raphaelite art was considered, by Pre-Raphaelite theorists at least, highly moral. John Lucas Tupper in “The Subject of Art (No. 1)” uses the appeal to “mental and moral faculties” as the criterion for distinguishing between “high” and “low” art; after listing subjects suitable to the high purpose of art, he concludes, “everything or incident in nature which excites, or may be made to excite, the mind and the heart of man as a mentally intelligent, not as a brute animal, is a subject for Fine Art.” In “The Purpose and Tendency of Early Italian Art,” F. G. Stephens, echoing Ruskin, says, “The Arts have always been most important moral guides. Their flourishing has always been coincident with the most whole-
These opinions, however, represent the more conservative element in the P.R.B. Though Holman Hunt believes that art "should unite with other powers to promote orderly purpose, and should denounce the pride of irresponsibility together with that dissectional spirit which proclaims that art has no connection with morals"; and though his pilgrimages to the Holy Land were not simply searches for authentic background for religious paintings but also expressions of religious purpose "to use my powers to make more tangible Jesus Christ's history and teaching," he also admits that art is not of necessity moral. And Rossetti's parable, "Hand and Soul," which appeared in the first issue of The Germ, suggests that a conscious moral purpose may destroy art. "Hand and Soul" traces the career of a thirteenth-century Italian painter, who sees one by one fame, faith, and moral intent fail as guides in his art. Finally the image of his own soul appears to explain to him why his art has failed: he has listened to his mind and not to his heart. His soul assures him that real faith cannot fail him; he made a mistake in consciously attempting to do God's work. When he wanted to depict "some moral greatness that should impress the beholder," he failed because he "wouldst say coldly to the mind what God hath said to the heart warmly." Thus Rossetti conceives of a divinely inspired and moral, even religious, art; but he believes that a consciously moral aim will ruin the ultimately moral effect of it. This concept of morality in art is, as we shall see in later chapters, basic in Shaw's theory of art. Whenever Shaw portrays an artist who is devoted to improving morality, that character is an unsuccessful artist; only the artist who, in Rossetti's words, does what God "hath set in thine heart to do, even though thou do it without thought of Him," produces great art.

But for the major influence on Shaw's concept of Pre-Raphaelite morality one turns not to the essays in The Germ but to the shapers of his attitude toward medieval art. Shaw's medievalism combined the Pre-Raphaelitism of Hunt, who saw the P.R.B. as an attempt "to emulate the courageous independence of ancient art," and of Ruskin and Morris, who saw the Middle Ages as an age of faith, of social stability and artistic vitality. In his use of a modern
subject in what he conceives to be a medieval spirit of independence from prescribed forms, Shaw is closer to the original aims of the P.R.B. than the second generation of Pre-Raphaelites were, with their love of what Ford Madox Ford says is best suggested by the phrase "long necks and pomegranates." Shaw is in agreement with the idea that "Pre-Raphaelitism is not Pre-Raphaelism"; instead of using predominantly medieval subjects, as Rossetti, Morris, and Burne-Jones did, Shaw uses religious themes in a modern milieu. That Shaw considered the essence of medieval art to be the religious impulse governing it is apparent in his essay (discussed above, pp. 12-13), "On Going to Church."

Shaw's commentary on religious art culminates in the thesis developed in "The Religious Art of the Twentieth Century" and the succeeding sections of the preface to Back to Methuselah, where Shaw maintains that "art has never been great when it was not providing an iconography for a live religion" (p. lxxviii). Reiterating the ideas from "On Going to Church," Shaw asserts that the Middle Ages produced great art; but, after Raphael (and this choice of the dividing point between medieval and modern art is significant), an interval of unbelief caused a decline in art. Shakespeare, for example, "could not become the conscious iconographer of a religion because he had no conscious religion" (p. lxxx). However, certain artist-prophets—Michelangelo, Beethoven, and Goethe—anticipated the next religion and kept art alive; now the concept of creative evolution makes great art again possible. The preface ends with Shaw's "hope that a hundred and more elegant parables by younger hands will soon leave mine as far behind as the religious pictures of the fifteenth century left behind the first attempts of the early Christians at iconography" (p. lxxxvi).

According to Shaw, the new living religion is a catholic one: "There is only one religion, though there are a hundred versions of it." The artist is to express this living religion in the theater, the equivalent of the medieval cathedral. The theater-church analogy, one of Shaw's favorites, is more than an analogy to him; for Shaw the theater is the church in which the living religion is preached: "The theatre is really the week-day church; and a good play is essentially identical with a church service as a combination
of artistic ritual, profession of faith, and sermon” (OTN, 1: 264). In “Church and Stage” (OTN, 2: 28) he defends the representation of religious ritual on the stage, maintaining that “it is better to tolerate the catholicly religious people who are claiming for the theatre its share in the common spiritual heritage than to put a weapon into the hands of the sectarianly religious people who would make an end of the theatre altogether if they could.” Though he would save the theater from “the sectarianly religious people,” he would not save it from puritanical purging when it defiles its holy purpose; accordingly, in the preface to Three Plays for Puritans he begs that the theater be rescued from “profaneness and immorality” by a realistic drama (p. xx). He condemns the romantic drama which substitutes “sensuous ecstasy for intellectual activity and honesty,” the pseudoreligious and all-for-love plays popular in the Victorian theater. Finally, Shaw was able to see a “sterner virtue” in the theater than in the church. “Church and Theatre” (Preface, Heartbreak House, pp. 34–35) contrasts “the Theatre: that stuffy, uncomfortable place of penance in which we suffer so much inconvenience on the slenderest chance of gaining a scrap of food for our starving souls,” with the church and its well-dressed women, its erotic literature, sensuous music, gorgeous stained glass, painting, sculpture, and architecture. The fact that Shaw’s catholic religion was also a puritan religion led him eventually to prefer his modern Pre-Raphaelite drama to the religious art of the Pre-Raphaelites, since “in point of appeal to the senses no theatre ever built could touch the fane at Rheims.” This sense of the religious mission of the theater is the key to understanding Shaw’s reference in the preface to Plays Pleasant to Pre-Raphaelite drama. In his words, “the time was ripe for a modern pre-Raphaelite play. Religion was alive again.”

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