The Bower of the Pre-Raphaelites: Plant Life and the Search for Meaning in the Art of Millais, Rossetti, and Morris

by

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# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................ iii

Introduction .................................................................................................................. 1

Chapter 1: “Down Her Weedy Trophies and Herself Fell in the Weeping Brook:” John Everett Millais’s *Ophelia* ................................................................. 17

Chapter 2: “An Angel-Watered Lily, that Near God Grows, and Is Quiet:” Rossetti’s *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* ................................................................. 42

Chapter 3: “Art Will Make Our Streets as Beautiful as the Woods:” The Pattern Designs of William Morris ................................................................. 68

Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 94

Appendix: Poems of Dante Gabriel Rossetti .......................................................... 104

Figures ....................................................................................................................... 106

Bibliography .............................................................................................................. 118
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INTRODUCTION

The Pre-Raphaelite movement was as defined by its heterogeneity as by any central theme or style. The movement is most popularly known for images of medieval damsels and sensual femmes fatales, but art historically it is generally valued for the realism of its landscapes and modern scenes; neither, however, is a fully comprehensive view. There is a great deal of complexity in Pre-Raphaelitism; it is not even simple to identify who the Pre-Raphaelites were. The term Pre-Raphaelite can identify an organized group of artists, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, which was established to rebel against the Victorian establishment, but this understanding is limited in scope; the Brotherhood only existed for approximately five years, and was restricted to its original seven members. The careers and influence of the members of the Brotherhood stretched far beyond those few years and few artists and, therefore, the term Pre-Raphaelite can also identify a much larger collection of relatively like-minded artists, whose careers spanned more than half a decade.

Questions of Pre-Raphaelite artistic style are as complex as the identification of the movement. Even among the major artists of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood there was great stylistic variety, and when one begins looking at the later careers of the Brotherhood and the works of their followers, that variety can verge on incoherence. Generally, Pre-Raphaelite art is visually arresting, dominated by luminous color, unusual composition, and immense detail; however, this does not always hold true, especially when looking at Pre-Raphaelitism outside of the original Brotherhood. Subjects, too, were varied; modern settings were as common as medieval scenes, and literary inspirations incorporated much of the English canon.
For all these reasons, “Pre-Raphaelite” is an essentially amorphous term; it describes a great deal, but in so doing it fails to describe anything in detail.

There are, however, certain elements which run through much of Pre-Raphaelite art; a Pre-Raphaelite work is instantly recognizable, and not only as a result of the movement’s shared formal qualities. To explicate this commonality among heterogeneity, it may be helpful to look at two works which are both classified as Pre-Raphaelite, but have little in common at first glance: Charles Collins’s *Convent Thoughts* (1850-51, Figure 1) and Ford Madox Brown’s *Work* (1852-65, Figure 2). The two works were begun within two years of each other, and were painted by artists who were part of the original Pre-Raphaelite movement, despite not being official members of the original Brotherhood. *Work* and *Convent Thoughts* therefore have a great deal in common, contextually; however, they differ greatly visually and theoretically.

There are many contrasts in the styles of *Work* and *Convent Thoughts*. *Work*, at four and a half feet tall and almost six and a half feet wide, is a huge painting, especially when compared to *Convent Thoughts*, which is less than three feet high and about two feet wide. *Work* depicts a London street scene filled with all the dirt and chaos of the modern world, while *Convent Thoughts* is a peaceful, contemplative medieval scene. *Work* is filled with figures and action; *Convent Thoughts* has only one figure, a nun who has paused in thought. Despite these differences, however, there are essential elements which link the paintings and mark them as distinctly Pre-Raphaelite. Both are filled with immense detail which pulls the viewer in, forcing them to consider the image at length. This detail is based upon the specific rather than
the ideal; both the flower held by nun of *Convent Thoughts* and the weeds carried by
the beggar in *Work* seem to have been based on actual natural models. Nature itself
also plays a large role in both works; *Convent Thoughts* is set among a garden, and
*Work* takes place under the spread of a giant, ancient tree that has somehow survived
the advance of modern London. The detail of the works and their artists’ attention to
nature mark the paintings as particularly Pre-Raphaelite; close-studied realism and a
devotion to the natural world are both central to Pre-Raphaelite thought and
technique.

The details of both *Work* and *Convent Thoughts* draw the viewer in, and in
doing so, they reveal a great deal more than the painters’ virtuosity. In *Work*, every
tiny detail – the three dogs meeting in the foreground, the woman spilling her basket
of oranges at the far right, the line of protestors above her – contribute to the narrative
and message of the image, which is devoted to questions of work and class in
Victorian London.¹ In *Convent Thoughts*, every detail still points towards the
message of the work, but Collins uses a completely different technique, working with
symbolism to further the image’s feeling of religious contemplation. These
differences can be seen clearly in the two artists’ treatments of plant life. Every
flower of *Convent Thoughts* contributes to Collins’s larger exploration of religious
thought and devotion, just as the tree and flowers of *Work* contribute to Brown’s
depiction of the distinctive qualities, problems, and contrasts of Victorian London.
These plants point to a much larger urge felt by both of the artists: they wanted, above

¹ For a brief discussion of this complex work, see Tim Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites* (New
all, to create and communicate meaning, and they used depictions of the natural world to reach that goal.

Pre-Raphaelite art pulls the viewer in, making him inspect the work and consider it closely, drawing from it not only a visual experience, but an intellectual exercise. This intellectual activity was meant to communicate thoughts and feelings, or, more generally, meaning. One Pre-Raphaelite method of exploring meaning, as mentioned above, was in the depiction of nature. Pre-Raphaelite artists found nature and its plants to be filled with many potential layers of meaning, and they used plant life extensively in their works to help communicate thoughts and ideals to their viewers. Nature can mean many things, and, therefore, so too can plants. This multi-layered meaning holds today; for example, a city-dweller and an outdoorsman might have very different ideals of nature, and a flower or tree might evoke different personal responses from the two. However, understandings of nature do not seem to play the same role in life and thought today as they did in the nineteenth century.

The concept of nature was hugely important to the Victorian imagination. It was something to be bested and conquered, something uncivilized, but it was also a site of nostalgia, a realm untouched by the sometimes horrific progress of industry and development. It could be embodied by the sublime wilds of the Lake District or

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2 Despite the vagueness of the term meaning, I have chosen to use it in this thesis because of it was commonly employed by the Pre-Raphaelites. John Ruskin, whose influence on the Pre-Raphaelite movement will be discussed in later chapters, wrote extensively on the idea of meaning in art, and that phraseology and ideology was adopted by Pre-Raphaelite thinkers.

3 It is important, at this point, for me to also establish what I mean by plant life, plants, and nature, as the three ideas are necessarily intertwined, and quite possibly confused. In my usage, plant life indicates the larger realm of which all plants – specific objects – are part. Nature, on the other hand, is a more abstract and subjective concept, akin to beauty in its interpretability and its elevation to an ideal. Plants are therefore concrete forms, elements of the larger world of plant life as well as being embodiments of nature which relate back to theories and ideals associated with the natural world.
the cultivated countryside of Sussex. It was the subject of scientific inquiry and insight, but it also provided subjects and symbols for poets and painters, and living plants, especially flowers, were important aspects of material culture, filling gardens, conservatories, and homes, and adorning clothing.⁴

In art, nature might be depicted in a careful botanical drawing – an exacting scientific object – or in a painting of a purposefully idealized symbolic rose – an object filled with creative meaning but without any specific botanical basis. Often, however, these apparent extremes did not dwell so far apart; nature, with all its significances, could be used to many ends in the same piece. Nature could be a forest scene photographed by an amateur photographer, an emotionally evocative and yet nominally objective depiction of a landscape;⁵ it could be expressed in the creation of a conservatory, erected so its visitors could experience both the wonder and the education provided by exotic plants; or it could be the plants of a Pre-Raphaelite painting or design, where the search for meaning led to a careful depiction of real plants but also to the exploration of those plants’ evocative, symbolic powers.

The Pre-Raphaelites were unusual in the art world for choosing to pursue the communication of meaning in plants and in all other aspects of their work. Though some Victorians might have read multiple significances in photographs and conservatories, as one can easily do in retrospect, the general Victorian public did not ask so much thought in their art. In the middle decades of the nineteenth century,

⁴ The popularity of the flower garden, especially the bedded formal garden, rose sharply during the Victorian era, providing a contrast with eighteenth-century landscape gardens, which were dominated by expanses of carefully cut grass. The conservatory was also a Victorian innovation, made possible both by advances in iron and glass technology and by extensive exploration in the topics which yielded plants to fill the new hothouses.
British art had stagnated; the progress seen in other areas, from industry to architecture, did not seem to have any parallel in the fine arts. As was the case in many other European countries, the realm of painting was dominated by the force of an academy – in this case the Royal Academy Schools, founded in 1768 and presided over for many years by Sir Joshua Reynolds. The Academy held the annual Exhibit and was the main source of artistic training; unlike in the similar French system, however, in England the “high art” of history painting was never pursued with any great fervor, despite Reynolds’s belief in the style.\(^6\) Rather, the public and the artists favored genre paintings and other smaller works. By the 1840s, this type of painting had dominated English art. English painting of the mid-nineteenth century was exemplified not in grand and noble compositions, but in sentimental, amusing, or anecdotal scenes drawn from literature and daily life. These subjects were in keeping with Victorian taste, which generally favored the innocuous, the sentimental, and the polished. Society was dominated, at least on the surface, by middle-class tastes and mores, and with good reason; the English middle classes had large cultural and financial influence, especially as the century progressed and they gained in numbers and prosperity in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. For an artist to be successful, he consequently would have to favor scenes which would prove popular with the Academy (leading to a good position and good press at the Exhibition) and with the staunchly middle-class public. The Pre-Raphaelites were therefore defiant in their decision to pursue non-academic, and highly meaningful, art; they were turning away from success and popular opinion to create art that privileged significance, not sentiment.

The movement dubbed Pre-Raphaelitism began in 1848 when a group of young men began to gather at each other’s homes to talk, read, and create art. By September these young men had declared themselves to be the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. There were seven members: James Collinson, William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Michael Rossetti, Frederic George Stephens, and Thomas Woolner. The group, however, was not particularly exclusive, or even coherent, and its members went on to varying degrees of fame. Hunt, Millais, and Rossetti would later be the most renowned; Collinson, also a painter, never achieved the same level of recognition. William Michael Rossetti was not an artist, but he became the chronicler and, sometimes, apologist of the movement. Woolner was a poet and sculptor, Stephens a painter and, later, an art critic. Others artists and friends of the group, such as Brown and Collins, still contributed to the formation of the larger Pre-Raphaelite movement, and some of the official members soon left the group and the movement. By 1854 the Brotherhood had dissolved fully, with its members choosing separate artistic paths to follow. The artists who founded the Brotherhood were individualistic, and very young; Millais was only nineteen when the group began meeting, and none of the Brothers was older than twenty-four. The young men’s training, styles, and interests varied greatly, and in many cases changed rapidly. Their artistic and thematic practices and preferences could be at odds, and in some cases the different artists’ works hardly seem to be from the same era, let alone the same movement. However, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood formed because a group of young men cared goals and ideologies, and despite all the differences inherent in Pre-Raphaelitism, certain themes and thoughts
were held in common by members of the Brotherhood and the movement that followed them.

As has been stated previously, the Pre-Raphaelite Brothers believed, most of all, in making art filled with ideas and meaning. It was partially for this reason that they chose to call themselves “Pre-Raphaelites.” The label apparently derived from a comment made by one of Millais and Hunt’s fellow Academy students, who upon hearing their criticisms of Raphael (an important painter in the Reynoldsian Academy pantheon) declared that they must be Pre-Raphaelite. They were an essentially rebellious group, abandoning traditional Academy practices by creating works without the idealized forms and studied modeling the Brothers associated with Raphael and the worst of contemporary art. The Brothers often worked on white grounds, which lent an uncommon brilliance to their colors, and they painted with careful exactitude, filling their canvases with detail and avoiding the “slosh” they associated with the Reynoldsian style. They used their families, friends, and Brothers as models, abandoning the idealized forms and faces of popular painting. They tried to create a new, rebellious style, and they did so by searching for techniques that were truer to life, striving to depict color and detail and the human form as they might actually be seen.

A direct result of the Pre-Raphaelites’ search for a new, true-to-life style was the profusion of closely studied, minutely depicted detail in their art, which has come to be seen as one of the most characteristic traits of Pre-Raphaelite style. The Pre-Raphaelite Brothers, in their search for truth in technique, paid equally careful

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attention to the accuracy of historic settings, the singular qualities of their models’ forms and faces, and the botanical details of flowers and plants. They refused to idealize the world which they depicted, instead showing people and objects as they were. Chris Brooks proposes that this realism, like so much of Pre-Raphaelite art, was centered on the creation of meaning: the artists wanted to depict things as they were, but also to interpret reality through that depiction, and “the technique of Pre-Raphaelite painting is thus not only the means whereby the world is represented, but also the primary vehicle for carrying the meaning of the world so depicted.” This claim is supported by the Pre-Raphaelites’ close interaction with the theories of John Ruskin. Brooks cites Ruskin as one of the main figures of Victorian symbolic realism, “a strategy whereby the complexities of existence – the sheer quantity of things needing to be seen as they really are – may be set in significant order, given a structure of meaning.” Ruskin, the most important art critic of the nineteenth century, did not approve of the idealism, vagueness, and vapidity of popular art; in his artistic writings, especially Modern Painters, he railed against the standards of the artistic establishment, and it does not seem surprising that the rebellious Pre-Raphaelites felt a connection to his theories. After all, they wanted their art to be full of meaning, and in Modern Painters Ruskin expressed his belief that “He is the greatest artist who has embodied, in the sum of his works, the greatest number of the greatest ideas.” The Pre-Raphaelites found a voice and, soon, an advocate in Ruskin, and followed his tenets to varying degrees; his extolling of the exact painting

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9 Ibid., 119.
of the natural world would prove to be very important to Millais, as will be discussed in Chapter 2, but his theories also were important to Rossetti and Morris.

Despite their general devotion to truth and accuracy in their works, the supposed “Pre-Raphael” Brothers generally did not pursue techniques or styles that were exactly in keeping with medieval or early Renaissance art. Rossetti did prove the exception to this rule, as will be discussed in Chapter 2, and Morris, later, would also turn to medieval techniques for the production of handicrafts. However, the general practices of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood were not based in any particular knowledge or imitation of medieval and early Renaissance Italian art. They did value the pure, bright color of Quattrocento (fifteenth-century) Italian painting and its use of flat space, and some of the early Pre-Raphaelite works, such as Millais’ *Lorenzo and Isabella* (Figure 3) and Hunt’s *Rienzi Vowing to Obtain Justice for the Death of his Young Brother Slain in a Skirmish between the Colonna and the Orsini Factions* (Figure 4), both of 1848-9, were set in medieval Italy. However, in most of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, that was as far as the visual influence of pre-Raphael art extended. This may seem surprising, as the group did claim to be “Pre-Raphaelite.” Their choice of this title might be chalked up to a burst of iconoclasm from a group of very young artists dissatisfied with the art establishment. To claim to be pre-Raphael was to claim to be anti-Raphael, a hugely rebellious move considering the significance of Raphael in the accepted artistic canon, but the artists did not even have an extensive knowledge of the era they claimed as their own. At London’s National Gallery, the first early Italian work had been purchased in 1848, but major
collecting of Quattrocento works did not begin until after 1850\textsuperscript{11}. The Pre-Raphaelites’ major knowledge of Italian art before Raphael was therefore drawn almost exclusively from the group’s close study of Carlo Lasinio’s fairly inaccurate 1828 engravings of the Campo Santo frescoes in Pisa (Figure 5). Despite the group’s ignorance, however, there was a definite idealistic choice implicit in their choice of the name Pre-Raphaelite, and it was based as much upon their search for meaning and truth as it was upon their youthful rebellion.

The Pre-Raphaelite Brothers considered the work of the Quattrocento to have been truer in feeling and in style than the work of Raphael and those who followed him. According to Hunt, who in his later years wrote a chronicle of the Brotherhood, the Pre-Raphaelites valued the “naïve traits of frank expression and unaffected grace”\textsuperscript{12} they found in the engravings of the Campo Santo frescoes. They enjoyed what they had seen of pre-Raphael art because it seemed genuine and deeply felt, unaffected by later developments in the art canon which favored smoothness and idealization or by the sentimentality of Victorian popular art. Therefore, they looked to pre-Raphael Italy as a period when thought and emotion were freely expressed in art; their choice to call themselves Pre-Raphaelite was, again, linked to their desire to make art filled with meaning. When they did draw visual or thematic inspiration from this era, as in their relatively medievalist early works, the Brothers never pursued an exact imitation of “primitive” Italian art; rather, they pursued an adaptive historicism, meshing archaic forms, such as general flatness of composition and an abundance of symbolic objects, with a realism which was all their own, creating works in a style

\textsuperscript{11} Barringer, \textit{Reading the Pre-Raphaelites}, 34.
\textsuperscript{12} Qtd. in Prettejohn, \textit{The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites}, 27.
which was meant to be both true to their idealized pre-Raphael period and to the specificity of human and natural forms.

In the pursuit of a new style filled with truth and meaning the Pre-Raphaelite Brothers also strove for “true” depictions of their subjects, staying accurate to the mood or narrative of their inspirations and studying the history of costume and architecture in an effort to create accurate settings. In their search for meaning they chose not to depict domestic genre paintings, or literary anecdotes, instead choosing dramatic and romantic literary subjects, religious scenes, or scenes of modern life. The Pre-Raphaelites’ chosen subjects were not meant to simply amuse and entertain the viewer; rather, they were intended to convey meaning, evoking strong emotions and intellectual thought.

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood split only a few years after its inception. The artists, as they aged, moved in different artistic directions. Millais and Hunt continued to pursue realism, and influenced further developments in that artistic realm, while Rossetti moved deeper into medievalism and, eventually, into a style drawn from Venetian Renaissance painting; his works were especially influential in the growth of aestheticism at the end of the century. However, Pre-Raphaelitism did not end when the Brotherhood separated, nor even when its original artists began to move away from their initial Pre-Raphaelite styles. All of the artists retained at least some of their initial Pre-Raphaelite belief in meaning and the creation of atypical images, and elements of the style were taken up by a number of painters. However, the most significant inheritor of Pre-Raphaelitism was never much of a painter; though he
trained with Rossetti, William Morris found his calling in design. A man of inestimable energy and creativity, he devoted his life to the decorative arts, setting up a design firm and generating a huge output of stained glass, weavings, embroideries, books, and pattern designs for fabric and wallpaper. He was an adaptive medievalist in the type of Rossetti, shaping earlier influences to fit his own ideas and conceptual processes, but he was also a great Ruskinian who valued nature above all else, and paid close attention to natural detail and truth in all his works. Most of all, though, Morris was a Pre-Raphaelite who poured significance into every piece of work and valued nothing unless it had some meaning, some ideal, behind its creation.

I have undertaken, in this thesis, to address the Pre-Raphaelite ideal of meaningful art by investigating the ways in which three artists, Millais, Rossetti, and Morris, chose to communicate meaning through their explorations of plant life. Through their depictions of plants the three artists explored the evocation of thoughts and feelings, drawing upon traditions of symbolism and their own experiences of nature while also working with the new theory of truth to nature. I hope to demonstrate how Millais, Rossetti, and Morris exploited layers of significance in plant life in order to communicate as much meaning as possible to their viewers, and that this urge to communicate meaning united the often disjointed Pre-Raphaelite movement.

Though the significance of plants in Pre-Raphaelite paintings is generally acknowledged in writing on the movement, there is no one work which takes into account how the interrelations of the group can be seen within their uses of plants.
For example, though Allen Staley’s excellent 1974 work, *The Pre-Raphaelite Landscape*, is important to an understanding of how certain Pre-Raphaelites interacted with the landscape and with nature, it is devoted largely to the truth-to-nature Pre-Raphaelites, Millais and Hunt, as well as associated artists such as Ford Madox Brown and the Ruskinian landscape painters such as John Inchbold and John Brett. Other important works on the Pre-Raphaelites generally take into consideration the ways in which different artists used nature when discussing that particular artist; if there is a discussion of Pre-Raphaelite addressing of plants and nature in general, it again focuses on the ideal of truth to nature, neglecting the significance of plant life in the works of Rossetti and other Pre-Raphaelite artists. Also, though Morris is often discussed as a second-generation Pre-Raphaelite, works concerning the movement in generally pay him less attention than seems merited by his extensive, and distinctly Pre-Raphaelite, work. Writings specifically concerning Morris do take into account his close relationship with nature and his work with plant forms, but I believe that a study of Morris’s work with plant life needs to be incorporated with a study of that of other Pre-Raphaelites in order to show how his famous nature-inspired design work reflects Pre-Raphaelite thought and ideology. There simply is not any work which shows Pre-Raphaelite plants for what they were: a commonality among all the Pre-Raphaelites, a type used and changed by each artist depending on his theories and ideals, and powerful enough to carry on into other forms of art at the hands of William Morris.
My selection of artists and works for this project was not arbitrary. I chose to work with the art of Millais, Rossetti, and Morris because I found that certain pieces by those artists particularly embodied the trends I saw and wished to elucidate with this project. This choice of course meant neglecting other artists who made significant contributions to the Pre-Raphaelite exploration of plant life and meaning, but the scale of this project demanded a narrowing of the subject matter.

In the early works of Millais and Rossetti, from the period when the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood still existed, one can find those artists’ most significant explorations of the meanings and uses of plants in painting; in Morris one can see the continuation, and possibly the culmination, of these explorations. Though Rossetti continued to use plants in his art throughout his life, it is in his early paintings that one can see the most concentrated, studied interactions with the meanings of plant life; *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* is especially overflowing in meaningful, symbolic plants. Millais, meanwhile, abandoned his most significant painting of plants and nature after several years, so as with Rossetti, Millais’s most significant uses of plant life are found in his early works. In *Ophelia* even the ostensive subject is almost subsumed by the plants which encroach upon every corner of the canvas; though he used plants and nature in other works, *Ophelia* is his most significant exploration of the ideals of truth to nature. Morris, who generally integrated his ideals into every aspect of his life and work, also changed less over time; much the same thoughts dominate his late work as his early, though he worked in multiple media over his long life. The great problem with Morris, then, is how to choose one aspect of his extensive works; in this case, it seems particularly revealing to look at his work in
pattern-design. He devoted more than fifteen years to his work in fabrics and wallpapers, and he drew upon nature and plants for all of those patterns. The patterns are therefore particularly good examples of Morris’s extensive exploration of natural forms, and particularly good places to start when studying Morris’s creative interaction with the natural world. The three artists I have chosen show the variety of Pre-Raphaelitism, but also its commonalities and its continuity, with the sometimes divergent works of Millais and Rossetti both reflecting the thoughts of the movement at its inception, and Morris showing how those ideas later evolved and grew.

As can be seen from the examples given above, John Everett Millais, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and William Morris sought meaning on many different artistic levels: they looked, often simultaneously, to realism and symbolism, historicism and modernism, while striving to communicate thoughts and ideals to their viewers. As I have argued, in these three artists’ depictions of plant life, many levels of artistic meaning are presented, and a careful viewer will see in the artists’ works a central urge for meaning in art which dominated the work of the Pre-Raphaelites. This is what I will demonstrate in the chapters which follow.
John Everett Millais worked in several different artistic styles in his life. He began his artistic career as an eleven-year-old prodigy at the Royal Academy before rebelling against his training to pursue Pre-Raphaelitism. In his later years he turned to an early sort of Aestheticism before returning to a more conventional style and becoming a member of the Royal Academy. In his Pre-Raphaelite days, however, he was deeply invested in his pursuit of Pre-Raphaelite ideals, making images filled with truth and meaning. His *Ophelia* (Figure 6), of 1851-1852, was his greatest Pre-Raphaelite work, and it is a significant aid not only to our understanding of Millais as a Pre-Raphaelite, but also to our understanding of the ways in which the Pre-Raphaelites explored meaning and truth through their artistic explorations of natural and literary inspirations.

Most authors of studies of the Pre-Raphaelites address Millais’s *Ophelia* in some depth; however, they tend to devote their attention to the painting as a study in Ruskinian truth to nature. While *Ophelia* is an excellent example of that artistic method, I feel that by focusing on truth to nature writers and critics tend to overlook the significance of Millais’s interaction with his painting’s literary source, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, and the text’s and image’s inherent symbolic content. While I
believe that Millais’s treatment of Ruskinian theory is important, I also wish to explore these other aspects of *Ophelia*, and to show how Millais’s attention to text and symbol, as well as truth to nature, are emblematic of his search for an art of deep meaning and significance. I believe that Millais’s interwoven exploration of literary and theoretic themes is expressed in his treatment of plant life in *Ophelia*, and it is from that aspect of the work that I will draw my larger conclusions about the work. *Ophelia* shows the multi-layered significances which simple details, such as the plants and flowers of the English countryside, could hold when employed by an artist bent upon filling his paintings with meaning and theory. For Millais plants were not simply a decoration to be added, logically, to outdoor scenes; they were symbols inherited from a specific literary and cultural milieu, they were an indicator of the effort he exerted to be true to his literary precedent, and they were evidence of his adherence to the truth-to-nature theories of the critic John Ruskin. In his *Ophelia* Millais adhered stringently to his inspiration, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, and filled his imaginative, unusual image with Shakespeare’s meanings and his own, exploring both symbolism and an exacting study of nature. Millais thereby integrated the Pre-Raphaelite interest in literary precedent and symbolism with another layer of meaning, striving for the truth and beauty Ruskin felt could only be communicated by an artist who studied nature closely. Every aspect of *Ophelia* is part of Millais’s close examination and depiction of the landscape and subject, but everything also relates to the narrative and Shakespeare’s text, and it is this integration of earlier Pre-Raphaelite thought with Ruskinian theory that truly sets the work apart from other works by Millais, and, even, from all other Pre-Raphaelite art. *Ophelia* is the epitome of the
Pre-Raphaelites’ explorations of Ruskin not only because it is so true to its natural inspiration, but because it shows how Millais was able to combine Ruskin with previous Pre-Raphaelite thought and style to make an especially forceful, striking, and thought-provoking piece.

*Ophelia* was one of several works that Millais painted for the 1852 Royal Academy Exhibition. Ophelia was a fairly popular subject of the time, and many painters showed her in her madness, or even just before her fall. However, Millais chose an even more dramatic moment, depicting Ophelia after her fall, floating downriver on her back, her mouth agape as though still singing her mad songs. It is a liminal point in Ophelia’s tragic fate; her death has been set in motion, but has not yet occurred. She will drown once her gown is water-logged enough to pull her under, but for the moment she is alive. This liminality provokes a tension which is furthered by the formal aspects of the work. The painting is remarkably claustrophobic; the image has no background, only the far bank on the river, which is hemmed in by dense undergrowth. Only a tiny sliver of sky shows through at the top of the image, and even that is crisscrossed by branches. There is little depth of field; everything seems pushed to the painting’s surface by the illogical perspective (it would be difficult to look down at Ophelia but also across at the far bank of the stream). The river seems ready to spill out of the bottom of the painting, and the plants of the riverbanks encroach upon the painting’s edges. There is little visual variation or respite. The entire scene is green, brown, black, and of similar tones; only Ophelia’s grayish dress and the flowers of the bank and Ophelia’s bouquet break the monotony.
There is also no empty space; even the water is filled with carefully painted detail, and the small window of sky is broken up, rather than allowed to provide an expanse of light and color. Ophelia’s dress, the only expanse of light tones in the image, is similarly broken up by detail. Everything is done to great detail, and the painting is dominated by plant life; Ophelia’s scattered flowers are joined in the water by plants native to the stream, algae and reeds, and the upper half of the painting is filled with the dense growth on the riverbank. Even Ophelia’s gown is covered in a stylized floral pattern. The plants frame Ophelia, drawing attention to her figure. Bright green algae and reeds surround her on three sides, drawing attention to her form but also constraining her; only the area above her face and hands is left open, framed instead by a darker, receding willow trunk. The face and hands, the most expressive aspects of Ophelia’s form, are also the only parts of her body left uncovered by her gown, and a patch of dark water, the only area of the painting left devoid of plants and detail, provides the background to these expressive elements, drawing attention to Ophelia, her mad expression and her coming tragic fate. Everywhere else, plants filled the scene, providing a background and framing Ophelia and yet insisting upon the viewer’s attention by merit of their carefully painted detail and their sheer abundance.

In *Ophelia* the ostensive background, the plants, were given as much close painterly attention as the foreground, so that every plant has its exact form detailed upon the canvas. The species of plants are easily identified; there are a willow tree, wild roses, and forget-me-nots on the bank and a variety of blooms, such as poppies and violets, floating in the water among the algae. The plants are unidealized; some of the reeds in the stream are broken or half-dead, the flowers and bushes on the far
shore grow among each other, intertwining and overlapping, and the willow tree is bent and misshapen, with branches springing out of its trunk at all angles rather than growing in an ordered manner. The plants are so detailed and natural that they actually take on an aspect of unreality which is directly related to the image’s strangeness, its flatness and odd perspective, and to Millais’s unorthodox method of painting the landscape.

While standard academic treatments of the natural world were focused on the ideal layout of a piece of land, Millais concentrated instead on depicting every inch of his chosen landscape exactly “as it was,” despite the fact that this practice took a great deal of time. Millais sat on the bank of the River Hogsmill near Ewell, Surrey, for four months in summer and fall 1851 in order to get the plant-filled background of Ophelia exactly right. This long period of continuous work meant that different plants came in and out of season; Ophelia shows flowers blooming together – such as the forget-me-not and the rose – that would not bloom together in nature. The close attention Millais paid to every detail of his work affected not only the temporality of his work, however; it also may have led to the strange spatiality of the image discussed above. Allan Staley points out that in Millais’s explorations of truth to nature “rationally ordered space is sacrificed to concentration upon natural detail;”¹ this meant a split with traditional landscape painting, with its emphasis on rational, ideal space, but it also led to a painted space which is difficult for the human eye to comprehend. The eye does not see every inch of its surroundings in equal detail; it focuses on one aspect, and everything else fades into the background, blurred by the action of the eye’s natural depth-of-focus. This blurring effect leads to a

comprehension of depth and space, even in a two-dimensional image, and it is absent in *Ophelia*’s closely studied details. The strange flatness and warped perspective of *Ophelia* therefore may be partially attributable to the unusual focus Millais gave to every aspect of the work. Showing each area of the larger two-dimensional image as it would look if the human eye was focused only on that three-dimensional area of the riverbank leads to the creation of an image that does not imitate the way the eye functions, and therefore diverges from nature even in its attempt to imitate it with the most exactitude possible.

The amount of time and attention that Millais devoted to the background of *Ophelia* attests to how he privileged the depiction of nature in that work. Millais and Hunt spent five months together in Surrey, working on the backgrounds of their 1852 Exhibition paintings; when they returned to London, they devoted less than four months to painting all the figures their paintings required.² Whereas in academic painting figures were the most important part of the work (as demonstrated by the emphasis on figure-drawing study in art schools), for Millais even painting the titular subject of his work demanded less time than drawing the intricate background. When one considers how difficult it would have been for Millais to paint, with extreme accuracy, the half-submerged, fabric-draped figure of Ophelia, this time allotment seems like a particularly important choice on the painter’s part. His devotion of such a large amount of time to what was, nominally, not his subject is evidence that his priorities did not rest exclusively in the narrative of his paintings. If his attention had been on Ophelia alone, he might have made sketches of some stream or another then

² Ibid., 23.
worked up an idealized river in the studio before laboring over his floating figure; instead, he devoted himself to four months of hard work in the field.

Painting *Ophelia* was not an easy task, and Millais struggled and complained. From stories surrounding the painting’s creation it seems that he could be a perfectionist, and considering the intensely detailed work his style required, this is unsurprising. According to Hunt, when the two painters began their work in Surrey Hunt found a suitable site quickly, but Millais spent much of a day searching for the perfect setting for *Ophelia*; when he found it, in Hunt’s words, “he pointed exultantly, saying, ‘Look, what can be more perfect?’”³ If Millais was to spend months painting a scene from nature, it had to be right; if he wanted to have a painting of Ophelia floating in a stream surrounded by lush plant life, he would have to find just that. Locating the perfect scene was only part of his problems, though; every annoyance of working outside was only magnified by the fact that he had consigned himself to that work for some months, and he wrote long and sometimes humorous complaints about the sun, the wind, the flies, and all the other problems of painting *en plein air*. However, he persisted, and according to his biographer G.H. Fleming, “he was pleased with his canvas, probably his most Pre-Raphaelite work.”⁴ This statement, however, raises a question: if the Pre-Raphaelites were, by name, an archaizing group, how is it that a painting most defined by its exacting depiction of plant life can be considered as Millais’s most Pre-Raphaelite work?

The first response to this question relates to the Pre-Raphaelites’ rather misleading name. Despite their name, the group was not particularly well-versed in

⁴ Ibid., 79.
Pre-Raphael painting, as I discuss in my introduction. They seem to have chosen to call themselves Pre-Raphaelite because they felt that painting before Raphael was more meaningful than that of Raphael’s followers and, especially, the modern art establishment which so valued the smoothness and idealization associated with Raphael and those that followed him in the Italian Renaissance. The Pre-Raphaelites were never direct revivalists in the mode of Augustus Pugin, the leader of the Gothic Revival in the 1830s, who had more wished to return to the medieval era than to adapt it to the modern world. Even in 1849’s *Lorenzo and Isabella* (Figure 3), which is marked not only by a medieval subject but by careful accuracy to medieval dress and by a flatness and oddness of perspective imitative of Quattrocento Italian art, Millais endeavored to make exact, realistic studies of his models’ forms and faces. Every figure, instead of having vague or idealized features, is based very directly on a real person, or a combination of several sitters; several members of the Pre-Raphaelite circle can be recognized around the table. Millais soon moved away from medievalist themes and style of *Lorenzo and Isabella*, but he continued to refine the exacting realism already visible in that early work. He began to paint works marked by their attention not only to the individuality of the human form, but also to the individuality of every element of the natural world. In 1851’s *Mariana* (Figure 7) a sliver of nature entices outside the window, and carefully painted leaves mix with the embroidery on the maiden’s table. In Millais’s works of the next year, his figures enter the natural world outside the window, and the plants come to demand as much attention as the people they surround.
Millais’s works of 1851-2, especially *Ophelia*, that period’s masterwork, represent a sea change within the movement which swept along Millais, Hunt, and Brown while leaving others, most notably Dante Gabriel Rossetti, behind. Devoting a great amount of time and creative energy to the plant-filled background of *Ophelia* was not simply an aesthetic choice on Millais’s part; it was an exploration of how one could add another level of meaning to works drawn from literary sources. The Pre-Raphaelite painting of outdoor scenes was an experiment which had its roots, above all, in their overriding impulse to create something new and meaningful, something that was true to nature as well as to source texts and the artist’s own imagination. Allen Staley, in his book *The Pre-Raphaelite Landscape*, argues that these explorations of truth to nature epitomized by *Ophelia* “henceforth would be regarded as the essential Pre-Raphaelite quality.”

That apparently commonly held view, when it is based solely on a consideration of style, can be seen as a matter of opinion; even in their earliest days of Brotherhood the Pre-Raphaelite artists were such a varied group that choosing a particular style as quintessentially Pre-Raphaelite is an essentially subjective choice. However, if this opinion were carried over into a consideration of the Pre-Raphaelites’ artistic theory, it would be false. The new artistic direction of painting exacting depictions of nature did not mean a shift in Pre-Raphaelite philosophy. The painter’s works still had a strong basis in history and literature, and they were still focused on the creation of art which was filled with purpose. Their rebellious desire for meaningful art continued unabated, but was transferred into a new, exactly realistic naturalism.

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When considering why Millais devoted himself to the close study and exacting depiction of the natural world, one must turn first to John Ruskin. Ruskin was a hugely influential, and hugely prolific, critic; his writings won Turner lasting recognition as one of the great British painters, and he made the most important argument for the acceptance and admiration of the Pre-Raphaelites by the general public. However, it was not only the public that came under the heavy influence of his words; so, too, did the artistic world. The first two volumes of his eventually five-volume *Modern Painters* (conceived, initially, as a defense of Turner) were published just as the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood began to meet and form its ideals for a new and more meaningful art. William Holman Hunt read *Modern Painters* and introduced the work to his Pre-Raphaelite brothers, and they all soon began exploring the implications of Ruskin’s ideas in their works. In the first volume of *Modern Painters* Ruskin wrote that young painters “should go to nature in all singleness of heart, and walk with her laboriously and trustingly, having no other thoughts but how best to penetrate her meaning, and remember her instruction, rejecting nothing, selecting nothing, and scorning nothing; believing all things to be right and good, and rejoicing always in the truth.”⁶ In Ruskin’s later pamphlet *Pre-Raphaelitism* he would claim the artists of the Brotherhood as the ultimate followers of his call to action in *Modern Painters*. The Pre-Raphaelites did not follow Ruskin’s tenets exactly, and their works certainly do not look like Turner paintings, but Ruskin seems to have appreciated the Pre-Raphaelites’ insistence on filling their works with meaning and realism, and he quickly became their great advocate. Ruskin’s writings, beginning with his 1851 letters to the *Times* in protest of their bad reviews of the Pre-

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Raphaelites, helped to raise a greater public acceptance and appreciation of Pre-Raphaelite art. His patronage, advocacy, and friendship were hugely important to the success of the Pre-Raphaelite group.

Ruskin introduced himself to Millais and William Holman Hunt after they wrote to him in response to his second *Times* letter. He quickly became an associate of the young artists, and an especially close friend and mentor to Millais.⁷ Ruskin was therefore a hugely important figure in the life of Millais in the early 1850s, both as a critic and as a friend, and it is important to address exactly what Ruskin advocated to Millais and his fellow artists.

Millais’s and Hunt’s endeavors to show nature with great exactitude have marked them as the most Ruskinian Pre-Raphaelites, though much Pre-Raphaelite thought owes itself at least somewhat to Ruskin’s theory and criticism. Ruskin’s interests and areas of expertise were numerous and varied. Well-traveled and well-educated, he studied geology at Cambridge but was also an artist in his own right, producing innumerable drawings and watercolors from a young age. He was a man of starkly defined tastes and morals, and, in fact, for Ruskin the two were inextricable. For Ruskin, as with many Victorian critics and artists, stylistic choices had moral, religious, and social connotations that stretched far beyond personal preferences in art. Ruskin’s Pre-Darwinian study of science was an exercise in the glorification of God’s works, and so too was his art. In 1842, Ruskin gave up his previous method of picture-making, which was marked by stylistic imitation as well as obvious technical ability. Instead, after a revelatory experience painting “a few ivy leaves around a

stump in a hedgerow”\(^8\) on a road south of London, Ruskin began drawing directly from nature. In simple studies of hedgerows and trees he found that objects from nature “‘composed’ themselves, by finer laws than any known of men.”\(^9\) Ruskin believed that by making close studies of nature he was studying and glorifying the work of God. When he argued against the traditions of academic landscape painting, which produced idealized, generalized images of nature, it was not simply because he preferred the look of works by Turner or Millais; it was also because he believed that the vapid, idealized academic paintings were representative of moral failure.

The careful rendering of nature represented not only a new style for Millais; it was also the expression of a new ideology. The paintings Millais and Hunt produced in the summer of 1851 were expressions of the height of Ruskin’s influence on the young artists. According to Allen Staley, Millais and Hunt, downtrodden after the savage critical reception of their previous year’s Exhibition works, might not have even begun any ambitious work in 1851 had it not been for Ruskin’s public defense of their work and ideals, and Millais was, at the time of the Surrey expedition, hugely excited about his new friendship with Ruskin.\(^10\) *Ophelia* can therefore be seen as an answer to the call Millais’s newfound friend and mentor had put out some years before.

There are many parallels between Ruskin’s writing and Millais’s method and work. Many statements in *Modern Painters* mark *Ophelia*, with its precise rendering of what is essentially a weedy river bank, as a quintessential work in the Ruskinian,

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\(^9\) Qtd. in Ibid.
truth-to-nature understanding of Pre-Raphaelitism. Ruskin wrote, in the first volume of *Modern Painters*,

It will be the duty, - the imperative duty, - of the landscape painter, to descend to the lowest details with undiminished attention. Every herb and flower of the field has its specific, distinct, and perfect beauty; it has its peculiar habitation, expression, and function. The highest art is that which seizes this specific character, which develops and illustrates it, which assigns to it its proper place in the landscape, and which, by means of it, enhances and enforces the great impression which the picture is intended to convey.¹¹

To Ruskin, this statement was a moral imperative. The “specific, distinct, and perfect beauty” of each piece of plant life derived directly from God. To generalize was to all but erase the perfection that God had engendered on Earth. Millais spent months studying his chosen patch of riverbank so he could do just as Ruskin wrote, depicting each flower and leaf and blade of grass as it was, trying to capture “its peculiar habitation, expression, and function.” It was not, to quote Ruskin again, “detail sought for its own sake…. (but) referred to a great end, - sought for the sake of the inestimable beauty which exists in the slightest and least of God’s works.”¹² Millais found the “weedy bank” of which Ruskin wrote repeatedly in *Modern Painters* and used it not just as a landscape but as a setting for a very Pre-Raphaelite scene. Though he was striving for an artistic goal, rather than one founded in religion, in *Ophelia* Millais mixed together naturalism with symbolism and literature to create a work which, to quote Ruskin yet again, “embodied… the greatest number of the greatest ideas,”¹³ a goal which was quintessentially both Ruskinian and Pre-Raphaelite.

¹³ Ibid., 12.
In *Ophelia* Millais did not only work towards Ruskinian truth to nature; he also reinforced earlier Pre-Raphaelite ideals, such as the abandonment of academic tradition and the embrace of literary sources. The Pre-Raphaelites had formed to fight against the standards of the academy and to bring significance back to art. In his interpretation of Ruskinian ideals Millais did not abandon the original Pre-Raphaelite ideal of reintroducing meaning to art; rather, he adapted that ideal to take in more concepts, more meanings. Ruskin was not the sole source of Pre-Raphaelite thought in 1851; rather, his theories fit well with other trends in the movement at the time. Ruskin had concluded that the Pre-Raphaelites were the inheritors of the tenets set forth in *Modern Painters* because they already showed a tendency towards realistic detail in their works. One of the common complaints against Millais’s much-maligned *Christ in the House of His Parents* (1849-1850, Figure 8) was that the image was simply too real; the carpenter’s shop was strewn with wood debris, clothes and skin showed signs of dirt and wear, and faces were drawn from models, not ideals. This detail in faces had always been true in Millais’s paintings, and in many works of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and the Brothers had also striven for at least some degree of historical accuracy in costumes and settings. The impulse for realism had been there, but it was Ruskin who moved that impulse into the landscape, where accurate depictions of nature could take center stage in even the most literary paintings – paintings such as *Ophelia*.

Choosing Ophelia as a subject was not particularly revolutionary, but the way Millais depicted her was, and his use of plant life was an important factor in his new depiction of the tragic heroine. According to Kimberly Rhodes, other Victorian artists
did depict Ophelia (she was, in fact, the most common Shakespearean woman in Victorian art) and some even used her death as their subject; however, they generally chose showed her before her fall or leap into the stream.\(^{14}\) In Victorian painting, as on the Victorian stage, Ophelia was depicted as a lovelorn innocent, pathetic but not desperate.\(^{15}\) In paintings of Ophelia by Richard Redgrave (Figure 9, 1842) and Arthur Hughes (Figure 10, 1852), Ophelia looks disconnected, but not crazed, and the scenes are calm and unthreatening, despite the given conclusion, that soon enough Ophelia will tumble into the stream and drown. Millais’s depiction of the character, however, differed in slight but important ways. He did not succumb to the sentimentality of depicting a “fallen innocent;” he chose to show her as a character of at least some activity, madly singing and standing (so to speak) on the threshold of death, not blithely dropping flowers into a stream before the fulfillment of her doom. He also did not place typical emphasis on Ophelia as the subject, instead incorporating her into the scene, whereas Hughes and Redgrave had made their Ophelias the highly illuminated, finely painted centers of vaguely painted scenes. The combination of Millais’s style and his lack of sentimentality was found distasteful by art critics; in a review of the 1852 Exhibition the journal *Athenaeum* wrote that “There must be something strangely perverse in an imagination which sooses Ophelia in a weedy ditch, and robs the drowning struggle of that lovelorn maiden of all pathos and beauty, while it studies every petal of the darnel and anemone floating on the eddy.”\(^{16}\) Similarly, a critic for *The Art-Journal* stated that while Millais followed Shakespeare

\(^{14}\) Kimberly Rhodes, "Degenerate Detail: John Everett Millais and Ophelia's 'Muddy Death'," in *John Everett Millais: Beyond the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, ed. Debra N. Mancoff (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 2001), 43.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 45.

\(^{16}\) ‘Fine Arts – The Royal Academy,’ *Athenaeum* 25 (1852): 581. Qtd. in Ibid., 53.
to the last detail, the painting left “other conditions” unfulfilled – conditions Rhodes posits were the sympathetic and sentimental feelings that were expected in a painting of Ophelia’s death. Critics seem to have thought, then, that Millais’s concentration on his detailed naturalism obscures or devalues the nominative subject of his painting, the half-drowned Ophelia. This opinion is still popular today. Rhodes accepts the views of these Victorian critics, writing that “Millais privileged surface effect over content and divested the literary heroine of her traditional emotive impact in favour of a sensationalistic style.” Allen Staley, similarly, writes in *The Pre-Raphaelite Landscape* that “what is most distinctive in *Ophelia* is the degree to which everything theatrical is subordinated to the depiction of the natural world.” However, I would argue that this view is skewed by expectations of what a painting of Ophelia must be. The subject of *Ophelia* is not lost among Millais’s depiction of the natural world, but incorporated into the overall value and meaning of the work; she is not the entire focus, but one part of Millais’s equal treatment of truth to nature and to text in his search for meaning.

Millais gave great attention to making *Ophelia* true not only to its landscape setting, but also to its literary source; his interpretation of Shakespeare’s text was driven by a desire for accuracy, and his choice of Ophelia’s death scene, in particular, allowed him the freedom to pursue both sorts of accuracy at once. In *Hamlet* Ophelia’s death is an off-stage event, described after the fact by Hamlet’s mother, Gertrude, in Act 4, Scene 7. This means that depictions of the scene are not restricted by stage direction or dialogue, or a history of dramatic presentations of the event;

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17 Qtd in Ibid.
18 Ibid.
there is more opportunity for the artist to make his own interpretation of the scene. By choosing this scene Millais allowed himself room for perfect accuracy and, yet, perfect imagination; he is restricted only by Gertrude’s description, which fits perfectly with his chosen outdoor scene. Gertrude’s speech on the event is dominated by imagery of flowers and plants:

There is a willow grows askant the brook,
That shoes his hoar leaves in the glassy stream;
Therewith fantastic garlands did she make
Of crowflowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
But our cold maids do dead mean’s fingers call them.
There on the pendent boughs her crownet weeds
Clamb’ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,
When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,
And mermaidlike awhile they bore her up,
Which time she chanted snatched of old lauds,
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and endued
Unto that element. But long it could not be
Till her garments, heavy with their drink,
Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death.  

Millais was careful to include the details of Gertrude’s painting, from the arch of the willow and the types of flowers to the spreading of Ophelia’s clothes and her singing of songs, in his painting. Millais’s Ophelia floats along the brook just as Gertrude described her, and surrounded by plants associated with her character. Millais was not satisfied with only including the plants described by Gertrude in his depiction of Ophelia; he also included plants from Ophelia’s mad speech of Act 4, Scene 5 (see below), which is her last appearance on stage. He thereby added reference to her

unhappiness and insanity and further tied the woman in the stream to the character of Shakespeare’s play.

The plants Millais drew from Gertrude and Ophelia’s speeches, and some other plants in the painting, as well, are not only exact depictions of the natural world and exact representations of Shakespeare’s words; they are also symbols, carefully picked by Shakespeare and Millais, of Ophelia’s sad fate. Shakespeare chose the plants of Gertrude and Ophelia’s scenes carefully, filling the women’s words with secondary meaning, and he even went so far as to explain some of these plants through his characters’ voices. Gertrude points out the sexual and deathly associations of the orchids Ophelia gathered before her death: “long purples, / That liberal shepherds give a grosser name, / But our cold maids do dead mean’s fingers call them,” emphasizing Hamlet’s scandalous scorning of Ophelia and her position as the “cold maid,” both separate from love and dead. In her mad scene Ophelia also gives a voice to the meanings of plants, going through a bouquet she has gathered and handing them to her listeners, saying,

There’s rosemary, that’s for remembrance; pray you, love, remember. And there is pansies; that’s for thoughts…. There’s fennel for you, and columbines. There’s rue for you, and here’s some for me; we may call it herb of grace o’ Sundays. You must wear your rue with a difference. There’s a daisy. I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died.21

Every flower Ophelia speaks of is emblematic of her situation; even the ones she names without giving explicit meaning has symbolic significance. Fennel indicates flattery, columbines “unchastity or ingratitude,” rue repentance; daisies, which are

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21 Ibid., IV.v.173-81.
also mentioned in Gertrude’s speech, are symbols of “love’s victims and… faithlessness,” and violets, which she says withered when her father died at her lover Hamlet’s hands, are emblems of faithfulness. Millais was careful to include these blooms, thereby relating his painting to both of the plant-centered speeches in his source text, but he was not content even to leave his floral symbolism there, with Gertrude’s and Ophelia’s flowers floating in the stream. As Tim Barringer points out, Millais included other plants which also carried symbolic meaning; “the fritillary, floating in the bottom right-hand corner, stood for sorrow; a poppy, by Ophelia’s right hand, for death; the name of the forget-me-nots is self-explanatory.”

Like Rossetti and the other Pre-Raphaelites, Millais included plants in this and other works which could easily be “read” by contemporary viewers, adding a layer of symbolism which was in keeping with the Brotherhood’s aim for meaning and with larger Victorian cultural understanding. Therefore, the plants in Ophelia reinforce the image’s meaning, adding more metaphorical detail to the death scene and aiding the viewer’s “reading” of the work as well as revealing Millais’s artistic ideologies, his truth to text and to nature.

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22 Ibid., 101 n. 84, 85, 87, 88.
23 Barringer, Reading the Pre-Raphaelites, 62. Fritillary is a type of lily.
24 Victorian understandings of the “reading” of images and the language of flowers will be discussed further in Chapter 2.
Beverly Seaton questions in her book, *The Language of Flowers*, whether that forget-me-not growing on the bank of the stream might hold a symbolic meaning,\(^25\) and as Barringer pointed out, it very well could. However, it might also have simply been a plant growing there on the bank, a lucky coincidence. The answer may be unknowable, but the question is indicative of the multi-layered meanings of Millais’s work. Whether or not the forget-me-not holds particular meaning to the subject, it still holds meaning to the overall painting; it could be a symbol or an object copied from nature, or both, and it would not matter, because it would still contribute to the integration of exacting realism and careful symbolism which characterizes *Ophelia*.

Visually, the plants of *Ophelia* draw as much attention as the figure, and the same is true in writing on the work; Millais’s naturalism is given as much, if not more, attention as the subject in critical writing on the painting. This is a reflection of the fact that Millais’s depiction of plant life is integral to the image’s aesthetic and significance. What seems to be forgotten, however, is that the subject is also important. Many critics, as I have shown, think that Ophelia is all but swallowed up, and thereby made secondary, by the plant life that fill the canvas. However, the subject was also hugely important, as is shown by how closely Millais adhered himself to Shakespeare’s text while still devoting himself to his exacting depiction of

nature. It is this integration of truth to nature and truth to text which make Ophelia such a characteristic Pre-Raphaelite work. Some artists may have depicted similar scenes, working with the symbolism of plants and flowers, or achieved a similarly detailed realism, but it was Millais and his peers who, thanks to their extensive readings and their technical skill, managed to integrate both these impulses to create works of art which are singularly dense with detail and meaning.

Ophelia was not Millais’s only experiment in Pre-Raphaelite truth to nature, but it was his greatest, the one in which he found the most potent synthesis of Ruskinian theory and other layers of meaning. The painting viewed as his other great truth-to-nature work, his 1854 Portrait of John Ruskin (Figure 11), does not display Ophelia’s dynamic integration of natural exactitude and other modes of meaning, marking it as less Pre-Raphaelite and more purely Ruskinian. The portrait, which shows Ruskin standing at the edge of a rushing mountain stream at Brig o’Turk, Glenfinlas, is as dominated by rock as Ophelia is by plants, an appropriate choice for a portrait of the geologically-trained art critic. In technique and visual quality, the painting has many parallels with Ophelia. The immensely detailed rocks fill the canvas, leaving no space for sky, and every inch of the work is filled with closely-studied detail. As with Ophelia, the background was painted en plein air, with the
figure added later, though Ruskin was present when the painting of the background was underway.26 Again, as in *Ophelia*, the ostensive background is given as much attention as the subject; the rock and Ruskin share significance. According to Staley, the pasted-on quality of Ruskin’s figure does not only reflect its later addition; “it also reflects Ruskin’s argument in *Modern Painters* that specific and historic facts (such as the lichens and striations of the rocks) are more important than general and transitory ones (such as light and atmosphere) and that expression of the later should not obscure the former.”27 The portrait is even more Ruskinian than *Ophelia*, and not surprisingly; after all, Ruskin himself was there during its inception, surely aiding and critiquing Millais, and going so far as to keep a timetable of Millais’s work.28

Ruskin, at Brig o’Turk, put in a concentrated effort to shape Millais into his ideal artist. Though he supported all the Pre-Raphaelites, and argued for them publicly, privately he had objected to some elements of Hunt’s and Millais’s pictures of the previous year. He made clear that he did not approve of their choice of Surrey for their landscapes, writing, “When you do paint nature why the mischief should you not paint pure nature and not that rascally wirefenced garden-rolled-nursery-maid’s paradise?”29 As early as July 1851 (when Millais was working on *Ophelia*) Ruskin

26 Staley, *The Pre-Raphaelite Landscape*, 51.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 50.
29 Qtd. in Ibid., 30.
tried to convince Millais to travel with him to Switzerland.\textsuperscript{30} However, when he and Millais finally traveled together in summer 1853, they went no further afield than the Scottish Highlands – a landscape less sublime than the Alps, perhaps, but far wilder than the fields of Surrey. The portrait of Ruskin painted during that summer in Scotland shows Ruskin at his most involved, and Millais at his most Ruskinian.

Soon after the trip to Scotland, Millais would abandon his pursuit of Ruskinian truth to nature in favor of other styles. This change can be attributed to several factors. First of all, Millais may simply have tired of the labor-intensive work of Ruskinian truth to nature; he had never much liked the extensive \textit{plein air} work it required, complaining throughout the time he spent painting both \textit{Ophelia} and the Ruskin portrait.\textsuperscript{31} However, Millais was also generally moving away from Ruskin and Pre-Raphaelitism, both stylistically and socially; his friendship with the critic soured after their trip to Scotland, and the Brotherhood had by that point largely broken up. Millais, still a young artist, began exploring other ideas in his work, moving away from the ideals of truth and meaning in painting. Works such as \textit{Autumn Leaves}, of 1855-56 (Figure 12), and \textit{The Blind Girl} (Figure 13), of 1854-56, do use nature and detail and symbolism, but to a far slighter degree than \textit{Ophelia}. His later works, rather than reflecting a search for meaning and truth and an exploration of art theory, instead show a search for sensual experience; \textit{Autumn Leaves} evokes a mood and a moment more than a story or concept, and \textit{The Blind Girl} is a visual exploration of the senses,

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 51.
a reflection upon the differences between what the blind beggar and her young sister experience in their surroundings. In both works Millais uses the landscape, and plants, to further his explorations of his chosen scenes, but in neither does he engage deeply with the natural world and its larger artistic and symbolic connotations; the integration of theory, story, and meaning of Ophelia has been lost.

*Ophelia* is the epitome of Millais’s Pre-Raphaelitism because it represents the height of his experimentations with Ruskinian theory and his greatest integration of Ruskin with other paths of Pre-Raphaelite thought and idealism. For this reason, it is also an extremely important work in the history of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. However, it is not the only epitome of Pre-Raphaelite practice or style; the movement was so varied, and worked with so many theories, thoughts, and ideals, that a great many works, sometimes of widely varying styles, can be seen to characterize Pre-Raphaelitism. Not all considerations of Pre-Raphaelitism understand this; many privilege the Pre-Raphaelites’ truth to nature, their exploration of the modern world, or their archaism over all other aspects of their work. I do not believe that this is the most helpful method of looking at the Pre-Raphaelite movement. I have found it most useful to understand Pre-Raphaelitism in terms of the artists’ search for meaning, rather than for any particular theory or style. This privileging of the Pre-Raphaelite search for meaning makes it easy to link *Ophelia* to other works by Millais and also
to those of the other members of the movement, who used their art to express
different, but related, types of meaning.
CHAPTER 2: “AN ANGEL-WATERED LILY, THAT NEAR GOD GROWS, AND IS QUIET:” ROSSETTI’S THE GIRLHOOD OF MARY VIRGIN

Dante Gabriel Rossetti, like his Pre-Raphaelite Brothers, was devoted to creating a higher form of art filled with significance. His paintings were invested with meaning, and his early works were filled with dense symbolism intended to communicate a great deal of information to the viewer. Nowhere is Rossetti’s pursuit of meaning through symbol more overt than in his first work in oil, The Girlhood of Mary Virgin (Figure 14). Painted in 1848-49, when Rossetti was only twenty years old, the work shows signs of Rossetti’s artistic immaturity and lack of training, but it was also very carefully thought out, and reflects Rossetti’s interest in expressing meaning and feeling in art. It represents an ambitious effort both on and off the canvas, both technically and theoretically. Like other Pre-Raphaelite works, it is an intellectual and artistic statement of the ideas and meanings its artist chose to explore.

In The Girlhood of Mary Virgin Rossetti did not aim to explore nature or text; he instead examined the nature of the expression of religious experience and feeling and art. However, the methods and theories he used to pursue this examination of artistic religion were as distinctly Pre-Raphaelite as those Millais used in his Ophelia, and as in all other great Pre-Raphaelite paintings The Girlhood of Mary Virgin was, above all, an exploration of the communication of thought and meaning in art.

Rossetti pursued symbolism and meaning in painting throughout his life. Even his famous late “Venetian” works, which are generally considered not Pre-Raphaelite but Aesthetic (a differentiation I will discuss in my conclusion), are often filled with
plants which are meant to be highly symbolic, as well as serving as beautiful complements to the paintings’ sensual female subjects (see, for example, 1878’s *A Vision of Fiammetta*, Figure 15). Plants are such major aspects of the Venetian paintings, in fact, that it may seem illogical that in this consideration of plants and meaning in Rossetti I have chosen to privilege the early *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* over these more mature, plant-laden works. However, I believe that the meanings Rossetti pursued with the Venetian works’ symbolic plants are not the ultimate example of his work with plants, nor with meaning and symbolism. They are, rather, a diluted example of his impulse to make works filled with meaning and significance, which was, I argue, the most important theme of Pre-Raphaelite art.

Rossetti’s late Venetian works do show that there was a trend throughout Rossetti’s work to communicate meaning to his viewers through symbolism, and *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, his earliest major painting, represents the beginning of that trend. The Venetian works are more subtle in their addressing of symbolism, incorporating plants into a larger aesthetic scheme; however, in *The Girlhood* Rossetti explores artistic meaning and significance to a far greater depth, as reflected by the loading of the image with symbolic objects which have a stranger but more engaging relationship with the painting as a whole. Through *The Girlhood* and its symbolic objects, most of which are plants, the one can interpret Rossetti’s desire for his works to be seen, read, and understood. *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* overtly shows a process which continued throughout Rossetti’s life: the careful consideration of the meanings of his work, its intellectual and psychological repercussions, and how to represent those meanings as carefully painted, easily understood symbolic elements.
The Girlhood of Mary Virgin was meant to be the first painting of a triptych depicting the life of the Virgin. One of the other two works, a depiction of the Annunciation, was realized in Ecce Ancilla Domini, of 1850; the other, which was to show the death of the Virgin, was never created.¹ Both The Girlhood of Mary Virgin and Ecce Ancilla Domini are simultaneously deeply involved in the traditions of Christian painting and set firmly outside them; they are Rossetti’s own personal, Pre-Raphaelite interpretations of the scenes. The Girlhood of Mary Virgin depicts Mary’s education with her mother, St. Anne, though it differs from most paintings of the type by showing Mary embroidering rather than reading, relating her education to Victorian domesticity as well as the Christian iconographical tradition.² Yet, the painting is filled with traditional Christian symbols, which along with its purposefully archaic formal aspects and its originally arched frame (later altered by Rossetti) related it closely to the “Pre-Raphael” Italian sources which Rossetti hoped to imitate. These references to the traditions of Quattrocento Italian painting, and Christian art in general, went to very specific use in The Girlhood, adding layers of meaning to Rossetti’s artistic exploration of the significance of Christian thought and feeling.

Rossetti was studying with William Holman Hunt when he painted The Girlhood of Mary Virgin, and he was also still in close contact with his previous teacher, Ford Madox Brown. Though Rossetti had been a student at the Royal

¹ Alicia Craig Faxon, Dante Gabriel Rossetti (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989), 44.
Academy, he had not been particularly regular in his attendance, and he chose instead to study under particular artists he admired. *The Girlhood* was his first oil, painted when he was only twenty years old and still very open to tutelage and to new ideas. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood came together as he was working on the painting, and it seems that, as with the Brotherhood itself, the painting was created out of a mesh of the ideas of Rossetti and the other members. Like the other Pre-Raphaelites, Rossetti painted carefully realistic, unidealized figures, using his friends and family for models; in the case of *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, a handyman posed for St. Joachim while Rossetti’s mother and sister posed for St. Anne and the Virgin. Also, although Rossetti is not particularly known for pursuing truth to nature, and he never completed any *plein air* works, he was influenced by Ruskin and, of course, by Hunt, an avid follower of Ruskin who had introduced his writings to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Rossetti did not feel a particular affinity for nature, but at the same time he was always concerned with the accuracy of his plants.³ When working on *The Girlhood* he spent a week in autumn in a conservatory, painting the vines from life;⁴ in March, however, he was forced to use an artificial lily as a model.⁵ This concern with accuracy, even if based on forced or artificial models, continued throughout Rossetti’s life; in 1878 he wrote a friend asking him to send studies of a flowering apple branch, because the trees were not in bloom where he was living (these apple blossoms can be seen in *A Vision of Fiammetta*, Figure 15).⁶ Ruskin disapproved of artificiality in plant life, so he may not have approved of Rossetti’s methods, but it is

⁵ Ibid., 99.
important to note that Rossetti did still attempt to make his lily look lifelike. As Tim Barringer points out, this puts him in opposition to early art in which the lily appeared only as “a stylized sign or symbol.” Here, in a characteristically Pre-Raphaelite fashion, the lily is both a botanically true depiction and a symbol. This dual nature is in keeping with Rossetti’s heavily symbolic use of plant life, which can be seen throughout his works. Plants were very important to revealing meaning in his works, so it would be wrong for them to be deceitful.

Rossetti sought truth and meaning not just in his objects and figures, but in his style. This practice was in keeping with the other Pre-Raphaelites: Millais and Hunt found truth and meaning in their careful realism and truth to nature. However, rather than striving for exact realism in the depiction of nature in his work, Rossetti sought another sort of imitation. He, like the other Pre-Raphaelites, drew inspiration from the perceived genuineness and naivety of Quattrocento Italian art. In the case of The Girlhood of Mary Virgin, this inspiration can be seen not only in Rossetti’s exploration of Christian iconography, but also in the work’s style, its archaic forms and its arched frame, and even in Rossetti’s painterly techniques. David Riede points out that Rossetti’s method of painting thinly over a white ground with a very fine brush “was imitative of the primitives as described by current authorities;” therefore, in his technique as well as his imagery, Rossetti was hearkening to the tradition of Christian art and, more specifically, the “Pre-Raphael” Quattrocento. However, the great importance of pre-Raphael Italian painters to the Pre-Raphaelites lay less in how the group conceived Quattrocento art aesthetically, and more in how they viewed it.

7 Barringer, Reading the Pre-Raphaelites, 8.
philosophically. The Pre-Raphaelites had little access to actual Quattrocento art, and relied mostly on Lasinio’s engravings of the Pisa’s Campo Santo frescos (Figure 5) to gain knowledge of the era. The Pre-Raphaelite Brothers studied a book of Lasinio’s engravings together just as their Brotherhood came into being, and they found the images, as John Dixon Hunt writes, “not only quaint but also eminently sincere;” therefore, in the engravings the Pre-Raphaelite Brothers saw not an aesthetic to pursue, but an intensity of feeling to which they too aspired. By that argument, it stands that in imitating the Quattrocento painters in style, technique, and a close attention to Christian iconography, Rossetti used his artistic method as a representation of what he felt art should stand for, much as Millais used truth to nature to represent a larger search for meaning and truth.

The view that the Pre-Raphaelites felt close to the Quattrocento in feeling, rather than direct revivalism, has existed almost since the origins of the Pre-Raphaelites. In 1851 Ruskin, in one of his letters to The Times, argued that the Pre-Raphaelites did not desire to replicate Quattrocento art, but rather to revive its apparent sincerity, to imitate its truth by drawing “either what they see, or what they suppose might have been the actual facts of the scene they desire to represent, irrespective of any conventional rules of picture-making,” to return to “archaic honesty” rather than “archaic art.” Ruskin supported this endeavor, and by doing so he accepted Rossetti’s work, as being meaningful and in keeping with his own artistic theories; it was this acceptance that marks all the Pre-Raphaelites, not just those who

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followed truth-to-nature ideals, as Ruskinian artists. As was the case with Millais, Ruskin accepted Rossetti as an inheritor and embodiment of his ideals before he had met the young artists of the Brotherhood. This was not an irrational decision on Ruskin’s part; there is a great deal of writing in *Modern Painters* which supports Millais’s truth to nature, but there are also whole chapters devoted to imagination and the symbol in art, and Ruskin’s ideas seem to mesh with Rossetti’s practices. He wrote specifically on the depiction of plants in Quattrocento painting (which he, unlike the Pre-Raphaelites, had seen in person), stating,

> The rose, the myrtle, and the lily, the olive and orange, pomegranate and vine, have received their fairest portraiture where they bear a sacred character; even the commonest plantains and mallows of the waysides are touched with deep reverence by Raffaelle; and indeed for the perfect treatment of details of this kind, treatment as delicate and affectionate as it is elevated and manly, it is the works of these [early Italian] schools alone that we can refer.\(^{11}\)

Ruskin saw in the Quattrocento painters, and in Raphael himself, a precedent for meaningful realism in the depiction of plant life; therefore, in using plants in a sacred context, especially one so referential to the Quattrocento, Rossetti kept close to Ruskinian concepts. His extensive use of symbolism and the need for viewers to “read” the painting were also not alien concepts within the theories of *Modern Painters*. Early in the first volume of *Modern Painters* Ruskin addresses the issue of symbolism and truth in painting, and states that a symbol “can convey uncorrupted truth, though it do not in any degree resemble the facts whose conception it induces.”\(^{12}\) Much later, well into the second volume of the work, Ruskin urges viewers to study paintings closely, reading their symbols: “Assuredly a work of high

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\(^{11}\) Ruskin, *Modern Painters: Volume I*, 82.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 21.
conceptive dignity will be always incomprehensible and valueless except in those who go to it in earnest and give it time; and this is peculiarly the case when the imagination... busies itself throughout in expressing occult and far-sought sympathies in every minor detail.”\textsuperscript{13} The latter part of this passage is, in essence, a Ruskinian summary of Rossetti’s painterly practice. This especially holds true in the case of \textit{The Girlhood of Mary Virgin}, which is filled so carefully with so many symbols pointing to one definitive message. Therefore, though Rossetti was not spending months copying objects from nature, his work, and especially his use of symbolism, was in keeping with some Ruskinian thought. Rossetti was a very different sort of Ruskinian, and a very different sort of Pre-Raphaelite, but his works still represent a particular mode of following the tenets of both the group and the critic. However, Rossetti was also his very own sort of artist, and he chose unusual meanings to pursue, and unusual forms with which to explore those meanings. \textit{The Girlhood of Mary Virgin}, despite its elements of truth to nature and to history, was above all an exploration of religion, an attempt to depict, understand, and communicate the significances of the Marian story and the Christian art tradition.

\textit{The Girlhood of Mary Virgin} is a very strange painting, visually and conceptually. Rossetti’s exploration of Christian tradition was not traditional, despite his drawing extensively on traditional sources, and this shows in the way he chose to depict his scene. In \textit{The Girlhood} Rossetti mixes an adapted archaism with objects depicted with careful realism, creating a sort of visual paradox of style. This mixing of archaism and realism was not uncommon in early Pre-Raphaelite painting (for

\textsuperscript{13} Ruskin, \textit{Modern Painters: Volume II}, 173.
example, Millais’s *Lorenzo and Isabella* of 1848-49, Figure 3), but nowhere was it more pronounced, or more significant, than in *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*. *The Girlhood* is a strikingly stiff, flat painting; its space is unnaturally constrained and without any clear perspective, with lines receding to different vanishing points. The figures are pushed to the very front of the picture plain, and the landscape in the background is more scenic backdrop than scenery; even the Campo Santo frescoes which Rossetti and his fellows so admired made more of an attempt at depth than this work. This could partially be attributed to Rossetti’s own inexperience; he had dropped out of the Royal Academy very early, and perspective and other painterly effects were never his strong suit. The strangeness and stiffness of the image carries over into its composition, which is carefully divided and is dominated by a linearity so strong it gives the entire work a gridded structure. This composition draws very direct attention to the both the major and minor aspects of the painting, emphasizing the subject and the ostensive narrative but also ensuring that the viewer will see the many symbolic objects with which Rossetti filled the picture-space.

Mary is given her own realm in the painting, her own part of the grid, which is defined by the rectangle of dark green cloth on the far right of the image. The viewer’s eye is drawn to the contrast between Mary and the cloth and, therefore, to her figure, and in that area of the image there are no other details or objects to distract from the viewer’s focus on Mary’s form and face. Beside Mary, St. Anne sits directly below the edge of the curtain; the line of contrast between the curtain and the landscape beyond draws attention to Anne, and thereby to the ostensive narrative of the painting, the education of Mary by her mother. St. Joachim, who is unimportant to
the narrative, occupies the upper third of the image, and he is divided from his wife
and daughter not only by the parapet of the terrace but by color. He is part of the
blue-green sector of landscape, curtain, and vine, not the deeply colored interior, and
he, as background figure, fades into the landscape, becoming part of the setting rather
than a player in the narrative. In the bottom-left corner of the painting a child angel,
books, and a lily are given pride of place, isolated in the middle of the floor. A
triangular composition that peaks with the heads of the Virgin and her mother leads
down to the books and the light-colored angel, shifting the focus of the viewer to
these elements and forcing them to begin reflecting on the symbolism and greater
meaning of the image.

Throughout the work, linear compositional elements, such as the line of
contrast at St. Anne’s head, create emphasis and help lead the viewer to deeper
readings of the work’s meaning. The emphasized faces of the Virgin and St. Anne are
in line with each other, and the rectangle of space occupied by their heads is extended
towards the opposite end of the painting, edged on one side by the edge of the parapet
and on the other by the cross-bars of the trellis. This space is bisected by the lake in
the background and by St. Joachim’s belt, which are both in line with the eyes of
Mary and her mother. This horizontal axis of figure joins a vertical axis which runs
along the left side of the painting. It is defined on the left by the edge of the frame and
on the right by the books, the lily, and the vertical bar of the trellis. Both axes are
filled with symbolic objects. The horizontal axis holds the blooms of the lily, a lamp,
and a rose; a red cloth hangs down from it, and a dove sits atop it. In the vertical axis
from bottom to top, Rossetti placed the angel, the rose and lamp, the dove, and the
beginning of the grape arbor, along with a clearly displayed bunch of grapes. One more vertical line runs from Mary’s embroidery frame up through the edge of the red cloth, into an illogically discontinuous piece of trellis, and then to the arm of St. Joachim (which leads, incidentally, to more grapes). All of these elements, so carefully placed in this grid of axes, are traditional Christian symbols; they all point to further meanings within the narrative of Mary’s life, and beyond. With his composition Rossetti did not just draw attention to the subjects of his painting’s narrative; he also provided a grid for his meanings to fill and his viewers to follow.

There is a great amount of overt symbolism in The Girlhood of Mary Virgin; everything from the dove and the lily to the grapevine and the red cloth hung over the parapet carries a meaning. The symbols are all taken from Christian iconography, and they therefore reinforce the link between this Victorian work and the Christian artistic tradition which Rossetti sought to imitate. Rossetti made his artistic voice abundantly clear in his chosen painterly symbols and in his sonnets on the work, which were inscribed on its frame (see appendix), placing an emphasis on symbol-as-meaning and on the continuing narrative of the Virgin’s life. In painting and in text he encouraged the viewer to read deeply into the work, considering not only the work’s formal aspects, but also its meaning – the larger story and feeling behind the work, which are emphasized not by one or two symbolic elements, but by a plethora of objects with secondary, tertiary, and even quaternary meanings. This loading of symbols links the work to Christian artistic tradition in an almost excessive way. In much Christian painting, symbolism might be seen in a saint’s attribute or in the lily held out to Mary in an Annunciation scene, but it generally referred to that specific moment or person;
the lily to Mary’s purity, attributes, such as St. Catherine’s wheel, to their saint’s life story or martyrdom. Rossetti took that symbolism many steps further, loading his image with symbols of Mary and of her fate as the future mother of Christ.

Rossetti’s loading of symbols was not only a practice in the study of Christian art, however; it was also closely related to contemporary understandings of art. Rossetti, designed his painting to be “read,” to be viewed closely and comprehended as a compilation of narrative and meaning. Reading a painting was a distinctly Victorian and Ruskinian art theory which valued the ability to see and understand symbols in art. In the second volume of Modern Painters, Ruskin wrote that “A powerfully imaginative mind seizes and combines at the same instant, not only two, but all the important ideas of its poem or picture, and while it works with any one of them, it is at the same instant working with and modifying all in their relations to it, never losing sight of their bearings on each other.” This was the sort of end for which Rossetti was aiming: he wished to be that powerful mind, combining all the important ideas of his picture into one larger meaning. In the case of The Girlhood of Mary Virgin, all the symbols point to the larger theme of the coming fulfillment of Mary’s fate, and each symbolic object is an important piece in Rossetti’s, and the viewer’s, exploration of meaning and religious feeling, carefully placed to help extract as much significance from the work as possible.

Rossetti seems to have specifically chosen some of the most recognizable and therefore most meaningful symbols for his work. Given the very density of symbols within the work it is clear that Rossetti wanted The Girlhood to communicate a great

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14 Riede, Dante Gabriel Rossetti Revisited, 39.
15 Ruskin, Modern Painters: Volume II, 152.
deal of information and feeling, whether or not he meant for every possible meaning to be extracted from each of his symbolic objects. In the second of the sonnets Rossetti composed for the work, Rossetti glosses some of the symbols he painted, making sure he is well understood:

These are the symbols. On that cloth of red
I’ the centre, is the Tripoint: perfect each,
Except the second of its points, to teach
That Christ is not yet born. The books – whose head
Is golden Charity, as Paul hath said –
Those virtues are wherein the soul is rich:
Therefore on them the lily standeth, which

Is Innocence, being interpreted.
The seven-thorn’d briar and the palm seven-leaved
Are her great sorrows and her great reward.
Until the time be full, the Holy One
Abides without. She soon shall have achieved
Her perfect purity: yea, God the Lord
Shall soon vouchsafe His Son to be her Son.16

As well as emphasizing his chosen symbols, Rossetti also draws attention, as in the first sonnet (see appendix), to the future life of the Virgin: “her great sorrows and great reward” and the fact that she “shall soon vouchsafe His Son to be her Son.” This is the narrative meaning at which all of The Girlhood’s symbols arrive; the objects are either indicative of Mary’s own purity and life, or of the life of her future Son. The Christian iconographical tradition is so rich that many of the symbolic objects in painting in fact The Girlhood of Mary Virgin are so laden in significance that many carry multiple meanings. Some of these meanings may be reflections not of Rossetti’s specific intentions but, rather, of the variance of the Christian iconographical tradition; however, Rossetti was likely aware of most, if not all, of the potential

meanings of his symbolic objects. He used these meanings deftly, combining them to create a symbolic message that is strongly expressed throughout his work.

The lily, one of the most prominent objects in the painting, is an emblem of the Virgin, reflective of her purity, and its three blooms can represent the Trinity. Therefore, it is a double symbol, representing both the Virgin herself and the destiny she is to fulfill: giving life to Jesus, the third part of the Trinity. Liana De Girolami Cheney, writing on the multi-layered symbols of *The Girlhood* in her essay “The Fair Lady and The Virgin in Pre-Raphaelite Art: The Evolution of a Societal Myth,” states that the rose on the parapet is a symbol of Christ’s Passion because it echoes the crown of thorns, and it therefore leads to reflection on Mary’s grief; however, the whiteness of the rose can also relate to Mary’s purity, making the rose another double symbol.17 The vines which frame and crisscross the upper third of the work are also multiple symbols. The vines are a symbol of Christ, alluding to the parable in which he states ‘I am of the real vine’ (John 15: 1-17).18 The grape vine, specifically, also carries implications of the Eucharist and Christ’s sacrifice, and the ivy stands for immortality.19 Therefore, the vines allude to Christ, both in his sacrifice and his resurrection; this symbolism is made all the more potent because the ivy grows upon the trellis in the middle of the painting, which is constructed in the impractical but, of course, hugely symbolic form of a cross. The palms and the branch of briar at the bottom of the painting carry a very similar message; the briars relate to the crown of

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19 Ibid., 251, n. 23.
thorns and Christ’s passion, but the palms are a symbol of victory over death,\textsuperscript{20} and they are also associated with chastity and with female saints.\textsuperscript{21} Therefore, the bundle of plants is related both to Mary and to Christ, and they are therefore reflective not only of the Christ’s future, but of Mary’s role and her fate. This meaning is made clear in the scroll which binds the plants, which reads \textit{tot dolores tot gaudia}: so many sorrows, so many joys.\textsuperscript{22}

Everywhere in \textit{The Girlhood of Mary Virgin} Rossetti was revealed and reinforced the narrative meaning of his work, the larger theme of Mary’s joys and sorrows, rather than concentrating on the image’s narrative or formal aspects. This emphasis on meaning is quintessentially Pre-Raphaelite, and this work therefore helps explain how Rossetti interpreted and worked with Pre-Raphaelite thought while still remaining quite different from other artists of the group. By pursuing his meaning not in exacting realism, but in imaginative symbolism, Rossetti was not abandoning verisimilitude, but pursuing an entirely different kind of truth. It is partially for this reason that Rossetti is often portrayed as a dreamer, an artist more interested in depicting his own personal, psychological reality rather than a larger, “realistic” truth, and is therefore, at least in the eyes of some critics, a lesser Pre-Raphaelite. David Riede argues in his book \textit{Dante Gabriel Rossetti Revisited} that Rossetti is most often critically considered as a “Victorian romantic,” a view which privileges a psychological reading of his works and attributes his artistic ability to his connecting with his inner soul; however, Rossetti’s works were very much meant to be seen and

\begin{footnotes}
\item \textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 251, n. 21.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 251, n. 21.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 251.
\end{footnotes}
to be understood by their viewers. In the early years of his career, especially, his works were meant to be “read” and fully comprehended by their audience; they were meant to communicate meaning directly, not get bogged down by Rossetti’s own psychology.

As much as Rossetti was attempting to communicate directly with his audience, however, it is also true that, as Elizabeth Helsinger writes in her book *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts*, Rossetti had “a strange relationship with visual representation” and “was rarely interested in painting simply what could be seen.” Of course, as I point out in Chapter 1, the other Pre-Raphaelites were also interested in eliciting ideas beyond the reality of truth to nature, and truth to nature was itself a concept and an ideal, not simply a technique. However, the tendency to paint beyond what could be seen was especially pronounced in Rossetti. A poet before he was ever a painter, Rossetti sought truth beyond copying nature, or imitating another artistic style; he showed meaning through the visual metaphors of symbolism, while making his own interpretation of artistic style and Pre-Raphaelite thought.

Rossetti’s aversion to “painting simply what could be seen” is reflected on several levels in *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*. His use of deep symbolism and the painting’s insistence upon being read show that he was primarily interested not in narrative or form, but in the meaning behind that narrative and form. Even within the painting’s world Rossetti seems to have been less interested in the reality of objects than in their meaning. The subjects of his painting, like the characters of a poem, operate in a world of the unseen, of evocative metaphors rather than concrete objects.

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23 Riede, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti Revisited*, 5.
The image does not attempt to show what the Virgin’s education truly would have looked like, and it is filled with anachronism, illogicality, and impossibility. Tim Barringer states in his *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites* that the objects in *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* “are both symbols and real objects in the physical world: they belong to a time-honoured iconography and yet they have an independent existence as modern things.”²⁵ The objects do have a modern character; Rossetti’s exacting depictions of his figures and his objects, especially the flowers, is essentially modern a Pre-Raphaelite innovation. Yet, Barringer’s statement is not categorically true within the world of the painting; the objects are not primarily related to a physical reality. This is one of the elements which contribute to the general strangeness of the image; the abstraction of the figures’ interaction with the painted space and objects leads to a question of what objects are part of the figures’ reality, occupying their physical world, and what is simply allegory, a painterly, poetic embodiment of concepts.

The most obvious example of object as allegory in *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* is the lily. The lily is possibly the most significant object in the painting. Rossetti gave the flower strong formal emphasis. As I discuss above, the lily is an important form in the image’s linear gridding. It also provides a balance on the left side of the image for the figures of the Virgin and St. Anne on the right, giving it great compositional weight. Rossetti painted the lily with great care; though the whole painting is detailed, only the faces of the Virgin and St. Anne rival the exactitude with which the lily is depicted. The lily is also important symbolically, of course, since it is most common emblem of Mary; this symbolic important is

²⁵ Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*, 8.
reinforced by the fact that the lily is the only symbol which appears in both of the sonnets Rossetti wrote to accompany his painting. In the first sonnet, Mary is compared to “An angel-watered lily, that near God / Grows, and is quiet;”26 in the second, its meaning as a symbol of innocence is explained. However, the lily is not a “real” object within the world of Mary and her family. The lily and the books upon which it stands are allegorical symbols, like the angel and the briars and palms, not objects which also happen to have symbolism, such as the vines and the rose. They are embodiments of heavenly beings and ideals, not things the Virgin and her family would be able to interact with, and they seem to be invisible to the players in the story.27 This heavenly quality could be ascertained simply because the lily sits on a stack of highly anachronistic books that happen to be labeled with the names of virtues, but it is also made clear by the way the figures interact with the lily. The angel, another embodiment of heaven, is the only figure which interacts directly with the lily, pouring water from a tiny golden vial into the red vase and staring vacantly at its leaves. Mary is embroidering the image of a lily, and Barringer claims that Mary is copying the lily through close observation in a sort of echo of the artist’s process,28 but this is not totally supported by the image. Mary’s gaze is so unfocused and thoughtful that it seems more likely that she either does not see the lily at all, or is somehow aware of it on an allegorical level of contemplation. If she is looking at any part of the lily, her eyes fall on the lowest of the three flowers. However, she is embroidering the stem; the blooms, long since finished, hang near the floor. As Helsinger writes, “The symbols of painting and poem point explicitly to future events,

26 Rossetti, "Mary's Girlhood (for a Picture)," 186.
27 Helsinger, Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts, 43.
28 Barringer, Reading the Pre-Raphaelites, 8.
but they are not themselves the means by which Mary – in her abstracted gaze – may be imagined to feel her way into such foreknowledge.\textsuperscript{29} The lily is not a natural image to be copied, but an object of meaning and devotion; by showing it to the viewer, Rossetti reveals the subject of the young Mary’s meditation and encourages the viewer to sympathize with Mary, who seems acutely aware of her mixed future, the sorrow and joy communicated again and again in the painting’s iconography.

The heavenly quality of the lily is further emphasized when one compares \textit{The Girlhood of Mary Virgin} to its sister piece, the Annunciation scene Rossetti titled \textit{Ecce Ancilla Domini}. A very similar bloom appears in the arms of the Angel Gabriel in \textit{Ecce Ancilla Domini}, just as it does in many images of the Annunciation. David Riede posits that through this repetition of the lily’s form the narrative of the two Mary paintings is linked not only visually, but through the passage of time: Mary has aged, and the lily has been plucked.\textsuperscript{30} Yet, the two lilies are not the same; the lily of \textit{Ecce Ancilla Domini} has two blooms and a bud, not three blooms. These two blooms and a bud represent the coming fulfillment of the Trinity: two parts, God and the Holy Spirit, exist already, but the third is budding within Mary and is yet to come.\textsuperscript{31} It stands to reason, then, that if the lily in \textit{Ecce Ancilla Domini} is a symbol of the immediate moment of the Annunciation, when the Trinity’s completion is predicted; it shows what is true at that moment, and will soon cease to be true. The very similar lily in \textit{The Girlhood}, however, is a larger, more abstract symbol, showing what is to come to the contemplative eyes of the viewer. Even more so than the lily of \textit{Ecce

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{29} Helsinger, \textit{Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts}, 44.
\textsuperscript{30} Riede, \textit{Dante Gabriel Rossetti Revisited}, 41.
\textsuperscript{31} Faxon, \textit{Dante Gabriel Rossetti}, 55. It is interesting to note that although both the lily in the pot and the embroidered lily in \textit{The Girlhood of Mary Virgin} have three full flowers, in Rossetti’s sonnet he implies that only two of the blossoms are yet complete.
\end{flushleft}
Ancilla Domini, the lily of The Girlhood of Mary Virgin is an object meant solely to elicit thought and to connect to larger significances of the scene, and is insistent in its role, taking a significant place in the composition and, by nature of its abstraction, making clear its purpose as symbol.

The Girlhood of Mary Virgin is forceful in its instance upon being read and understood. Rossetti’s role is less as a facilitator, subtly guiding his viewers towards potential interpretations; rather, he is a poet-lecturer, laying out a painterly text full of metaphors that are meant to be read in a very specific way. The multitudinous symbols in the work and their various layers of meaning and reality would have made the Victorian viewer, already aware of the process of “reading” a painting, inspect the work very carefully and become embroiled in its meanings. Rossetti himself wrote that “a picture is a painted poem,” and The Girlhood of Mary Virgin functions as just such a “text.” Helsinger points out that “Rossetti conveys the scene’s charged significance almost wholly through words and symbols directed at the spectator outside the picture” and the forcefulness of it, along with the archaism of the poems themselves, means that the spectator “finds herself addressed as if she were a medieval parishioner in need of instruction through pictures and through the authority of the priest, who could make such pictures speak to those who could not read.”

Rossetti is not the painter of a scene pre-determined by traditional narratives, or the copyist of a previous style of image; rather, he is the poetic interpreter of established

33 Helsinger, Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts, 43.
34 Ibid., 44.
symbolism, with a great desire for his work to be read and understood by its audience. The linearity of the work creates a very clear, gridded rubric to lead the viewer to each symbol in turn. Rather than there being one or two objects which reference Mary’s coming role as the mother of Jesus, there are many, and most are given as flowers, which would likely have been the most easily readable symbols to a generally Anglican Victorian audience, who would have known at least some of the language of flowers but might not have been very aware of Catholic iconography. To help guide them these iconographies, there were the sonnets, footnotes to the painting itself. The supposedly Quattrocento style and technique also would have had significance; they made very clear reference to the era of Catholic devotional art, and thereby, along with the texts, “set the terms in which the pictures would be understood, and strongly suggesting the attitudes with which they should be approached.” Rossetti was therefore extremely overt in his communication with his viewers. He was as embroiled in considerations of meaning in art as any other Pre-Raphaelite, and he was very careful to make his meaning known.

Rossetti’s insistence upon the viewer reading and understanding the meanings of The Girlhood of Mary Virgin raises questions of Rossetti’s full intent with this work. Rossetti was not a particularly religious man; William Michael Rossetti wrote in 1847 that his brother “was more than vague in point of religious faith.” Therefore, Rossetti’s choice of a religious scene was not likely to have been a devotional exercise. Some of Rossetti’s interest in choosing a religious scene as his first oil may have lain in the iconoclastic nature of such a choice. Though Victorian

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35 Ibid., 184.
36 Qtd. in Riede, Dante Gabriel Rossetti Revisited, 28.
paintings were often moralistic and sentimental, they were not often overtly devotional or religious. The Church of England had long been suspicious of displays of religious wealth or art, which were associated with Catholicism; it was only in the 1830s and 1840s that the Tractarian movement began to draw Anglicanism towards a more Catholic “High Church” style, leading to a resurgence in church design and decoration which was very tied to the Gothic Revival. Even with the Tractarian influence, however, religious subjects were still uncommon in popular, Academy-associated art when Rossetti began his Marian paintings. Pre-Raphaelite scenes, however, were generally in a more “high art” tradition, with a focus on drama, emotion, and direct literary reference. By focusing on such elevated scenes, the Pre-Raphaelites created a very particular, and peculiar, avant-garde which came from the outer edges of the establishment, but attacked from the heights of the traditions of art.\textsuperscript{37} \textit{The Girlhood of Mary Virgin} stands out even among the high art Pre-Raphaelite work. Though it is associated with lower, “primitive” art because of its visual archaism, it is a study in religious feeling and devotion, placing it, according to the traditional art canon, in the highest realm of “high art.”\textsuperscript{38}

However, it was not only high art iconoclasm that seems to have influenced Rossetti’s choice of a religious subject for his first major painting. Rossetti was also very interested in the inspiration and feeling religion could elicit, and he explored these religious evocations in his poetry and, in the case of his Marian paintings, in his art. According to Riede, Rossetti’s early poems, from the 1840s and 1850s, dubbed the “Art-Catholic” poems, represent “a serious endeavor to explore in (literature) the

\textsuperscript{37} Prettejohn, \textit{The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites}, 37.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 36.
psychological need for religion;” they reflect not the poet’s own faith but a nostalgia for faith which is particularly characteristic of nineteenth-century England and can be seen in the works of the Romantics and the Tractarians, Ruskin and Tennyson, and, of course, those of the Pre-Raphaelites. 39 Riede identifies similar impulses in Rossetti’s early poems and in The Girlhood of Mary Virgin and Ecce Ancilla Domini. This seems to be a logical conclusion, since the two sets of works were approximately contemporary, and Rossetti tended to associate his paintings with his poems. Both Marian paintings examine on Mary’s psychology, showing her as contemplative or emotional, and they also seek to draw the viewer into a consideration of the mysteries of the Marian story. In the Catholic art which Rossetti sought to imitate with these works, the narrative and symbols would not simply have been part of a story, but a route to devotion via thought. Rossetti did not seek to lead his viewers to devotion, but he did seek to elicit thought about the subject: its narratives, its symbols, and its greater significances.

In 1849 Rossetti wrote a sonnet, entitled “St. Luke the Painter” (see appendix), in which he explores the relationship of art and religion. St. Luke is the patron saint of religious painting, and he is often depicted painting an icon of the Virgin.40 In the sonnet Rossetti describes St. Luke teaching Art to abandon “devious symbols” and instead see “How sky-breadth and field-silence and this day / Are symbols also in some deeper way / She looked through these to God and was God’s

39 Riede, Dante Gabriel Rossetti Revisited, 33.
The symbols are not simply veiled references to narrative, they reveal God. It is unclear what symbols in particular are “devious,” but it is clear that Rossetti considers art as revelatory. By forcing his viewers into a close reading of the symbols and the story of Mary in *The Girlhood*, Rossetti encourages, if not a true experience of faith, then a more detached, nineteenth-century consideration of the faith devotional art could elicit.

Rossetti’s emphasis, in *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, on thought and meaning is distinctly Pre-Raphaelite, although its emphasis is not on finding meaning in exacting depictions of nature, but rather on finding emotional meaning through the exploration of symbol and feeling. The art critic David Masson, writing in 1852, already understood this, stating that the Pre-Raphaelite imitation and adaption of earlier Christian art was meant to rescue “Art from the degraded position of being a mere minister to sensuous gratification, and elevating it into an agency of high spiritual education. That Art should be pervaded with the Christian spirit, - that it should convey and illustrate the highest truths related to man’s being, is a maxim of the Pre-Raphaelites.”

Although Rossetti was not religious, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* and all the paintings which followed it were meant to be “Art-Catholic” in the broadest sense, an art with a meaning, a larger truth, rather than a simple decoration. John Dixon Hunt writes that Rossetti saw *Girlhood* “as an attempt to make his topic ‘more probable and at the same time less commonplace.’ The nostalgia for the incredible, the distant and the irreducible mysteries which the second part of Rossetti’s phrase betrays is more at the centre of Pre-Raphaelite art than either a

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42 Qtd in Riede, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti Revisited*, 29.
moral or a literalist inclination." The Pre-Raphaelites, whether pursuing truth to nature or truth to Christian traditions, sought a type of art in which nothing was commonplace, and everything had the deeper significance mentioned in “St. Luke the Painter.” That same sonnet goes on to state that Art, after serving as God, “turned in vain / To soulless self-reflections of man’s skill, - / Yet now, in this the twilight, she might still / Kneel in the latter grass to pray again.” This, in essence, was the aim of the Pre-Raphaelites; not to devote their art to God, but to make it turn to a more prayerful state, when it was something of significance and thought.

Rossetti was, at the time of the formation of the Brotherhood, the most overtly devotional of the Pre-Raphaelites in his addressing of meaning in art. He chose to relate meaning to truth and meaning in an artistic, psychological, and symbolic sense, and examined not the meaning to be found in the beauty of nature, but the bygone world of devotional religion, seeking a more direct revival of meaning than that of the other Pre-Raphaelites. While the others, especially Millais and Hunt, chose to follow Ruskin’s ideals of nature, Rossetti moved towards his own sensibilities, until he eventually diverged so greatly from the other Pre-Raphaelites that they could no longer be considered a coherent group. This divergence was not necessarily seen as a schism, but as a logical outgrowth of the difference in the group. Even Ruskin, the progenitor of the ideal of truth to nature, argued that both strands were valid interpretations and results of Pre-Raphaelite ideals, resulting from “responses to different types of truth.” According to Brooks, “The key to the split in Pre-Raphaelite art is the way in which the different artists elected to synthesise the

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45 Brooks, Signs for the Times, 121.
structures of meaning and expression in their paintings. Millais had elected to show truth through strenuous, careful accuracy; Rossetti chose to show it through more poetic means, emphasizing symbol and the “reading” of the image through a style that was almost didactic, especially in his immaturity. Both sought to explore meaning and truth in painting, but their modes of exploration resulted in very different ends. Through Rossetti and the separate strand of more poetic, revivalist Pre-Raphaelitism a new generation of artists grew. His influence was to be felt in the later Aesthetic movement, but his first followers were possibly his most significant. These early followers, the “second generation” of Pre-Raphaelites, included William Morris, the great designer and writer, who was possibly the most important inheritor of Pre-Raphaelite thought, as will be discussed in the following chapter. Morris abandoned painting early in his career but, in his myriad and prolific undertakings, achieved a synthesis of the two strands of Pre-Raphaelite thought and, through his extensive influence, passed them on into many different realms and into the modern era.

Though the Pre-Raphaelite group separated after only a few years, the Brothers originally shared a similar goal: the revival of meaning in art. The individualistic artists explored that meaning in different ways, but they all worked closely with plants and nature in their explorations of artistic significance, and their urge for meaning can be easily seen in the lily and grapevines of The Girlhood of Mary Virgin, the weedy banks and floating flowers of Ophelia, and even in the naturally inspired pattern designs of William Morris.

46 Ibid.
CHAPTER 3: “ART WILL MAKE OUR STREETS AS BEAUTIFUL AS THE WOODS:” THE PATTERN DESIGNS OF WILLIAM MORRIS

William Morris was the artist and thinker who brought Pre-Raphaelite ideas and style to a new generation, and to the Modern era. Although he was a designer and writer, not a painter, his works show his inheritance of Pre-Raphaelite interests and ideals, as well as the direct influence of Ruskinian though. These concepts were reimagined and reborn through Morris’s creativity and his central belief in the integration of all the arts. As a designer and a theorist of design Morris helped found the English Arts and Crafts movement, and thereby became influential in the international design community. He was a man very much against his time; he detested the ugliness of Victorian life, idealizing all things medieval, and he pursued methods of craft which had all but died out in the Industrial Revolution. However, he was also very much a man of his time, running a large craft workshop and selling the wares of his design firm, Morris & Co., from a shop on Oxford Street in London, as well as becoming an early and vocal member of the Socialist movement. His designs and writings were popular, and his influence wide-ranging and long-lasting. Though he was not an artist in the standard, fine-art sense, he could in fact be considered the most influential thinker and artist to have emerged from the Pre-Raphaelite circle.

It may seem strange, given the general division of fine art and decorative art, to consider a man who was never much of a painter as part of a movement which is generally conceived of as centered on painting and High Art. However, Pre-Raphaelitism was not founded as a specifically painterly movement – some members
of the Brotherhood were not artists, and Woolner was a sculptor. Not only that, but the members also explored art beyond painting. Rossetti worked with writing, engraving, and decoration – notably at the Oxford Union, where he and other artists, including Morris, made an epic failure of their fresco paintings. Rossetti would also contribute designs in the early days of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co., the company that would later become Morris & Co. It seems unlikely, then, that the Pre-Raphaelites would have excluded Morris from their ranks, had he been active at the time of the Brotherhood. Since Morris began pursuing Pre-Raphaelitism after the Brotherhood had dissolved, there may be some question of whether he might be considered a Pre-Raphaelite at all: what, exactly, constitutes a Pre-Raphaelite? I would argue that Pre-Raphaelitism should not be considered as a movement that was restricted to the era of the Brotherhood, nor to the original membership of that group. The Brotherhood was never an exclusive group, and their artistic style and thought did not simply cease to be once the group dissolved. The continuation of Pre-Raphaelitism can be seen not only in the works of the Brothers after the group split, but also in the works of the artists who are associated with so-called “second generation” Pre-Raphaelitism.

Considerations of Pre-Raphaelitism often give little attention to the second generation of Pre-Raphaelite artists, which also included, besides Morris, painters such as Edward Burne-Jones and Simeon Solomon. Some writers even seek to discredit the group entirely. Timothy Hilton, in his *The Pre-Raphaelites*, is almost bitterly negative about the later Pre-Raphaelites, going so far as to call his chapter on Burne-Jones and the other later Pre-Raphaelite painters “Standstill,” calling Morris’s
work boring and meaningless.\textsuperscript{1} Hilton’s statements are strong examples of anti-
second-generation criticism, but they are not particularly unorthodox opinions; later
Pre-Raphaelite painters are often addressed simply as followers of the Brothers,
creating diluted versions of early Pre-Raphaelite works. Criticism in this vein belittles
the second generation’s investment in Pre-Raphaelite thought and art, and seeks to
overlook them because they began their careers after the initial Pre-Raphaelite
impulse. I believe, however, that the “second generation” Pre-Raphaelites should be
considered as later members of the same movement, not secondary hangers-on, and it
is for that reason that I have chosen not to divide Morris from the Brotherhood in my
discussion of the Pre-Raphaelites. Morris should not be discredited in considerations
of Pre-Raphaelitism; he was deeply involved in Pre-Raphaelite thought, which he
meshed with his own ideals and creativity to create designs – and a design movement
– which were totally new and hugely influential, and which carried Pre-Raphaelitism
into a new era.

Born in 1834, Morris was only five years younger than the youngest Pre-
Raphaelite Brother, Millais. However, unlike the first generation of Pre-Raphaelite,
he did not begin his career studying at London art schools. Rather, he discovered the
world of art when he was an undergraduate at Exeter College, Oxford in the 1850s.
Though Morris had entered Oxford in 1853 with the intention to enter the clergy, he
and his closest friend, Ned Jones, soon abandoned their religious path, deciding
instead to find their vocation in art. They were especially inspired by Ruskin, the Pre-
Raphaelites, and medievalist writings such as those of Alfred Lord Tennyson and Sir

\textsuperscript{1} Hilton, \textit{The Pre-Raphaelites}, 172.
Walter Scott. They became friendly with Rossetti, who encouraged the young men’s creative pursuits, and in 1856 Morris and Burne-Jones left Oxford to pursue their artistic careers. Ned Jones would soon aggrandize his name, becoming Edward Burne-Jones, and later Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones, the greatest painter to follow in the footsteps of the Pre-Raphaelites. Morris, already a writer but without any training in the visual arts, would pursue an apprenticeship with G.E. Street, a leading architect of the Gothic revival, and learn painting under Rossetti before finding his talent in design and, in 1861, establishing his company, Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Company (which was most often called, simply, the Firm). Though there were many artists, designers, and craftsmen involved with the company, the venture always centered on Morris, and it was very much the vehicle of his work and ideals from 1861 until his death in 1896. In his business Morris found an outlet for his energy and for his interests and ideals, and his commercial designs are his most well-known works today.

Morris was a wildly energetic man, constantly at work on something, always using both his mind and his hands. He was so prolific and talented, and his output so varied, that every scholar seems to find another aspect of his work to consider his “career best.” It could be his poetry or his political speaking, his stained glass, books, or interior design. In terms of lasting influence, it might be his early Arts and Craft ethos or even the style of his gardens; in terms of continued popularity, it would have to be his patterns, the wallpapers and fabrics that still decorate homes today. There is an implicit problem in choosing just one aspect of Morris’s work, however, because for Morris dividing and comparing each aspect of his work would likely have been
distasteful, if not unthinkable. Though he divided his design work to write about it – for example, the focus on fabric and wallpaper in his 1881 speech to the Working Men's College at Queen's Square, Bloomsbury, later published as the essay “Some Hints on Pattern Designing”– one of the most engaging aspects of Morris’s work is the way the same impulses and philosophies run through all of his work. Every one of his myriad undertakings was significant, pointing towards the same thoughts and goals, and intended to impart meaning to as much of the population as possible, in order to aid the population’s elevation through art, thought, and work. Whichever element of his works scholars choose to study, they will find the force and energy of William Morris, the character of the man himself, preaching meaning and beauty and getting his hands into everything.

One of the most important and recurring themes in Morris’s work is that of the beauty and almost sacred quality of nature. Morris had a deep admiration of, and connection to, the natural world, and a focus on the beauty of nature was intrinsic to every area of his many works. The natural world and the plants growing within it were important not only as inspiration for his patterns, but as ideals of space and aesthetics that pervade his writings and philosophy. Nature is in fact so important to the Morris’s pattern design, and all of his other work, as to be almost indivisible from it. The natural world, its beauty, and all its aspects – flowers, trees, animals, even the cultivation of the English countryside – are integral elements of every facet of Morris’s prodigiously productive life and his deeply-felt philosophies. His attention to nature therefore serves as a theme which can carry the viewer through his works and can lead to an understanding of his larger philosophies. The greatest visual
expression of Morris’s attention to nature is, arguably, in his pattern designs, and so it is from a view of Morris’s treatments of plants in his patterns that this particular consideration of Morris will begin.

The first fabrics produced by the Firm were embroideries, most often stitched by female relatives of the designers. The Firm also produced woven tapestries, though their tapestry production was not large-scale until after 1879. However, embroideries and tapestries were labor intensive and, therefore, very expensive, and soon Morris began exploring other ways to produce and sell wall coverings and fabrics. His first pattern designs intended for production as wallpapers were created between 1862 and 1866; he would later also design for large-scale fabric production. The three designs of the 1860s, *Trellis* (Figure 16), *Daisy* (Figure 17), and *Fruit*, also known as *Pomegranate* (Figure 18), mark the beginning of more than twenty years of devotion not only to the exploration of pattern designs, but also to the investigation of all other aspects of the production of printed papers and fabrics. Though Morris designed a great many patterns and had only a few standard formal structures for the designs, he was always finding new inspirations and methods for the creation of his patterns. The designs never seem stale or repetitive, and almost all are instantly recognizable as Morris & Co. work.

Morris’s virtuosic treatment of both botanical detail and formal structure is one of the defining elements of pattern design. Morris felt that it was necessarily to

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2 Many of the dates of Morris’s designs are unclear; some were long-time works in progress, or were not issued for some time after their creation. For my purposes I have chosen to use the dates given in *William Morris*, edited by Linda Parry, which was published in 1996 to accompany a major Morris exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum. The authors and editor seem to have made every attempt to give the most accurate dating possible, based either on known design dates or the dates that the patterns were released for purchase.
contain the natural forms within the restrictive space and structure of patterning, creating what Caroline Arscott calls a “tension between the encounter with nature, on the one hand, and geometric system, on the other.” This was why his patterns can be seen both as botanically accurate and highly stylized. He depicted plants that he saw in nature, and he studied them closely, giving them the inflections, the twists and turns and oddities of growth, that a plant of the garden or wayside would possess. However, he was careful to fit them within formal structures derived from earlier patterns, which he studied in depth, both in his own collection and in the South Kensington Museum (later the Victoria and Albert). As Ray Watkinson points out, “in no case… does the love of natural form destroy the formal order.” Though Morris looked to historic precedents for his work, he emphasized adaptation both of history and of nature. In his speech “Making the Best of It,” published in 1882 as part of *Hopes and Fears for Art*, Morris wrote that “your convention must be your own, and not borrowed from other times and peoples; or, at the least, that you must make it your own by thoroughly understanding both the nature and the art you are dealing with.” Therefore, designers needed to study their inspirations closely, but also needed to rely on their own imagination and creativity; they needed their own style. He seems to have felt that those three elements, structure (as dictated by historic forms), naturalism, and creativity, were all but inseparable. In “Some Hints on Pattern Designing” he states: “Above all things, avoid vagueness; run any risk of failure

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rather than involve yourselves in a tangle of poor weak lines that people can’t make out” and adds that, “rational growth is necessary to all patterns, or at least the hint of such growth; and in recurring patterns, at least, the noblest are those where one thing grows visibly and necessarily from another;” however, “as to dealing with nature. To take a natural spray of what not and torture it into certain lines, is a hopeless way of designing a pattern. In all good pattern-designs the idea comes first.”  

Morris was a master of this sort of integration of form, naturalism, and creative ideas, and his adaptation of these elements is one the major reasons that his style is so unmistakable.

Morris’s design work originated in a personal necessity, as befits a venture so practical and yet so artistic. After leaving Oxford for London Morris and Burne-Jones were unable to find any satisfying furnishings for the rooms they shared at No. 17, Red Lion Square (rooms once occupied by Rossetti), and so they designed and decorated their own. Three years later in 1859, Morris and his bride, Jane Burden, moved into the Red House, a home designed for them by Morris’s friend and collaborator Phillip Webb, and Morris undertook to furnish that house as well. It was around this time that Morris and his friends had the idea of founding an association of artists to produce furnishings and decorative schemes. The products of the association would be handicrafts created on a small scale, often by the members and their families, rather than as part of large-scale industrial manufacture. This association was soon established as a company headed by Morris; Charles Faulkner, a

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7 Hilton, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, 162.
mathematics don; and Peter Paul Marshall, an engineer. Designs were contributed by, among others, Webb, Burne-Jones, Rossetti, and Ford Madox Brown. The Firm designed for both church and domestic settings, and its offerings included furniture, stained glass, and fabric-work, all carefully executed by hand and reflecting not contemporary design trends but the group’s interest in historic precedents of design and handiwork.

Morris placed himself, and his company, in opposition to his design contemporaries, but his patterns were both radical and conventional. His designs fell somewhere between the three-dimensional realism of “French” designs popular between the 1840s and 1860s (Figure 19) and the historical copies and abstractions of nature associated with the “Design Reform” of the era, which was epitomized, in pattern design, by men such as A.W.N Pugin, Owen Jones, and Christopher Dresser (Figure 20). Botanical forms were the most popular types of patterns in the 1850s and 1860s; the so-called French style was dominated with bright and forcefully realistic images of flowers, and the Design Reform patterns, especially those of Christopher Dresser, featured natural forms stylized to the point of abstraction. According to the Firm’s first manager Warrington Taylor, Dresser’s treatment of natural objects in his patterns was distorted and harsh; Design Reform artists tended to favor bright, simple patterns with an emphasis on formal structure. Patterns in the French style meanwhile, paid little attention to the formal restrictions of wallpaper, favoring

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11 Ibid.
opulent *trompe l’œil* florals which did not necessarily interact logically with the space they decorated. These patterns did not accept the flatness of the wall, instead filling rooms with three-dimensional representations more akin to still life paintings than to any sort of pattern work. Some even bore heavy shading which was highly unlikely to correspond with light sources. Such painterly effects might have worked at a small scale, but on a large scale they could be overwhelming and strange, effects not aided by their bright, unnatural coloring. Morris’s patterns, in opposition to both the French and Design Reform styles, emphasized natural colors, specific forms, and a sense of movement and growth which was oriented, but not restricted, within a formal structure.

Though Pugin, Jones, and Dresser looked for reform in design, they found it in the depiction of “types,” stylized and idealized forms; Morris, on the other hand, sought to evoke nature and a sense of meaning. According to David Brett, the designs of Morris “seem to stand at the opposite pole to those designed by Owen Jones in the same period… Morris’s ‘Nature’ is something to be rendered pictorially, with botanical accuracy and specificity.”¹² Both schools of design were, of course, reacting against the popular “French” style. While Jones operated at an extreme of abstraction, turning plants into geometry in his pursuit of “design reform,” Morris instead chose to pursue accuracy without false realism. To take a Ruskinian view, if Pugin and Jones were at fault for being unrealistically stylized, without any relation to what nature actually looked like, the “French” designs were at fault for their false, idealized realism, which did not take into account the restrictions of the medium. If the French

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style and the patterns of Design Reformers represented the popular establishment of the design world, then Morris stood as the Pre-Raphaelite rebel of decoration. Morris, on the other hand, sought a style which incorporated both truth to nature and an acceptance of stylization, seeking specific detail in his plant subjects while also flattening his images to conform to the visual effect of walls covered in paper, evoking the natural world while working with the limits of his medium.

The three patterns designed by Morris in the 1860s are generally referred to as his most naïve and unskilled designs. They certainly do not show the masterful understanding of the relation of foreground and background evident in his later works, nor do they possess the same strong sense of movement and growth. However, they are important precedents to Morris’s more prolific pattern-designing period, which began in the early 1870s and continued into the later 1880s, and they are also remarkable in their own right. They are totally unlike other wallpapers of the time, and they show Morris’s experiments with structure and movement, naturalism and stylization. *Daisy*, from 1864, is based on a repeating pattern of bunches of three flowers, a design seen repeatedly in Morris’s work. Inspired by hangings in the illustration *The Dance of the Wodehouses* in a fifteenth-century manuscript of Froissart’s Chronicles (Figure 21), this pattern first appeared in Morris’s work in a wall-hanging embroidered by Jane Morris for Red House (Figure 22). The wallpaper is more complex than the hanging, both in its forms and in its organization. The plants are given more detail (the hanging was stitched in outline) and the background is a grass-like pattern, giving the impression of a meadow, albeit an unrealistic one.
The daisy forms fit carefully together; although they are separate, they come close to overlapping, adding visual interest to their spatial relationships. *Fruit (Pomegranate)* is a diagonal pattern of branches bearing with carefully studied fruits in different stages of development. It is fairly static; its separated branches lack the growth and movement implied by linked forms. However, it shows Morris moving towards better coverage of his space, filling the background with a secondary pattern, as would be the standard for his designs in the future.

While both *Daisies* and *Fruit* show certain elements which would remain important in Morris’s later pattern work, such as an interest in historical patterns and an attention to the interrelation of foreground and background motifs, it is *Trellis* which is the most arresting and which holds the most implications for Morris’s design philosophy and his future works. *Trellis* was apparently the first of Morris’s designs, having been drawn up in 1862. Though the pattern is simplistic and stiff by Morris’s later standards, it is very much a “Morris” design, marked by its emphasis on the plant’s growth and specific features and by its interaction with Morris’s interest in relating his designs both to historic precedents and to the true forms of nature. The pattern shows a rose plant winding its way up a wooden trellis. Birds (drawn by Phillip Webb, who was more talented than Morris in drawing animals) perch on the trellis’s wooden slats, and insects visit the rose blossoms and hover in the empty space between slats and stems. Unlike *Daisy* and *Fruit* and the many other designs that followed them, the background of *Trellis* is left blank, almost as though one is looking out into the sky – an effect amplified when the design is printed on a blue background.

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ground. While this lack of background restricts the depth of the image and makes it appear simpler than the other patterns, there is a great amount of dynamism, detail, and dimensionality in the rose plants, which are more reminiscent of Morris’s later designs than any elements of the other early wallpapers. The roses are not turned into simple decorative forms or perfect bouquets; they have a specific nature, with irregularly shaped petals that turn over at the ends, as they would in a real rose plant. Also, not only are the plants covered in thorns, but the design shows the fine downy needles present all along the surface of the stems, a detail that would be obvious to anyone who had ever picked up a rose, but that might be omitted by less exacting artists. This plant is not ideal, but true and specific; it could be growing among others in gardens of Morris’s Red House, which featured rose-bearing trellises inspired by the gardens in medieval manuscripts such as the *Roman de la Rose*.

Though highly stylized, the blooms are meant to be reminiscent of real flowers, and they are also allowed to move in a way that resembles real plants. The roses are allowed to twist and turn; some are shown from angles, and one is shown from behind, where the petals meet the stem. The plant’s natural growth and movement is emphasized by the structural quality of the pattern. The undulations of the plant stems contrast with the trellis’s perfect square grid, which is also the most obvious repeated pattern within the overall design, so the repetition of the stems and roses becomes a secondary, less obvious formal element. Against the obvious constricting quality of the trellis, the stems seem filled with movement and highly natural in their growth, although upon close inspection they of course repeat within a very restricted pattern. This evocation

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14 For a good summary of Morris’s garden design, an engaging subject in its own right, see Jill, Duchess of Hamilton, Penny Hart, and John Simmons, *The Gardens of William Morris* (New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1999).
of movement and natural growth would become very important in Morris’s later work; his ability to show natural form, and to disguise within it the strict repeating formality of wallpaper patterning, is one of the most significant technical, and visual, qualities of his work.

Morris designed several less remarkable patterns in the late 1860s, working both with non-directional tiling forms (such as Diaper, from 1868-1870) and with fairly direct adaptations of historic styles. In 1872, however, Morris again began pursuing more experimental work in his wallpapers. His designs were quickly becoming more refined; his papers of 1872, especially Jasmine, show a greater understanding of the possibilities, and restrictions, of wallpaper. Whereas in the early patterns of the 1860s Morris explored depth and movement to a certain degree, in Jasmine one can see the evolution of the twining movement and depth of pattern which are so common in Morris patterns. The foreground and background interact, rather than standing against each other, providing a depth within the pattern without making it an imitation of three-dimensional forms. While the plants themselves are less specific and true-to-nature than those of Trellis, the interaction between the plants is carefully observed and depicted. The twisting, twirling movement of the stems evokes the growth of the jasmine vines among the hawthorn branches, but it also creates a sense of movement which prevents the viewer’s eye from immediately tracing how the pattern repeats. The pattern is both naturalistic and free and carefully constrained, demonstrating Morris’s deep understanding of the necessity of both form and freedom in pattern design.

Morris’s attention to the movement and growth of plants would persist throughout his pattern-designing period, and he also continued to give specific attention to other natural characteristics of the plants he chose to depict. Through his close study of the specific characteristics of plants he developed an ability to show the dimensionality of natural forms without resorting to *trompe l’œil* realism. The twisting and intertwining of motifs, along with the treatment of color and shading, lent his patterns a degree of spatial depth without implying a false three-dimensionality (unlike, for example, the popular “French” style patterns of the era). He would often give a leaf two different tones, one on each side of its central vein, indicating its fold without providing a visually confusing shadow, which would imply a light source (see Figure 23, *Acanthus*, for an example of this method). Slight line-shading was also provided on petals and leaves, giving a sense of the plant’s shape without modeling it in a painterly fashion (see, for example, the centers of the jasmine blossoms in *Jasmine*).

Morris’s later patterns were often vividly complex in color, detail, form and movement, and every aspect was carefully combined to create patterns that were natural without being realistic and carefully arranged without being stiffly formal. They were obviously flat, repeating, wall coverings, but they possessed a sense of depth that left the viewer without an exact idea of where one motif ended and the next began. This can be seen in the twisting, circular motifs of 1874’s *Acanthus*, in the complex diagonal meander of 1884’s *Wild Tulip* (Figure 24) and many of the patterns which followed it, and even in the relatively simple leaves and branches of 1887’s *Willow Bough* (Figure 25). In these and in all the other designs certain concepts recur:
Acanthus is the greatest example of the way Morris would twist leaves to show depth and natural growth, and also how he used a far simpler, far smaller background motif to complement, fill, and add depth to the backgrounds of his patterns. The exacting depictions of the plants in Wild Tulip are reminiscent of the early Trellis; the blooms of the flowers are irregular and the turning, curving leaves flip over themselves and twist around the plant’s stem. This pattern was an experiment in a new formal structure, the “meander,” in which the pattern moves diagonally upwards across the space, and it is still a work of movement, depth, and natural growth. Willow Bough is a simplified variation on the meander. This design has only one type of plant in it, the willow boughs of its name, and it was designed in a fairly naturalistic green color. Willow branches of this type often serve as the background in Morris’s other patterns, appearing first in his Tulip and Willow fabric of 1873 and recurring throughout 1870s and 1880s, but in Willow Bough they are brought to the front and placed against a blank ground, creating a simpler, more peaceful design which, however, still possesses depth (emphasized by the lighter and darker greens of the boughs) and movement. The difference between this and a complex meander pattern such as Wild Tulip likely relates to the nature of the two plants, as viewed by Morris. In these patterns, the large blooms and thick stems of the flowers have a vigorous nature in keeping with the thrust of the meander pattern; the willows, however, seem to float atop the blank background, much as the boughs of a weeping willow might drift in the breeze. Both patterns evoke certain aspects of the plants, showing them as they were while, again, fitting them within the constraints of wallpaper patterning.

The evolution of Morris’s designs for printed fabrics was similar to that of his wallpaper. His work with the meander structure in fabric patterns is particularly remarkable. His late fabric patterns, such as 1884’s *Wandle* (Figure 26) are richly detailed and intricately structured. Their rich colors and careful printing owe themselves to Morris’s extensive experiments with the printing process. He innovated not merely in his designs, but in how he had them executed; he was not only a designer, but the head of a movement of craft. Morris, after one failed experiment in producing his own wallpapers, left the printing of the papers to expert block-cutting and printing workshops Barrett’s and Jeffrey & Co., taking control only in approval stages of the production. However, he was much more involved in the creation of his fabrics. He found the alternately murky and garish chemical dyes of modern fabric printing practices completely unsatisfactory, and he set about finding preferable ways to produce his patterns on fabric. From the 1875 he worked closely with Thomas Wardle, the brother-in-law of George Wardle, the Firm’s manager, who owned fabric works in the own of Leek, Straffordshire; together they experimented with the creation of new dyeing methods and the revival of old methods all but lost after the Industrial Revolution and the advent of chemical dyes in the 1850s. Dyeing and fabric production were also the principal reasons for the 1881 move of the Firm’s workshops from Morris’s home in London to Merton Abbey, a collection of old silk-production buildings in the countryside, near Wimbledon on the River Wandle.\[17\] At Merton there was room for extensive operations, for dyeing and weaving and stained-glass work, and there was abundant, clean water. It was there that Morris achieved the creation of his designs completely under his own auspices, altering the creation of

\[17\] Parry, *British Textiles from 1850 to 1900*, 14.
commercial fabrics by reviving earlier handicraft techniques and thereby also creating a better medium for his innovative pattern work.

All this experimentation and work, Morris’s great exertion in the creation of his patterns and fabrics, is attributable, largely, to Morris’s need to explore every facet of his work – in this case, to “taking in dyeing at every pore”\(^\text{18}\) both literally and figuratively. Throughout his adult life he would devote himself to one craft, immersing himself fully and exploring every facet of it before moving on to new designs and tasks; his pattern designing and the resultant wallpapers and fabrics are great examples of what this concentrated effort could produce. His extended effort with fabrics, especially, is also indicative of his perfectionism and his devotion to the cause of improving English interiors. He could not be satisfied with low-quality products, and so he took it upon himself to make them better in order to help his own goal of creating something totally new, something completely within his philosophy of design and separate from what was standard and, in his view, degraded and ugly.

As befits a follower of Ruskin, Morris sought not only well-printed, aesthetically pleasing decoration; he also wanted his patterns to possess a depth of meaning that seems to have been all but unheard of in earlier Victorian designs. In “Some Hints on Pattern-Designing,” he wrote that “You may be sure that any decoration is futile, and has fallen into at least the first stage of degradation, when it does not remind you of something beyond itself, of something of which it is but a

\(^{18}\) Qtd. in Fiona MacCarthy, "The Designer," in *William Morris*, ed. Linda Parry (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), 40. Morris was heavily involved in the investigation of new dyes for his fabrics, not only researching historic techniques but also conducting dyeing experiments with his collaborators. His hands were blue for weeks during his experimentations with the indigo discharge dyeing technique. Linda Parry, *William Morris Textiles* (New York: The Viking Press, 1983), 41.
visible symbol.”¹⁹ Not only that, but, simply, bluntly: “Without order your work cannot even exist; without meaning, it were better not to exist.”²⁰ This meaning, as he explained in his most famous essay on decoration, “Making the Best of It,” was to be expressed through the evocation of nature. “You must not only mean something in your patterns, but must also be able to make others understand that meaning... Now the only way in our craft of design for compelling people to understand you is to follow hard on Nature; for what else can people refer to, or what else is there which everybody can understand?”²¹ To Morris, meaning seems to have meant ideology; with his patterns and other work he hoped to express his own ideals of design and of ways of life. It is this ideologically-minded design philosophy that most obviously links Morris to both Ruskin and the earlier Pre-Raphaelites. Morris’s belief in the importance of meaning in every work and his expression of ideas through nature, like many of Morris’s deepest-held ideals, are distinctly Ruskinian; his resultant close attention to nature, like his adaptive historicism, is also distinctly Pre-Raphaelite. However, because Morris’s designs were intended for commercial sale, he went a step further than the Pre-Raphaelites; he ensured that his ideals were widely disseminated, not contained on a relatively few canvases exhibited once, then purchased by the artistically inclined wealthy. This dissemination was one of the most important aspects of Morris’s work; even before he embraced Socialism in the 1880s, he believed in elevating the circumstances of all people through improvements in design and aesthetics, and he achieved this not only through the products of Morris &

²⁰ Morris, "Making the Best of It," 106.
²¹ Ibid., 111.
Co., but also through his lectures, in which he encouraged others to pursue similar ideals in order to improve the situation of art and of society.

Morris wrote extensively on his theories of design, both in pattern-work and in general decoration, and these writings reflect his particular way of thinking about design and aesthetics. For Morris, the practicalities of designing or producing were inseparable from the questions and problems of contemporary life. He, like many Victorians, was horrified by the rapid changes wrought by England’s Industrial Revolution. Less than a century before, England had been a largely agricultural, rural society, but as its industrial power grew, so did its cities. These new industrial cities were shockingly overcrowded, polluted, and squalid. In the homes of the new middle class, however, rooms were stuffed with as many showy status symbols as possible, and heavy curtains shut out the world beyond.

For a man like William Morris who so valued nature and history, the ostentation and poor quality of modern design and the detrimental effects the Industrial Revolution made modern society seem ill and ugly. One way to redress the problems of society, in his eyes, was to ameliorate the aesthetic situation – and one method of doing that was to improve design. This expression of idealism in decoration was not limited to Morris. As Brett points out, “The discourse of nineteenth-century decoration and ornament (a discourse that was conducted both in and through words and in and through design practice) partook of a philosophical debate of ferocity and consequence.”22 Morris expressed these ideals not only in his designs, but in his prolific writing. He gave many speeches on design and, later, on politics, and his practical advice on how to design a pattern or a home was

22 Brett, *Rethinking Decoration*, 106.
consistently inseparable from his idealism concerning aesthetics, nature, and the improvement of modern English society. For him, everything was integrated; everyday life was inseparable from art, and art was inseparable from the larger condition of society. By that token, it was necessary for the home, the center of everyday life, to be beautiful if art and society were to be beautiful (and beauty was synonymous with health, usefulness and goodness). As Morris wrote in “Making the Best of It,” “If we want art to begin at home, as it must, we must clear our houses of troublesome superfluities that are for ever in our way… *Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful.*”\(^{23}\) By creating patterns with an emphasis on natural forms and the evocation of meaning, Morris sought to help others reach this goal and thereby ameliorate their homes and their lives.

Morris believed that plant forms in patterns could, if treated correctly, create an atmosphere of nature within the home. The patterns, which were often based on Morris’s own encounters with plants in his garden and the countryside, were meant to evoke in their viewers a sense of the natural, of interaction with the world to which the plants belonged. In “Some Hints on Pattern-Designing” he writes of “beautiful and natural forms, which, appealing to a reasonable and imaginative person, will remind him not only of the part of nature which, to his mind at least, they represent, but also of much that lies beyond that part.”\(^{24}\) To achieve this, the pattern could be neither too realist nor too formal. It was far more important to Morris to show the idea of a natural space than to subscribe to a formal scheme or an exacting realism,


and yet, as shown above, he still managed to depict carefully realized structures and keenly observed plants.

Morris often looked to his own experiences of nature to create his patterns; he was always designing, and always ready to be inspired. *Trellis* resembles the rose trellises of his beloved Red House, and *Willow Bough* was created after a walk near Kelmscott Manor, his country retreat, with his daughter May. As May described it, “We were walking one day by our little stream that runs into the Thames, and my Father pointed out the detail and variety in the leaf-forms, and soon afterwards this paper was done, a keenly-observed rendering of our willows that has embowered many a London living-room.”²⁵ Morris looked closely at nature and the world around him in order to create patterns which evoked his ideal English landscape of gardens and cultivated countryside, which reappears throughout his visual and written work. Whereas Ruskin had argued against the “rascally wirefenced garden-rolled-nursery-maid’s paradise”²⁶ of countryside chosen by Millais for his *Ophelia*, thinking it lacked power when compared with sublime landscapes such as the Alps, Morris favored such environments above all others. The English countryside, not tamed but not wild, marked both by history and by the beauty of nature, was Morris’s ideal space, and it reappears across his works, from his poetry to his gardens to his patterns. He always turned to the simple joys and beauty of the country for ideas and ideology; the country is as important to his socialist writing as it is to his poetry. His idealized view of the medieval era was the only other element which possibly held such sway in his life, and the two were intrinsically linked. The ills of modern society were

²⁶ Qtd. in Staley, *The Pre-Raphaelite Landscape*, 30.
reflected in the smoky, ugly, crowded London streets; beauty and ideal society was to be found in the countryside, where the landscape was deeply interwoven with the remains of England’s history, especially its surviving medieval structures. Morris saw these structures as perfectly integrated with their surroundings, sympathetic and inoffensive to the larger world and its inhabitants. He argued for the preservation of both the historic structure of England and the landscape which contained them, greatly influencing the growth of both the historic and the environmental preservation movements. On a more personal level, though, it was at Red House and at Kelmscott that Morris came closest to attaining the ideal realm of historic (or historic-looking) buildings integrated with the countryside, and it was to those spaces that he turned in order to create his ideal-filled patterns.

The ideal of nature and natural spaces was not restricted to Morris’s pattern-work, and it was important not only to his understanding of aesthetics, but also to his understanding of the structures and ills of society. He wrote in his lecture “The Lesser Arts,” published in 1882 as part of Hopes and Fears for Art, that

> When we go beyond our smoky world, there, out in the country, we may still see the works of our fathers yet alive amidst the very nature they were wrought into, and of which they are so completely a part. For there indeed if anywhere, in the English country, in the days when people cared about such things, was there a full sympathy between the works of man, and the land they were made for.⁷⁷

In the countryside, then, history, nature, and humanity were all comfortably integrated and, as Fiona MacCarthy writes, “the main thrust of Morris’s life was integration.”⁸⁸ In Morris’s utopian socialist narrative The News from Nowhere, the

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city has become one with the countryside, and orchards grow in the middle of London. As he argued in “The Lesser Arts,” such integration could be achieved by art and design which set its mind on meaning, history, and nature, rather than opulence or falsity:

That art will make our streets as beautiful as the woods, as elevating as the mountain-sides: it will be a pleasure and a rest, and not a weight upon the spirits to come from the open country into a town; every man’s house will be fair and decent, soothing to his mind and helpful to his work: all the works of man that we live amongst and handle will be in harmony with nature, will be reasonable and beautiful: yet all will be simple and inspiriting... and every man will have his share of the best.29

Therefore, in a smaller way – but one no less significant to Morris’s ideology – Morris’s pattern designs, which hearken to the English countryside and to the designs of the pre-industrial world, were meant to bring a piece of the ideal realm of “Nowhere” into the homes of the people, whether those people lived in country manors or city townhouses.

By filling his patterns with plants which could evoke his ideal realm, Morris was hoping to further his cause and move towards a world of aesthetic socialism, where art and society both regained their health and beauty. In his view, expressed most succinctly in “The Prospects of Architecture in Civilization,” another lecture published as a section of Hopes and Fears for Art, art was on the road to ruin and could not recover unless it was aided by social change and, yet, that social change could not occur without aesthetic change, without the population embracing nature and art. Again, his thoughts on politics and on art flowed together, as did his views on nature; he argues in the same essay that “the real meaning of the arts… (is) surely the

expression of reverence for nature” and that “art is the only possible guardian” of nature’s beauty.30 By expressing nature and the countryside in his patterns, Morris was taking part in his own philosophies, integrating art and nature and idealism even in the commercial world of crafts and interior design.

It seems that Morris was at least somewhat successful in his evocation of nature and ideas in his pattern design. Fiona MacCarthy, after dubbing him the “the high priest of the countryside”31 for the special attention he gave to, and brought to, rural England, proposes that “part of the reason for the lasting popularity of Morris’s wallpapers and textiles with the urban middle classes is their fecundity of rural imagery: they put us back in touch with our lost imagined landscapes.”32 By exploring his own interaction with his personal landscapes, both real and ideal, Morris managed to lead those who viewed his patterns into considerations of the beauty and value of his beloved English countryside. One could argue, then, that Morris’s patterns are significant not only because of how they reflect his own ideals, but also because they achieved Morris’s goal, evoking for their viewers the particular greatness of the simple plants, and simple life, of rural England.

William Morris was not only a prolifically creative man; he was also a man with a very clear understanding of his own ideals and an innate sense of the integration and interrelation of every aspect of culture and politics. He valued the imaginative and the practical in even measure, and he mixed them with a careful indiscrimination, so that his poems and prose were historic and romantic and political,

31 MacCarthy, William Morris, xv.
32 Ibid.
his socialism was aesthetic, and his designs were not only depictions of nature but evocations of a better world. Therefore, despite the immense numbers of works of writing and design attributable to Morris, every object and string of words is filled with the same themes, the same ideals. Morris sought not only to create beautiful and meaning-filled objects, but to communicate that beauty and meaning to a larger audience and thereby further his own ideals, urging his beloved England towards a world of less polluting industry and terrible conditions and more equality, joy, and beauty. The Pre-Raphaelites inspired him to become an artist, and it was he who carried their work and ideals to a logical conclusion, attempting to fill every aspect of his life, and the lives of others, with labor and objects that were inherently meaningful and that moved away from the ugliness and inequality of modern society to a realm where “every man will have his share of the best.”

33 Morris, "The Lesser Arts," 27.
CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have argued, via my examination of plant life in the works of Millais, Rossetti, and Morris, that the central urge of Pre-Raphaelitism was not archaism or realism, but the search for meaning. This argument is not only evident, however, in Pre-Raphaelite treatments of nature; the Pre-Raphaelite search for meaning can be read in every aspect of their works, from the literary subjects they chose for their early paintings, to their interactions with and depiction of modernity, to the philosophies they expressed in their other works, such as the poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the political speeches of William Morris. If this is true, however – if meaning was the central urge of Pre-Raphaelitism – it leads one to ask what happened to this drive for meaning after the Pre-Raphaelite movement had died away.

The visual trajectory of Pre-Raphaelite style is not hard to trace. Even while Morris was beginning his exploration of Pre-Raphaelite decorative arts, other Pre-Raphaelite artists were already moving in new directions, helping to fuel the rise of Aestheticism in the 1860s and 1870s. The transition from Pre-Raphaelitism to Aestheticism is logical enough in a historic context: Pre-Raphaelitism immediately predated, and in some cases coincided with, Aestheticism; several Pre-Raphaelite artists grew towards Aesthetic ideologies as their work progressed; and Pre-Raphaelite art and design were highly valued by Aesthetics. I wish to posit, however, that Aestheticism, with its heavy emphasis on the visual, rather than the moral or meaningful, was not the greatest inheritor of Pre-Raphaelitism. Rather, Pre-
Raphaelitism died with William Morris, but was also reborn, through his influence, in the theories and ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement.

Morris was not the last surviving Pre-Raphaelite; when he died in 1896, other Pre-Raphaelite artists were still active, and Hunt outlived him by fourteen years. However, Morris had proved himself the inheritor of Pre-Raphaelitism when he began producing his meaning-driven decorative art in the 1860s. By that time, Millais and Rossetti had already given up their earliest, most meaning-centered style; if, again, one is to assume that the search for meaning was central to Pre-Raphaelitism, then it is clear that as the group evolved Morris, not Millais or Rossetti, operated within the most Pre-Raphaelite style. Morris added vitality and continued relevance and rebellion to the movement he had inherited. Though he was physically survived by other Pre-Raphaelite artists, it was he who survived them in the continuation of Pre-Raphaelite ideals and theories, passing them on not to Aestheticism, but to Arts and Crafts.

Aestheticism was a trend in arts, literature, and popular culture which is most often associated with the idea of “art for art’s sake.” Aestheticism in painting was not defined by any one visual style; it was characterized as much by the romantic, idealized Classicism of Frederic Leighton (Figure 27) as by John McNeil Whistler’s modern cityscape “nocturnes” (Figure 28). However, much of Aestheticism did owe itself to Pre-Raphaelite influences, such as Rossetti’s languid, sensual women. Rossetti was at the center of one group of artists associated with Aestheticism, including Whistler and the second-generation Pre-Raphaelites Burne-Jones, Morris,
and Simeon Solomon, as well as the American Whistler. Another circle centered on Leighton and George Frederick Watts. The two groups represented social circles, not oppositional groups, and the Aesthetic movement was, if anything, even less coherent than the Pre-Raphaelite movement which preceded and overlapped it.¹ Aestheticism did not have the moment of formation that Pre-Raphaelitism had experienced with the Brotherhood, and its central philosophy was not as clear as that of Pre-Raphaelitism. There was no overarching urge besides the seeking of the “aesthetic,” hence the common association of the movement with the doctrine of art for art’s sake.

In her book *Art for Art’s Sake: Aestheticism in Victorian Painting*, Elizabeth Prettejohn argues that art for art’s sake was not an artistic theory, but a problem for the artist to solve, the “problem of what art might be.”² Prettejohn argues that the English understanding of art for art’s sake was that the question of what art was or could be – how it could be seen as beautiful or important – was dependant entirely upon the experience of each concrete work of art.³ This conception of art meant that the movement tended to be concerned with questions of the visual experience of specific works of art, placing it at odds with the Pre-Raphaelites, who were so concerned with the intellectual experience of viewing and “reading” art. Walter Pater, one of the great theorists of the Aesthetic movement, wrote in his 1877 essay, *The School of Giorgione*: “In its primary aspect, a great picture has no more definite message for us than an accidental play of sunlight and shadow for a few moments on

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² Ibid., 2.
³ Ibid., 5.
the wall or floor.” Arguments such as this outline the clearest ideal of aestheticism: the privileging of formal values, such as color, tone, and composition, rather than narrative or meaning. These formal aspects were meant to lead to an image of great visual beauty, without any auxiliary considerations beyond, possibly, the general mood created by the image. This line of theory was antithetical to Pre-Raphaelite thought, and even devoted Aesthetic artists found issue with the lack of meaning, sometimes returning to addressing larger issues and thoughts in their later works; abandoning meaning entirely was not an easy task.

The Aesthetic movement sat uneasily with Pre-Raphaelite thought not only because of its privileging of formal qualities over meaning, but also because of the related privileging of visuality, art for art’s sake, and the aesthetically pleasing above all other considerations. The dichotomy between artists who valued meaning and artists who valued visual form began early; in 1846, when the aesthetic was still a new concept in English art theory, Ruskin argued against the concept, writing that “the term ‘aesthesis’ properly signifies mere sensual perception of the outward qualities and necessary effects of bodies... but I wholly deny that the impressions of beauty are in any way sensual.” To Ruskin, the great art-moralist, such attention to “sensuality” was repulsive because it denied the effect of thought and meaning, of morality, on the perception of art. Related, and possibly even more problematic, was the ranking of art above all else, even nature. Some artists balked at being considered close to the idea of art for art’s sake even when their work was claimed by Aesthetics

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4 Qtd. in Treuherz, *Victorian Painting*, 132.
5 Ibid., 142.
6 Qtd in Prettejohn, *Art for Art’s Sake*, 4.
as being sympathetic to Aesthetic philosophies.\textsuperscript{7} Morris was especially uncomfortable with this aspect of Aestheticism; though he valued art greatly, and argued vehemently for its revitalization, he never separated art from other considerations. Especially problematic for Morris was the Aesthetic claim, made by Pater and preached by Oscar Wilde, that art was superior even to nature. Such a claim discredited the imitative practices of art, but it also discredited nature itself. Such an idea would have been both personally and artistically distasteful to Morris. He also would have taken great issue with Wilde’s claim in “The Renaissance of English Art,” that Morris felt “that the close imitation of Nature is a disturbing element in imaginative art.”\textsuperscript{8} Morris was appropriated, and misinterpreted, by the Aesthetics, but, like much of Pre-Raphaelite thought, his central ideals were at odds with those of Aestheticism.

For Morris, who so valued nature, history, and meaning, Aestheticism was not indicative of the direction in which art needed to move. Morris’s designs, despite their essentially visually pleasing qualities, were not made purely for aesthetic reasons (as discussed in Chapter 3). To Morris, every aspect of a work of art was interrelated; an image was not separable from its inspiration or its context, and its aesthetics were indivisible from its politics. Pattern designs had to be inspired by historic forms and specific plants not because such inspirations led to aesthetically pleasing designs, but because they were evocative of each person’s own ideas about and love of nature. The patterns were meant to be attractive, but that was not the primary concern in their creation. Rather, Morris felt that if his patterns were true to nature and history, and made well, they would be aesthetically pleasing and evocative

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 7.

\textsuperscript{8} Qtd. in Peter Faulkner, \textit{Against the Age: An Introduction to William Morris} (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980), 108.
in the same moment. Morris, therefore, was no Aesthetic, despite his deeply-felt relationship with the beautiful, because for him, beauty carried social and moral meanings. Everything, beautiful or ugly, affected him, and, he felt, all of society, and that is why he sought to change the visual experience of the world through his decorative arts. He pursued reform in design not “for art’s sake” alone, but for the sake of society and, thereby, for the sake of art – because to Morris, art and society were inseparable, and each had to be healthy for the other to thrive.

Morris gave great attention not only to the creation of meaningful objects, but also to how they were brought into being. He believed that beautiful objects were created by craftsmen outside of the industrial system of mass production, who could invest themselves in their activities and derive enjoyment and happiness from their work. This essentially Ruskinian view also became a Socialist view for Morris, but in the end it was more important to the creation of an art movement than a political movement. If, in Morris’s words, Aestheticism’s “fore-doomed end must be, that art will at last seem too delicate a thing for even the hands of the initiated to touch; and the initiated must at last sit still and do nothing – to the grief of no one,”9 the Arts and Crafts movement was to be the opposite. The movement was dedicated to putting art in the hands of every region, every class, and every person. Artists produced works which were dynamic and backed by considerations of the history of place and human creativity, the beauty and goodness of nature and the unaffectedness of vernacular forms, and the joy of work removed from the eternal repetition and uncreative production of modern industry.

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9 Qtd. in Prettejohn, *Art for Art’s Sake*, 247.
The Arts and Crafts movement was as founded in meaning as Aestheticism was in the lack of meaning. Though there was variation within both movements, and overlap between the two, their essential difference lay in what they had inherited from Pre-Raphaelitism. Aestheticism inherited visual style (the most important aspect of its theory), whereas Arts and Crafts inherited the search for meaning, a goal with greater reach than the creation of attractive objects. Like Aestheticism and Pre-Raphaelitism, Arts and Crafts was more an approach to making objects than a specific visual style; its theories were more focused on what should be contained in art, what theories or practices, rather than what art should look like. The Arts and Crafts movement was also (again like Aestheticism and Pre-Raphaelitism) an oppositional movement directly engaged with the modern world. Aestheticism advocated art over all else in an effort to deny the ugliness and disturbing qualities of modern life, but the Arts and Crafts movement chose a different set of philosophies in order to ameliorate the modern world. Arts and Crafts designers devoted themselves to a variety of ideas, many of which were drawn from the philosophies of Ruskin and Morris. These ideas included, to use Wendy Kaplan’s list, “‘joy in labor,’ ‘the simple life,’ ‘truth to materials,’ ‘unity in design,’ ‘honesty in construction’ ‘democratic design’ (and) ‘fidelity to place.’” Arts and Crafts designers intended to separate themselves from the realm of mass industry and poorly-planned urbanization, which were causing rapid change not only in England, the birthplace of the movement, but across the developed world. The movement quickly became international, though it varied widely from place to place as a direct result of its privileging of the local, the ‘fidelity

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11 Ibid.
to place’ of Kaplan’s list. The movement was also wide-ranging in its media; it was associated with the design of objects from tiles to textiles to tableware, but it was also an architectural movement which can trace its origins to Red House, the home Phillip Webb designed for Morris in the 1860s. In all aspects, though, the Arts and Crafts movement gave great attention to theories and beliefs, to the incorporation of thought and meaning into its works.

Followers of Arts and Crafts wanted to integrate art and life, making all aspects of design come together to form an “environmental whole.” This integration was, in the thought of the movement, not only a practice for specific spaces, but also a larger philosophy. All of life, not only the parlors of the rich, needed to be redesigned, and design and art needed to be integrated into every aspect of the world. This overarching philosophy was essentially oppositional to Aesthetic beliefs, which were founded upon specifics. However, the two movements did overlap stylistically; they were, after all, contemporary movements of close associated thinkers and artists, and Aesthetic collectors also found Arts and Crafts objects visually valuable. Though Arts and Crafts designers owed a great deal to Morris's theories of craft and work, their actual design practices did not necessarily correspond to those advocated by Morris; for example, the pattern designs of Walter Crane (Figure 29) harkened to the works of Jones and Dresser and to Aesthetic images as well as to the specificity of Morris, but Crane was devoted to Arts and Crafts ideals, and was, like Morris, a Socialist. Similarly, Morris’s closest friend

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12 Ibid., 18.
and colleague, Edward Burne-Jones, was possibly the greatest example of a later Pre-Raphaelite artist working in a more aesthetic vein, but he was an Arts and Crafts believer – and a Pre-Raphaelite – at heart. Not only did Burne-Jones design for Morris and Co., but Elizabeth Prettejohn argues that his paintings though visually associated with the Aesthetic movement and highly ornamental, might be seen as decorative objects intended for much the same purpose as Burne-Jones stained glass and other Morris and Co. productions: “to inhabit the actual world in which we live,” adding to the environmental whole rather than standing alone, as was the intent with Aesthetic objects.  

Prettejohn also argues that Burne-Jones’s paintings (for example, The Mill, 1870-82, Figure 30) are associated with Morris’s belief in “man’s happiness in his labour,” and that Burne-Jones intended his works for public consumption, not private collection, scorning Aesthetic elitism. Morris was not, therefore, the only artist who carried Pre-Raphaelite ideals beyond the years of the Brotherhood; however, Morris’s interpretation of Pre-Raphaelitism influenced his contemporaries and also led to the theories and practices of the Arts and Crafts movement, making Morris the most significant perpetuator of Pre-Raphaelite thought.

In this thesis I have shown some ways that the treatment of plant life in the works of several of the great Pre-Raphaelite artists reflects those artists’ experiments with meaning in art, as well as the artists’ influence on the Aesthetic and Arts and Crafts movements. I argue that the belief in evoking thoughts and ideas through objects – and thereby bettering the minds of the people and the situation of society –

14 Prettejohn, Art for Art’s Sake, 235.
15 Ibid., 246.
16 Ibid., 248.
was essentially Pre-Raphaelite before it was ever part of the Arts and Crafts movement, just as adaptive historicism and languid beauties were Pre-Raphaelite before they were Aesthetic. Pre-Raphaelite thought did, of course, evolve over time, largely with the help of William Morris, without whom the pursuit of meaning might have died out in the Pre-Raphaelite circle altogether. Through Morris some essentially Pre-Raphaelite ideals – the superiority and specificity of nature in art, the value of adaptive historicism, and the pursuit of meaning in art – passed into the Arts and Crafts movement, which was simultaneously the last major Victorian artistic movement and the first major artistic movement of the modern era. The Arts and Crafts movement survived into the 1920s and directly influenced tenets and styles of early Modernism, carrying with it all the while the influence of William Morris and the ideals of the Pre-Raphaelites.
APPENDIX: POEMS OF DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI

Mary’s Girlhood
(For a Picture)
I.
This is that blessed Mary, pre-elect
   God's Virgin. Gone is a great while, and she
   Dwelt young in Nazareth of Galilee.
Unto God's will she brought devout respect,
 Profound simplicity of intellect,
   And supreme patience. From her mother's knee
 Faithful and hopeful; wise in charity;
 Strong in grave peace; in pity circumspect.

So held she through her girlhood; as it were
   An angel-watered lily, that near God
 Grows and is quiet. Till, one dawn at home,
She woke in her white bed, and had no fear
   At all, – yet wept till sunshine, and felt awed:
 Because the fulness of the time was come.

II.
These are the symbols. On that cloth of red
   I' the centre, is the Tripoint: perfect each,
 Except the second of its points, to teach
 That Christ is not yet born. The books – whose head
 Is golden Charity, as Paul hath said –
 Those virtues are wherein the soul is rich:
 Therefore on them the lily standeth, which

Is Innocence, being interpreted.
The seven-thorn’d briar and the palm seven-leaved
   Are her great sorrows and her great reward.
 Until the time be full, the Holy One
Abides without. She soon shall have achieved
   Her perfect purity: yea, God the Lord
 Shall soon vouchsafe His Son to be her Son.

St. Luke the Painter

Give honour unto Luke Evangelist;
   For he it was (the aged legends say)
 Who first taught Art to fold her hands and pray.
Scarcely at once she dared to rend the mist
 Of devious symbols: but soon having wist
How sky-breadth and field-silence and this day
Are symbols also in some deeper way,
She looked through these to God and was God’s priest.

And if, past noon, her toil began to irk,
And she sought talismans, and turned in vain
To soulless self-reflections of man’s skill, –
Yet now, in this the twilight, she might still
Kneel in the latter grass to pray again,
Ere the night cometh and she may not work.17

Figure 1.

Figure 2.
Figure 3.
John Everett Millais, *Lorenzo and Isabella*, 1848-49. Oil on canvas, 3'4 1/2" x 4'8 1/4". Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.

Figure 4.
William Holman Hunt, *Rienzi Vowing to Obtain Justice for the Death of his Young Brother, Slain in a Skirmish between the Colonna and Orsini Factions*, 1848-49. Oil on canvas, 34 x 38 in. Private Collection.
Figure 5.

Figure 6.
Figure 7.

Figure 8.
Figure 9.

Figure 10.
Arthur Hughes, *Ophelia*, 1852. Oil on panel, 27" x 48 3/4 ". Manchester City Art Gallery.
Figure 11.

Figure 12.
John Everett Millais, *Autumn Leaves*, 1855-56. Oil on canvas, 41 x 29". Manchester City Art Galleries.

Figure 13.
Figure 14.
Figure 15. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *A Vision of Fiametta*, 1878. Oil on canvas, 55 x 36". Private collection.

Figure 16. William Morris, *Trellis*, 1862. Wallpaper, block-printed in distemper colors.

Figure 17. William Morris, *Daisy*, 1864. Wallpaper, block-printed in distemper colors.

Figure 18. William Morris, *Fruit (Pomegranate)*, 1866. Wallpaper, block-printed in distemper colors.

Figure 20. Owen Jones, wallpaper with formalized floral motif, mid-nineteenth century. Colour print from woodblocks. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Figure 22. William Morris, *Daisy* hanging, early 1860s. Woollen ground embroidered with wools in couched stitches, worked by Jane Morris, Bessie Burden, and others. Society of Antiquaries of London (Kelmscott Manor).

Figure 23. William Morris, *Acanthus*, 1875. Wallpaper, block-printed in distemper colors.

Figure 24. William Morris, *Wild Tulip*, 1884. Wallpaper, block-printed in distemper colors.

Figure 25. William Morris, *Willow Bough*, 1887. Wallpaper, block-printed in distemper colors.
Figure 26. William Morris, *Wandle*, 1884. Indigo-discharged and block-printed cotton.

Figure 27. Frederic Leighton, *Daedalus and Icarus*, 1869. Oil on canvas, 54 3/8" x 41 7/8". Private collection.


Figure 30.
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