

William Holman Hunt's Early Work

In Relation to the High Church Movement

In the first decades of the Victorian era the Church of England was divided among fiercely fighting parties, each convinced that it represented the only true faith and provided the only possible salvation for the dignity and popular appeal of the Established Church. However, all were agreed on the urgent need to combat the proliferation of what they called "nominal Christianity."

Thomas Arnold and his followers, later to be called the Broad Church party, demanded the restriction of the dogmatic articles of the English Church to a necessary minimum, in order to make it accessible to a great majority of the people. This argument became especially forceful after the astounding results of the 1851 religious census were made public, according to which 44 per cent of the churchgoing population of England and Wales belonged to the main Protestant dissenting churches. The Evangelicals, by contrast, intended to restore the former solemnity of Anglican religion by propagating above all the true fear of God and deep hatred of sin, and calling for the fervent and attentive study of the Gospels. The Tractarians, or High Churchmen, wanted rather to consolidate the Church of England by the revivification of its - as they thought - basically Catholic character: its past enthusiasm as well as its rituals and regalia, monasticism and priestliness. Their renewed attention to the pre-Reformation church and its bygone traditions was coupled with a subsequent interest in medieval art and life, and a longing for the simplicity, devotion, and mysticism of the early Christians.

Though starting from different grounds, the Pre-Raphaelites also became advocates of the principles and appearances of this vanished Catholic age. They were disillusioned by the affectations of contemporary academic painting, and

therefore turned to the legacy of the Early Christians. They felt that the artists of this often-despised age were far more sincere than their Victorian successors, and that their works were manifestations of a profound piety and humbleness unknown in art after the dominant influence of the High Renaissance. As the result of their affinity with 14th- and 15th-century Catholic painting, the Pre-Raphaelites became associated in the public mind with the High Church Movement; consequently, they had to face the same repugnance on the part of the Evangelicals as did any advocates of Tractarianism.

However, some of the Pre-Raphaelite brothers had certain links with the Tractarian Movement in a religious respect as well. The Rossetti family frequented Christ Church on Albany Street, a church founded by the Rev. W. Dodsworth, who fell so much under the influence of Newman and the High Church Movement, that he finally in 1850 converted to Roman Catholicism. Millais is also said to have attended Tractarian services,¹ and James Collinson's early religious hesitations finally ended with his second conversion to Catholicism and his entry into Stonyhurst House as a Jesuit novice

In his early years William Holman Hunt was untroubled by religious dilemmas; he was "a contemptuous unbeliever in any spiritual principles,"² as he later recalled. The change came in 1847, when a fellow student at the Academy Schools lent him Ruskin's *Modern Painters* - interestingly enough with the intention of converting Hunt to Roman Catholicism, for he was convinced that the author was a professed Roman Catholic. He was most probably misled by Ruskin's enthusiasm for early Catholic art, and perhaps also by the writer's Oxford degree. Though Hunt was not converted to Roman Catholicism by *Modern Painters*, the book gave him the first significant impetus on his way to religious belief, and it also greatly influenced his artistic conceptions. In reading Ruskin's impressive analyses of the religious works of the 14th and 15th century painters, Hunt resolved to create a new type of religious painting, accessible to his Victorian audience and - though based on strict realism in presentation - also lending itself to expressing moral messages and the concerns of the spiritual world.

The first picture he worked on in the spirit of this new determination was the unfinished *Christ and the Two Marias*. It presents the scene when Mary Magdalene and Mary Salome meet Christ on their way to the disciples to report on Christ's resurrection after finding His tomb empty: "And as they went ... behold, Jesus met

¹Bendiner, 71.

²Landow, 6.

them, saying, All hail! And they came and held Him on the feet, and worshipped Him." (Matthew 28:9). In accordance with the new principles he was resolved to follow, Hunt tried to envisage the scene as it actually might have happened, thus presenting the Resurrection with as much realism as possible. Therefore he decided to abandon his earlier plan to show Christ with a banner in His hand, which would have been incompatible with his realist intentions, and the symbolic meaning of which would have been incomprehensible to most mid-19th-century spectators. In Hunt's painting Christ appears simply with lifted, wide open arms, a pose traditionally attributed to the risen Saviour, suggesting glorification as well as benediction. (This posture was amplified with new significations by Hunt later in 1870-73 in *The Shadow of Death*, where the cruciform shadow of Christ's body recalls the Crucifixion.) Nevertheless, realism was hard to achieve, especially for a novice painter, in a painting the subject of which was the manifestation of wonder, of divine redemption. Thus Hunt tried to lay special emphasis on the emotional aspect of the scene; he wanted the spectators to "see this Christ with something of the surprise that the Maries themselves felt on meeting Him as one who has come out of the grave."³ But he could not even succeed in presenting the bewilderment that the two Maries themselves might have experienced at the sudden encounter. They are shown kneeling on the ground in front of Christ, one of them bending to His feet and embracing it, the other bowing her head and putting her hands together as in praying. This second figure especially displays something of the humble devotion with which Catholic representations show the piety of the Madonna. It strongly recalls the revivalism of William Dyce, a prominent religious painter of the time, a devout High Churchman and authority on church rituals. So instead of being realistic, the scene visualised by Hunt looks rather affected and theatrical. The painter's intention to represent and evoke genuine emotions has clearly failed. Though unwillingly, his work was becoming reminiscent of High Church revivalism, and it probably seemed impossible to Hunt to avoid it within the context of the given subject. No wonder, therefore, that he abandoned the picture altogether, and turned rather to other themes of religious history more appropriate to his ambitious aims.

In March 1848 the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was formed with Hunt, Rossetti and Millais as its chief members. They all agreed that the mannerism of contemporary painting as imposed by the education and value judgement of the Royal Academy should be rejected, thus they all turned for inspiration to the early

³*The Pre-Raphaelites*, 51.

Christian painters' sincere and naturalistic approach to art. However, behind this common conviction lay different incentives, which became apparent later in the dissimilar character of their mature works. Rossetti's enthusiasm for early Christian art was augmented by his young tutor, Ford Madox Brown, who not only had the rare opportunity to see many of these masterpieces on the Continent, but was also familiar with the art of the German Pre-Raphaelites, the Nazarenes, whose influence can clearly be seen in his works of the 1840s. Rossetti was attracted to the painting of the Early Masters for its brilliant, rich colouring and its mystical character. While Hunt's admiration for 14th, 15th century art originated in Ruskin's, Millais's interest was most probably generated by the strong impression his friends' enthusiasm had on him.

Right from the beginning of their joint work Hunt had fears of a Nazarene-inspired, Romish effect on the art of their association. Therefore he objected to Rossetti's proposal to ask Brown to become a member of the Brotherhood, and he also prevented the adoption of the name *Early Christians*, for in his opinion it was dangerously suggestive of Catholicism.

Preparing for the next exhibition of the Royal Academy, the Pre-Raphaelites' first public appearance as a united group of artists with common aims, Rossetti decided on a religious subject, Millais and Hunt on literary ones. *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* was Rossetti's first completed oil painting, executed under Hunt's tutorial supervision, and very much according with the latter's conception of a new type of religious painting. The picture was finally exhibited at the Free Exhibition in March 1849, and was given considerable praise by the critics. Despite the general appreciation however, accusations of Mariolatry were to be heard, the first signs that Hunt's early anxiety to avoid possible suspicions of Romanism was well justified.

Notwithstanding, at the 1850 exhibitions all three artists were represented by religious works; Rossetti exhibited his *Ecce Ancilla Domini*, Millais *Christ in the House of his Parents* and Hunt his *Converted British Family Sheltering a Christian Missionary from the Persecution of the Druids*. Hunt's painting was suggested by the Royal Academy Gold Medal contest on the theme of 'an act of mercy', but as the painting was not completed by the deadline of the competition, it was finally shown at the annual exhibition of the Academy together with Millais's work. Rossetti, again fearing the evaluation of the Selecting Committee of the Royal Academy, sent his new picture to the exhibition of the National Institution, which opened somewhat earlier than that of the Academy. The ensuing hostility towards

Rossetti's *Ecce Ancilla Domini* and the quite justifiable references to its affinity with Catholic art must have caused grave concerns to Hunt. He might have realised that his new painting also displayed certain features which would provoke accusations of Tractarianism. So most probably at this time, just a few days before his own painting was due to be shown, he had obliterated the tonsures of the missionaries in his painting, in order to ward off attacks of High Church sympathy. Nevertheless, Hunt's efforts were to no avail. *The Times*, for example, called *The Druids* "a deplorable example of perverted taste,"⁴ *Fraser's Magazine* reproached it for being "too prone to mannerism,"⁵ and the *Athenaeum* regarded it simply as "a pictorial blasphemy."⁶ Only the Tractarian *Guardian* praised the work.

The supposed High Church attitude of the painter was seen in three features of the painting: in its employment of many early Christian symbols, in the garments of the missionaries, which were mistaken for Eucharistic vestments, and in the presence of the young boy in a fur loincloth at the preparation for the celebration of the Eucharist, which was regarded as a support for the Tractarian view in the so-called Gorham case, a prominent religious controversy of the time on the nature of baptism.

Back in 1847, when reading *Modern Painters*, Hunt realised the importance and inherent potentials of typological - or pre-figurative - symbolism in religious painting. He regarded it as a means by which to effectively combine realism and spiritualism. His first successful attempt at its application can be seen in *The Druids*. Some of these symbols are traditional ones, many of which were re-discovered by High Church revivalism, and thus often used in Tractarian churches as ancient, mystic symbols as well as decorative elements. Therefore, Hunt's employment of the same symbols or types entailed High Church connotations. The burning of candles or oil in a lamp, for example, became part of the High Church rituals, as well as the display of the cross on the altar or on the walls; both symbols are shown in Hunt's painting. The grapevine, the thorn, and the fishing-net are less obviously Catholic symbols, but they are usually associated with the art of the pre-Reformation era. Hunt, however, could successfully create some new, entirely original types. The way, for example, the elder woman supports the missionary recalls the Deposition, or the other woman's act of refreshing the missionary by washing his face with a sponge, obviously refers to the Crucifixion when Christ was

⁴Dobbs, 34.

⁵Bickley, 154.

⁶Dobbs, 34.

given vinegar in a sponge to quench his thirst. The two birds on the roof of the hut recall the parable of the fallen sparrows (Matthew 10:29), in which Christ prophesies the persecution of his apostles.

A bowl of water is shown in the lower left corner of the painting, referring - together with the river in the foreground - to baptism. Behind it, a boy is squeezing grape-juice into a cup, suggesting that Holy Communion is about to be taken, commemorating Christ's sacrifice. The little boy holding the cup wears a fur loincloth which is a traditional attribute of St. John the Baptist, further emphasising the symbolic reference to baptism. But, however well Hunt incorporated the symbols of baptism and Eucharist into the scene, it was an unlucky choice to connect them in this way, as it recalled in the contemporary audience the bitter debate between High Churchmen and the Evangelicals in the course of the Gorham case.

The Gorham controversy started in 1846, between George Cornelius Gorham, vicar of St. Just and Penwith in Cornwall, and Bishop Phillpotts of Exeter. Their fierce fight was launched by Gorham's advertising in the *Ecclesiastical Gazette* for a new curate who should be "free from Tractarian error,"⁷ which obviously irritated the bishop, who was a High Churchman and claimed that the attitude exhibited by Gorham only encouraged unnecessary divergence within the Church of England. Thus when, a few months later, Gorham applied for the parish of Brampford Speke, the bishop, after examining the creed of the candidate, declined to institute him, finding him unsound in the doctrine of baptism. Bishop Phillpotts and High Churchmen in general claimed that man had been unconditionally regenerated in infant baptism, as opposed to Gorham's Evangelical standpoint, according to which regeneration was gained only with the heart-renewal of the already baptised man. In June 1848 Gorham asked the court of arches to compel the bishop to nominate him to the parish of Brampford Speke. The dean of arches delivered his judgement in the case more than a year later, in August 1849, in favour of Phillpotts. He declared that he had no doubt about the infant being regenerated in baptism: therefore Gorham had maintained a doctrine opposed to that of the Church of England, and Bishop Phillpotts had rightly rejected his appointment. This decision was, of course, unacceptable to the Evangelicals. They appealed to the juridical committee of the privy council for supervision. Its final judgement, announced on 15 January 1850, was in favour of Gorham and the Evangelicals, raising doubts in Tractarians not only about the basic nature of the Church of England, but also about the right of the

⁷ Chadwick, 251.

non-ecclesiastical juridical committee to deliver judgement in theological questions. So the debate over infant baptism and regeneration went far beyond the original theological problem involved. It induced further arguments about the fundamental character of the Church of England, and it intensified pressure for its disestablishment. And though a schism in the church was yet again avoided, a number of secessions to Rome from the High Church party followed the final decision.

Not much after the ruling was announced, Hunt's *Druids* touched a raw nerve. The presence of the child holding the cup for the grape-juice at the preparation for the celebration of the Eucharist was seen clearly to support the Tractarian standpoint in the debate.

And there was yet another sign of Hunt's supposed High Church attitude: the robes of the missionaries. Archeologically as accurate as ever, Hunt showed the missionaries wearing white dalmatics and red paenulae, that were unfortunately taken for surplices and chasubles, over the use of which fierce debates were held among the Anglicans. Ritual controversies of the 1840s and 50s stirred an even bigger turmoil than the Gorham case in which basically only the clergy was interested. But the questions of whether to place a candlestick and a cross upon the Holy Table, whether to sing hymns or psalms during the services, whether to allow private confessions or require that a priest should wear a surplice - all these were issues affecting common people, and everyday churchgoers as well. No wonder, therefore, that in 1842, when Bishop Blomfield of London introduced new regulations in the ritual of the Church of England and ruled, among other things, that the preacher at morning services should wear a surplice, he provoked considerable opposition. Parochial wars and so-called surplice riots broke out in many parishes, and the bishop was accused of Tractarianism. It was again Bishop Phillpotts of Exeter who further fuelled the tension by requiring his clergy to have a weekly collection and also to preach in the surplice, both of which were hardly acceptable to the Evangelicals. The resistance against these new regulations was so vehement that finally the bishop was forced to withdraw the order. Surplices were mostly regarded as accessories of the Roman Catholic ritual, so with the threat of 'Papal aggression' in 1850 objections to such regalia were still very much on the agenda. In this hostile, anti-Catholic atmosphere Hunt had little chance of convincing the public that the robes worn by the missionaries in his painting were nothing more than the archeologically proper ones.

The Tractarian undertones dissipated Hunt's hope for popular appeal. They won him, however, the support of Thomas Combe, superintendent of Oxford University Press, who was to become the painter's most important patron. Combe, nicknamed by his friends and acquaintances 'the Early Christian' or 'the Patriarch', was a devout High Churchman. He probably first got to know Millais in 1850, being introduced to the young painter as a potential patron by a local art dealer, James Wyatt. It was thus on Millais' recommendation that *The Druids* was finally purchased by the wealthy uncle of Mrs Combe as a present to Combe himself. In the autumn of 1851, when Millais, Hunt and Charles Collins were staying in Surrey engaged in landscape painting, Hunt met Thomas Combe for the first time, and from this first meeting stemmed a life-long friendship and correspondence between the two. The painter stayed with the Combes in Oxford at Christmas that year, and returned on their invitation next June. Through his new friends Hunt got acquainted with several Oxford clergymen, among them Rev. Hackman, chaplain of Christ Church, and Rev. John David Jenkins, curate of the Tractarian St. Paul's. Hunt had a very high opinion of Jenkins despite the fact that he could not share Jenkins's convictions. On Jenkins's death in 1876 he wrote, in a letter to Combe:

I never knew a man more pure in mind and deed than Canon Jenkins. - It was a boon to have known him - not less a gain to those who like myself had in so many points different views than to those who could feel the pride in the thought that he added a lustre to their own school of mind.⁸

Hunt painted a portrait of Jenkins in 1852 on Combe's commission, and the picture was exhibited in the same year at the Royal Academy Exhibition under the title *New College Cloisters*. Corresponding to the High Church convictions of the sitter, the painting contains many allusions to Tractarian belief, several probably suggested to Hunt by Rev. Hackman and Thomas Combe. The setting itself, the cloister of New College, refers to pre-Reformation Christianity, since it was built by the grant of a papal bull as early as 1389. Its architectural features indicate the High Church interest in Gothic art, and because of the monastic associations generally attached to cloisters, it provides an appropriate background to the portrait of a Tractarian priest. Jenkins's garment, a stole of black silk over a surplice, is typical of those worn by the advocates of the High Church party, over which the surplice riots broke out in the 1840s. The precious, gilt-edged Bible in Jenkins's hand may

⁸*The Pre-Raphaelites*, 106.

also suggest the Tractarian taste for more ornament in regalia and church decoration. The ivy in the background has a two-fold symbolic meaning. First of all it refers to the friendship between Jenkins and Hunt, as, according to Victorian flower language, ivy is the emblem of friendship. But as Andrea Rose points out it can also suggest "the tenacity with which High Church Anglicanism was still gripping Oxford."⁹

However, compared to the heydays of the Oxford Movement in the 1830s, by the time Jenkins's portrait was painted Tractarianism had lost its earlier appeal. This mainly resulted from Newman's retirement in 1841, after which the party fell into confusion. Newman's successors advocated more extreme, sometimes even fanatical ideas, to the extent of invoking panathemas upon Protestants. This new, arrogant style, and a lack of collaboration between its members, made the party much less attractive to potential supporters than before. The numerous conversions to Roman Catholicism further alienated the party from many of its followers, and the re-establishment of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in England together with the appointment of Nicholas Wiseman as cardinal in 1850 had similar effects. These events raised new fears, which created a strong demand for unity within the Anglican Church.

In 1851 Ruskin wrote a pamphlet titled *Notes on the Construction of Sheepfolds* in which he severely criticised the divisiveness of the Church of England, claiming that

the schism between the so-called Evangelical and High Church parties in Britain is enough to shake many men's faith in the truth or existence of Religion at all ... If the Church of England does not forthwith unite with herself the entire Evangelical body, both of England and Scotland, and take her stand with them against the Papacy, her hours has struck.¹⁰

Ruskin's words show the shift which was to be seen in the focus of public attention from the beginning of the 1850s. The expanding influence of Rome and later the alarming increase in the number of sceptics and non-believers generated more anxiety from that time on than the earlier disagreements in ceremonial or meticulous theological issues.

Accordingly, Hunt's following pictures reflect similar concerns. The subject of *The Hireling Shepherd* was originally suggested to the painter by Edgar's song

⁹Rose (1981), 51.

¹⁰Ladow, 40.

about the jolly shepherd in Shakespeare's *King Lear* (Act III, Scene vi), but the title obviously carries biblical connotations, recalling Jesus's parable of the good and the hireling shepherds. But as Hunt was familiar with Ruskin's pamphlet, it could also have an influence on the painter's conception.

The moralist point of *The Hireling Shepherd* is described by Hunt as follows:

Shakespeare's song represents a Shepherd who is neglecting his real duty of guarding the sheep: instead of using his voice in truthfully performing his duty he is using his "mimikin mouth" in some idle way. he was a type thus of other muddle headed pastors who instead of performing their services to their flock - which is in constant peril - discuss vain questions of no value to any human soul.¹¹

Hunt's words as well as his painting are usually interpreted in accordance with Ruskin's *Notes on the Construction of Sheepfolds*, attributing to them references to pointless and divisive church party rows and to the dangerous effect of 'Papal aggression'. On the same basis, Judith Bronkhurst suggests that in the light of Ruskin's firm Evangelical standpoint at the time, Hunt's picture may be interpreted as a manifestation of anti-Tractarianism. She claims that in this case

the shepherdess, attired in scarlet like the recently appointed Cardinal Wiseman, becomes a symbol for the whore of Babylon (Revelation 17) or Roman Catholic Church, with whom the Shepherd is flirting at his peril. The lamb, representative of the vulnerable youth of the country, will die from eating the green, unripe apple, an emblem of dangerous knowledge or seemingly attractive yet ultimately poisonous doctrine. The neglected sheep, representative of the bulk of the Protestant Church, are in this reading symbols of potential converts to Rome, at risk from being allowed to feed on the corn - indeed three animals on the left middleground have already died in this way.¹²

Whether Hunt really wanted to express such anti-Catholic notions by applying these symbols is hard to decide. Notwithstanding, this sort of interpretation of the work implies certain incongruities. Thus, if accepting the shepherdess as the symbol of the Roman Catholic Church, we must assume the shepherd to be a symbol of the High Church party; but then Hunt's reference to their discussion of "questions of no

¹¹Landow, 39.

¹²*The Pre-Raphaelites*, 96.

value," as well as Ruskin's point about the schism of Evangelical and High Church parties, becomes irrelevant. The shepherd can be regarded as a representative of the Evangelical pastors, but then the shepherdess must stand for the Tractarians, since his flirting with her as the symbol of the Roman Catholic Church would simply make no sense. Therefore, the most justifiable interpretation seems to be that the two represent nothing more than the Anglican clergy and their engagement in pointless discussions, while neglecting their far more important task of minding the sheep entrusted to them. And in this failure both of them seem equally guilty, as the painter's description of the work also suggests: "My fool [the shepherd] has found a Death-Head Moth, and this fills his little mind with forebodings of evil, and he takes to it an equally sage counsellor for her opinion."¹³ Furthermore, it also seems unlikely that a green, unripe apple would be used as an emblem of the oldest Christian doctrine, the Roman Catholic. In this case again a more general interpretation would be more effective. The green apples, which are poisonous to lambs, together with the swampy, marshy ground that can cause sheep-rot and the dying and straying sheep, simply refer to the dangers the flock is exposed to as a consequence of the negligence of its pastors. But this danger is not unambiguously specified as solely and necessarily the influence of Catholicism, either Roman or Tractarian. It can also be regarded as the spreading of scepticism or complete loss of faith, which is also mentioned in Ruskin's pamphlet, or as the growing popularity of the different dissenting churches.

So just as the application of High Church revivalist symbols in *The Druids* does not make it a manifestation of Tractarian propaganda, it would be an exaggeration to regard *The Hireling Shepherd* as a definite expression of anti-Tractarian publicity.

The same can be said about the next picture, *Strayed Sheep* or *Our English Coasts*. It was commissioned originally as a repeat version of the sheep in the background of *The Hireling Shepherd*, but Hunt finally decided on a different composition. In this painting the shepherd is absent, leaving his flock completely on its own; the sheep are shown stumbling on the rocky coasts of the country. The religious message of the work is basically the same as that of the previous *The Hireling Shepherd*, but because it presents no more symbols than that of the abandoned sheep, the picture suggests an even more general view, a concern for man's disposition to aberration.

¹³Landow, 39

Despite the fact that after his conversion from atheism Hunt's religious conviction was basically Protestant and closest to that of the Evangelicals, his intellect as well as his heart remained receptive to new impressions, his attitude thus never becoming sectarian. In his condemnation of religious controversy Hunt's ideology was akin to that of the Broad Churchmen, and the latter's deep respect for labour was also shared by the painter, which is reflected in his *The Shadow of Death* painted in 1870-73. He also showed a genuine interest in highly individual religious conceptions. His friendship with Henry Wentworth Monk, his help in having Monk's unique interpretation of the Revelation published, and the portrait he painted of Monk in 1858 to publicise his ideas show an exceptional tolerance in religious issues, uncommon especially among the Evangelicals.

However, Hunt acknowledged the Evangelicals' strict moral principles, their literal approach to the Scriptures, and their conviction of personal conversion. And his popular success was finally achieved with paintings that presented solely Protestant qualities. When first exhibited, *The Light of the World* (1851-3) was still criticised for its presentation of the Saviour as a feeble, pompous priest, and for its supernaturalism; Carlyle, for example reproached it as "a papistical phantasy."¹⁴ But the muscular, determined appearance of the youthful Christ in *The Finding of the Saviour in the Temple* (1854-5) won immediate appreciation. Landow regards this work as a Protestant version of the traditional Annunciation theme,¹⁵ for here the moment of Christ's self-recognition is shown as the revelation of His divine mission. Mary's significance is restricted to her role as the earthly mother of Christ; she is even pushed away by her son: Catholic Mariolatry and superstition seem to be firmly rejected.

The basically Protestant character of Hunt's art remained unchanged throughout the rest of his career. And though in his last important religious painting, *The Triumph of the Innocents*, he attempted again to integrate supernatural elements into the presented scene, High Church symbolism or allusions to Tractarian ideas appeared no more in his painting.

¹⁴Bendiner, 69.

¹⁵Landow, 102.

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