In her charming autobiography, *My Grandmothers and I*, Diana Holman-Hunt tells of going with her grandmother, the widow of the painter Holman Hunt, to visit the version of *The Light of the World* hung in Saint Paul’s Cathedral. As a crowd gathered about the formidable figure of Mrs. Hunt, she proclaimed, “I have the honour to be the artist’s widow. . . . The picture is full of symbols: the white robe represents the Power of the Spirit.” But Diana, who was of a different generation, was of a different mind concerning the nature of the painter’s symbolism. “It was great-grandma’s best damask tablecloth,” she tells a boy next to her. “She was very cross when Grandpa cut it up.” And Mrs. Hunt’s reply suggests that even she did not fully share her husband’s sacramental vision: “My grandchild is right in a way but it was the tailor who cut it up, and in spite of my husband’s careful sketches and entreaties, he produced—what do you think? A fashionable frockcoat! It was really rather droll.”

Indeed, much in the history of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood is rather droll. The thought of Elizabeth Siddal freezing in a tub of cold water while posing as the drowning Ophelia, or of Holman Hunt, his feet wrapped in straw against the cold, waiting in the freezing night to paint the proper shade of moonlight on a wall, is so curious to the modern mind that commentators have often found it difficult to move beyond anecdotal accounts of the Brotherhood to serious consideration of its principles. That the Brothers were earnest no one can doubt; indeed, their earnestness is the very source of their drollness. But that their curious behavior manifests an aesthetic and a style consistent within their own terms if not within ours, and that the Brotherhood’s communal enterprise engaged serious issues within the artistic and literary culture of Victorian England, is a proposition that is less often accepted.

One reason for the air of drollness, the attitude of condescension, that still inform modern accounts of the Brotherhood is the assumption by many modern critics of an art-historical model that, with a Hegelian determinism, evaluates nineteenth-century art according to how closely it anticipates the “modern.” Within this historical scheme, Brotherhood work comes to be seen merely as a “dead-end” in the evolution of
nineteenth-century art toward impressionism and abstraction. But in the history of the arts there is not cumulative progress but rather the destruction of one paradigm and its replacement by another. The historian of artistic and literary movements can, like the historian of science, seek not to demonstrate how the past failed to anticipate the present but, instead, to reconstruct the coherence of styles and theories that have long since disappeared.  

It is precisely because the aesthetic that the members of the Brotherhood shared has disappeared so completely, has become to the modern mind even more remote than the vision of the early-Renaissance artists the Brothers believed they were emulating, that the work of the Brotherhood appears to offer such a striking series of paradoxes. Although adopting an avant-garde role in opposing the teachings of the Royal Academy, the Brothers conceived of their own mission as the restoration of the authentic Western artistic tradition. Attacked intensely by the general periodicals on the exhibition of their early paintings, the Brothers nevertheless saw themselves as public artists, Victorian sages delivering highly orthodox sermons to a wide audience. Furthermore, their effort to emulate Italian artists of the fifteenth century generated a style that in its detailed naturalism and historical accuracy is distinctly of the nineteenth. To the modern sensibility, the virtually obsessive detailing of the physical world works against the transcendental significance and the personal impulses underlying the art against its public meaning. Finally, there is the historical irony that this group so self-consciously devoted to the revitalization of a didactic, orthodox sacramental art should become the germ of the modern movements that developed in later nineteenth-century England. And yet, the communal quality of their activity, the publication of The Germ as a manifesto, the stylistic similarities in the work produced by the circle between 1848 and 1853, all indicate that the Brothers themselves did not feel the contradictions so apparent to the modern mind, but rather held to artistic beliefs and to stylistic practices that were so deeply shared as not to require explicit articulation. It is the main purpose of this study to describe these shared ideas and style, to reconstruct the artistic and literary paradigm of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

Once the Brothers are no longer forced into the role of precursors, but set within their immediate cultural context, their work emerges not as misguided groping toward modernism but as participation in a widespread effort in the 1830s and 1840s to revive sacramental forms of art and literature through the adap-
tation of figural methods. Like Carlyle and Ruskin, the Brothers sought to reconcile through their art the fading belief in the sacramental quality of the natural world and in the providential nature of history with the powerful new attitudes generated by a wholly materialistic science and an avowedly scientific history. Rather than seeing the visible world as less significant than the transcendent reality that it symbolizes, these Victorians saw both natural fact and historical event as figure, as simultaneously tangible reality and symbol of the transcendent. Within these assumptions, the end of art is neither allegory in the religious sense of leaving the "given to find that which is more real" nor realism in the secular sense of representing tangible phenomena in a world from which God has disappeared. Instead, the Brotherhood, deeply influenced by Carlyle and Ruskin, employed a symbolic realism that sees fact as spiritually radiant and assumes that only through detailed representation of this natural and historical fact can the phenomenal be seen as figuring the transcendent. The highest power of the imagination, then, lies neither in the accurate perception of the phenomenal nor in the unmediated vision of the transcendent, but in the integrated sensibility that can see with the greatest acuity the phenomenal fact while simultaneously reading the fact as sign of a higher reality. At its most successful, figural art depicts the hard, tangible reality of individual lives in historical time while pointing to the providential design that lies beyond history.

Interest in a contemporary version of figural theory developed in the early 1830s with Carlyle's fusion, in such works as "History" (1830), "Biography" (1832), and Sartor Resartus (1833-34), of the new historicism with typological reading of Scripture, the most available form of figuralism in Protestant England. By 1843, Carlyle developed in Past and Present a literary-historical form adequate to express his vision of the facts of secular history and even of contemporary urban life as manifesting operations of the Divine. In the same year, Modern Painters I appeared offering a sacramentalist defense of Turner's landscapes and in 1846 Modern Painters II, a work that in its explication of Renaissance religious painting through Protestant typological exegesis exerted the single most important theoretical influence upon the Brotherhood. Indeed, Hunt dates the origin of the Brotherhood to his 1846 conversation with Millais about the possibilities of a truly contemporary, yet distinctly Protestant, religious art based upon the figural principles expressed by Ruskin in Modern Painters II (Hunt, 1:90).
But the beginning of 1854 saw the Brotherhood "in its decadence." The divergent imaginative impulses visible in the work of the Brotherhood, but generally subordinated to figural purposes, could no longer be reconciled. Hunt alone continued to create sacramental religious art. Elected an Associate of the Royal Academy in 1853, Millais turned increasingly to the sentimentalism that vitiates his Brotherhood history painting. And Rossetti, obsessively involved with Elizabeth Siddal, moved toward the visionary style that appears in his early illustrations of Dante.

Finally, a note about the boundaries of this study. Throughout, I shall make a distinction between the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the association of seven young men working together from approximately 1846 to 1853, and the Pre-Raphaelite movement, those artists and writers who followed the Brotherhood and who, for all their variousness of style, felt a common source in the work of the Brotherhood. Since the theory and the style of the Brotherhood differ from that of its followers, the limits of the study are chronological. The focus of this book is the work of the Brothers during the Brotherhood, more particularly, the elements of theory and style shared by the principals of the group—D. G. Rossetti, Hunt, and Millais—during their association from 1846 to 1853. Since for Rossetti, Millais, and, to a lesser extent, Hunt, the Brotherhood marked only a phase in their development, I shall distinguish between their Brotherhood and post-Brotherhood work.

2. The condescending tone that has disappeared from the discussion of most Victorian subjects lingers on in regard to the Brotherhood. References to the Brotherhood’s juvenility and lack of coherent thought are too numerous to cite. I will only quote from two recent popular texts by distinguished scholars. “Like many schools of art, their watchword was the ambiguous ‘Back to nature!’—which always turns out to mean something rather different. Painters, sculptors, and critics rallied to the three young founders, and a highly confused non-movement had begun” (Lionel Trilling and Harold Bloom, eds., The Oxford Anthology of English Literature: Victorian Prose and Poetry [New York: Oxford University Press, 1973], p. 615). “After a few years, in the manner of such spontaneous and high-minded campaigns, the founders and the associates they had attracted went their separate ways as painters, and such small unity of principle and aim as they had initially had disappeared” (Richard D. Altick, Victorian People and Ideas [New York: Norton, 1973], p. 289).
3. For the deterministic view of nineteenth-century architecture as moving toward the International Style, see Sigfried Giedion, Space, Time, and Architecture [xviii]
Introduction


5. This modernist position is argued by Christ, pp. 57–61.


11. These definitions differ somewhat from those of William E. Fredeman in his invaluable book *Pre-Raphaelitism: A Bibliocritical Study*. Fredeman does not see the Brotherhood as having left a "canon of critical comment by which they can be clearly identified" or as having "succeeded in crystallizing their aesthetic assumptions" (pp. 1–2).

[xix]
FACT INTO FIGURE