Although the antecedents of sacramental art stretch far back in Western thought, the particular shape of the figuralism adopted by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood derives from two intellectual systems still powerful in early-nineteenth-century England—a pre-Darwinian science closely linked to natural theology and the typological exegesis of Scripture. In each of these modes of thought, the minute investigation of visible fact or historical event becomes the means of strengthening religious belief. In the 1830s and 1840s, both Carlyle and Ruskin, each of whom had studied the Bible at home and science at the university, articulated an aesthetic of the factual in which religious science and typological exegesis become models for the artist’s use of a detailed realism to figure the transcendent. It is this identification of the modern artist with the scientist and the elevation of the Scripture read typologically as the model for art that was transmitted, primarily through the writings of Carlyle and Ruskin, to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

Pre-Darwinian Science

Although the romantics saw science as so inimical to the imagination that poetry is defined by its opposition to science,\(^1\) for Carlyle, Ruskin, and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, contemporary science provided a model for the work of the artist. Rather than holding to the Wordsworthian doctrine that we murder to dissect, they believed, with the natural theologians, that the act of dissection, the minute analysis of both animate and inanimate matter, would only further reveal the power and benevolence of God.\(^2\) Within the framework of natural theology, the visible world exists in a richness and vitality that is itself a sign of the power of God. Particularly in the early nineteenth century when an increasing amount of natural detail seemed to be filling in the outlines of the divine plan, the methods of the religious scientist seemed to provide an example for the artist in demonstrating that only through the accurate perception and close recording of physical fact would transcendental purpose be
made clear. In William Paley's *Natural Theology*, a work that Carlyle and Ruskin, as well as most university graduates knew, and that serves in many ways as a model for *Modern Painters* I and II, Paley repeatedly moves to detailed, minute description of physical fact in order to demonstrate the overall purposefulness of the Creation. In describing the circulation of the blood, he notes: "One use of the circulation of the blood (probably amongst other uses) is to distribute nourishment to the different parts of the body. How minute and multiplied the ramifications of the blood vessels, for that purpose, are; and how thickly spread, over at least the superfcies of the body, is proved by the single observation, that we cannot prick the point of a pin into the flesh, without drawing blood, i.e. without finding a blood vessel."

The activity of religious science, then, demands a unified sensibility, a mind that is concerned not merely with physical fact and natural law but with fact and law as evidence or sign of divine attributes. For the pre-Darwinian scientist, observation is the support of faith by revealing the faultlessness of the Creation, yet faith is at the same time the support of observation, for the belief that the world is intelligently designed leads the investigator to search for, and to find, the function of each element within this world. Faith becomes even more necessary if physical fact is made to prove not merely the intelligence of the Creator through the economy of the Creation, but the benevolence of the Creator as well. Paley's assertion of the happiness of all created beings, exemplified by the young shrimps' "bounding into the air from the shallow margin of the water" as "signs of their happiness,"

seems only wishful thinking to the post-Darwinian mind.

The highest achievement of the religious scientist is a particular kind of work in which the facts and the laws of the natural world are presented in the most minute detail, but in which details and general laws are so organized as to be seen as signs of transcendental truth. The work of Philip Gosse, one of the best-known Victorian religious scientists, exemplifies the belief, shared by the Brotherhood, that acute observation could unveil spiritual truth. In a series of popular books such as *A Year at the Shore* (1865) and *Evenings at the Microscope* (1859), Gosse examines with a truly microscopic eye the living world in order to demonstrate the glory of God. In speaking of the eye of the mollusk called the purple-spotted top, he says:

If you could dissect out one of these points, and submit it to careful examination with a good microscope, you would find all
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... the parts essential to an organ of vision. . . . Minute these parts are, to be sure, but not less exquisitely finished for that. Indeed, the more skill they require in the demonstrator, the more they reflect the inimitable skill of the Creator.\textsuperscript{5}

Gosse illustrated these works himself with colored plates done in what might be called a scientific manner. In their hard-edge outline, detailed particularity, definition by color rather than light, clear illumination of each specimen, and closeness of the subject to the front of the picture plane, such drawings as Dog-Whelk. Pelican's Foot. Top. Cowry bear a marked resemblance to the work of the Brotherhood. Indeed, when the young Edmund Gosse was taken by his father to see Hunt's The Finding of the Saviour in the Temple, he was struck by the correspondence between the Brotherhood manner and scientific illustration: "The exact minute and hard execution of Mr. Hunt was in sympathy with the methods we ourselves were in the habit of using when we painted butterflies and seaweed, placing perfectly pure pigments side by side, without any nonsense about chiaroscuro."\textsuperscript{6}

Figural History

Just as a religious science based on the premises of natural theology served, for a time, to reconcile scientific advances with traditional religious beliefs, so figural history attracted interest in the 1830s as a way of fusing the new historicism with an older faith in the providential nature of historical events.\textsuperscript{7} In Erich Auerbach's words, the figural reading of history "established a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first. The two poles of the figure are separate in time but both, being real events or figures, are within time, within the stream of historical life."\textsuperscript{8} The notion of one historical event as prefiguring another assumes a firmly teleological order, a providential purpose outside historical time yet being fulfilled within it. Furthermore, men still live in figural time. The events of the past figure events occurring in the present or still promised; the events of contemporary life prefigure events to be realized in the future. The historical event as figure, then, is both natural and supernatural, historical fact and transcendent symbol, "both tentative fragmentary reality, and veiled eternal reality."\textsuperscript{9}

The mode of figural history that most shaped the sensibilities of Carlyle and Ruskin and that informs Brotherhood painting is the typological reading of Scripture. In its strictest form, typolog-
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ical exegesis sees a person or event in the Old Testament as a type prefiguring a person or event in the New. Again, the emphasis is on the fusion of historicity and revelation. An event that is real and historical prefigures another event also real and historical within a providential order beyond historical time. Furthermore, the proper reading of the scriptural narrative, indeed, of the entire Book of Human History, demands the same habits of mind as reading the Book of Nature. Within each, not only do events in the phenomenal world have an intense reality but the more intensely and minutely this phenomenal or historical reality is perceived and recorded, the more clearly the transcendental is revealed. Just as the more a writer such as Gosse can demonstrate purpose in the smallest detail of the eye of a mollusk, the more powerfully he can demonstrate the intelligent design of the Creation, so the more cogently the exegete can demonstrate that the most seemingly inconsequential event in the Old Testament prefigures events in the New, the more clearly he reveals the providential quality of the biblical narrative. Furthermore, just as religious science demands a sensibility that unifies faith with acute visual perception, so typological reading of Scripture demands a unified sensibility that perceives the historicity of the events while simultaneously seeing their place in the divine order.

Figural Theory in Carlyle and Ruskin

From their common grounding in typological exegesis and religious science, Carlyle and Ruskin developed an aesthetic in which the facts of nature, of history, even of contemporary life can become through the intensity of their representation radiant with transcendent meaning. Within this view, realism and symbolism are not opposed but interdependent. In theory, at least, the more intense the power of observation, the more extensive the awareness of the symbolic meaning; the more accurately each minute fact of the phenomenal world is reproduced, the more forcefully the spiritual significance will shine through. Such an aesthetic depends upon faith in a sacramental universe; and for Ruskin and Carlyle, the term that connects sacramentalism to the practice of art is the metaphor of art as language, a comparison as suggestive to these Victorian theorists as organic life to the romantics or music to the later Victorians. To the religious scientist, the physical world is itself a form of language, a book written by God that men must decipher. To Carlyle and Ruskin, the more clearly the artist can reproduce this language
Fact into Figure

by creating the illusion of confronting the phenomenon directly, the more forcefully the content of this natural language will emerge. For the early Ruskin, the highest example of such an art is, of course, the work of Turner. The fusion of mimetic and religious criteria in Ruskin's defense of Turner's "Truth" provides the background for the sense of sacred mission informing the Brotherhood's own adherence to scientific realism and also helps explain Ruskin's comparison of the Brotherhood to the stylistically opposite work of Turner in his "Pre-Raphaelitism" pamphlet of 1851.

One section of *Modern Painters* I, "Of Truth of Clouds—First of the Region of the Cirrus," will serve as an example. Ruskin speaks of Turner's mimetic accuracy by describing with great verbal precision the appearance of cirrus clouds: "Each rank composed of an infinite number of transverse bars of about the same length, each bar thickest in the middle, and terminating in a traceless vaporous point at each side" (3:359). But to see Ruskin's praise of Turner's Truth as based solely on mimetic grounds is as incomplete as to explain Brotherhood style solely through its opposition to the idealizing manner of the Academy. Like Gosse's drawings of marine life, Turner's work provides scientific data from which the laws governing the natural world become intelligible; Turner's "fidelity and force . . . present us with . . . more clear expression and illustration of natural laws, in every wreath of vapour, than composed the whole stock of heavenly information which lasted Cuyp and Claude their lives" (3:369). As with Gosse, even the discovery of natural laws leads toward, and is subsumed within, a higher and more inclusive form of understanding in revealing what Ruskin calls the "great attributes of the upper cloud region" (3:362). Here the word *attributes* fuses mimesis and revelation by referring directly to the visual appearance of the clouds while simultaneously suggesting that the shape of the clouds is itself a sign of the attributes of the Deity, especially the wisdom of the Creator. Similarly, a phrase like "heavenly information" (3:369) plays upon the double meaning of heavenly to show that through accurate representation of the sky, Turner provides knowledge of a truth beyond the visible world. Turner's mimetic art thus becomes moralized in presenting the natural symbols of hill and sky as clearly and vividly as if the audience were actually present. Ruskin praises "the watchfulness of the entire meaning and system of nature, which fills every part and space of the picture with coincidences of witness, which come out upon us, as they
would from the reality, more fully and deeply in proportion to the knowledge we possess and the attention we give” (3:367).

To Carlyle and Ruskin, the aim of the artist is to imitate not only the Book of Nature but also the Book of God. For each, art approaches the condition of Scripture. Carlyle’s elevation of Scripture into the model for art appears most directly in the influential chapter “Symbols” in Sartor Resartus. Here, his distinction between “extrinsic and intrinsic” symbols points to his sense of art as the representation of the sacred significance of fact, rather than the creation of fictions. The “extrinsic,” exemplified by political symbols and “other sectarian Costumes and Customs” (223), are inferior in being mere creations of the human imagination. Although through these human constructs there may “glimmer” some transcendent meaning, they lack the “necessary divineness” (223) of the “intrinsic” symbol or figure, the actual phenomenal fact, the creation not of man but of God. In history itself, the noblest such “intrinsic” symbol, the “divinest Symbol” (224), is Jesus, the Word made Flesh, the transcendent manifested in historical time. For the artist-historian, then, the model for art is Scripture itself, the record of this “divinest Symbol,” the historically accurate yet spiritually meaningful narrative that Carlyle, anticipating his own chronicling of great men in postbiblical times, calls Jesus’ “Biography” (224). It is this sense of the historical reality of Jesus’ life, with particular emphasis upon the low economic position and the domestic context, that Carlyle shared with the Brotherhood. In one of Hunt’s reconstructed conversations, Carlyle, on a visit to Hunt’s studio in 1853, appears to articulate the Pre-Raphaelite vision of a humanized, rather than idealized, Jesus:

I’d thankfully give one third of all the little store of money saved for my wife and old age, for a veritable contemporary representation of Jesus Christ, showing Him as He walked about . . . And when I look, I say, “Thank you, Mr. Da Vinci,” “Thank you, Mr. Michael Angelo,” “Thank you, Mr. Raffaelle, that may be your idea of Jesus Christ, but I’ve another of my own which I very much prefer.” I see the Man toiling along in the hot sun, at times in the cold wind, going long stages, tired, hungry often and footsore, drinking at the spring, eating by the way, His rough and patched clothes bedraggled and covered with dust, imparting blessings to others which no human power . . . was strong enough to give to Him. (Hunt, 1:356-58.)

For Carlyle, as for Ruskin, not only biblical but postbiblical history must be understood and represented in the mode of Scripture. To Carlyle, all human history is a “Prophetic Manu-
script" ("On History," 27:90), a "Divine Scripture" ("On History Again," 28:176), a "Gospel" ("Johnson," 28:110), a "Volume" that some "new Noah's Deluge" may conclude ("Biography," 28:47). History writing, and by extension history painting, then, must emulate the Bible in its concern with the truth of the past. More than Ruskin and more than any of the Brothers, Carlyle finds the very realization of the actuality of the past, an experience often described in religiously resonant metaphors of the unveiling of intense light, as in itself a form of revelation. Of Boswell's Life, he says, "How indelible and magically bright does many a little Reality dwell in our remembrance!" ("Biography," 28:55). Or he describes how in reading the account in Clarendon's History of the Rebellion of the defeated Charles being fed by a peasant, the awareness of the reality of this "genuine flesh-and-blood Rustic of the year 1651" generated a visionary moment in which the "blanket of the Night is rent asunder, so that we behold and see, and then closes over him—forever" ("Biography," 28:55). But such evocation of the tangibility of the past becomes for Carlyle in Past and Present, as for Ruskin in The Stones of Venice, part of a larger plan in which events after the time of Christ are seen as continuing scriptural patterns and even contemporary life is seen as figuring a divinely ordained future. It is the extension of scriptural form, in the sense of establishing historicity through quotidian detail and the arranging of such detail into prefigurative patterns, that is continued in the sacramental symbolism of Brotherhood history painting, such as Hunt's Converted British Family (R.A., 1850) (plate 12), and in moralized genre painting, such as Rossetti's Found (no. 64) (plate 17).

For Ruskin, too, the Scripture considered typologically is the exemplar of art. At the heart of Ruskin's aesthetic lies the belief in an integrated mode of perception, what might be called a figural sensibility, that can focus on the natural fact while simultaneously comprehending this fact as sign of transcendent power. In his most important definition of this moralized vision, the discussion of the Theoretic Faculty in Modern Painters II, Ruskin likens this faculty of the artist to the ability of the exegete to read the Bible typologically, to perceive the spiritual significance within historical fact: "All things may be elevated by affection, as the spikenard of Mary, and in the Song of Solomon the myrrh upon the handles of the lock, and the sense of Isaac of the field-fragrance upon his son" (4:48). It is Ruskin's insistence in Modern Painters II that through the re-creation of this Theoretic Faculty the contemporary artist could again create a sacred art,
particularly through historical treatment of Scripture, that provides the most direct link between the figural theory of the 1830s and 1840s and the work of the Brotherhood. For at its inception, the dominant aim of the Brotherhood was the revitalization of what it called “Christian Art” (PRBJ, 9) through historically accurate handling of scriptural subjects, and here the chief theoretical source appears to have been Ruskin’s discussion of the “Imagination Penetrative” in Modern Painters II.

Ruskin defines the Imagination Penetrative, the “penetrating possession-taking faculty . . . the highest intellectual power of man” (4:251), as the ability to perceive and to communicate the transcendent meaning inhering in natural and historical fact. Like Carlyle, Ruskin uses metaphors of discovered light to suggest the artist’s revelation of the divine energy contained within the phenomenal world: “Such is always the mode in which the highest imaginative faculty seizes its materials. It never stops at crusts or ashes, or outward images of any kind, it ploughs them all aside, and plunges into the very central fiery heart, nothing else will content its spirituality” (4:250). In his scriptural paintings, then, Tintoretto becomes exemplary in showing the spiritual meaning inherent in tangible historical fact. In the Annunciation, Ruskin singles out the setting in a ruined palace and the inclusion of Joseph’s carpentry tools, noting that a viewer of secular sensibility would see merely the historical denotation of these tools, responding to them only as a “coarse explanation of the calling and the condition of the husband of Mary” (4:264). But a viewer of Theoretic or figural sensibility would recognize their truly “typical character” (4:265). Seeing the painting with a mind that integrates formalistic sensitivity, acute attention to detail, and religious faith,

he will find the whole symmetry of it depending on a narrow line of light, the edge of a carpenter’s square, which connects these unused tools with an object at the top of the brickwork, a white stone, four square, the corner-stone of the old edifice, the base of its supporting column. This, I think, sufficiently explains the typical character of the whole. The ruined house is the Jewish dispensation; that obscurely arising in the dawning of the sky is the Christian; but the corner-stone of the old building remains, though the builders’ tools lie idle beside it, and the stone which the builders refused is become the Headstone of the Corner. (4:265)

Similarly, in praising Tintoretto’s Crucifixion, Ruskin sees as its “master-stroke” the man, in the shadow behind the Cross, riding on an ass colt and looking “back to the multitude, while he points with a rod to the Christ crucified. The ass is feeding on the
remnants of withered palm-leaves” (4:271). To Ruskin’s exegetical sensibility, this rather ordinary yet historically possible event figures the “disappointed pride” (4:271) of the Jews when Christ earlier entered Jerusalem riding an ass and carrying palm leaves.

To Ruskin, even the most seemingly inconsequential objects in the painting operate, like the events of Scripture, as types; real and tangible, historically consistent, they figure events in historical time. In the work of Tintoretto, then, Ruskin sees an “illustration of the peculiar power of the imagination over the feelings of the spectator, by the elevation into dignity and meaning of the smallest accessory circumstances.” He continues: “But I have not yet sufficiently dwelt on the fact from which this power arises, the absolute truth of statement of the central fact as it was, or must have been. Without this truth, this awful first moving principle, all direction of the feelings is useless” (4:271–72). For Ruskin, as for Carlyle and the Brotherhood, then, the defining quality of effective religious art is the revelation of the sacred meaning within historical fact, “fact as it was, or must have been.”

7. The term historicism has acquired many meanings. In this study, I shall use the term to refer to the widespread faith in the early nineteenth century that the past could be reconstructed as it actually occurred and that this re-creation involved an act of imaginative empathy similar to that of the romantic artist, yet an empathy that must be controlled by a scientist’s regard for factual evidence. See Hans Meyerhoff, The Philosophy of History in Our Time (New York: Doubleday, 1959), pp. 9–18.
10. Citations of Ruskin will refer to Works of John Ruskin, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols. (London: George Allen, 1903–12), and be given parenthetically in the text.
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12. Citations of Carlyle's essays will refer to *Works of Thomas Carlyle*, ed. H. D. Traill, 30 vols. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1896–99), and be given in parentheses in the text. Citations will provide the name of the essay.
