

OVER THE TRANSOM

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When Swinburne died in April 1909, W.B. Yeats recognized his own position of ascendancy, proclaiming himself now as the new “king of the cats.” Thirty years later when Yeats died, T.S. Eliot shared a similar recognition, explaining in the first annual Yeats lecture that “the generations of poetry in our age” last about twenty years “before a new school or style of poetry appears.” Eliot identified the early Yeats of the Victorian era as “a younger member” of the Pre-Raphaelites, and empathized that “the weight of the pre-Raphaelite prestige must have been tremendous.” Hence he well understood the sense of relief Yeats had expressed in 1909. Eliot clarified his principle of the twenty-year generational cycle by identifying his own position among the cats: “By the time a man is fifty, he has behind him a kind of poetry written by men of seventy, and before him another kind of poetry written by men of thirty. This is my own position at present.” More than fifty years later the poet Les Murray, with a sigh of resignation, told me that if we are lucky we can stay in fashion for a decade before we slide into obsolescence.

Thirty, twenty, ten: through its communal nature, a journal can escape this fate. Most journals are like *The Germ*, *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, *The Yellow Book*, and *The Savoy*: they last less than a year or so. But the successful journal becomes institutional in a Ruskinian sense of the word: like a Gothic cathedral, a journal is dependent upon the communal effort of successive generations. My Yeats and Eliot quotations above are cited from an article by Joanne Seltzer – “The King of the Cats: Yeats and Eliot” – published thirty years ago in the first issue of our journal. When Francis Golfing founded the journal in 1977, which he called *The Pre-Raphaelite Review* until 1980, its printing technology was based on a pica typewriter and the critical pedagogy was old historicist and pre-poststructuralist. Golfing introduced the new interdisciplinary journal with a brief “Editorial Statement” identifying a utopian

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factor at the centre of Pre-Raphaelite culture: “It is part of the aim of this journal to show how men and women so diverse in vision, intention, and method were able, for a time, to set aside their idiosyncrasies and engage in a joint endeavor: an endeavor which has proved to be of seminal importance both for the future of English poetry and English art.” This vision of Pre-Raphaelite culture as one distinguished by the noble notion that a cooperative community emerged from diversity is an apocalyptic vision intended to inspire us to extend the implications of our academic scholarship.

Initially, the Pre-Raphaelites were shifting attention from the solitary genius to the social group: sharing studios and mural projects, reading aloud their poetry to each other. But, moreover, the Pre-Raphaelites were charting a paradigmatic shift for the creative arts, one that positions creativity at the intersection between a reflexive discourse for an Art-for-Art’s sake ideology and a communal discourse for an Arts-and-Crafts ideology. This fusion of aesthetics and politics draws the Pre-Raphaelite movement from Ruskin to Wilde closer to our own late postmodernist sensibility than it was to the elder Yeats’s Modernist era. Thus when Yeats visited Ezra Pound in 1929, they read together “with great wonder” the poems of Morris’s *Defence of Guenevere*, leaving Yeats afterwards sinking to a despondent conclusion: “I have come to fear the world’s last great poetic period is over” (*Letters* 2 March 1929). The wonder experienced by Yeats and Pound left Yeats nostalgic for the aesthetic community of his youth: “I was in all things Pre-Raphaelite.... We were all Pre-Raphaelites then” (*Autobiographies* 141).

Few editors would have ventured to articulate the noble ideal Francis Golfing announced in that inaugural issue of 1977. But as Eliot characterized the era of the early “Yeats of the pre-Raphaelite twilight,” we are now well into the twilight of the postmodernist era that began in the 1960s, an era that looks like it will last at least as long as the Pre-Raphaelite era, despite our prevalent belief that the speed of change is so rapidly increasing. As we slouch blindly toward the next era, Golfing’s communal ideal may become more relevant than it was in the 1970s. The now popular interest in interdisciplinary studies has moved our Pre-Raphaelite discipline to the forefront of scholarship, so that ours is no longer a field for nostalgic reflection, as it was for Yeats, or for arrogant censure, as it was for Eliot, who equated the Pre-Raphaelites with the confusion and indistinctness that arise from an art inspired by vague enchantment.

Eliot’s cultural posturing luckily did not survive his own generation, but the following critical principle from his “Frontiers of Criticism” (1956) is worth repeating, one indeed he did himself repeat from an early editorial he had written for *The Criterion*: “Many years ago I pointed out that every generation must provide its own literary criticism; for as I said, ‘each generation brings to the contemplation of art its own categories of appreciation,

makes its own demands upon art, and has its own uses for art.’ When I made this statement I am sure that I had in mind a good deal more than the change of taste and fashion: I had in mind ... the fact that each generation, looking at masterpieces of the past in a different perspective, is affected in its attitude by a greater number of influences than those which bore upon the generations previous” (*On Poetry and Poets* 104). A healthy journal will continue to grow as scholars continue to pursue new perspectives. Editors must actively solicit manuscripts, but equally important, we must also passively wait for manuscripts: I mean that we must eagerly welcome every new manuscript that arrives over the transom. With each new manuscript, each new book for reviewing, each new subscription to record, Kristine Garrigan and I recognize that the *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* renews itself through the communal effort of the readers as well as the writers, through the manuscripts we return as well as those we publish.

In contrast, we observe the ill effects of a large financial windfall on the little magazine *Poetry*. A \$200 million endowment from a pharmaceutical fortune has made that little magazine a magnet for the ilk of the think tank, a misnomer for those right-wing lobby groups funded by business interests. Since money promenades with power, *Poetry* now has a Poetry Foundation Board hellbent on flexing its muscles to lead the charge for changing the course of poetry. The magazine which first published Eliot’s “Prufrock” now prides itself for publishing the provocative bugle call by the president of its Poetry Foundation, a stockbroker who considers it his mandate to “rouse an entire art form out of a bad mood” because the “way poets have learned to write no longer captures the way things are, how things have changed” (*Poetry*, October 2006: 434). We can see where this nonsense is going: “Although poets pride themselves on their independence, when did you last read a poem whose political vision truly surprised or challenged you?” His solution to the problem, as he sees it, is for poets to live more “broadly” beyond the insular realm of books in the library and thereby learn how to write for the general public. The indoctrination of embedded reporters positioned alongside “our” troops in the designated war-zones may be the inspiration behind this scheme. Presumably if a physics journal were to receive a similar endowment then its editors might also want to shake things up by publishing a call for the next generation of physicists to close their books and agree to get out more. When a prominent Toronto surgeon confessed to the novelist Margaret Laurence that he intended to write a novel after his retirement, she promised to return the favour by trying her hand at brain surgery after her retirement.

Confident that *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* will not be troubled with a rich endowment, I daydream of commissioning a design from Morris & Company for a stained-glass transom to attract many more manuscripts that exemplify Dante Rossetti’s scholarly principle that all art, criticism, and

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literature require a “fundamental brainwork,” as we celebrate our thirtieth anniversary by looking forward to another thirty years of serving our mission to maintain a dialogue between the past and the present, nurturing a creative relationship between writer and reader, artist and audience.